

Hope is a Thing with Futures: Past Visions of the Future and the Past in the Anthropocene

European History Quarterly

2025, Vol. 55(4) 637–648

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/02656914251378003

journals.sagepub.com/home/ehq**Amanda Dillon**¹ 

Gerard Delanty, *Senses of the Future: Conflicting Ideas of the Future in the World Today*, De Gruyter: Berlin, 2024; 213 pp.; 9783111240503, £88.00 (hbk); 9783111242217, £28.50 (pbk); 9783111240602, £88.00 (ebook)

John L. Hennessey, ed., *History and Speculative Fiction*, Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2023; 293 pp.; 9783031422348, £44.99 (hbk); 9783031422355, open access (ebook)

Ian P. MacDonald and Kate Polak, eds, *Science Fiction and the Historical Novel: Days of Future Pasts*, Liverpool University Press: Liverpool, 2024; 288 pp.; 9781835538395, £120.00 (hbk); 9781835538173, £120.00 (ebook)

Matthew Shindell, *For the Love of Mars: A Human History of the Red Planet*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 2023; 248pp, 12 colour illus, 20 halftones; 9780226821894, \$27.50 (hbk); 9780226836775, \$19.00 (pbk); 9780226821900, \$18.99 (ebook)

In the words of my undergraduates, the future ‘hits different’ these days. The days of being able to watch any piece of science fiction set in a quasi-utopian future without feeling a sense of loss are pretty much over. The idealized future presented in the original

¹University of East Anglia, UK

Corresponding Author:

Amanda Dillon, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK.

Email: a.dillon@uea.ac.uk

series of Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* (1966–1969), for example, has become frankly laughable in a world of endless and hopeless wars, horrific tragedies, post-human technologies, and a deeply rooted feeling of pessimism that things are only going to get worse. Recent reboots and retcons of familiar media franchises pile on the darkness, full of enemies hell-bent on destroying everything our heroes worked to create. One only has to compare the primary-coloured positivity of Roddenberry's original series with the more recent iteration *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* (2022–present) to see that we certainly understand our future differently now. The characters are deeply damaged, the villains home grown and internal (sometimes literally¹) – and, in any case, the stories are not the source of endless optimism that the hijinks of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy were in the original iteration. Moreover, the much-lauded attempts to avoid impacting uncontacted alien cultures with advanced technologies (the so-called 'Prime Directive') have become inflected with a twenty-first-century understanding of postcolonialism: such interactions have always ideally been avoided within the franchise, but the damage done when they aren't is now shown in technicolour. Even Seth MacFarlane's *The Orville* (2017–2022), frequently seen as an attempt to recapture some of the old optimism of the *Star Trek* franchise, revels in its dark side and pulls no punches with its politics in a non-idealized future. These are hardly the only examples. Have we simply lost hope? Have we *forgotten* how to hope? Or are we just a bit more pragmatic in the face of catastrophic climate change and the rise of a post-truth, post-human society? Even Patrick Stewart – Captain Jean-Luc Picard himself – can only rouse a sense of impassioned nostalgia for a future where we believed we might have someday 'work[ed] to better ourselves and the rest of humanity'² rather than focus on profit and shareholders.

Moreover, the stakes of the past have changed starkly: we now live in a world where repeating something makes it true enough for the 24-hour news cycle, complicating the relationship between fiction and history to an uncanny and uncomfortable degree. Those who query popular historical monoliths (what Jean-François Lyotard might call 'grand narratives'³) have increasingly come into the cross-hairs of governmental policy in some countries for such anodyne assertions as the idea that women, queer people, and people of colour *existed* in the past (in Europe, in the Americas – anywhere, really, outside Asia and Africa), much less that they had tangible influences on the present day. This, *ipso facto*, means our relationship with the past (rather than merely 'history') and the future has shifted. How a society understands its past and its future – that is, how it sees itself in relationship to time – has become a 'category of historical experience'.⁴ This simultaneous looking forwards and backwards, something which Ian

¹ The melding of alien Gorn DNA with Captain Marie Batel's genome as a method of 'saving' her life is an excellent case in point: the enemies are *literally part of us*.

² *Star Trek: First Contact*, dir. Jonathan Frakes (Paramount 1996).

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans (Manchester 1994), 31–41.

⁴ Gerard Delanty, *Senses of the Future: Conflicting Ideas of the Future in the World Today* (Berlin 2024), 2.

P. MacDonald and Kate Polak term ‘metarecursivity’,⁵ is at the core of what’s explored in the present piece: how the future and the past relate for historians, stuck in the present with only our imaginations and the need to tell a story.

I

To talk about the past, or the future, is to talk about time. It is the forest that we as historians roam in amongst the archival trees. Our relationship with the past is a deeply temporal one: that was *then*, this is *now*, and here’s how we got here. It is not merely that the past, as L. P. Hartley would have it, is a different country; it is separate from us both in time *and* space. There is, too, a dialogic relationship between past and future – we imagine the future by looking to the past – and the present is that ‘nexus point’⁶ of change, whether through interpretation or interpellation. The complex calculus of change-over-time that is historical work does not simply stop when we reach *now*, though; it goes on beyond today, and there is a convincing argument to be made that the work of speculative fiction,⁷ particularly that of science fiction, uses the same understanding of causality seen in historical work to forecast its futures. But what does fiction have to do with time – and the future?

Gerard Delanty’s *Senses of the Future*, effectively a book-length bibliographical essay, provides us with the basics here. As a survey of the ways that specifically the Western, specifically European, and specifically *Western* European world understands the future today, Delanty offers a kaleidoscope of different ways of conceiving the future. But the core problem in Delanty’s work – beyond the *impressively* lacklustre copyediting⁸ – is that it barely skims the surface of the speculative and its relationship to the future. This is, to put it mildly, odd. In fact, after spending a good amount of time talking about the underlying science of the future, Delanty then says that ‘the theories of time discussed here do not have direct applications for the human and social sciences’.⁹ This is certainly a strange thing to claim when the future is not only frequently the domain of the arts and humanities, but explicitly so. I mean, there’s a whole genre of fiction devoted to it. Scholars working on high Modernist writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf would also probably like a word. Attempts to wrestle with concepts of time in the safe experimental space of fiction provide us with meditations on the future – and its

⁵ Ian P. MacDonald and Kate Polak, ‘Introduction: Speculative Histories and Past Futures: Rethinking Memory in the Twenty-First Century’, in Ian P. MacDonald and Kate Polak, eds, *Science Fiction and the Historical Novel: Days of Future Pasts* (Liverpool 2024), 6.

⁶ Karen Hellekson, *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (Kent, OH 2001), 27.

⁷ ‘Speculative fiction’ is a term used to denote any type of fiction which showcases a ‘break’ from the real world, and includes, traditionally, science fiction, fantasy, horror, and the Gothic. It also, clearly, includes romance and historical fiction, though this is not commonly acknowledged within genre studies.

⁸ This is not hyperbole. For example, poor Cassandra gets even shorter shrift than usual at the hands of Delanty’s copyeditors (‘Casandra’ on 65, 66, et passim), and a phrase clearly meant for the editors/copyeditor (‘Please add this sentence’ on 42) has been integrated into the main text. These errors and the *many* others like them, due to their nature, are unlikely to be Delanty’s fault, and instead shoddy work on the production side.

⁹ Delanty, 43. Admittedly I may be reading ‘human sciences’ a tad too liberally.

relationship to the past. This is the realm of science fiction, but also historical fiction and film. Something like Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), where a Black woman time travels to the antebellum south repeatedly to save her white ancestor from death and thus ensure her enslaved grandmother's rape at the hands of her enslaver, or Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* (2018), a novel about the discovery of an autobiography of Jack Sheppard (1702–1724) claiming he was a trans man, both provide complex explorations of how the past and the present (the past's future) speak to one another, as well as our complicity in its creation and today's resulting inequalities.

Fair enough, though; this sort of 'timey-wimey'¹⁰ thinking is tough stuff, particularly when we have to think about the way the general population takes on and integrates these larger and more complex theories into their conceptions of the future. But Delanty's skirting of the relationship between the future and the creative (outside the usual – male, white, and British suspects like George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and H. G. Wells, anyway) is indicative of a broader issue here in his work which showcases the fracture between academic approaches to the future and the way the everyday person might think about the future. While the average person in 2025 might be less than optimistic about what's coming in the next century (or, heck, next week), this is probably not *inherently* because philosophical concepts of the future have themselves shifted. If anything, the line of influence is the other way around.

II

Our understanding of the future is not static, nor should we expect it to be. Frequently, scientific discoveries and theories – from Einstein's Theory of General Relativity to Opportunity Rover's tenure on Mars – change what we can realistically imagine as our futures. This is something we see even before the industrial revolution and before we started visiting outer space: as Matthew Shindell argues in *For the Love of Mars: A Human History of the Red Planet*, scientific progress and imagination form an endless feedback loop. According to Shindell, what characterizes humanity's relationship to Mars in earlier periods is Mars's impact on humans in terms of things like personality, war, or weather; in later periods, the relationship shifts to one of what Mars might *provide* humanity. In order to do this, these narratives need to invent far-flung technologies. Sometimes these are fantastical, as in the case of Eberhard Christian Kindermann's *Die Geschwinde Reise auf dem Luft-Schiff nach der obern Welt* (1744) or Bernardin de St.-Pierre's *Harmonies de la nature* (1792–1814),¹¹ or robustly scientific, as in the case of Andy Weir's *The Martian* (2011).¹² These narratives display human ingenuity and (frequently British or American) exceptionality – but they are also frequently critical of their societies. H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), for example, gets specific lip service here in Shindell's analysis, though I'd say it's practically a critical cliché to say

¹⁰ 'Blink', dir. Hettie Macdonald, *Doctor Who* (BBC, 9 June 2007).

¹¹ Matthew Shindell, *For the Love of Mars: A Human History of the Red Planet* (Chicago, IL 2023), 109.

¹² *Ibid.*, 174–5.

that Wells writes satire of Victorian Britain. Shindell does deal with less well-known fictions (to Anglo-American readers), such as Kurd Lasswitz's *Auf zwei Planeten* (1897). Lasswitz's novel is similarly anti-imperialist in nature to Wells's – a tremendously common theme in invasion narratives coming out of imperialist nations, according to David M. Higgins.¹³ We ought not to merely cast these texts as satirical dystopias, though: they simultaneously note very real actions as well as show us the function of Mars for humanity at the time. It was – and is – a means to an end. That the invasion comes from Mars, rather than somewhere else on Earth, means the writer can dislocate their story in both time and space, looking both backwards and forwards at once. This is the core of the relationship between the future and the past, the historical and the speculative: what we can imagine is only limited by what we have learned, though of course this cuts both ways. Our futures may pass out of scientific reality due to new discoveries – C. S. Lewis's *Perelandra* (1943), where the explorer visits a beautiful and welcoming Venus, is now 'just' fantasy, and can never be a future (without significant terraforming, anyway). Our pasts, meanwhile, become richer for new information.

Shindell is especially and perhaps surprisingly strong when it comes to his narrative of the creation of the medieval and early modern conceptions of Mars, tracing his story through various connected pieces of European fiction and quasi-scientific literature. Moving beyond the expected examples of Galileo and Copernicus and their conceptions of the cosmos and Mars's place in it, Shindell's story of stories reiterates a continued and continuing tendency of medieval and early modern Europeans to centre not only their individual cultures in these narratives, but also their desire to 'justify the enslavement and exploitation of people around the world'.¹⁴ This narrative function of non-Earth worlds is not especially unusual, as previously mentioned, but Shindell makes the point that it has a very long history of providing powerful colonial European nations with a 'Eurocentric' cosmos.¹⁵ The future in medieval and early modern Europe was an explicitly European one.

Strangely, Shindell is dismissive of space operas which take place on Mars, such as Edgar Rice Burroughs's Barsoom novels (1912–1964). It's not entirely clear if this is because Burroughs in particular is clearly pulpy and therefore 'perishable stuff',¹⁶ or simply less 'scientific' in nature and doesn't quite fit the narrative Shindell wants to create. This seems odd, though, given the dream-visions detailed in both the medieval and early modern sections, but it does also explain some of the more obvious missed titles here, such as Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star* (1908). Bogdanov's novel places an idealized socialist world on Mars – presumably, and probably entirely deliberately, *because it is red*. The use of Mars as a backdrop for human literary experimentation and social speculation is missing from Shindell's history, which seems to come down more heavily on the

¹³ David M. Higgins, *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Anti-Victimhood* (Iowa City, IA 2021).

¹⁴ Shindell, 73.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (Bern 2016), 1.

side of the scientific human, rather than the everyday human, and thus he prefers H. G. Wells over C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Red Planet* (1938), and Weir's NASA-inspired novels over Pierce Brown's fantastical *Red Rising* saga (2014–present). In some ways, despite the wide range of scientific and historical material that is deftly and carefully presented for the average reader, what's really missing in Shindell's story is the human element in this 'human history', particularly in how we use Mars to push forward our own futures. Mars has always been as much as source of scientific curiosity as it has a cypher for humanity's best – and frequently worst – qualities.

III

Traditionally, the speculative and the historical are not seen as similar endeavours, though this attitude is changing incrementally, as showcased by both John L. Hennessey's collection *History and Speculative Fiction* and Ian P. MacDonald and Kate Polak's collection *Science Fiction and the Historical Novel: Days of Future Pasts*. While we can speak of histories and historical fiction, speculation and speculative fiction, we don't, in general, tend to think about *speculative* pasts outside the very specific category of the historical counterfactual.¹⁷ While historical methods do to some extent depend on a flexible imagination and some educated speculation, historians still think of our field as focused on evidence, if not 'truth' per se.

But fiction in a broad sense has forced us to question this cordoning off of the imaginative from the historical. How different are these endeavours? What can they provide to each other? Must they always be at methodological and theoretical loggerheads? I would argue that melding the speculative and the historical provides us with a unique challenge and a lot of opportunities for methodological self-reflection, though it is also a specifically academic and disciplinary challenge as well. Gerry Canavan puts this challenge rather succinctly in his afterword to MacDonald and Polak's collection: 'That is not to say that [this] work is easy – far from it. It requires not only creativity and deep intellectual humility but a polymath's mastery of multiple intersecting discourses [...]'.¹⁸ Easy enough, right? Probably not. We can but try.

This matters, because no matter what way we slice and dice academic departments in terms of discipline (despite any cries of 'interdisciplinarity!'), creatives will keep creating. Creative writers, filmmakers, and producers will fund and write historically-inspired pieces with relatively little regard to what our own histories say. As a result, many critics of historical film and fiction prefer to route their analyses through reflections of the present in depictions of the past,¹⁹ rather than necessarily arguing that historical fiction and film say anything in particular about the past. Similarly, speculative fiction is also presumed to largely speak about the present, and this presumption is rife in its methodology

¹⁷ See: Catherine Gallagher, *Telling it Like it Wasn't: The Counterfactual in History and Fiction* (Chicago 2018); Hellekson.

¹⁸ Gerry Canavan, 'Critical Afterword', in MacDonald and Polak, 230.

¹⁹ This is in the grand tradition of György Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1937, translated into English in 1961).

and theory.²⁰ Yet there is a sense that historical fiction speaks to the past (and the future), and that science fiction speaks to the future (and the past). Both of these collections explore this in different ways, with different levels of success, often due to meeting or failing to meet Canavan's challenge.

Much of this is to do with the framing of the collections. Hennessey's broad introduction name checks scholars like Brian Attebery, Darko Suvin, and David Seed – all major scholars on science fiction and fantasy (SFF) – though it's worth noting that this version of SFF studies is very 1990s/early 2000s.²¹ Given the collection's focus on Gunlög Fur's concept of 'concurrent history', unsurprisingly, critics working in the areas of post-colonial SFF (Jessica Langer, Isiah Lavender III) also make appearances. As the collection specifically frames itself as approaching the speculative fiction through the lens of concurrent history, it is not unexpected that (some of) the collection focuses on texts that showcase the meeting of two (or more) alien worlds. Problematically, however, concurrent history as a concept does not have much currency beyond Sweden, and this creates a stumbling block for the uninitiated. Concurrent history, for Fur, is about negotiating, methodologically, with the fact that history is multiple, conflicting, and entangled, and that cultures that may not at first appear to be connected frequently are. Fur's solution to this problem is 'multivocality'.²² It is not entirely clear what Fur's approach provides us with that is not covered by existing postcolonial methods when done correctly, but I digress.

MacDonald and Polak's collection, meanwhile, approaches the intersection of the historical and the speculative from the angle of literary studies, but they are no slouches when it comes to historical theory either. Indeed, the recent history of historical theory (White, Jenkins, Munslow, etc.) has been so impacted by the narrative turn that it's difficult to talk about time in fiction without dealing with historical theory. Their theoretical and methodological introduction covers a broad swath of theorists – again the usual suspects, but here focused on Fredric Jameson and György Lukács, as well as those who hang their hats on the work that people like Alun Munslow, Hayden White, and Linda Hutcheon have done on postmodernism, narrative, and history. The introduction places the problem of squaring the circle of historical and speculative front and centre: how do we deal with a genre of fiction which is essentially forward looking (science fiction) when it acts like one that looks backwards (historical fiction)? To do this, they coin the

²⁰ The most influential is Fredric Jameson, 'Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?' *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1982), 147–58. This is seen even amongst critic-writers: Samuel R. Delany, 'Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction', in Samuel R. Delany, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT 2012), 26.

²¹ A more up-to-date list might include scholars like Lisa Yazak, Mark Bould, Sherryl Vint, Rob Latham, Andrew M. Butler, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, Roger Luckhurst, and Andy Sawyer (though these are all now very much senior scholars in the field and there is an army of rising mid-career and early career researchers contributing to the field). This is not to say that Hennessey's introduction is *out* of date, but I wouldn't call it *in* date.

²² Gunlög Fur, 'Concurrences as Methodology for Discerning Concurrent Histories', in Diana Brydon, Peter Forsgren and Gunlög Fur, eds, *Concurrent Imaginaries, Postcolonial Worlds: Toward Revised Histories* (Leiden 2017), 38, 39–41. The fact I had to backtrack to Fur's work to make sense of Hennessey's introduction does not cover it in glory.

term ‘metarecursivity’: ‘a future-oriented archival gesture’.²³ The collection makes the case, through its constituent chapters, that metarecursivity can be seen across all speculative subgenres, as well as texts that appear on the very edges of the speculative (such as Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) or Stephen Graham Jones’s *The Bird Is Gone: A Monograph Manifesto* (2003)). It’s not an easy argument to make, and will almost certainly gain its detractors from both disciplines, but it is certainly food for thought: thinking about the future requires thinking about the past, even if only in fiction. And it’s worth asking ourselves if the reverse is also frequently true – that we must think of the future so we can think of the past – if only methodologically.

Both introductions frame themselves according to their respective disciplines, and while MacDonald and Polak’s is more obviously and demonstrably aware of current research in its ‘other’ discipline, both are missing some interesting things that might have helped out a bit. Hennessey’s introduction makes very little mention of existing work on imperialism in speculative fiction, which is rather strange in a collection ostensibly about meeting cultures. Both David Higgins’s excellent *Reverse Colonialization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood* (2021) and John Reider’s *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008) are missing here, though Reider has provided a blurb on Palgrave’s website. Related work on translatability of the Other in SFF is similarly missing, despite the expected name checks of both Douglas Adams’s Babel Fish from *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (radio show 1978; novel 1979) and the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode ‘Darmok’,²⁴ where the universal translator famously fails to understand cultural metaphor. There is substantive work on this specific issue,²⁵ as well as broader work on created/constructed languages (‘conlangs’) in SFF which would have made Hennessey’s job much easier here. The collection could easily have piggybacked on the existing literature on SFF studies to push forward its own thesis rather than spending time attempting to reinvent the wheel. There is a clear lack of familiarity with the depth and breadth of work on SFF and literature more broadly²⁶ here which impedes its ability to make an incisive intervention in the literature.

This is seen even at the level of textual choice in the collection, and it leads to some very odd chapters. The most egregious example of this is Ashleigh Harris’s contribution on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and Apartheid South Africa. It’s an odd

²³ MacDonald and Polak, ‘Introduction’, 6–7.

²⁴ ‘Darmok’, dir. Winrich Kolbe, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Paramount 1991).

²⁵ For example, see: Lucy Armitt, ‘Your Word is My Command: The Structure of Language and Power in Women’s Science Fiction’, in Lucy Armitt, ed., *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction* (Routledge 2012) 123–38; Bettina Beinhoff, ‘Why Are Alien Languages Inherently Human?’, *Foundation*, Vol. 122 (2015), 5–19; and Ria Cheyne, ‘Created Languages in Science Fiction’, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2008), 386–403. See also Amanda Dillon, *Metafiction and Narrative Worlds in Science Fiction: ‘Prism, Mirror, Lens’* (Liverpool 2025, forthcoming), ch. 5. Admittedly, he’s unlikely to have read that last one yet without a time machine.

²⁶ Cecelia Trenter’s chapter on *The Legend of the Ice People* seems to have walked in from a collection on world-building (again missing major work in the field), and Kristín Loftsdóttir’s meditation on future fiction reads as very old-fashioned from the perspective of SFF studies.

choice, given Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) was *right there*, and means that the chapter is full of over-reading and ends up just being about media consumption in South Africa, rather than about anything specifically speculative *or* historical, much less concurrent. Other chapters are stronger but no less odd here. Johan Höglund's chapter on Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, when it finally gets down to analysis, is practically just a description of the novel and a statement that she has written about the meeting of cultures from an anti-imperialist point of view. This is, it's fair to say, a critical cliché in SFF studies. Similarly, it's not the most obvious example of this in her oeuvre: her collection *Changing Planes* (2003) is easily her most pointed intervention in this, particularly the story 'The Silence of the Asonu', which has disturbing echoes in a world finally waking up to the atrocities of residential schools in the USA, Canada, and Australia. Similarly, her *Always Coming Home* (an ethnography about a civilization that 'might be going to have lived a long, long time from now'²⁷) would have been excellent for this sort of collection – and indeed finds itself at the centre of Eric Aronoff's contribution in MacDonald and Polak's collection.²⁸ It really matters for this sort of work what texts are chosen: it's less 'not the chapter I would have written' and more 'this would have been far easier if they'd chosen x or y'.

MacDonald and Polak's collection is much stronger overall, with a truly transnational and intersectional approach to its history and literary choices. It deals with more familiar and expected titles like Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016), as well as a fascinating reading of Liu Cixin's Three-Body Trilogy (2008–2010), short stories from Ugandan writer Immaculate Innocent Acan, and the Métis author Cherie Dimanline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017). MacDonald and Polak's collection almost entirely skirts the usual examples of historical fiction and science fiction here. Texts like Kim Stanley Robinson's alternate history *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002) and Margaret Atwood's famous dystopian past future *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are mentioned, but only in passing. It is refreshingly up-to-date, and skirts definitional in-fighting, as well as unnecessary squabbling over disciplinary 'ownership' that might have otherwise been tempting. There's not a single bum chapter seen here – a rarity in edited collections – and each one is full of one- and two-line diamonds of insight that provide further food for thought and future work at this disciplinary and critical intersection. Especially fascinating is Philip K. Wegner's contribution in Jo Walton's *Lent* (2019). *Lent* takes place in Renaissance Florence, using as its basis the life of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498). In Walton's novel, Savonarola attempts, repeatedly, to change history to avoid his execution and damnation. For Wegner, Savonarola must 'accept the chance, if no means the guarantee, that his previous returns are all in the past and that the future is never set':²⁹ that is, that the future is not in stone and we can still change it if only we understand causality well enough.

²⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (London 2016), i.

²⁸ Eric Aronoff, "'I Go Backward, Look Forward, as the Porcupine Does': History, Indigenous Futurity, and Decolonizing the Culture Concept in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Always Coming Home*", in MacDonald and Polak, 61–78.

²⁹ Philip E. Wegner, 'The Future of the Historical Novel: Freedom and Salvation in Jo Walton's *Lent*', in MacDonald and Polak, 34.

Such a call to arms is not limited to the alternate history, though. Wegner sees this as a challenge for all of us in ‘these, our bad new days’,³⁰ an essential function of the metarecursivity seen in these sorts of speculative histories.

It’s not a perfect collection, though. While the overall argument that the science fictional and historical have similar methods when dealing with time, most of this has been done through the usual theoretical avenues (Jameson, White). Jerome de Groot, meanwhile, has made a parallel argument from the standpoint of historical fiction studies³¹ (though he does not make an appearance here), and it would have been nice to have seen more input from recent studies of historical fiction. There is a reliance on older work in this respect – Lukács and Jameson don’t just haunt the collection: they *jaunt* through every single chapter. More recent work has been included, such as the 2005 special issue of *Rethinking History* edited by Hayden White, but this is largely limited to the introduction. Diana Wallace’s work, focused mostly on women-authored historical fiction, is nowhere to be seen. As such, I wonder if the methodological dialogue going on here is unnecessarily one-way. It does make me wonder if it might not have been *even more* beneficial to see the SFF-historical relationship not so much a single argument (e.g., that science fiction is a sort of historical fiction, which echoes 1980s attempts to de-ghettoize the genre through comparisons to postmodernism, such as that by the late Brian McHale³²), but as a constant dialogue instead. This slippery circuitous relationship between the historical and the speculative seems to me to get to the core of metarecursivity – or is at least one of its upshots on a practical level – but perhaps that’s a concern for the next collection.

What is especially interesting across these two collections is that both, explicitly and implicitly, deal with post-colonial fall-out. The ravages of European colonialism provide considerable fodder for imagining how things might be (or might have been). In Ian P. MacDonald’s contribution looking at Tade Thompson’s *Wormwood Trilogy*, largely centred on Nigeria, he speaks of a sense where history (as opposed to a ‘lack of history’) is symptomatic of ‘intersection with Europe’.³³ Nigerian history is marked by the oral tradition in particular, and as MacDonald says, the ‘leap’ Thompson makes between ‘historicity and the archive in the written tradition of the West is a small one’.³⁴ Similar themes can be seen across multiple chapters, both in MacDonald and Polak’s collection and in Hennessey’s. The past may be set – the damage may be done – but in many cases, such fictions imagine what might happen should the empire be able to strike back (pun intended).

IV

To bastardize Emily Dickinson, hope is a thing with futures. But hope is also a thing with a clear-eyed past, and an awareness of how the past impacts our present day and our

³⁰ Ibid., 42.

³¹ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon 2009), 3–5.

³² Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York 1987).

³³ Ian P. MacDonald, “‘A Poor Sort of Memory’: *Jamais Vu* and the Historian as Archive in Tade Thompson’s *Wormwood Trilogy*”, in MacDonald and Polak, 109.

³⁴ Ibid., 117.

future. Whether or not we can actually ‘learn’ from the past in any useful way is not really the issue, though as John Arnold once quipped, it’s pretty clear no one is ‘paying attention in class’.³⁵ But what our visions of the future and the past *can* teach us is where and how to find hope – how to *create* it. MacDonald and Polak’s collection is rife with calls for true, intersectional change. As Rebecca Oh says, ‘apocalyptic realism ... demands that we attend to the structural inequalities and historical forces that make futurelessness the once-and-future real’.³⁶ To make changes, for us to learn, we need to remind ourselves that ‘the present [is] the past of a future that is itself the past of a further future’.³⁷ For Delanty, ‘the past ... [is] shaped by our orientation to the future’.³⁸ I’d extend that to say it’s always shaped by our orientation to the now. *Now* is the site of change, and it involves thinking how we’d like to recast the past.

As a brief explanation, I’d like to think a little bit about the stand-out contribution in Hennessey’s collection: Piia K. Posti’s chapter on the use of Black characters in *Bridgerton* (2020–present). A well-timed and thoughtful analysis of the *Bridgerton* universe’s nexus event (e.g., that Queen Charlotte was Black, and out of respect to her ethnic background, people of colour were elevated to the aristocracy in Britain), Posti’s work thinks a lot about the uses of alterity in historical fiction and how it might intersect with a whole host of issues when we stop getting hung up on ‘accuracy’. Posti makes the point that ‘the romance script and the casting ... intersect in a way that reinforces a “new racism” while simultaneously providing a global audience with an unforeseen level of diversity and representation in historical romance and heritage film and TV series’.³⁹ Absolutely – but *Bridgerton*’s usefulness for thinking about alterity, the past, and the future we’d like to see goes beyond that.

All historical fiction and film has some degree of the speculative about it, but the Georgian/Regency period presented in this show is speculative on a different level to something like, for example, *The Tudors* (2007–2010). *The Tudors* merely asks its audience to believe the young, fit Jonathan Rhys Meyers is in fact the older, cantankerous, and gangrenous Henry VIII (amongst other melding of historical figures into single characters for simplicity). This willow-like bending of the truth is along the lines of what Robert Rosenstone talks about in his work on historical film.⁴⁰ *Bridgerton*, and its spin-off *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (2023) in particular, is different, and explicitly plays what-if games. This is made clear in *Queen Charlotte*’s opening intertitle:

Dearest Gentle Reader,
This is the story of Queen Charlotte from *Bridgerton*.
It is not a history lesson.

³⁵ John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2000), 120.

³⁶ Rebecca Oh, ‘Realist Apocalypse and Pessimistic Aesthetics in *Animal’s People* and *The God of Small Things*’, in MacDonald and Polak, 82.

³⁷ Canavan, 230.

³⁸ Delanty, 3.

³⁹ Piia K. Posti, ‘“I Get to Exist as a Black Person in the World”: *Bridgerton* as Speculative Romance and Alternate History on Screen’, in Hennessey, 134.

⁴⁰ Robert A. Rosenstone, ‘The Historical Film as Real History’, *Film-Historica*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1995), 5–23.

It is fiction inspired by fact.

All liberties taken by the authors are intentional.

Enjoy.⁴¹

To be clear, the ‘liberties’ are (a) the presentation of Queen Charlotte as Black, and (b) the ‘great experiment’ of elevating those of colour in society. We do, of course, know that there were people of colour in Britain and had been for a very long while,⁴² but the theories around the Queen’s racial background that inspire these ‘liberties’ are largely seen as speculative and do not hold much methodological water. But what producer Shonda Rimes does here in this alternate history romance is, instead, provide us with a past based on a future we’d like to see: one of intersectional equality (as much as we can do with a narrative mostly about the British aristocracy!). It is using the struggles of the present to recast a past with our idealized future. Such inflections of the past with the present are hardly unknown in recent historical film – Netflix’s quasi-adaptation of Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* (2024) is not really about the Black Death in Italy in more than basic filmic trappings (settings, names, and fashions), but it is *definitely* about Covid-19. *The Decameron* may not be a world we especially want to see, but it grapples with the world in a way we *need* to see to move on.

We can, of course, simply complain and say ‘it’s inaccurate’ and throw our popcorn at the screen, but we do ourselves a disservice if we do. Such presentations of the past provide us with hope, with a vision of the past that is not revisionist so much as a re-envisioning through our desires to learn and to make our world a better one. As Gerry Canavan says of our current historical moment, ‘if these are ... “our new bad days”, they are also, in every moment, the Jonbar hinge that some future-inspired alternate historian, scribbling in a notebook somewhere and somewhen down the line, might unexpectedly recognize as the moment when everything changed’.⁴³ Hope is still there, lurking in the future and the past together.

ORCID iD

Amanda Dillon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3925-7471>

Author Biography

Amanda Dillon is a lecturer in the School of History and Art History at the University of East Anglia. She works at the intersection of genre studies, history, and historical and narrative theory. She also manages the journal *European History Quarterly*. Her first monograph, *Metafiction and Narrative Worlds in Science Fiction: ‘Prism, Mirror, Lens’* will be published by Liverpool University Press at the end of 2025. She has previously published on time travel fiction, women, and historical fiction in the *SFRA Review* and teaches modules on the history of gender and sexuality, historical fiction, and historical film.

⁴¹ ‘Queen to Be’, dir. Tom Verica, *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*, Netflix (4 May 2023).

⁴² Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: A Forgotten Georgian History* (London 2022).

⁴³ Canavan, 234. A ‘Jonbar hinge’ is a term referring to the moment when something changed, similar to a ‘nexus point’.