

Dabbling in Science Fiction

Something rather unusual has just joined my publication list: a work of science fiction. Any readers who consider that all of my papers are science fiction can keep that opinion to themselves, thank you very much...

The publication was by way of an unusual invitation, and had rather a long gestation. It began with the appointment of an Artist in Residence at Edinburgh's Centre for Synthetic and Systems Biology ('Synthsys'), about five years ago now. The Artist, the creative writer Jessica Fox, had come from a similar position at NASA. She had multiple roles at Synthsys: writing creatively in her own right, helping with public engagement and, off her own bat, trying to get hard-bitten, fact-obsessed scientists to try a little creative writing themselves.

She proposed that a selection of Synthsys academics, of varied career stages, each write a fictional short story on the general topic of synthetic biology. The stories would then be published as a single volume of synthetic biology science fiction, with the 'unique selling point' of being written by actual scientists. This is not really unique, of course: some of the most famous science fiction authors in history have been scientists themselves, Isaac Asimov being possibly the best known example. But generally those authors were not still engaged in research. I think Jessica's hope was that whatever clunky naivety was in our writing style would be made up for by our immediate, everyday contact with the subject material.

The call went out, in person at one of our fortnightly all-hands meetings and by e-mail, asking for for anyone willing to try their hand at writing a short story. I had absolutely no experience of this, not enough time, and no idea how to go about it... so of course I said yes. I was bound to learn something, after all – even if that 'something' was that I should not say yes so easily. I was delighted that Alazne, a post-doc in my group, said yes too, and we heard that enough other people also did so for the project to be viable. So we wrote, and handed in our work by the deadline.

I heard from Jessica a while later that some people side-stepped the fiction part, and wrote instead of their own lives and their paths into synthetic biology. But ever cheerful, she pressed on with the publisher she had found, finding a way to integrate autobiography into a general weave of story telling in the synthetic biology space. The publisher she found very well placed to make the most of the odd provenance of the writing. All went quiet for a long time, and we learned that the publisher

had changed direction and pulled out not only of this particular project but of all fiction. Jessica, who had by that time moved on, promised to try to find another publisher. It all went quiet for even longer and I ended up forgetting all about my story. Then, just a couple of months ago, an e-mail was sent to all of the authors, telling them that the book would appear in print, and as an e-book, at the end of April.

True to their word, the new publishing house *Shoreline of Infinity*, who specialize in science fiction, did indeed publish the work exactly on time. The book is called *Once upon a Biofuture – tales for a new millennium*. It contains an introduction, and then the actual stories. Of these, six are actual science fiction stories centred on synthetic biology, from Alazne Dominguez-Monedero, Jessica Fox, Liz Fletcher, Alex Shao, Pippa Goldschmidt and me. Several other stories are autobiographical, and provide insights into different paths to becoming a scientist, and analogies between science and other parts of life. Gaynor Campbell writes a moving autobiographical view of adventure and discovery, drawing parallels between the adventuring of a child and that of a scientist, including not just the joy of discovery but also moments of frustration and fear. Maqsood Ahmed, Tilo Kunath and Abdenour Soufi all write of their own paths into research and the people and ‘niches’ that influenced them. Jessica Fox contributes a short biographical piece on the cell biologist Bill Earnshaw, from an unusual angle that I knew nothing about although I have known Bill, and his wife, the cell biologist Margaret Heck, for years. Joyce Tait’s ‘A punk rock guide to innovation’ can be read as a guide to a young would-be academic about how to carve out a path. One of the subheadings of her piece stuck in my mind: ‘only dead fish go with the flow’.

Anyone interested in reading these writings from the strange border between real synthetic biology and its possible extensions can order the book, in physical or electronic form, online (see ‘links’). Dabbling in fiction, as one of the writers, was fun, but now I have to return to writing a grant application – another hybrid between the absolute non-fiction of current data, and the conjecture of what might come out at the end of a project if only someone would be willing to fund it.

Jamie Davies, Edinburgh, May 2023

Links:

[Once upon a Biofuture](#) (e-book, and ordering point for the printed version)