

Twelve Tomorrows



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TWELVE Tomorrows is volume five in a series begun in 2011 with *TRSF*, and the first to be published in book form rather than as an issue of *Technology Review* magazine. A more accurate if less streamlined title might be *Eleven Tomorrows and One Yesterday*, as the book includes only eleven new stories, and a new retrospective on the life and career of Samuel R. Delany. The remit of the series, as explained on the series website is to offer “original stories that explore the role and potential impact of developing technologies in the near, and not-so-near future.” A Delany retrospective might not seem to be the ideal fit for that remit, since Delany’s importance is arguably more for his innovations in style and in social extrapolation, rather than specifically in speculation about scientific innovation, but on the other hand, he is one of SF’s major figures, and more can always be said about him. The eleven stories come from diverse hands, including several well-known SF names (e.g. Elizabeth Bear, Liu Cixin, Paul McAuley, Nnedi Okorafor, and Alastair Reynolds) as well as from upcoming figures and writers not usually associated with SF. The overall quality of the anthology is consistent, but perhaps more narrow in focus than its stated goal would suggest. While it is unsurprising that implications of computer technology innovations should loom large, the anthology would be more diverse and more fully meet its aim of speculation about developing technologies if the stories tackled a more broad range of topics. Roush indicates in his introduction that he generally banned dystopian stories because he likes his “SF with a dose of hopefulness. [...] Pessimists don’t invent vaccines or build moon rockets [ix]; however, several of the stories here are more cautionary than celebratory, and a few are outright dystopian.

Several are about AI, or variations thereof, again unsurprising at this juncture. One of the few overtly dystopian tales here, McAuley’s “Chine Life,” offers a far future in which AI has mostly supplanted humanity and has split into factions, one of which wants humanity eradicated and the other of which ostensibly wants to help, but literally colonizes the bodies of human beings in order to do so. McAuley here offers a neat sort of twist on invasion/colonization. Somewhat differently, Clifford V. Johnson’s “Resolution” (told in comics format, a welcome innovation, though John’s style is functional) offers something of a variation, imagining a future in which an alien invasion goes unnoticed because the

aliens (who are apparently incorporeal) have passed themselves off as the AI the protagonist thought she had developed. Bear's story, "Okay, Glory," is about a wealthy recluse whose AI is hacked into believing there has been a catastrophe in the outside world, so confines him to his impregnable fortress of a house, until he pays the hacker/extortionists \$150,000,000. The cautionary tale about the susceptibility of computer tech to hacking is competently enough handled, if not new, but the story suffers from a major plot hole: if one expects to be paid a huge pile of money, one must leave the person they are extorting a way actually to get to the money. Sarah Pinsker's "Caring Seasons" also involves smart tech (whether actually AI or not is not spelled out) run amok, as it presents a retirement facility in which the medical protocols designed to protect residents instead become the tools that imprison them. J. M. Ledgard's "Vespers" imagines the first interstellar spaceship, run by an AI that spends the story ruminating about its situation. Almost half the stories here, therefore, are essentially variations on a theme. As such, this group represents a suite of stories that might be considered in tandem in a classroom to discuss how SF deals with AI.

Most of the rest of the stories also play on the implications of computer tech, in one way or another. Ken Liu's "Byzantine Empathy" presents an intriguing story about attempts to co-opt cryptocurrencies to serve charitable ends—or, conversely, to allow one charitable organization to become the most powerful charitable organization in the world—by melding social media and giving. Liu Cixin's "Fields of Gold" (which might also be connected to the AI stories) posits that the accidental launch of a woman into space on a doomed voyage may become something that would unite the world in an attempt to reach the stars, but we ultimately learn that the real woman is long dead and replaced by a computer simulation, when the rest of Earth catches up and sends out a ship that can catch up to hers. Reynolds's "Different Seas" carries remote control to an extreme by positing humanoid helpers that can be inhabited remotely to aid people in crisis. The story includes an ironic twist that is perhaps unnecessary. Malka Older's "Disaster Tourism" might be seen as a complementary piece, as it involves the use of drones in rescue work, when an inexplicable infection breaks out.

Only the remaining two stories carry us any distance from computer tech, S. L. Huang's "The Woman Who Destroyed Us," and Okorafor's punningly titled "The Heart of the Matter." The former deals with a medical innovation that allows for the tweaking of brains, which can allow for the cure of mental conditions, or simply for self-improvement. Whether such tech makes one more truly oneself or whether it transforms people into something else—whether this is an advance created by a Frankenstein, or a genuine boon to humanity—is treated with some nuance. The story is neither a stereotypical warning about science daring to tread where it ought not, nor a paean to advancement, though it perhaps skews in the

latter direction, as it is narrated from the point of view of a woman who initially views it as the former and hopes to destroy its creator but who comes ultimately to see value in the procedure. “The Heart of the Matter” explores age-old fear of scientific advancement by representing the replacement of a Nigerian President’s heart with an artificial one as something that inspires superstitious fear in some—a fear exploited by a would-be usurper, who takes advantage of credulous equations of new technology with witchcraft.

Overall, then, this is a strong volume that does indeed offer speculations about new and emerging technology. The stories are all solid, if thematically and stylistically for the most part fairly staid (I imagine many readers will have recognized familiar themes and plot points in the brief precis above). The book is possibly useful for a course on SF and tech, or on contemporary trends in SF.