

Future Library will open its door to the readers in the year 2114

An art project in Oslo draws attention to the fact that all of literature is one big, juicy time capsule.

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British novelist David Mitchell (left) and Canadian writer Margaret Atwood

The Future Library is about to turn one. When it turns 100, it will open its doors to the reader. We shall never know who this reader will be because by 2114, when the library opens, all of us will be dead — the founder of the library, the contemporary writers who will fill its shelves, you, I and almost everyone we know or will ever know. The Future Library is to the modern world what the memento mori was to medieval Europe. It is also a lively black joke inviting random thoughts on the future, the linear continuity of culture, the arrow of time, the uncertainty built into the universe and the fundamentally optimistic nature of the investor, the insurance salesman and the artist, who play its odds. Surprisingly, we in India have not paid this mind game much attention.

Today, the library consists of a grove of 1,000 trees in a forest outside Oslo. Ninety-nine years from now, they will be cut down, pulped and turned into (lovingly handmade?) paper, on which 100 literary works, commissioned in each of the intervening years, will be printed. In May, Margaret Atwood submitted the first manuscript, titled *Scribbler Moon*. This year's contribution is awaited from David Mitchell.

This growing body of work will be shelved in a room in Oslo's New Deichmanske Public Library, created by Katie Paterson, the Scottish artist who conceived this centennial project, from wood from that grove of 1,000 trees outside the city. Now you know why there are so many. A hundred trees should have sufficed for 100 manuscripts. But panelling is way greedier than books. Then there's the possibility of disease. Who can say what new viral diseases develop over the next century, and how many of them set upon trees rather than animals? Half the fun of this project seems to lie in managing distant risk, from the possibility of future writers wrecking the plot to the eternal, pedestrian threat of sudden death by termite attack.

For the next 99 years, will sensitive people fly into Oslo from all over the world to sit in a room and gaze longingly upon a growing pile of books, which will only reveal title and author? Thus tantalised and edified, will they shall fly back to their homes in diverse lands, perchance to die unrequited? At least for the next two decades, they are unlikely to survive till the covers of the anthology are opened, and their contents pirated in PDF format by the famous commons ninjas of Scandinavia.

The Future Library is a surprising vote in favour of continuity. It seems to wager that there will be fewer Bamiyans and Palmyras in the future, and more MOMAs and Uffizis. This optimism runs counter to the historical record, which suggests that “barbarian” cultures upset their “civilised” betters, creating discontinuities which spur cultural development.

The most dramatic example is the rapidly growing empire of Genghis Khan, which closed a chapter in the Old World and opened new possibilities for political powers and trading networks which used to be bit players. But their predecessors, the Goths and Vandals who overran Greece and Rome, were no less impressive for their world-altering qualities. And when the European powers launched the age of exploration and colonial empires, their first emissaries were regarded as savages by the civilisations they visited. The Portuguese armadas which visited these shores left behind an echo in local tongues in the word “harmad”. Roughly meaning “illegitimate” or “rogue power”, it is applied equally to political militias and pirated PDF editions of modern literature.

The received wisdom of history discourages confidence in a future which assumes cultural continuity, minus barbarian disruptions. Besides, in our rapidly accelerating times, we must be open to the idea of catastrophic change as a part of the natural order. While we can be reasonably sure that Atwood will retain her importance a century from now, will the import of her work remain the same? The shelves of the world’s libraries are loaded with successes from a century ago whose work has been turned upside down by contemporary critical theory. In the spirit of kindness, they are referred to as “quaint”.

Speaking of time, the nicest black joke encapsulated in The Future Library is on time itself. The concept is a time capsule which will be hatched like an egg in 2114, and it draws attention to the fact that all of literature is one big, juicy time capsule anyway. It used to be sequestered in academic libraries, but the internet has made it publicly accessible. The Illustrated London News is online, vying for attention with Thucydides and the Upanishads.

The Future Library is different only because it forces anticipation. It has started with a bang, with Atwood. Whoever runs the project when it comes to fruition, who may be yet unborn, would have to ensure that it closes with a bang at least as loud, with an author yet unborn, who writes in an idiom yet unknown. An idiom which may seem incomprehensible, pointless or precious today.