

Future Library
by Margaret Atwood

I was very pleased to have been invited to be the first author for the Future Library project. Katie Paterson's artwork is a meditation on the nature of time. It is also a tribute to the written word, the material basis for the transmission of words through time – in this case, paper – and a proposal of writing itself as a time capsule, since the author who marks the words down and the receiver of those words – the reader – are always separated by time.

There are some disadvantages to being the first author. One, I have not yet seen the actual forest in Norway, so I can't say anything about it. Nor will I be able to stand in the Future Library room and see the names of the other authors and the titles of the works they have contributed. Authors far along in time – Year 90, Year 95 – will know that when their sealed box is opened and their work published, those reading it will be their contemporaries. But those who will read my work are a hundred years into the future. Their parents aren't yet born, nor, in all likelihood, are their grandparents. How to address these unknown readers? What will they be able to understand of my world, the world that is the ground for my own contribution? And how will the meanings of words have changed in that time? For language itself is subject to pressure and metamorphosis, just as the rock of the earth's crust is.

Science fiction has made art out of space travel – travel to places that the author has never seen, and that may not exist except in the human imagination. Time travel is similar. In the case of the Future Library, I am sending a manuscript into time. Will any human beings be waiting there to receive it? Will there be a “Norway?” Will there be a “forest?” Will there be a “library?” It's hopeful to believe that all of these elements – despite climate change, rising sea levels, forest insect infestations, global pandemics, and all of the other threats, real or not, that trouble our minds today – will still exist.

As a child, I was one of those who buried treasures in jars, with the idea that someone, some day, might come along and dig them up. I found similar things while digging in the various gardens I have made: old nails, old medicine bottles, fragments of china plates. Once, in the Canadian arctic, I found a tiny doll carved of wood – rare wood, for no trees grow there and such a piece of wood must have been driftwood. That is what the Future Library is like, in part: it will contain fragments of lives that were once lived, and that are now the past. But all writing is a method of preserving and transmitting the human voice. The marks of the writing, made by ink, printer ink, brush, stylus, chisel – lie inert, like the marks on a musical score, until a reader arrives to bring the voice back to life.

How strange it is to think of my own voice – silent by then for a long time – suddenly being awakened, after a hundred years. What is the first thing that voice will say, as a not-yet-embodied hand draws it out of its container and opens it to the first page?

I picture this encounter – between my text and the so-far non-existent reader – as being a little like the red-painted handprint I once saw on the wall of a Mexican cave that had been sealed for over

three centuries. Who now can decipher its exact meaning? But its general meaning was universal: any human being could read it.

It said: Greetings. I was here.