Time and Time Again

Think of your greatest regret. That moment that haunts you even now, its agonizing details replaying themselves again and again as you try to fall asleep, as you try to move on. *Remember*. Feel the pain and the shame, still raw. Now—what would you give for the chance to go back and change it all?

For you and me, such a question carries the sting of futile hope; true revision is as unattainable for us as immortality. But in literature, the allure of rewriting or revisiting the past is not limited to hypotheticals. The inevitable and the immutable soften in the mirror-realm of fiction, just as metaphor and analogy coalesce into literal events. From these conditions, popular temporal tropes have sprouted over decades, growing into a loose and vibrant subgenre: the time-travel story.

You know the stock elements. There's the time loop, typically repeating for a single character alone, while the rest of the world blithely resets. Meanwhile, in a story of intervention in the past—the classic "shooting Hitler" narrative—we know to expect terrible effects; Stephen King's *11/22/63*, about a man who goes back in time to prevent the Kennedy assassination and inadvertently causes the apocalypse, offers an illustrative example. Paradoxes, such as killing one's own grandparents, are likewise *de rigueur* in journeys to the past.

I believe, however, that these works are not only what they seem. Despite their often familiar trappings, they offer far more than the excitement of wish fulfillment, the dread of unintended consequences, and the academic interest of metaphysical riddles. Through their conceits and devices, time-travel stories embody the very essence of the narrative art: elision, retrospection, and distortion; time as a fluid medium; experience as nonlinear and interrelated.

By examining these works, in turn, we learn more about ourselves. Time travel is the study of memory and grief, regret and anticipation, storytelling and human nature.

In his 2013 book, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, David Wittenberg writes:

> Since even the most elementary narratives, whether fictional or nonfictional, set out to modify or manipulate the order, duration, and significance of events in time—that is, since all narratives do something like 'travel' through time or construct 'alternate' worlds—one could arguably call narrative itself a 'time machine,' which is to say, a mechanism for revising the arrangements of stories and histories. In this more expansive view, *literature itself might be viewed as a subtype of time travel*, rather than the other way around.

With this intriguing claim as his thesis, Wittenberg goes on to argue that "time travel fiction is a 'narratological laboratory,'" explicitly exploring the features that underlie all storytelling, from oral traditions to contemporary Western literature.

Frankly, I adore the notion of books as time machines. In assembling this collection, I have sought to reflect both the diversity of the genre and the tenuous separation between overt and covert time travel. *The Noise of Time*, by Julian Barnes, for instance, is not a science fiction novel in the slightest. But its boldly inventive approach to memory in the life of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich *is* a matter of time—its ebbs and flows, its erasures, and its incongruous repetitions. The novel leaps across decades, exemplifying Wittenberg's "narratological laboratory." In the novel, Barnes asks us, "What could be put up against the noise of time? Only that music which is inside ourselves… which, over the decades, if it is strong and true and pure enough to drown out the noise of time, is transformed into the whisper of history."

Many books in this collection explore such whispers of history. It is one of the great frontiers of the time-travel novel—the collision between the individual and the march of society, shaped by an incomprehensibly complicated aggregate of choices and chance. In Claire North's

Harry August, an ambitious time-loop story, the eponymous narrator concludes that "complexity should be your excuse for inaction." Reliving the same life over and over, August learns precisely how fragile his world is, how easily a careless action can cascade. He knows what we, in our daily lives, can only guess at: the consequences. But for him, such knowledge brings little more than terror and danger.

The destructive nature of such certainty is, perhaps, the most enduring lesson of time-travel narratives. In *Arcadia*, by Tom Stoppard, the character Septimus reflects: "When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore." That utter solitude is the lonely burden of most fictional time travelers. Perhaps we read these stories to reassure ourselves that our own achingly linear uncertainty is for the best.

And yet—we cannot refrain from telling our tales, distorting time in Wittenberg's temporal laboratory. We dream of the future; we dwell on the past. Constantly, we escape from the present and distort the passage of time. It is hardly surprising, then, that we are captivated by the literal depiction of this warping. Time travel novels, with all their fantastical turns, reflect nothing but ourselves, in all our convoluted and imperfect radiance.

Think of your greatest regret—not as mere pain, but as a story. *Your* story. Write it down, if you can, or lay out its anatomy in your mind. Shape its contours. Remember, a narrative is a time machine: step inside, past the flashing instrument panels and whirring dials; close the hatch; don't hesitate; flip the switch.

Who knows what you might find on the other side.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Adams, Douglas. *The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Portland House, 1997.

One of the rare masters of absurdity in science fiction, Adams revels in the fluidity of time. The second book in this omnibus collection, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, includes a brilliant satire of the numerous problems posed by time-traveler grammar, such as "how to describe something that was about to happen to you in the past before you avoided it by time-jumping forward two days in order to avoid it." The focus on tense formations, rather than classical paradoxes, is refreshing and typical of Adams. In such linguistic knots as "the Future Semi-Conditionally Modified Subinverted Plagal Past Subjunctive Intentional," he wonderfully illustrates the delights and difficulties of the genre.

Barnes, Julian. *The Noise of Time*. Vintage, 2017.

The fastidious realism with which Barnes fictionalizes the life of the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich should not eclipse the raw audacity of this novel. The narrative vaults non-linearly between three pivotal 'encounters with power' that shape and unravel Shostakovich's life through the censorship of his music. With a style that captures the intricate circuits and loops of memory, the time travel in this novel unfolds not by machines or magic, but through the narrator's wandering retrospection. And yet, despite all the convolutions, Barnes offers the reader the tentative hope of resolution through creation. "Art is the whisper of history," he writes, "heard above the noise of time."

Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Beacon Press, 2009.

A classic of modern literature and the science fiction canon alike, *Kindred* is a brilliant reckoning with the legacy of American slavery. In the opening pages, Dana is pulled from 1970s California back to the antebellum South, where she encounters her ancestors—both enslaved and enslaver—and fights to survive as a Black woman. The novel is a visceral allegory for the inherited trauma of racism, showcasing the power of time-travel stories to ground abstract ideas

in starkly literal terms. As Dana loses her temporal identity, Butler reminds us all that our violent history is never as distant as it seems.

Chiang, Ted. *Stories of Your Life and Others.* Vintage, 2016.

The best-known story in this collection, *Story of Your Life* (1998), was popularized as the basis for the 2016 movie, *Arrival*. But the story—a mind-bending interrogation of language, cognition, and love—deserves to be read on its own terms. As a linguist named Louise Banks deciphers an alien language, her perception of time slowly changes. She begins to remember events that haven't happened yet, including the life and tragic death of her as-of-yet-unconceived child. Chiang is meticulous in his technical invocations of linguistics and physics—all of which elevate his novellas from passing thought-experiments to unforgettable theoretical journeys.

Chiang, Ted. *Exhalation*. Vintage, 2020.

This collection features several excellent time-travel narratives among its nine stories. The Hugo- and Nebula-winning opening piece, "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate," is an elegant reimagining of classic time-travel tropes, set in medieval Baghdad. Fictional meddling in the past almost always ends in disastrous changes or bleak inevitability. But Chiang neatly sidesteps this dichotomy to tell a story about a time-traveler who fails to change his guilt-laden past, but instead, learns that his guilt is altogether misplaced. As the character concludes, "Nothing erases the past. There is repentance, there is atonement, and there is forgiveness. That is all, but that is enough."

Crouch, Blake. *Recursion*. Ballantine Books, 2020.

I listened to this book over a few days of hiking, and it took weeks for Crouch's concentric and recursive madness to fade. At once a murder mystery, an apocalyptic thriller, and a technocratic think-piece, the novel centers on the invention of a "memory chair," which allows users to jump back in time to a moment from their past while retaining their intervening memories. The intrigue builds until the characters are racing to stop a nuclear war from annihilating humanity. Although thoroughly high-octane, Crouch never neglects the philosophical implications of escaping death and rewriting time.

El-Mohtar, Amal; Gladstone, Max. *This Is How You Lose the Time War*. Saga Press, 2019.

This novella began as an epistolary experiment between the two authors—writing letters to each other in the voices of the narrators—and the enduring organic energy of that process is impossible to deny. One of the most grandly speculative books on the list, it follows two time-travelling super-soldiers, Red (Gladstone) and Blue (El-Mohtar), as they battle across millennia on behalf of their respective empires and taunt each other through their letters. But within the epic scale of galactic warfare, El-Mohtar and Gladstone find a surprisingly intimate love story. At once sprawling and concise, *Time War* reveals how the most immense stories hinge on the smallest moments.

Gaiman, Neil. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. William Morrow Paperbacks, 2021.

In this slim and haunting novel, the journey into the past is again mediated by memory. As the nameless protagonist returns to his childhood home for a funeral, he is plunged into recollections of a dark and fantastical youth: fairy tales, monsters, and inexplicable dangers. Gaiman draws on the equally dreamlike and horrific immediacy of childhood, daring us to remember what we forgot as we grew up.

King, Stephen. *11/22/63*. Thorndike Press, 2011.

Looking back on history, with its cascade of causes and effects, it's almost impossible to avoid the question: "What if…" Counter-factual scenarios speak to the appeal of revisionism, a classic domain of time-travel fiction. For King, this hefty novel is the answer to the question: "What if you could stop the assassination of John F. Kennedy?" Per the conventions of the genre, high-school English teacher Jake Epping's attempt to alter history and prevent JFK's murder goes very poorly. In lesser hands, the plot might feel stale. But King sticks to his strengths throughout: ambient dread, revealing detail, and strong character.

Michener, James. *Chesapeake*. Dial Press, 2003.

Many of Michener's geographic sagas would fit on this list, but I chose one particularly close to home. In *Chesapeake*, with his typically meticulous approach, Michener begins in the sixteenth-century with warring Native American tribes on the Eastern Shore of what will become Maryland. English settlers arrive soon after. As the arc of the story extends into the modern day, Michener follows a group of families through war, revolution, and persecution. Despite being strictly linear, the story is undeniably one of time travel. The scope of Michener's writing imparts the sense that the place itself, as it changes and evolves, *is* the character. Human transience only highlights the immortality of the world we inhabit and shape.

Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas*. Random House, 2004.

At the risk of leveling a superlative, *Cloud Atlas* is likely my favorite work of fiction. Relentlessly innovative, Mitchell braids six stories across millennia and genres into an intoxicating puzzle of a novel. What begins as historical adventure fiction pulls us, in short order, through romantic satire, noir mystery, contemporary comedy, dystopian science fiction, and far-future pastoral—and then back again, in reverse order. Each of the stories is connected to the adjacent ones as an artifact, found by the next set of characters as a letter, journal, or manuscript. In fact, connectivity is Mitchell's great theme, across time and space. As he writes: "Our lives are not our own. We are bound to others, past and present, and by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future."

Mitchell, David. *The Bone Clocks.* Random House, 2015.

In this novel, Mitchell is more mature and more controlled, though no less ambitious. The interlocking stories of *The Bone Clocks* proceed in one direction, from 1970s England to an unsettlingly plausible near-future in steep decline. However, it features a more supernatural bent, charting a metaphysical war between immortal body-hopping souls and a clan of vampiric sorcerers. At the same time, it interrogates everything from the absurdities of high-literary culture to American wars in the Middle East. Mitchell's genius for character and voice keeps intact what might otherwise be an unwieldy novel, arguing for the necessary coexistence of the fantastical and the familiar.

North, Claire. *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*. Redhook, 2014.

A fresh take on an old form: the time loop. North's exhilarating novel is not simply a Groundhog Day rewriting, however. Instead, she raises the stakes from the first conceit. Instead of a repeating day, Harry August has a repeating life; when he dies, he is reborn in the same time and place, with all his previous memories. After letting us enjoy the premise, North propels us into a philosophical and scientific thriller, as another immortal seeks to build a "God machine" that will unravel the secrets of the universe—by any means necessary. *Harry August* is a good reminder that there are still new frontiers to be explored in subgenres like the loop.

Osborn, Mary Pope. *Dinosaurs Before Dark*. Random House, 1992.

As with many readers, the *Magic Treehouse* series was one of my first introductions to time travel in fiction. In this first installment of the prodigiously long-running children's fantasy series (now well over fifty volumes), Osborn flings her two young protagonists, Jack and Annie, back to the Cretaceous. The story's whimsical time machine—the titular treehouse—mirrors the role of the books themselves, carrying young passengers back in time to galavant through distant eras.

Stoppard, Tom. *Arcadia*. Grove Press, 2017.

Arcadia is not an easy play to describe. When I assistant-directed its production for the KWP last year, we often referred to it as a play about sex, gardening, and the Second Law of Thermodynamics. It is certainly about all of those things. But it is also about time—its immutability, its proximity, its strangeness. With his characteristic elegance, Stoppard brings two centuries of the same family so close that they nearly touch, under the guise of a literary mystery about Lord Byron. When Stoppard died recently, I was reminded of the play's conclusion: death, we see, is inevitable. From a certain perspective, the characters are already gone. But in those few moments of stillness that remain, before time comes crashing down around them, they simply dance—oh, how they dance.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Dial Press, 1999.

Overt time-travel is rare in mainstream literature, but Vonnegut's famous exception is unmatched. Drawing on his own experience as a German prisoner of war, the nonlinear story follows Billy Pilgrim as he bounces through his own improbable life, "unstuck in time." At once fatalistic and lively, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a daring and foundational piece of time-travel literature, echoed by many subsequent works in this collection. It even includes, like Chiang's *Story of Your Life*, an alien culture with a simultaneous perception of temporal events.