

with our inner caveman, which explains why certain predictions in the past have gone badly wrong. For instance, hearsay is not enough when it comes to news of a fresh food source; our ancestors wanted evidence. Could this be why we insist on printing out e-mails and not having paperless offices? Or why the internet has not killed television and radio? (Or, likewise, why television and radio have not

killed theatre and live concerts?) Or why university campuses are filled with students when they could be getting an online diploma instead? We're naturally "high touch" rather than "high tech" individuals.

I had high hopes for this book, but unusually, it took me a month to read it — including a brief hiatus during which I devoured Stephen Fry's autobiography in just a couple of evenings. Possibly I am

too in touch with my inner cavewoman to believe in the future. My feeling is that there will be several disruptive changes in our near future because our planet is unable to sustain our growing population. Many of these changes will be driven by science, but we can't predict the revolutions that will surely happen. □

REVIEWED BY MAY CHIAO

## Back to the future

EXHIBITION

There is something symbolically chilling about the sight of the saucer-shaped object protruding from the well-stocked library wall. Contemplating the detritus of anonymous tomes scattered round about, you might be moved to lofty thoughts of bland orthodoxy reduced to rubble

in the face of an aggressively imagined future. Alternatively, you could just run away screaming: "The aliens are coming! The aliens are coming!"

An auspicious (if ambiguous) start to the British Library's new exhibition, *Out of this World* (20 May–25 September 2011), and its first such foray into the weird and wonderful worlds of science fiction.

Detractors of science fiction, of which there are many, might argue that it all reduces to a series of juvenile glimpses of an imaginary future. This does the genre a disservice. For sure, many popular practitioners have adopted the trappings of science fiction simply as storytelling devices, little different from the common contextual frameworks that typify other fiction genres. But for others, the conceits of what we now call science fiction have provided a versatile substrate on which to explore deep philosophical questions relating to the impact of progress on society, politics and even what it ultimately means to be human. (Or indulge in the occasional bout of intergalactic mud-wrestling between scantily clad nubile and garishly pigmented tentacular extraterrestrials.)

Regardless of whether your tastes for the fantastical are pulpy or highbrow, the exhibition has the capacity to inform and surprise. One moment you might be

fascinated by the intricate hand-drawn timeline produced by Olaf Stapledon in preparation for his epoch-spanning epic *Last and First Men* — a graphic that could have been lifted straight from a contemporaneous scientific periodical (indeed, is that a reference to Eddington I saw inscribed in the margin?). The next you find yourself bemused by the graphical adventures of Doraemon the robo-cat.

Carefully drawing from nearly two millennia of speculative literature (and unsurprisingly the British Library does have a lot to draw from), this exhibition is not a dry academic chronology of science fiction. Rather, it focuses on the overarching themes that have motivated writers and inspired their devoted readers through the ages. We get to share their dreams of alien worlds, utopian societies and even the convoluted landscapes of the mind itself (dream worlds being the predecessors of more contemporary explorations into virtual 'cyberspaces'). If one feels the need for a reductionist description, then the concept of parallel worlds, or 'multiverse', will probably do the trick. But then, what wouldn't fit under such a rubric?

Where the exhibition goes astray is, surprisingly, in its adoption of multimedia tools to add an interactive audio-visual dimension to these other-worldly themes. In principle, this sounds like a highly appropriate idea — a tangible nod to the technological progress envisaged by so much of the source literature. But to a generation weaned on iPads and their ilk, the tools on display seem merely quaint and outdated, like the dusty props from a decades-old science-fiction movie.

It is also perhaps ironic that the centrepieces of the exhibition — the texts themselves — appear as fading relics



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Turn back the clock. The concept of machine-assisted time travel is often accredited to H. G. Wells and his 1895 novel, *The Time Machine*. But in a temporal twist of fate, one such device surfaced several years earlier in *El anacronópete* (1887), a little-known novel by dapper Spanish diplomat Enrique Gaspar.

suspended, butterfly-like, in glass-fronted display cases. What were once notable examples of forward-looking thought now reduced to museum curiosities? Yet these texts are ultimately the exhibition's strength, offering a vivid illustration of the timeless power of the mind to imagine and extrapolate. □

REVIEWED BY KARL ZIEMELIS

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