

SCIENCE FICTION

Broken brains and runaway technology

Jennifer Rohn enters the dystopian world of Susan Greenfield's first novel.

In her debut novel *2121*, the outspoken neuroscientist Susan Greenfield wants us to be very afraid about the effect of computers and the Internet on our way of life, and even on the structures of our brains. Greenfield, the former director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, has delivered this cautionary message extensively in other media, notably in her non-fiction book *Tomorrow's People: How 21st-Century Technology Is Changing the Way We Think and Feel* (Allen Lane, 2003).

2121 projects what Greenfield thinks might happen in a hundred years or so if our digital obsessions persist unchecked. In the novel, humanity is split into two groups so distinct that they are nearly different species. The majority, known as the Others, have embraced genetics-perfecting techniques such as mutation correction and *in vitro* fertilization with approved donors, and have surrendered completely to technology they no longer understand. They possess no self-consciousness, engage in minimal personal contact and live entirely for pleasure, using

drugs and implants that make life one long video game. Their truncated attention spans mean that they can scarcely remember how to communicate.

The other group, a splinter population known as the N-Ps (for 'Neo-Platonic' or 'Neo-Puritan'), has set up an independent society in an isolated area on the other side of a mountain. The lives of these people centre on earnest work, intellectual enrichment and physical exercise. Most technologies are

"Fiction is a valuable way to engage people with science, but interesting ideas are not enough."

banned, along with anything spontaneous or emotional — "What's an exciting feeling?" one N-P child enquires of his father, who replies, "It's when you feel so funny inside that you cannot concentrate on learning things." As with Spock, the half-human Vulcan character in *Star Trek*, true emotions still occur, but the N-Ps are trained to suppress them.

At the beginning of the story, N-P neuroscientist Fred is dispatched by his government employers to the world of the Others to assess whether they pose a threat. The Others are largely oblivious to real-life stimuli, so Fred is able to study them as if they are goldfish in a bowl. The experiment begins to break down when Fred becomes seduced by the Others' lifestyle and behaviour, and loses his scientific objectivity. In parallel, his main experimental subject has learned so many N-P



2121
SUSAN GREENFIELD
Head of Zeus: 2013.

characteristics from Fred that she starts to break free from the experiment, as well as from the Others' mental prison, with potentially world-changing consequences.

2121 conveys many of Greenfield's pet ideas, and her portrayal of a civilization on the slide to nowhere is evocative and sometimes alarming. But as a work of fiction it disappoints. The pace never picks up in a story woven together from the supposed audio diaries of several characters — multiple first-person narratives that confine the action to their limited points of view. The dialogue in these diaries is freighted with vast amounts of exposition and scientific facts, interrupted by long, introspective passages. Moreover, the dual civilizations are so one-note that they fail to live and breathe. In fact, Greenfield confesses in her Afterword that the Others and the N-Ps are caricatures. Fiction is a valuable way to engage people with science, but interesting ideas are not enough: a lively story and believable characters are essential.

The book will not enlighten those eager for proof of Greenfield's oft-voiced claims about the perils of ubiquitous technology. But the novel does make you think. Anyone who has watched people stroking their smartphones rather than talking to one another, or who feels alarmed by Google's web- and video-enabled spectacles, will probably experience some unease over the descriptions of the Others' oblivion. Still, we lack solid evidence that the "all-too-inevitable outcomes of the twenty-first century lifestyle" may be a loss of brain health, consciousness and identity, as Greenfield states in the Afterword. *2121* remains — for now — firmly lodged in the realm of speculative fiction. ■

Jennifer Rohn is a cell biologist at University College London and the editor of *LabLit.com*. Her latest novel is *The Honest Look*.
e-mail: jenny@lablit.com

