

HT Wknd

A PART OF YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE

In other worlds...

The future is closer than it used to be. In our five-year Wknd stock-taking of sci-fi evolutions – our first since the pandemic – it turns out timelines have shrunk to a few decades from now. Utopias have their dark sides. Machines have taken the jobs, and we are modifying our bodies and brains to try to keep up. Octopi have set up societies of their own; families may contain a cyborg and a robot. Take a look...

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- Actors, models, writers and photographers turn out to be lines of code in an algorithm.
- A robotic metal platform vrooms into floodwaters and rescues 300 people at a time.
- Typhoons rip facades off buildings in China, heat waves dry up a river in Europe, and rains flood South Asia, all in the same month.

That's not from the novels featured here. It's from the news in recent weeks. Five years after Wknd first explored what sci-fi writers were writing about as dystopias unfolded around them, we set out to ask: What on earth are they writing about now? As we expected, AI is everywhere, as is a new climate reality. In a bit of a surprise (at least for the more sceptical of us on the Wknd team), tales of utopias endure – though none is quite as pure as the classical ones from bygone eras. We survive beyond capitalism. Build cities on distant moons, where we tend to idyllic farms and make things by hand again. We attempt to colonise star systems with empathy. We still cycle in San Francisco. But the seas continue to rise. Robots demand rights. Gig economies are the only economies left standing. The timeline is shrinking too. These dystopias are set not centuries from now, but decades... some as close as 2095.

Science-fiction today isn't so much prediction as it is predication, or the inferring of outcomes. How will changes in the world materially affect what it means to

be a human being?" says American-Canadian author Ray Nayler. "Because the technologies we create have always, in turn, recreated us. Even our mastery of fire changed us, not just in terms of what we ate as a species, but also how our guts and brains evolved." In his novel, *The Mountain in the Sea* (2022), humans discover a species of super-intelligent octopi that want nothing to do with us, raising questions about the nature of our own intelligence. "We tend to place ourselves at the top of a hierarchy," Nayler says, "when intelligence is really about context." As we face changes in the economic and political spheres, ecology and society, how will we respond and adapt, "emotionally, socially and existentially... that is what much of science-fiction is now about," he adds. Hopeful futures, when they appear in new works, are rarely straightforward. "We're imagining societies that may have overcome some major structural problems – capitalism, ecological collapse, inequality or oppression – while recognising that the conflict doesn't simply vanish," says lawyer and science-fiction writer Gautam Bhatia. But then, when were the good times ever

Imagine taking a white ball from a white room and placing it in a green room. The ball hasn't changed. But the shift in context is everything... that's what sci-fi can do.

SILVIA PARK, author of *Luminous* (2025)

good times for all? he adds. "Someone's present-day reality has always been someone else's dystopia. As William Gibson put it: 'The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed.'"

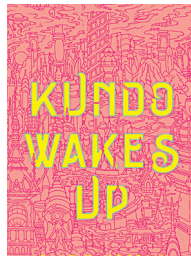
Does it help to process the world in this way, writing of a future in which, however we did it, we do make it through? "People turn to speculative fiction not because it predicts the future, but because it gives us a language with which to understand the present," says South Korean author Silvia Park. In her book, *Luminous* (2025), two siblings, a human and a cyborg, look for a missing third, a robot. What does it mean, the novel seems to ask, to care for someone programmed to care for you? "What we truly look for with this genre is perspective," Park says. "Imagine taking a white ball from a white room and placing it in a green room. The ball hasn't changed. But the shift in context makes it suddenly visible. As technology warps our sense of reality, speculative fiction can help us pause and take stock of what's actually going on." Read on for more on Park's novel *Luminous*; *Machinehood* (set in 2095); *Neon Riders* (the one set in San Francisco); and others hand-picked by our guest curators. Bhatia's choices include *Monk & Robot*, the hopepunk tale about human settlements and idyllic farms on a distant moon. Even in that utopian work, there is conflict, though it is a conflict that resides within. A seemingly happy monk travels the sylvan countryside, grappling with the sense that there must be more to life. A robot rejoins the world of men to ask: "What do humans need? What do humans need?" He asks in vain, of course. If we knew how to answer that one, we wouldn't be here, would we?

1 { KUNDO WAKES UP }

A collapse of karma

Tiny excerpt: *Kundo blinked twice for messages, still his first instinct of the day. Nothing. Nothing personal, nothing from another live human. Nothing even from Karma, the AI running the city, who had been gradually going silent. At first her updates had been round the clock, but over the past few years they had reduced in number, until today, for the first time, there were none at all, no greeting, no report on the weather or hostile-nanotech count in the air. Could an AI stop caring?*

Set in a drowned and decaying Chittagong, *Kundo Wakes Up* (2022) by Bangladeshi author Saad Z Hossain imagines a world in which an algorithmic force called AI Karma – that once governed society through a vast social-credit system – has mysteriously fallen silent.



The port city is meanwhile being swallowed by rising seas. In crumbling neighbourhoods, amid failing infrastructure, residents have in every sense been abandoned. Amid all this, Kundo, a once-celebrated artist, is now determined to resume the search for his wife, a gamer who left him about a year ago. As it turns out, others from across the city have gone missing too. Kundo is soon drawn into a far larger mystery. Joined by an eccentric band of gamers, coders, an Alzheimer's patient and a single mother, he journeys through hidden gaming parlours, digital underworlds and, eventually, into the mystical realm of djinns and ancient gods. Blending cyberpunk, folklore, high fantasy and climate fiction, *Kundo Wakes Up* tells a story of our enduring search for belonging and redemption, set in a civilisation on the brink of collapse.

2 { PRIVATE RITES }

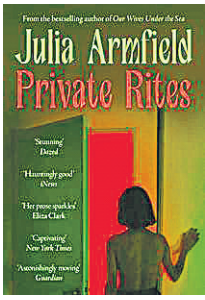
A world's final stages

Tiny excerpt: *It has been so many years... of almost this... It rains constantly and... the rain's whole great impending somethingness, runs parallel to the day-to-day of work and sleep and lottery tickets... of buying fruit and paying taxes, of mopping floors... and reading books and wondering what to do on dates. It's exhausting, as it always was, to live with such a breadth of things to take up one's attention – exhausting, the way there can be too much world, even in its final stages.*

It hasn't stopped raining in Britain. In years. Rivers have swallowed roads, neighbourhoods have disappeared; and people have simply learnt to live with the deluge. Against the backdrop of this

larger disaster, in Julia Armfield's *Private Rites* (2024), a family is falling apart. Isla, Irene and Agnes's father has died. A celebrated, charismatic architect, Stephen Carmichael was master builder to the elite. The sisters, largely estranged, have memories of a cold and emotionally manipulative man.

Now, they are forced back into his floating-on-pylons mansion, where buried resentments and fractured memories resurface. Loosely inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the novel unfolds as an interrogation of what it means to endure collapse day after day; as well as loss, grief and trauma, in a world that refuses to stop drowning.



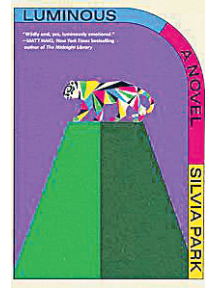
3 { LUMINOUS }

One big family

Tiny excerpt: *My father's older brother died in a fire... I was made in his image. When I woke up, I saw my father weep... I wept with my father, but he pulled away.*

In Silvia Parks's *Luminous* (2025), a disabled girl, scavenging through a scrapyard for metal that might help support her body, stumbles upon an abandoned robot boy. The novel soon unfolds into a story about family, disability, us and AI, and the ways in which we learn to care for one another. In a near-future reunified Korea, one where humanoid robots have become part of everyday life, two estranged siblings – Jun, a detective who started out human and is now a cyborg, and Morgan, a human who designs robots – are pulled back into each other's lives by the disap-

pearance of Yoyo, the robot boy created by their father and now befriended by the girl in the scrapyard. The novel seems to ask: What does it mean to care for someone programmed to care for you. Park says *Luminous* started out in her head as a children's book. Then childhood became representative of another liminal state, that of being human-like but not-human. The worldbuilding was inspired by memories of growing up in Seoul, "where centuries appear to co-exist". "Instead of a world that seems futuristic or flashy, I wanted to paint a future that feels surprisingly familiar," Park says. "Writing *Luminous* during the pandemic helped me realise how fragile society really is. And how the thing we still want more than anything, is connection, despite the way technology pushes us toward isolation. That's why I leaned into this sense of alienation and yearning, when trying to imagine our future."



BY THE NUMBERS: Titles recommended by (from top): 1. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, professor of global culture studies at University of Oslo. 2 & 3. Kashyap Kompella, author and tech-industry analyst. 4, 5 & 6. Gautam Bhatia, lawyer and science-fiction writer. 7 & 8. Sukanya Datta

HT ILLUSTRATION: PUNEET KUMAR VIA CHATGPT

4 { MONK & ROBOT }

Celebrate as we rebuild

Tiny excerpt: *"Do you not find consciousness alone to be the most exhilarating thing? Here we are, in this incomprehensibly large universe, on this one tiny moon around this one incidental planet, and in all the time this entire scenario has existed, every component has been recycled over and over and over again... You and I – we're just atoms that arranged themselves the right way."*

A monk and a robot walk into a forest, on a distant moon orbiting an unnamed planet. They talk about work, fulfilment, loneliness, ambition. Becky Chambers's two-part *Monk and Robot* novella, featuring the Hugo Award-winning *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and its sequel, *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* (2022), is, as she puts it in her dedication, "for anybody who could use a break".

On this distant moon named Panga, AI and robots once helped humans build an industrialised society. Following a robot revolution, the machines disappeared into the wilderness. Without them, humans have switched to a life of farming, building self-sustaining villages from "mycelium masonry". In this idyllic world, a tea monk shuttles between villages, offering tea and a patient ear. But his placid smile hides a restlessness. He cannot help but wonder if there is more to life than this. In the forests, he meets a robot curious about human life. Part 2 follows the duo as they wander through human settlements, the robot asking the people they meet: "What do humans need? What do humans need?" In this hope-punk world, characters choose kindness as rebellion. But the need to challenge the system never disappears.



FLASHBACK: Read: Cracks in the Crystal Ball. Dystopian writers discuss 2020 – and where the plot would go next, if they were writing 2021