

on the web

Frozen, not stirred

The polar explorer Romain Troublé has won the Shackleton prize for an audacious plan to spend all winter atop a frozen sea, in a research vessel that looks like a flying saucer, studying the North Pole as it changes



What do you mean, maybe?

The likelihood that a storm will hit, crops will fail, a stock will sink... probability theory helps hold our world together. How far back does it go? It turns out hunter-gatherers may have harnessed the idea using dice, as much as 12,000 years ago



The eras tour

A YouTube series called Off the Record offers a gripping, sweeping 'history' of music, starting with the Big Bang, says Sanjoy Narayan. In Download Central



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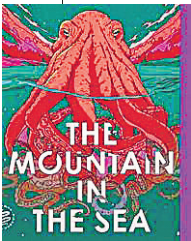


6 { MOUNTAIN IN THE SEA }

Shutter island

Tiny excerpt: "In the forests of South America, hunters sleep face-up so the jaguar will see them as beings capable of looking back at him, and leave them alone. If they sleep facedown, the jaguar will mistake them for helpless prey and attack them... If we are to communicate with a sentence that has gained language skills like the ones we have, everything will rely on how sensitive we can be to how that alien mind perceives our actions. Everything."

That's from a book being written by researcher Ha Nguyen, the protagonist of The Mountain in the Sea (2022). Each chapter of Ray Nayler's novel opens with an excerpt from her notes.



She is currently studying a highly advanced species of octopus discovered off the coast of Vietnam. Early glimpses indicate they possess a new form of intelligence.

A tech giant has now bought the rights to the region, sealed it off, and asked Nguyen to make first contact. They want to use the octopi to make better AI.

She learns that the creatures communicate through symbols such as changes in skin colour. Through various such forms of messaging, they seem to be saying "Go away".

Through Nguyen's eyes, the book explores ideas of consciousness, AI, environmental destruction, exploitation of labour, and the limits of human exceptionalism.

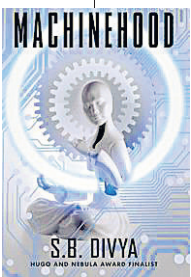
"We constantly judge other species by what we consider intelligence – our own. We tend to place ourselves at the top of a hierarchy," Nayler says, "when intelligence is really about context. So I thought the book could ask: What might another form of intelligence make of us?"

7 { MACHINEHOOD }

'Life' in 2095

Tiny excerpt: "We believe that the time has come to end the distinction between organic and inorganic intelligence. All of us are intelligent machines. All of us deserve the rights of personhood."

By 2095, the rise of AI has pushed humans to modify themselves via pills and enhancements, in order to stay employable. Most workers, human and non-human, operate in a hyper-competitive gig economy. They livestream their day, hoping for tips from viewers, which provide a vital source of added income.



This is the world of Nebula-nominated Indian-born American author SB Divya's Machinehood (2021). Amid all this, a terror group – a collective of intelligences – releases a declaration of rights. All beings, including all animals, trees, humans and intelligent machines, must be recognised as equal, they say. The extreme, body- and mind-mangling pills must stop too.

When the world ignores their demands, the assassinations begin. The first target is a high-profile billionaire who has poured money into pill companies. "The idea was to set the plot in a realistic future where the good, the bad and the ambiguous co-exist," says Divya, a former electrical engineer with a history of working on machine intelligence.

"Because the ultimate danger isn't what machines will do to humans, but what humans will devise next, to exploit both machines and themselves."

8 { NEON RIDERS }

A golden gate

Tiny excerpt: He had the wild thought that San Francisco was like one big cathedral. Almost every window was... some manner of solar coating to capture sunrays... Every skyscraper was like a stained glass window. And at night—ahhh!—it was as if buildings were decked in Christmas lights.



AE Marling's pulsating solarpunk thriller, Neon Riders (2025), is set in a San Francisco of the future.

In this lush, neon-green metropolis former office towers have become thriving vertical neighbourhoods. Clean energy powers everyday life. People live by tending to shared gardens, making clothes, and repairing rather than replacing.

Beyond city limits, a family of survivalists soldiers on in isolation, mistrustful of the new ways. Their quiet existence is shattered when one of their own runs away.

In San Francisco, the young man discovers friendship, and falls in love with a competitive bicyclist.

She introduces him to a community of e-bike racers who turn the city's hilly streets into high-speed circuits. When the survivalists arrive in an armed group, the determined to reclaim him, the city becomes the stage for a tense confrontation.

What happens when new forms of solidarity come up against stagnancy and fear?

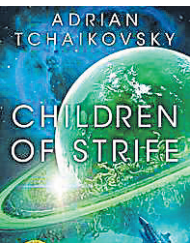


ALSO CHECK OUT two new collections of Indian sci-fi, with a focus on caste and the absurdities of modern life

5 { CHILDREN OF TIME }

Across star systems, empathy

Tiny excerpt: [The mantis shrimp] came before the other species and made their request. Resources, technology, space. Most importantly, that last one. Somewhere among the stars... A star system where they could set up and be themselves, and live in a way their ancestors would recognize. Albeit with spaceships and orbitals, and all the benefits of Panspecific ingenuity. There was no central authority to apply to, of course, because the Portiids had never worked like that, the Octopuses still less so, while the Humans were trying not to.



A dying Earth. Untameable space colonies. Uplifted spiders, octopi, giant crows and mantis shrimp (made sentient or more intelligent via technology). And the search for a place to call home.

Adrian Tchaikovsky's Children of Time (2015-26) series is a sweeping, four-part space opera of strife, non-human intelligen-

ces, evolution, survival and the hubris of playing God. It comprises Children of Time (2015; winner of the Arthur C Clarke Award), Children of Ruin (2019), Children of Memory (2022) and Children of Strife (March: 2026). It begins with humanity's doomed bid to terraform a distant planet, and charts the rise of new civilisations in different star systems.

This year's release, Children of Strife, follows a lost research vessel whose only surviving members include a mantis shrimp war hero, a tormented scientist, and the ship's AI. Together, they search the ruined planet of Marduk for their lost colleagues.

What ties the books together are an emphasis on empathy and cooperation. Empathy is an increasingly endangered commodity in the world, Tchaikovsky has said.

A good future, regardless of whether we live alongside humans or aliens or spiders, is one where it survives.

culture

Disco gets its revenge

It was mocked, derided, chased out of the mainstream, but never really went away. It lived on in house, garage, EDM. Now, it has come roaring back – via Beyoncé, Dua Lipa, films, TV



Disco's syncopated basslines underpin Dua Lipa's Dance the Night and Beyoncé's Summer Renaissance. Read on to see why John Travolta's Saturday Night Fever (1977) never really did the genre justice.

GETTY IMAGES

Bhanuj Kappal

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On the evening of July 12, 1979, a large crate full of disco records exploded in the centre of Chicago's Comiskey Park stadium. The detonator, dressed in army fatigues and a combat helmet, was local rock DJ and anti-disco crusader Steve Dahl. The event was called Disco Demolition Night. After the explosion, the crowd stormed the field and set fire to any discs that had survived it.

All this was part of a backlash gathering steam across the US.

Many called July 12 "the day disco died". In July 2026, that obituary looks wildly premature. Disco has quietly slipped back into the mainstream.

Its syncopated basslines underpin chart-topping tunes by Dua Lipa (the '70s-inspired Dance the Night, among others), Tyler, The Creator (Sugar on my Tongue; which owes a lot to Italo-disco and funk) and Beyoncé (Cuff It and Summer Renaissance, among others).

Retro Indian tracks are being rereleased by archival labels such as the LA-based Naya Beat, being spun at bars and clubs, and appearing on the soundtracks of blockbuster films such Dhurandhar: The Revenge (Usha Uthup's Ramba Ho) and series such as Bait.

Boogie wonderland

Born in the warehouses and underground clubs of early-1970s New York, disco was more a social experiment than a specific sound. The scene united Black, Latino and queer communities, as well as artists, immigrants and working-class New Yorkers, on the dance floors of parties such as DJ David Mancuso's The Loft.

"Race, color, belief and sex were minor details in the dance," Michael Gomes, a writer and a regular at the Loft parties, tells historian Tim Lawrence in the latter's 2003 book, Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979.

That vision of the dancefloor helps explain both disco's explosive rise and the vehemence of the backlash against it.

The John Travolta-starrer Saturday Night Fever played an interesting role in that arc. Released in 1977, it earned over \$237 million worldwide and turned what had been an underground subculture into a global phenomenon, but it also flattened disco into a caricature of mirror balls, polyester suits and clownish moves.

Meanwhile, the genre was dominating the



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{ DEE FOR DRAMA }

Deepanjana Pal



Errors in mapping

Isn't it odd that the Odyssey, written ~3,000 years ago, should have stronger, more easily forgiven women than a modern retelling?

Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey begins in a great hall, with a bard (Travis Scott).

Drawing an elegant line between ancient epic storytelling and modern-day rap, Scott begins the bard's performance with a neat summary of the Iliad: "A face, a fleet, a war, a man, a thought, a trick." Armed with that context, we enter its sequel, the Odyssey.

The face he's referring to is that of Helen of Troy, played by Lupita Nyong'o. The decision to cast her led to outrage from corners of the internet populated by trolls whose tiny brains exploded at the idea of a Black woman playing the legendary beauty.

Nyong'o is an inspired choice and does justice to her roles (as Helen and her sister Clytemnestra). But, wonderful as Nyong'o is, she and her character are failed by Nolan.

In Homer's 8th-century-BCE epic, Helen is a commanding presence as the queen of Sparta. She is powerful not only because of her husband Menelaus, but also by virtue of her "potion", which com-

charts. Gloria Gaynor's I Will Survive and Village People's YMCA (both 1978), for instance, sold over 12 million copies each.

As more music from the genre flooded the market, critics lashed out. Disco was called "formulaic" and "soulless". But historians argue that the root of the anger ran far deeper, reflecting anxieties around race, sexuality and changing ideas of masculinity.

Then came Comiskey Park. After that, labels were wary; artists moved on.

Stayin' alive

The genre didn't die, though. It retreated underground. In Chicago, DJs such as Frankie Knuckles distilled disco's grooves into what would become house (a genre he famously called "disco's revenge").

The genre's rhythmic DNA seeped into boogie, garage, and electronic dance music.

"Disco has influenced so much contemporary Black American music," says Raghav Mani, a DJ and founder of Naya Beat Records. "It may have gone through these peaks and valleys, but the soul and heart of it remained very much alive."

Europe embraced the synth-driven evolution called Euro-disco. In Japan, the sound fused with jazz, rock and funk to give rise to city pop. Nigeria and Ghana folded it into Afro-funk and highlife. Across the Caribbean, it collided with soca and calypso.

In India, films played up absurd stereotypes. But at the same time, Bangalore-born producer Biddu helped invent Euro-disco in Britain, producing Carl Douglas's Kung Fu Fighting (1974) before returning to South Asia for Aap Jaisa Koi (1979) and Nazia Hassan's Disco Deewane (1981).

The current revival can be traced, at least chronologically, to electronic duo Daft Punk's smash hit Get Lucky, a breezy disco-pop track that reached #2 on the Billboard Hot 100 list in 2013.

Alongside, nu-disco bands such as Soulwax and Aeroplane helped the genre get back onto the charts. Nu-disco proponents have found work producing for artists such as Lady Gaga, nudging the sound of contemporary pop towards funk and disco.

Contemporary filmmakers and storytellers then began to deploy disco as emotional shorthand: for glamour, longing, identity, nostalgia, liberation, or collective joy, benefiting each time from the genre's undeniable sense of propulsion. "I think the sound represents a more hopeful bygone era," says Mani. "When people could come together as a community. When the future felt brighter."

It is also still simply great music that seems to suit every scene.

forts the drinker by taking away their pain and grief. Nolan strips her of her powers, in his retelling, turning her instead into a battered wife.

We meet her when Telemachus (Tom Holland), son of Odysseus, the absent king of Ithaca, travels to Sparta.

Menelaus (Jon Bernthal) introduces him to Helen, taking vicious pleasure in turning his wife's face so he can see that the other side of her immaculate profile is disfigured by terrible scars.

This is a fear-struck woman subdued into an apologetic alter-ego of the Homeric version. It's ironic that one of the oldest surviving works of literature is able to imagine a woman commanding her husband's respect even after having an affair, but the 21st-century retelling chooses to punish her.

Another character reduced to a fraction of her stature is Athena, goddess of wisdom and protector of Odysseus. Towards the end, we are shown a flashback of the sacking of Troy, and a brief moment when Odysseus sees a priestess, weeping and begging for mercy, beheaded. The great reveal is that hers is the face that morphs into Athena's and haunts him on his journey.

Homer's Athena radiates power, and plays an enormous role in how the tale progresses. The film version, played by Zendaya, is entirely irrelevant to the action.

Nolan was arguably the perfect person to remake the Odyssey as a film. He has explored many of its themes with awe-inspiring elegance in the past (think of 2014's Interstellar or even 2023's Oppenheimer), and while The Odyssey is flawed, it is still a filmmaking feat.

There are many flashes of brilliance from him as well as from collaborators such as cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema and composer Ludwig Goransson.

The only aspect of Homer's epic that sits uncomfortably with Nolan's filmography is the ancient bard's ability to make space for complex women within a rigidly patriarchal tradition. That says quite a lot about us in the present.

(Write to Deepanjana Pal @dpanjana on Instagram. The views expressed are personal)