

EVENT TITLE: The Future is Now—Near Future Speculative Fiction

EVENT DESCRIPTION: Many near-future fiction writers find themselves writing prescient scenarios, their imagined futures coming true. Four speculative fiction authors of pandemics, climate change, virtual reality, forced motherhood, immigration dystopias, and other cataclysms discuss the power to look forward, how they unearth the seeds of what will come and what is already here, and how to stay ahead of a future fast closing in.

EVENT CATEGORY: Fiction Craft and Criticism

**IN-PERSON EVENTS, PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR EVENT:**

Welcome to “The Future is Now—Near Future Speculative Fiction.”

A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, (identify moderator), know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.

- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

## OPENING MODERATOR REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Bren da	Peynado	brenda.peynado@gmail.com	Mode rator
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**Short Bio:** Brenda Peynado, author of *The Rock Eaters*, her debut collection, has received an O. Henry Prize, a Pushcart Prize, a Fulbright Grant, and a Nelson Algren Award, and appears in *Tor.com*, *Georgia Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *The Sun*. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Central Florida.

Jami e	Ford	jamie@jamieford.com	Partic ipant
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**Short Bio:** Jamie Ford's debut novel, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, spent two and a half years on the New York Times bestseller list and won the 2010 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature. His latest novel, *The Many Daughters of Afong Moy*, was published August 2022 by Simon & Schuster.

Jess amin e	Chan		Partic ipant
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**Short Bio:** Jessamine Chan's short stories have appeared in *Tin House* and *Epoch*. A former reviews editor at *Publishers Weekly*, she holds an MFA from

Columbia University. The School for Good Mothers is her first novel.

Sequoia	Nagamatsu	nagama1@stolaf.edu	Participant
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**Short Bio:** Sequoia Nagamatsu (@SequoiaN) is the author of the national bestselling novel, *How High We Go in the Dark*, and the story collection, *Where We Go When All We Were Is Gone*. He teaches creative writing at St. Olaf College and in the Rainier Writing Workshop Low-Residency MFA program.

Erin	Swan	erin.swan1@gmail.com	Participant
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**Short Bio:** Erin Swan is the author of *Walk the Vanished Earth*, a work of speculative fiction focusing on intergenerational trauma and environmental upheaval. A graduate of Teachers College at Columbia University and the MFA program at the New School, she teaches English at a public high school in Manhattan.

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## PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS, INITIAL THOUGHTS, OR READINGS

The moderator will begin the event by introducing the panelists and reading their short biographies.

Each panelist will give a brief introduction of their work and how it classifies as near future speculative fiction.

## MODERATOR QUESTIONS

1) What is the appeal of writing near future scenarios? Why did you choose that mode to write in for your story? How did you decide how close to the present to set your story?

Jessamine Chan:

- One of my inspirations was the Rachel Aviv article “Where is Your Mother?,” which appeared in The New Yorker in late 2013. In that article, the way that every representative of the government (social workers, family court judges, lawyers) spoke about parenting felt so chilling and clinical that it almost reminded me of science-fiction.
- The School for Good Mothers is set in an alternative present, or only slightly into the future. I decided not to add too many futuristic elements, because I wanted the focus to be on Frida and Harriet’s story.
- Using elements of speculative fiction allowed me to raise the stakes for the reader as well as giving me more room to play as a storyteller.

Erin Swan:

- For me, writing about the near future is a way for me to channel my anxieties about the present. If I can somehow transfer to the page my worries about what is happening now – the changes occurring in our climate, the battles over our bodily autonomy, the finite nature of our resources – I have found that it helps me envision where these paths will lead us and how we as a species might face these challenges. This doesn’t actually make me feel better, and I don’t think it should. These challenges are real and pressing, and I’m not interested in using writing to assuage my

anxieties, but rather to give them a voice, so that I can imagine where we might be headed and consider what my place – and the place of our species – in such a future might be. It is also a way for me to test my love for this world. It's kind of like pressing on a bruise to see if it still hurts. If I can create a terrible future for us and place my characters within that future, it's almost like I can check to see how much I still love the world we live in. It's like, "Oh, imagine if the coastlines flooded and we lost cities and towns and animals and people and plants and entire ecosystems? Yeah, that would be awful, and yeah, I love this complex world so much, and yeah, I'm so happy to be living in it and let's do what we can in our small ways to protect it." I used to do this with my dog when he was alive, imagine his death in horrible ways. It was pure torture, and I'd wonder why I was torturing myself with these scenarios, but then I'd be like, "Yep, I love my dog more than anything and I will do all I can to keep him safe." And so, writing about the future heading quickly our way helps me reaffirm my commitment to what lies before me now.

Sequoia Nagamatsu:

- Speculative and Sc-ifi narratives come naturally to me as someone who grew up consuming a lot of Asimov, Bradbury, Greg Bear et al. I even wore a Starfleet uniform to my first MFA workshop (albeit with the sleeves cut off for a bit of edge). And it wasn't just my fascination for space and technology or a peek into our future that drew me to these genres. For me, futuristic narratives are often a lens through which to

understand who we are as individuals and as a society . . . what if, if only, if, if this goes on . . . the primary considerations of futuristic visions according to Robert Heinline. How can some piece of technology or a soon to be but yet unrealized scenario help us better articulate how we navigate our world and how we might choose to navigate tomorrow? Ultimately, I think I often tend toward the futuristic and the speculative because we are living in the future . . . the gap between what we once considered the future world, the science-fictional, even the dystopian and our own reality is ever diminishing.

- How High We Go in the Dark is mostly set ten years in the future but does zoom out several generations from now and, depending on how you're counting and accounting for the relativistic effects of space travel, even thousands of years. But I wanted the heart of the narrative to be close enough to be our world . . . recognizable and yet a step or two ahead. The distance and the generational time scale was important because 1) I wanted to remove readers from our own pandemic and into how my characters navigated their own and 2) I wanted to be able to map how individuals and society moved forward from grief and tragedy, how such an event (far worse than our own) sent ripples through our infrastructure and culture in both expected and unexpected ways that could still be felt a century later.
- While I wrote How High largely before Covid, much of my late stage revisions happened in the late summer/fall of 2020 when much of the nation was under lockdown and quarantine. With this context, I knew that whatever I did my book would likely enter a conversation with readers about our experiences . . .

that while not a Covid book, it would become a book that could act as a speculative mirror for what we've gone through, how the liminal and tragic spaces we've lived in for so long wasn't just hitting a pause button on life but a time for reflection, possibility, and hard truths. Being a step removed from today is important for that kind of discovery.

Jamie Ford:

- I'm known for writing historical fiction, but spec fic is actually my mother tongue. I grew up on spec fic and it's what inspired me to become a writer. I even bought Harlan Ellison's first typewriter. But in a practical sense, historical fiction requires tons of research and you have to be mindful of how you may be distorting or misrepresenting the past. I never want to write historical morality plays, I'd rather present the facts, recreate the world, and let the reader form their own opinion. With spec fic, you don't have to be wedded to actual historical events, which, for me, is quite liberating.
- The appeal was very specific. I wanted to write about Afong Moy, the first Chinese woman to come to the US back in 1834. But despite her celebrity, she's voiceless and her story ends tragically. By giving her a matrilineal line that reaches to 2085, I was able to let her voice echo through her fictional descendants and redeem her story in a way.
- I chose *near-future* since I wanted to ground the reader in familiar events, places, and technology. Partly because this was such a change-up for those who have read my other books, but also, I'm more interested in

evolutions or culture, rather than revolutions, which a more distant-future story might call for.

2) What are the ways in which the scenarios and dystopias you've imagined have come true? What did you imagine that did not come true, or not quite in that way? What surprised you about the way that things unfolded in real life compared to your imagined futures?

Jessamine Chan:

- My book is intended to be a critique of the American child welfare system and the real-life tragedy of the government taking children from their parents, which affects thousands of families every year. In a sense, the basics of Frida's story have already come true.
- Government-mandated parenting classes exist, but my book pushes these real-life inspirations to an extreme to get readers to see our present reality in a new light. For example, indoctrination is literally indoctrination here, rather than being suggested. The monitoring that all parents under CPS supervision face is aided by technology in the world of my book.
- Though I shouldn't have been so surprised, I've been shocked and enraged by how much our country has moved backwards since 2016. Among many other problems, including racial injustice and climate change, the overturning of Roe has made me feel like my dystopian novel is not nearly dystopian enough.



Erin Swan:

- When I was writing my book, I made a decision not to write about our real future – because who was I to predict such a thing? – but rather to choose an alternate timeline in which the coastlines flooded in 2017 and Earth swerved onto a different course, somewhat, but not quite, tangential to the one we're on now. This allowed me to make up all kinds of wild things that I don't see actually happening in our own future, so that it became an exercise in hyperbole, a way to imagine the most extreme situations and make them come true on the page just to see how my characters would deal with them. For example, I don't think we will ever engineer a new species that can walk around on Mars without protective gear. That was me messing around and having fun with what I was writing. That said, I was also thinking about our very real interest in traveling to Mars, which I do believe is a possibility within this century, and I was also thinking about what has been documented about changes in the climate. I cannot say that the unusual weather patterns and increased natural disasters we have seen in the past few years have come as any surprise. But of course, it didn't take a rocket scientist to predict that, did it?

Sequoia Nagamatsu:

- So, as I noted earlier, *How High We Go in the Dark* does deal with the origin and aftermath of a plague—something called the Arctic Plague that is unleashed with the frozen remains of a Neanderthal girl in Siberia releases an ancient (and otherworldly)

pathogen. It's a far worse pandemic than what we've experienced . . . I mean, organs are shapeshifting into other organs . . . a liver into a brain, a heart into lungs. So the medical nature of the Arctic Plague is quite different and as with many (most?) plague books, the plague isn't really the point of the narrative at all vs. the humanity and community that navigates it.

- When I was revising the book, I made a concerted effort to diminish or entirely delete aspects of my plague that seemed too similar to our Covid world. I changed modes of transmission and most references to social distancing and masking because I wanted and needed readers to inhabit this fictional world first instead of seeing it immediately as a Covid mirror. So, in other words, a lot of what I had initially written did come true in terms of how we reacted. That said, and perhaps this is the most tragic and unfortunate thing of all, I think what remains to be the more fictional aspect of my novel is the amount of empathy and community that can be found within *How High We Go in the Dark*. I wish we saw more of that in our own world, more efforts of using the last few years to be kinder, to become better versions of ourselves, to look beyond our differences not only during a dark time but once we emerged from that time. In the pages of *How High*, people are lonely, isolated and grasping for connection, holding onto memories. We've all felt that. But when my characters reach out, there is almost always someone or something that promises a way forward, a better tomorrow, a brighter future for the health of our planet.

Jamie Ford:

- In my novel, *The Many Daughters of Afong Moy*, I'm writing about epigenetics which wasn't widely discussed a few years ago, let alone understood. As I was creating the book, the only person I spoke with who was familiar with epigenetics was my therapist, since there are several therapeutic modalities that address inherited trauma. But now epigenetics is quickly becoming part of our cultural lexicon. It's discussed in mainstream media, popular podcasts, and occasionally in film. I see it everywhere. Also, in the book I have given future-Seattle some rather dramatic weather: ARKstorms, which occur when the jet stream snags a typhoon in the South Pacific and brings it crashing into the Northwestern US. It's theorized that these happen once every few hundred years, but just this year, Sacramento was drenched with torrential rain and flooding. Much to my surprise, the AP wire and Yahoo New called this changing weather pattern an ARKstorm. It was the first time I saw the term used outside of a historical context.
- In the book, I've combined epigenetics and optigenetics (a real technology used to transfer a memory from one lab animal to another), creating a new therapeutic modality called epigenesis. We're not there yet, but I'm hoping. In the same way that Arthur C. Clarke presaged artificial satellites in 1945, years before Sputnik in 1957, I'm hoping some intrepid folks will create a form of epigenesis—so I can undergo treatment.
- My answer here is somewhat adjacent to the question, but in the book, I wrote about the plague epidemic in San Francisco in 1899--as a global pandemic was

unfolding. The similarities were shocking. With the plague epidemic, the governor of California, Henry Gage, would not acknowledge that this was happening for fear of hurting the California economy and his chance for reelection. There was also a doctor (wait for it) with a new vaccine. The doctor and the politician had a war of words in the press, with the politician accusing the doctor of having a profit motive and needlessly scaring people. Does this sound at all familiar? Tragically, like with covid, the Chinese were blamed for the plague outbreak.

3) How should readers and writers approach the idea that fiction can “predict the future”? What is the power fiction has to look forward? What are the limits of this expectation, and how would you complicate, reject, or embrace that expectation?

Jessamine Chan:

- Fiction has predictive powers, but I think we’re all reading for human stories, and the humanity in our work hopefully has a timeless quality.
- I think fiction has the power to ask important, difficult questions that will inspire readers to learn more and go on their own journeys of discovery, as all of us did in writing our books.

Erin Swan:

- I don’t think fiction writers can necessarily predict the future any more than anybody else. It’s only that we

choose to write about what we see happening now, and the issues confronting us now necessarily have their own futures, ways in which they will play out and continue to evolve and find resolutions, or not. For sure the worlds portrayed in classic works of futuristic dystopian fiction – 1984, Brave New World, and The Handmaid's Tale, for example – have found embodiment in what we are living through now, with the existence of the surveillance state, our adoration of consumerism, and the policing of the female body, to name a few realities. However, I assume those writers were also in many ways channeling their anxieties about their own times. The seeds of our future are, of course, already embedded in our present worlds. I think in some ways it can be simply a matter of following things through to their logical conclusions.

Sequoia Nagamatsu

- I don't think books are meant to predict the future. Sure, some might seem to in retrospect and the government and military has a history of tapping sci fi writers to dream up machines and scenarios, but I think the purpose of futuristic narratives is to better understand our present and the fabric of who we are and who we might become. Futuristic stories can be cautionary tales, but they are also possibility spaces to consider where we might want to step and how.

Jamie Ford:

- Novels are imagination-expanding experientials. Spec fic and SF are directional, and even if not predictive, will be compared to actual history as the real world

catches up (like when I read 1984 in high school, in 1984). It helps if readers and writers have the capacity to suspend their disbelief and go with it, otherwise they should stick to contemporary storytelling. Also, see my earlier answer regarding Arthur C. Clarke

- Non-fiction tells you what happens, what's possible, but fiction tells you how it feels. It's a powerful difference.

4) What advice would you give other writers who are writing near future fiction?

Jessamine Chan:

There's no one right way to write near future fiction or build a world. You don't necessarily even have to know you're writing speculative fiction. I certainly didn't. You could just be telling a story, using the elements you need from different genres. Trust yourself. Trust the reader. Read widely and look for inspiration everywhere.

Erin Swan:

- The same advice I would give any writer, if asked. Write whatever you want. Write what thrills you, what gives you joy, what scares the daylights out of you. Make stuff up. Make crazy stuff up. Write, as a wise author once said, with "most of your stars out," or all of your stars out. Nobody else – except maybe ChatGPT? – is going to do it for you.

Sequoia Nagamatsu

- As others have noted, I don't think there's a specific rule book here. Read a lot and read widely first and foremost. Watch film and television that inhabit these spaces and ask yourself why these narratives matter beyond their high concept or conceit . . . what do these stories tell us? I will say that a cool concept or piece of technology isn't quite a story. It might be part of a world and maybe even part of a narrative engine, but character (people) should be a significant if not central part of that equation. The proportion of how much that equation falls on particular elements of craft is a personal decision and this ultimately will land a story on the vast spectrum of the tradition of futuristic stories.

Jamie Ford:

- Create stories that aren't something for everyone, but everything to someone, even if that someone is yourself. Or as Harlan Ellison once said, "Write for the wisest, wittiest, most intelligent audience on earth—write for yourself."

## Q&A SESSION

There will be time for a 10–15-minute Q&A session. Please pass the wireless microphone to the person posing the question or repeat all questions into one of the wired microphones.