

The Ayes Have It
by David Mitchell

Late in 2014 I received an email from a British editor friend. It was about an art project called Future Library, the brainchild of Scottish artist Katie Paterson, and it contained a unique proposal. The deal would be that I write something – poem, story, full-length novel if I wanted – and hand over a hard-copy and a digital copy on a USB stick in May 2016. I could neither discuss nor show anybody what I'd written. What I wrote would be stored at the City Library in Oslo, along with manuscripts given by one writer a year until 2114, when the entire collection will be printed on paper made from a plantation of Norwegian spruces planted in 2014. Margaret Atwood had gone first: would I like to be the 2015 writer? Once my ego stopped purring at the sight of my name next to Margaret Atwood's, doubt started creeping in. I have serious debts at the Bank of Free Time, and if I did say Yes I'd want to contribute something more substantial than a story knocked off over a week or two. So I did what I normally do when I don't know what to do, which is nothing. This default ruse is my apathy filter: if a request or offer isn't for real, or if it lacks momentum, you never hear from the sender again.

My editor friend is an experienced handler of dithering authors however, and he knows all about apathy filters. In early 2015 he sent a follow-up 'We're serious; how about it?' email. This time I drew up a list of reasons why I might say Yes:

Firstly, the Future Library project is a vote of confidence in the future. Its fruition is predicated upon the ongoing existence of Northern Europe, of libraries, of Norwegian spruces, of books and of readers. Votes, especially Utopian-tinged ones, often count for nothing; but sometimes, in matters of politics or karma, you do indeed get what you vote for – by dint of having voted for it. Maybe that's a little woolly, but if civilisation's long-term survival prospects are zero, why bother getting up in the morning?

'Secondly' is similar to 'Firstly' but it pertains to trust, not idealism. Katie Paterson will not be alive in 2114, nor Anne Beate Hovind, the Future Library's coordinator, nor me, nor the next thirty or forty writers who deposit manuscripts in Deichman Library in Oslo, nor the foresters who tend the plantation of spruces. We have to trust our successors, and their successors, and theirs, to steer the project through a hundred years of political skulduggery, climate change, budget cutbacks and zombie apocalypses. We have to trust that 'digital archeologists' will be manage to get inside ancient USB sticks. Katie Paterson has to trust me and my successors not to hand in a sheaf of blank A4 pages at the hand-over ceremony at the Future Forest at the end of May. We all have to trust that people not yet born will solve Known-Unknowns and Unknown-Unknowns. We trust that our trust is not misplaced. Being trusted often brings out the best in people – like when the cabin staff asks me to sit in the exit row, I actually read the "What to do in an Emergency" sheet and feel enabled and alert. Trust is a force for good in our cynical world, and the Future Library is a trust-generator.

Thirdly, imagine if an artist in 1913 had set up the Future Library Project, and the hundred-strong anthology had been published last year. Imagine leafing through new works by EM Forster, Katherine Mansfield, Knut Hamsun, Zora Neale Hurston, Rabindranath Tagore, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Amos Tutuola, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, Herman Hesse, Mikhail Bulgakov, Halldor

Laxness, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Gabriel Garcia Marquez; as well as, no doubt, writers whose names would now mean nothing – but whose contributions could still prove nourishing and beautiful. It's not false modesty to say that the chances are I'll be one of the also-rans in the Immortality Steeplechase too – most writers are. Nonetheless. Isn't the prospect of a berth aboard an Ark of Literature with fellow-passengers of this calibre not a tempting one?

Fourthly, I liked the project's cocktail of vanity and humility. How vain, to suppose that the scribblings of little old me will be of enduring interest to future generations. Yet how low-key and understated, to slave over a manuscript that nobody will ever pat you on the back for and say, "Nice one", or "God, I loved the bit where she did that and he did this..." Come next May, my manuscript will be as gone from me as a coin dropped in a river.

Lastly, not so long ago I was 15 years old, reading Isaac Asimov's Foundation Trilogy, and dreaming of vast literary projects with my name on the cover. I dreamed of them so zealously it hurt. That kid would never forgive his apathy filter-deploying 47 year-old self if I said No. Nor, I suspect, would my 79 year-old self, if I live that long.

Surveying this list, my main reason for declining the proposal – 'I don't really have time' – looked footling, and withered away. As they say at Westminster and in Katie Paterson's native land, "The Ayes have it."