

This Library Has New Books by Major Authors, but They Can't Be Read Until 2114

The Scottish artist Katie Paterson is collecting 100 unpublished works that won't be released in their writers' lifetimes.



The Future Library already houses works by the novelists Margaret Atwood, David Mitchell, Sjö́n and Elif Shafak. Esther Choi

By Merve Emre

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In a small clearing in the forests of Nordmarka, one hour outside the city limits of Oslo, a thousand spruce trees are growing. They will grow for the next 96 years, until 2114, when they will be felled, pulped, pressed and dyed to serve as the paper supply for the Scottish artist [Katie Paterson's Future Library](#): an anthology of 100 previously unpublished books written by some of the 21st century's most celebrated writers. There will be one book for every year the trees will have grown, each a donation from a writer chosen by the Future Library's board of trustees — a gift from the literary gatekeepers of the present to the readers of the future.

This summer, nearly 100 people made the annual pilgrimage to the clearing to watch the Turkish novelist Elif Shafak present Paterson with the fourth manuscript for the library, which already houses novels by [Margaret Atwood](#), David Mitchell and the Icelandic novelist Sjö́n. The Handover Ceremony, as it is called, is a modest ritual. The audience is called to order by the flutings and shouts of a Norwegian folk singer who blesses the land its offerings. Anne Beate Hovind, Chair of the Future Library Trust, established by the Oslo city government in 2014, introduces the audience to Paterson, Shafak and the seedlings, which now stand just over a foot tall and are dressed up for the occasion. Pretty red schoolgirl bows are tied around their center stalks, and the tops of their needles are turned out a younger, brighter green than the wild grass that surrounds them.

In previous years, it has rained, which means the local foresters have brewed coffee and hot chocolate on colossal iron grills while the audience has stood shivering under their umbrellas. But this year, the entire day — the entire summer, really — has been uncommonly hot and dry, and so the audience sits scattered among the saplings, drinking water and perspiring, as they listen to Shafak, author of 10 novels and a prominent feminist and critic of Turkish nationalism, speak. She describes writing a novel for the Future Library as “a secular act of faith” in a world that seems to have gone mad, a world that violently accentuates the differences between people instead of celebrating their common humanity. “When you write a book,” she says, “you have the faith that it will reach out to someone else, to someone who is different from you and it will connect us. That you will be able to transcend the boundaries of the self, that was given to you at birth, that you will be able to touch someone else's reality.” Yet in 96 years, when the seedlings become trees and the trees are sacrificed to the written word, it is impossible to know whose reality they will touch.



The site of Katie Paterson's “Future Library” in Nordmarka, a forested area north of Oslo.

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The next 96 years do not look promising for the seedlings, which are more vulnerable than their ancestors to all manner of man-made disasters: the storm surges, wildfires, heat waves, and droughts precipitated by global warming, as well as the less dramatic possibility that, amid the daily brutalities of life on earth, people will simply stop tending to them and the books that are their fate. The announcement of each new author is greeted with less media fanfare than the author that came before, and very few people have commented on the recent choice of Han Kang, winner of the 2016 Man Booker International Prize for her novel “[The Vegetarian](#),” as the fifth author. Increasingly, it seems, there is something unbearably precious about writing novels that cannot be read — an act of delayed gratification that can have no real payoff because it has no real stakes, only symbolic ones. And there is something more straightforwardly unbearable about planting trees knowing that, in a time of mass deforestation and consumer waste, they will be cut down to make paper. Confront the long, laborious process of preserving language. It refuses to take it for granted. And it reminds us that we have not always been attentive to how literature is made, distributed, preserved and celebrated.

But these are thoughts for tomorrow and not today, which is a day for celebration. Shafak's manuscript is sealed in a handsome gray box tied with a royal purple ribbon. “Don't open it and don't talk about the contents,” Hovind warns Shafak as she gets up to hand the box to Paterson, who weeps softly and openly. She explains that she is especially emotional this year as she has just had a child who she has brought with her to the forest, a towheaded little creature who will be 96 years old when the Future Library's anthology is printed.

Shafak kisses Paterson on both cheeks as she makes her offering. “I'm only allowed to share the title of the manuscript,” she apologizes, turning back to the audience. “It is called ‘The Last Taboo.’”

“PERSONS OR THINGS which are regarded as taboo may be compared to objects charged with electricity,” observed the anthropologist Northcote Thomas. Taboo, a Polynesian word that Sigmund Freud translated as “holy dread,” most often referred to an action that was both sacred and forbidden, consecrated and dangerous. It is an apt description of the Future Library, which grafts an environmental taboo onto an artistic one: trees that are planted to be cut down; books that are written not to be read.

The manuscripts are electrified by these taboos. In 2020, they will be moved to the New Deichmanske Library, currently under construction in Oslo, where they will be displayed in a “Silent Room”: a womb-shaped chamber facing the forest, lined with wood from its trees. Visitors will be able to enter, one or two at a time, to gaze at the manuscripts lying under their protective glass cases, waiting for the years to pass. More like a prayer closet than a reading room, Paterson describes the Silent Room as a “contemplative space.” Her hope is that it will prompt the visitor's imagination to journey through “deep time” to probe the mysteries of the forest.

What Paterson's description of the Silent Room makes clear is that the books of the Future Library were never meant to be read, certainly not in our lifetime, but not even in the future. They are meant to be worshipped, to be desired — a desire that draws all its strength from the impossibility of reading or reproducing them: Theirs is the fetishization of the singular, the uninterpretable. Like the 48 surviving copies of the original Gutenberg Bible, the manuscripts are devotional rather than functional objects, the genesis of a new practice of reading and writing. The correspondence they stage between writer and reader is not the immediacy of address Shafak attributes to a book as it circulates in the world but the projection of a literary kinship so deep, so transcendent, that it is worth waiting for — worth dying without.

It is no coincidence that the re-enchantment comes at a time when books as objects are treated like endangered species, their vitality threatened by the rise of new media ecologies and economies. This is a false panic — there are more books published and printed now than ever — but it is an infectious one. You can hear the defensiveness in her voice when Paterson insists during the Handover Ceremony that, in a hundred years, “There will be life! There will be books!” and it is surprising to note that her inflection falls harder on the latter than the former. What she means is that there will still be certain kinds of books: books written by authors already consecrated by the Western, white literary establishment; books which will be exempt from the vicissitudes of the market and preserved in what David Mitchell, referring to the Future Library, called “the Ark of Literature.” But the ark does not preserve those who are most in need of preservation. It is firmly committed to those authors who have already proven themselves the fittest, at least according to the tastes of the current literary marketplace.

What seems more naïve is how the mystical valence of the book is tied to the fate of life on earth, as if the manuscript's totemic powers could somehow ward off ecological devastation. The hope that underwrites the Future Library is, in turn, underwritten by a near apocalyptic sense of doom. Ecocide is a frightening, complicated political issue, and yet the members of the Future Library Trust allude to it with a strange air of placidity. “This is a simple place,” Hovind says of the clearing. Paterson echoes her sentiment. “This is an ordinary forest,” she says, as if the simplicity or ordinariness of the trees meant that protecting them did not have to be complicated, as if everything that threatened them could be wished away.

THE OPTIMISM OF ART feeds off the pessimism of ecocide — this is the dialectic that sits at the heart of projects like the Future Library and their banks of sacred objects. Many of these projects are in or around Oslo, which is a wealthy city that can afford to be one of the most sustainable. Buoyed by a rise in oil prices and Norway's generous welfare state, Oslo has invested heavily in sustainability initiatives: hydropower plants, biofuel buses, electric cars, an energy-positive airport city. Here it is a privilege and a duty to be aware of not just today, but the next hundred years.

If you fly three hours north from Oslo to the Svalbard archipelago, to a mountain buried deep in the Arctic permafrost, you will find the [Svalbard Global Seed Vault](#), a gene bank that can store samples of up to 4.5 million types of seeds from all over the world: wheats, lentils and chickpeas from extraordinary. The artistic-environmental banks of the present decide what ordinary things — books, seeds — we will make extraordinary now, before they are lost, so we can imagine a world in which we never lost them in the first place. “Hope for the future, plan for the Fallout,” urges an ocean expedition group that steers tourists near the Svalbard vault. “The Future Library is in itself a very hopeful thing because, number one, you're assuming that there will be people a hundred years from now,” echoes Margaret Atwood in an [interview](#) with Slate in 2015. “Number two, you assume that the forest will grow. You're assuming the library will still be there. You're assuming that people will still be able to read and that they will be interested in reading.”

But hope is a quiet and melancholic affect, an ethical position that is defined by a horizon of impossibility rather than action. Hope does not agitate. It does not incite opposition; it is often touted as transcending politics. Perhaps this is what makes it so readily available for art, which often privileges the virtual, the magical, over the political, economic and ecological practicalities of building a sustainable city, weaning it off fossil fuels and decreasing carbon emissions. The reconstitution of hope is an artistic task; indeed, it is art's only possible gift to the future. The Future Library is real in that there are books being written for it and there are trees growing to fuel its creation. But its politics are imaginary.