

# William Gibson: unintended prophet of our digital future

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a review of

*Distrust That Particular Flavor* by William Gibson. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York. Hardcover, 259 Pages, \$26.95

For over thirty years William Gibson has been the unintended prophet of our digital future. The award-winning author of *Neuromancer*, *Virtual Light*, and a string of other best-selling science fiction novels, Gibson's writings have not only presaged the future in many ways, but also serve as critiques on the present in which they were written.

Gibson is credited with coining the term cyberspace, and imagining worlds where the physical and the digital seamlessly overlap. The settings of his novels are often dystopian in nature, filled with corporate conglomerations controlling all aspects of society in not so uncertain terms, and inhabited by individuals trying their best to survive in a world where they are as much products as people. One detects not only echoes of Orwell and Huxley, but also disturbing resemblances to our own current living conditions, which Gibson says is the point of all good science fiction.

With *Distrust That Particular Flavor*, Gibson offers up his first collection of non-fiction writings, assembled from throughout the course of his entire career. These twenty-six essays provide not only a deeper look into the writer and his work, but also offers Gibson's own unique takes on numerous subjects. The touchstone to all of Gibson's writings, fiction and non-fiction, is the idea that we can't even begin to understand society and culture until we understand technology's role in shaping our culture.

In "Rocket Radio," the first and earliest essay in this collection, published by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1989, Gibson takes up this theme, writing, "I belong to a generation of Americans who dimly recall the world prior to television. Many of us, I suspect, feel vaguely ashamed about this, as though the world before television was not quite, well, the world."

"The world before television," he continues, "equates with the world before the Net—the mass culture and the mechanisms of Information. And we are of the Net; to recall another mode of being is to admit to having once been something other than human."

When referring to the Net, Gibson's writing predates the internet as we know it, and isn't meant to include simply the transmitting of information via computer, but meant to encompass the totality of communications technology. "Once perfected, communication technologies rarely die out entirely; rather, they shrink to fit particular niches in the global info-structure," he writes.

This includes not only television and then burgeoning internet, but even technologies highly archaic at the time of his writing: crystal radios, mimeograph, and crank and dial adding machines. Gibson describes the freedom as

a portable battery-powered turntable available to his teenage-self. “This constituted an entirely new way to listen to the music of choice,” Gibson writes, “‘Choice’ being the key word.”

In the commentary at the end of the essay, Gibson writes that his take on the idea of the Net was more about “some more abstract expression of the totality of cyberspace,” than the actual circuits and wires of the internet, and it is this abstract expression, the putting into words things that feel subtle or otherwise unexpressed, that give all of Gibson’s writings their resonance with the reader.

Much of Gibson’s fiction writing is set in a fictional near-future Japan. One of the questions Gibson is most asked by journalists in interviews is why Japan, as opposed to the US, his place of birth, or Canada, his place of residence? Gibson answers that question in several essays in this collection, each time coming back to the touchstone of the intersections between technology and culture.

Many of us like to think that our culture shapes technology to suit its needs, but Gibson points out in “Modern Boys & Mobile Girls,” that the reality is actually quite the opposite. “Japan is the global imagination’s default setting for the future,” Gibson writes.

The Japanese seem to the rest of us to live several measurable clicks down the timeline. The Japanese are the ultimate Early Adaptors, and...if you believe, as I do, that all cultural change is essentially technology driven, you pay attention to the Japanese.

Gibson provides two examples of the rapid embrace of technology by the Japanese, and how their culture, and the rest of the world’s culture is shaped by it. The first is the early adoption of text messaging by Japanese school girls, who Gibson dubs “Mobile Girls,” as a primary means of communication.

What’s striking is that these Mobile Girls took what was then a new minor function of cell phone technology and built a culture around it. “What is it that the Mobile Girls are so busily conveying to one another?” Gibson writes. “Probably not much at all: the equivalent of a schoolgirl’s note,” he answers.

The second example is the symbol of what launched Japan from the end of its feudal period, and straight into the industrial revolution, and the future. That symbol of technology is the mechanical watch. The watch, the symbol of what came to be known popularly in contemporary Japanese as “Modern Boys,” the young generation of European-influenced Japanese who embraced the technological future, and pushed the country to become the first industrialized nation in Asia.

Gibson cites the rapid industrialization of Japan, as the launching point for the Japan of the future. The break-neck pace at which the country industrialized set them on the path to “empire-building expansionist mode, which eventually got them two of their large cities vaporized...by an enemy wielding a technology that might as well have come from a distant galaxy.”

What followed was an aborted attempt at cultural reengineering. “The result of this stupendous triple-whammy, (catastrophic industrialization, the war, the American Occupation),” Gibson writes, “is the Japan that delights, disturbs, and fascinates us today.” In the essays “Shiny Balls of Mud,” and “My Own Private Tokyo,” Gibson further explores the unique aspects of Japanese culture, and the interesting ways in which that culture permeates into the rest of the world’s culture. In all of these essays, there is the inkling of the idea of The Future as present. While this phenomenon can be easily observed in Japan, it is happening everywhere, and Gibson addresses the topic in other essays in the book.

In his 2010 talk for Book Expo New York, Gibson grapples with the relationship between history and the Future with a capital F, and the kind of mirror image relationship between them. He laughs off the science fiction critics who declare the future is over. “I wouldn’t blame anyone for assuming this is akin to the declaration that history [is] over, and just as silly,” Gibson writes.

Instead, what Gibson sets up is the idea that instead of living in The Future, as those of his generation envisioned it, “be it the crystalline city on the hill, or radioactive post nuclear wasteland,” he writes, we have reached what he calls a state of “No Future.” “Ahead of us, there is merely...more stuff. Events. Some tending to the crystalline, some to the wasteland-y.”

He goes on to say that what every generation thinks of as their capital-f Future, “We discover it, invariably to be the lowercase now.”

This train of thought leads to one of the central concepts behind all of Gibson's fiction, and from his perspective, the central concept behind all the best science fiction: the idea that the best science fiction has always been, under various guises, about the present in which it was written.

This understanding might seem obvious to anyone who thinks of fiction as a tool for political expression. The best art is always commentary upon the present society of the artist who creates it. Gibson cites Orwell's 1984 as an example, and goes on to relate how his own novels, nine of them and counting, each related to the era in which they were written. His breakout novel, 1984's *Neuromancer*, was set in a fictional 2030, and his 1990s trilogy, beginning with 1993's *Virtual Light*, was set in 2006. There's more to fiction than just setting and subtext Gibson notes.

"A book exists at the intersection of the author's subconscious and the reader's response," he writes. "A writer worries away at a jumble of thoughts, building them into a device that communicates, but the writer doesn't know what's been communicated until it's possible to see it communicated." Gibson refers to this as part of the "mysterious business," that is writing fiction, but it's an idea that could be applied to all the arts.

In nearly all of the essays in this book, Gibson touches on autobiographical topics, inserting himself and his own experiences into the narratives. I found this gave many of the pieces an added layer of depth, or provided a bit of grounding context in which to understand the points the author tries to make.

A few purely autobiographical pieces here provide additional context to Gibson's own life. In "Since 1948," Gibson lays out his personal life and the development, partly out of necessity, of his writing life, and he debunks several myths about himself. "Google me and you can learn that I do it all on a manual typewriter, something that hasn't been true since 1985, but which makes such an easy hook for a lazy journalist that I expect to be reading it for the rest of my life."

He freely admits to avoiding the internet in its early days, but only until "the advent of the Web turned it into such a magnificent opportunity to waste time that I could no longer resist." Gibson talks about his internet explorations in a few pieces, including "The Net Is A Waste Of Time," a short essay written for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1996.

For an essay written in the pre-Google or social media era, Gibson's words are striking. The essence expressed in the piece is it takes a lot of work to waste time on the net, and that the use of the internet what we would normally think of as a leisure activity akin to watching television, actually resembles working. I think any of us whose work involves spending time on the internet would agree with Gibson's assessment, something that has only become truer in the nearly twenty years since.

Ultimately, what *Distrust That Particular Flavor* offers readers is more than just a glimpse into the mind of one of our greatest contemporary writers and cultural analysts. It presents us with a series of challenges to the wired world most of us take for granted, and asks us to pause and consider how our culture got to where it is, and in what direction it might be heading.

When we consider the bleak glossy techno-worlds of Gibson's fictions, his reasoned critiques of our own wired reality strike with even greater force of thought. They're critiques we should all be taking seriously.



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