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### What Strange World are we Visiting Next"? "Ours

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“What strange world are we visiting next?” “Ours.”

Ted Chiang’s short story, “Liking What You See: A Documentary,” is indisputably science fiction, but it is also a true story at Washington University. On the surface, the story is a convincing work of journalism about callagnosia (“calli” for short), a new technology that shuts off a person’s perception of attractiveness. As a neurologist in the story explains, “A callagnosic perceives faces perfectly well; he or she can tell the difference between a pointed chin and a receding one, a straight nose and a crooked one, clear skin and blemished skin. He or she simply doesn’t experience any aesthetic reaction to those differences.” The story follows a private college that is considering mandating calli for all students as a way of combating “lookism,” discrimination based on attractiveness. Chiang explores students’ interactions with the technology and with each other, the commentary of professors from several different disciplines at the school, and how special interests like the cosmetics industry sway the final vote that marks the story’s climax. While our understanding of the brain lags far behind engineering “programmable neurostats” like calli, the comparison to political debates around other forms of discrimination is clear and intentional. Chiang constructs a different world as an accessible lens through which we can re-examine our own.

Speculative fiction purports to be about distant galaxies and alternate dimensions. However, the science fiction and fantasy books that have resonated with me most are those that are designed to mirror a current or timeless issue for those of us confined to this version of Earth. These books, especially those by Chiang, Mary Doria Russell, and Neal Shusterman, make up my collection. I believe that the unique lenses these authors can foster meaningful engagement with problems we encounter as individuals and as a society, making them valuable tools for personal and political change.

A few pages later in *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Chiang's short story collection that houses "Liking What You See: A Documentary," readers are treated to a completely different worldview in "Hell is the Absence of God." In the world inhabited by Neil Fisk, born physically handicapped and more recently struggling with his wife's unexpected death, the Abrahamic God is real, and all of humanity knows it. Angelic visits are commonplace; Hell itself is visible during earthquakes. What struck me as incredible about this story is how Neil's relationship with God is no different than it is for many of us. Neil knows that his wife's death was a divine act—the appearance of an angel caused the window next to her to shatter—while his disability was caused naturally—his mother did not have any supernatural encounters during her pregnancy. Neil still has a crisis of faith, and he embarks on a pilgrimage with other equally provocative characters to grapple with God's plan for him. Mary Doria Russell tackles a similar question in her sci-fi debut novel, *The Sparrow*. In this story, God does not feature as a character, but He is always on the minds of the eight main characters, members of a Jesuit expedition to make first contact with an alien planet. When Emilio Sandoz, a devout priest and linguist, returns home as the broken, sole survivor of the ill-fated mission, he is filled with shame and with hatred for the God that put his crew through such suffering. I later learned in an interview that the author also wrestled with her relationship to religion before writing *The Sparrow*. Though Russell invented a fascinating, fleshed-out culture for two sentient alien species, she kept the focus of the story human. In doing so, she inspired me to reflect on my own faith and to accept my conflicting feelings and uncertainty, as she does not preach or point to a right answer.

This open-endedness is the other crucial ingredient of my collection. Some of my books lack clear heroes and villains. All of them, to make the cut, must take care to separate the actions of the antagonists from the question at hand. For example, in "Liking What You See: A

Documentary,” a handful of cosmetics companies use another neural technology to make their speakers supernaturally compelling, and their manipulation defeats the calli initiative. Yet these companies were not the only ones arguing against calli throughout the story. Other characters’ condemnation of their actions does not change the vote, nor the strength of the opposing points. It is left for the reader to consider whether we should approach addressing discrimination by calling less attention to the differences between people, as calli does; by calling it out explicitly to start a frank discussion around the issues, or by mixing both approaches in different contexts.

Importantly, the reader *is* encouraged to consider the issue. The great strength of these books is that the worldbuilding involved in speculative fiction immerses the reader in a new society and characters. The reader becomes emotionally invested in a conflict without the preconceptions and defensiveness accompanying real-world situations. Then the author can cement the analogy, without antagonizing proponents of either side of an issue, and leave the reader with questions and concerns to take back into our world.

My collection began with *Dry*, by Neal Shusterman. The novel escalates the California drought into an acute emergency, beginning at the moment the taps run dry. *Dry* was published in November 2019; I read it in March 2020. I am from Southern California, and I picked up the book after returning with my family from a trip to Costco to stock up on food and water, not knowing where the initial lockdown order would lead. Within the first couple chapters, I watched the main characters rush to Costco for the same items—possibly the exact same location, based on other landmarks in the book. I realized that Shusterman’s imaginative societies evolve from an eerily wise understanding of our own. The novel ultimately gave me more empathy for what seemed like irrational behaviors and poor local government decisions around me from people I did not know. Shusterman, who often switches between several narrators in one book, primed me

to imagine what this emergency looked like for other families and for overworked crisis center staff.

The right book can help us sit more comfortably with personal questions, as my collection has done for the matters of doubting my decisions and of my relationship to religion. When it comes to larger issues, however, reading alone is insufficient. I hope to continue finding books that serve as a springboard for taking action. *The Sparrow* memorably reminded me of the harm that can be caused when a group with the best of intentions tries to make changes in a culture they do not fully understand. The novel encouraged me to look critically at volunteer programs abroad, and, after graduating, I will spend the fall supporting an organization that I know works with partners on the ground and does not impose their own solutions to the challenges of local people. Moreover, as I continue writing sci-fi and fantasy stories, I am looking for ways to open my readers' eyes to the problems I am already informed about, with the hope of opening these doors for someone else.

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