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**Past// Forward
Retrofuturism, Science Fiction, and Toxic Nostalgia**

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Past// Forward
Retrofuturism, Science Fiction, and Toxic Nostalgia

by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2022

Dedication

For my mother, an excellent teacher and exceptional human.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge that this thesis was researched, written, and performed in Austin, Texas, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Jumanos, Comanche, and Tonkawa People.

I would also like to acknowledge my co-writer on the book, Harrison Baxley, for loving the Davies, and helping them become flawed and realistic people. He provided me with an infinite amount of patience, enthusiasm, and an artistic well to draw from.

I would like to give a hearty thanks to anyone who let me springboard ideas and ask questions of, primarily to Alex Schmidt and Michael Bruner for their expertise on science fiction and robots and how they intersect. Without their thoughtful insights I do not believe this project could have happened.

I should also shout out my constant inspiration Ruther Bader Ginsberg for all her years of service, but most importantly for her work on the 1974 Equal Credit Opportunity act, without which women would not be guaranteed financial independence.

I am forever grateful to all the people I have met at UT. My colleagues, cohort, friends, mentors and family, I could never have done this without you. And finally, to anyone who let the Davies into their lives in this small and important way, thank you.

Abstract

Past// Forward

Retrofuturism, Science Fiction, and Toxic Nostalgia

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How we look at the world has changed vastly over the course of the human experience, and how we imagine humans within the context of the world even more so. The ability to center the human narrative in the context of history seems to be the first thing creatives try to do, but even more so they work to center themselves in the context of imagined futures. In this MFA thesis I seek to explore how the relationship between science fiction, popular media, and nostalgia work to preserve a more concise version of the contemporary moment, and how we can use this information to acknowledge what the cultural attitudes were at the time.

The goal of this thesis exploration is not to determine what hundreds or even thousands of years to come will look like, it is difficult to imagine what the distant future will embody, but through this process I seek rather to explore what the collective pop culture of the recent past thought was important enough to push forward into the

inevitable future. The project working title Past//Forward seeks to explore previous decades' attempts to imagine the future and what those visual media creations can tell us about the societal norms, cultural values, and fears and hopes they collectively deemed important enough to push ad infinitum into the future.

This is not a comprehensive overview of the idea of retro futurism as a whole, this iteration of the ideas I am exploring focuses almost entirely on western media and science fiction in the English language through the twentieth century. My primary goal for this reflective practitioner document is to incorporate elements of retro science fiction materials to construct a more modern narrative through the creation of an illustrated book. I will do so by partially condensing my vast catalog of science fiction source material, as well as giving some distance to analyze material in cultural context which is much harder to do as history is being actively written around us. The ability to analyze and engage with the previous decades' forays into the distant future can hopefully give us more insight into what they aspired and fretted over from the future through how they chose to present it in the media.

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Introduction: From Science Fiction to Syfy

An overview of my fascination with retrofuturism began with rainy Florida afternoons spent with my paternal grandfather watching reruns of Star Trek (65') and I was enamored. Beyond being a super progressive show for its era, with an integrated cast and the first interracial kiss on television, it also showed the ambitions and doubts of the real-life space race in their projections of the future. My grandfather supported and fostered my love of science fiction and fantasy, also introducing me to seminal properties like The Jetsons and the whimsical fantasy for the dated future. Much of my youth was spent reading, imagining worlds and drawing characters. I was most fascinated by characters from science fiction. I had watched and grieved the loss of Frankenstein's monster, been aboard the USS Enterprise, and imagined my own life on new earth alongside the Jetson family.

My background in art stems from a life of drawing that started as soon as I could pick up a pencil, drawing animals from reference books and copying my favorite sailor moon poses. My mother is a k-12 art teacher and allowed me all the freedom in the world to explore different mediums as a child. She gave me lessons on how to draw perspective, what color theory meant and how to use it well. Even more than telling me how to use these design tools, she showed me how to read elements of design when other people were using them on me and the rest of the world. I became aware of my surroundings and how advertisements used color and proportion, or when a doctor's office chose blue wall paint to try and calm down the patients. To make art is one thing, but to see how others use artistic principles is another.

The process of defining the genre of Science Fiction and further separating it from fantasy, is an honest effort at prophetic extrapolation from the known and I found some interesting takes in the article “What can Frankenstein Still Teach Us 200 Years later” Kat Eshner did for Smithsonian Magazine. George O. Smith’s *Venus Equilateral* series, originally published in 1947 states:

Scientific methodology involves the proposition that a well-constructed theory will not only explain every known phenomenon but will also predict new and still undiscovered phenomena. Science-fiction tries to do much the same—and write up, in story form, what the results look like when applied not only to machines, but to human society as well. (Eshner8).

While John W. Campbell Jr. originally made this statement in regard to literature properties such as Jules Verne’s *the Time Machine*, the sentiment still rings true for my own definition of Science Fiction as a genre as well as the sub-genre of Retro Futurism, as it attempts to keep it a whole fully realized society and how the characters interact within the “new normal”.

As an example, “Frankenstein presents an excellent vehicle for introducing readers to a broader conversation about scientific responsibility,” says Eshner In contrast to the pejorative use of Frankenstein’s name in terms like “Frankenfood” for GMOs, the novel is “actually quite thoughtful and takes a much more nuanced and open stance on this question of scientific freedom and responsibility,” (Eshner 7). She says in the article Kat Escher called “What Frankenstein Can Still Teach us 200 Years Later” for

Smithsonian Magazine. Through the article Escher goes into the different kinds of ethics that we as 21st century readers have in contrast to science as a vessel, and I believe that this is representative of our feelings as well as any sort of dated fiction property reflective of contemporary societies views on ethics and morality. This is elevated since science and the creation of new life changing inventions is the most extreme example of this. Using Science fiction as a tool we can express our own blind spots and ethics as to how we would solve this problem in a better way than the protagonists (or in the case of Frankenstein the Antagonist of the story) do or condemn their actions from a technical understanding and better education than the protagonist would reasonably have. The idea that the societal norms and current view of either is thrown into hard contrast specifically because of that new invented technology. This allows for a plot that is totally new and has no execution that the characters could conceive of or have reasonable cause to have thought about before, their baseline ethics and moral compass and societal norms are the default to try and deal with this new invented technology. In the case of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, the new technology being the revivification process or new life process. Eshner goes on to question of whether Dr. Victor Frankenstein should revive the corpse at all is not thrown into question because this is a novelty idea. Manaktla offers "It's a book that's relentlessly questioning about where the limits are and how far to push, and what the implications are of what we do in the world" (Eshner 8). For students learning about subjects like gene editing and artificial intelligence, those questions are worth exploring, she says, and science fiction offers a creative way to do that. With this in mind, science fiction as I am using it becomes a vessel for exploration of ethics and

morality in contrast to whatever new invented technology has been created for the property. Technology is not a moral implication in this way, but how that technology is used -- for beneficial or maleficent purposes_-- must have some impact on the plot of the given story for it to qualify as science fiction. Sufficient to say, that the real guidelines I am using here from Esher example is that technology, being invented by a person and not magically produced, must impact the plot or storyline in a major way so that the plot could not exist without that technology. IE, if the technology needed to invent warp speed had not been created, then none of *Star Trek* could have occurred. Or in the instance of *Metropolis*, the invention of the robot is the point of the inciting incident and subsequent plot



Figure 1: *The Jetsons* Pilot Episode, Source Hanna-Barbera Warner Bros. Animation

How I wanted to define robots seemed especially important since they are a hallmark of the genre and play narratively in building the future. Some primary examples would be characters like Data from *Star Trek Next Generation*, Rosie the maid robot from *The Jetsons* (figure 1), or the main antagonist from the film *Utopia*. Most of these would fit further into the sub-story of android, but for my needs simply defining that a robot can act independently of a user to complete a task, but a machine needs an operator at most or all steps to complete a process. Rosie is a robot with programmed items, but a cell phone is a machine since it requires an operator to do any tasks to completion. By extension, an android goes one step further and has enough cognitive function to determine and execute what it makes its next task be. When approaching the topic of robots, I also needed to tread with caution. The idea of condensing someone to their most basic functions would be perpetuating the idea of bio essentialism, but for the purposes of pointing out how harmful this practice can be, I opted to showcase a robot within the context of the book to point out this harmful behavior.

(Retro) Futurism

As a designer I have been trained to use visual aesthetic treatment and visual art can do so much to help fill in the blanks on societal values and norms. How people dress and the colors they are drawn to, the amount of fabric used, or the length of a skirt hem say so much about the economic situation without using a word. How someone expresses themselves aligned with or against these norms is also important. I have spent the last three years teaching and assisting on a theory of aesthetics course through the Fashion and Textiles department and it changed my approach to visual analysis. The circular mode of creation is different from the singular act of creating a painting or drawing. The moment of inspiration can come from anywhere but in fashion and costume design. It is limited severely by the human figure, or the fabrics available or in style and how we dress can spell out how we move through the world. How we look at the ideals of the past gives us a glimpse into what a culture, group, subgroup, or sect of expulsion deemed important. How my personal connection to costume and fashion translates to visual aesthetics of generative ideas is always projective at best, and can reveal the best and worst about us



Figure 1: P. Terry's Burger Stand plans, Source: Austin 360

My exploration of the topic of science fiction in its application to retrofuturism began in earnest in early 2020 after viewing some of Austin Texas's local 50's Googie style architecture which can be seen prominently in a local staple of P. Terry's Burger stand (figure 2). The initial concept was simple enough, what can the design aesthetic of the past tell us about the values and cultural norms of a given society in its time? If this idealized version of the future was large enough to produce on an architectural scale it must have other cultural indicators and significance. My thoughts began to evolve after coming across a Hank Green quote concerning his fiction book *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing* in 2018 about how "(h)umans do think ahead more than any other animal, but that isn't saying much. The oceans are filled with plastic, and the atmosphere is filled with carbon dioxide. We've built enough bombs to destroy everything ten times

over, but apparently solar panels were just one expense too many”. It brought up the sort of gargantuan scale that is the future. Blowing up aesthetics to building size in architecture terms is one thing but projecting current social norms ad infinitum of the foreseeable future and beyond is a different kind of scale. It makes a statement intentionally or otherwise that that current moment and its ideals are so strong and pervasive that they not only could, but should, be projected forward.

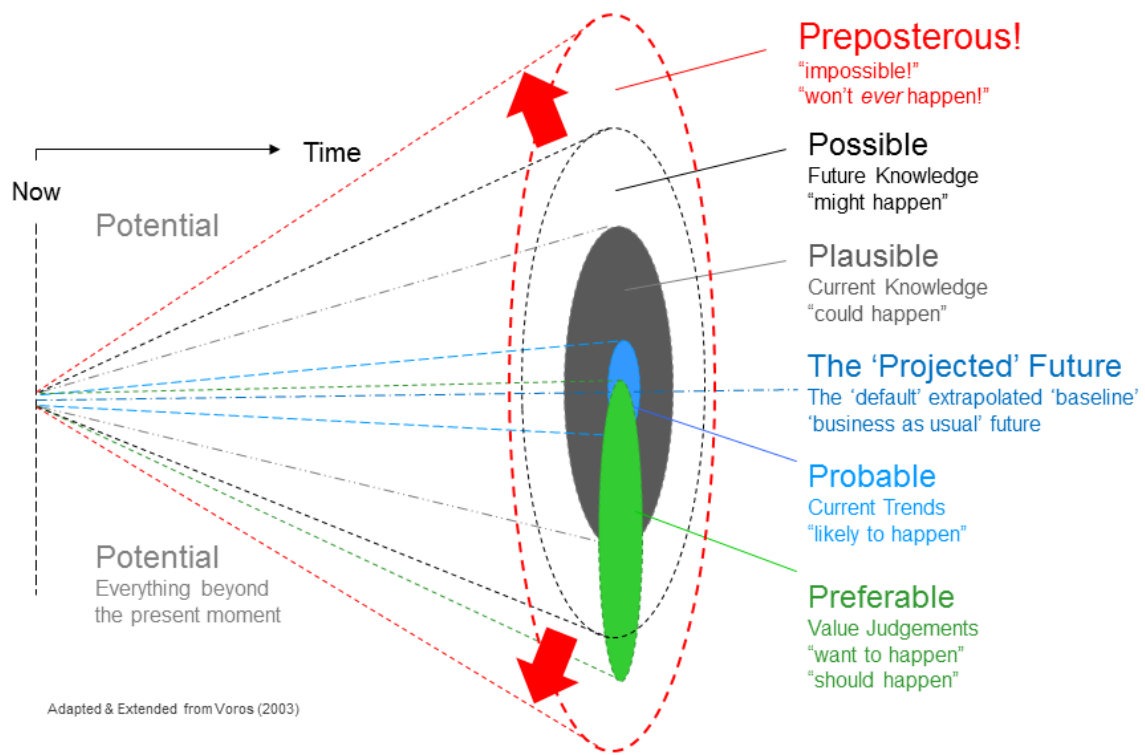


Figure 3: Predictive futures model, Source Voros 2003

After doing more research into the topic of futurism, I came across this thesis by Jacques Waller Barcia Jr., which attempted to explain the process of future predictive studies within the context of a narrative (see Figure 3). This was immensely helpful since

the ideas I am exploring are within the context of narrative storytelling and narrative art. What this thesis novel tries to showcase is a potential meta-textual example of how predictive ideals work in the context of a future setting. The main take I came away with from this example is the inherent counterproductive ideals in narrative storytelling and the general disinterest of ethics in predictive studies. For the immediate and also longer-term predictive models, it's always safer to count on the selfish nature of people, which is a solid indicator of all of the post-apocalyptic imaginings of the future out there. A notable recent example would be the *Hunger Games* novels by Suzanne Collins and their subsequent film adaptations. There are a few brief windows of hopeful imaging of the future, things like the utopia of the year 3000 in the *Jetsons*, or the first *Star Trek* series. These properties are more about exploration for the sake of science than for humanity's last hope by contrast to properties like the 2012 film *Interstellar* based on the earlier novel by Kip Thorne. After further analyzing the two primary types of predictive models, optimistic and pessimistic. I was curious to see what sort of trends lined up with pop culture science fiction media and if there were any sort of movements and how they treated the future based on their present moment. Taking this broad look at the 20th century visual media treatments, there were some easy ones to spot, but I also quickly realized that if I wanted to examine a whole century's worth of media treatments of the future, even if it was a strictly American white perspective, would take years of research and be a whole book and not just a master's Thesis. With that in mind and the ideas I was also exploring in *Nostalgia* I narrowed my focus on the later 1950s into the early 1960s as a much more manageable size for the project mind.

This intersection of the American space age, the post-WWII economic boom, ridged social norms, and an explosion of the white American suburbia landscape created such a nexus of culture that is showcased glamorously in properties like the Jetsons and is found in the architecture and design philosophies of the moment. Big Googie-style design elements like atomic stars, boomerangs, and wild color combos speckled the landscape in the form of bowling alleys, car washes, and burger joint signage. Shows like Star Trek had new and diverse casts and showed the future as hopeful instead of something to be dreaded.

But these glamor moments also are not the whole of the picture. When looking at ideas around nostalgia it is so easy to yet again, fall into the blinders of only remembering the good parts of the past, rather than analyze it for what it was and how it impacted people who are not the default media representation. When looking at the pool of representation it is primarily cis-gendered, heterosexual, white, educated middle-class men and their spouses. If you're anything other than those specified people then it is going to be a different kind of experience, and it was not as easy an experience as the default male perspective of this time. I say all of these things and would be remiss not to just plainly state that I am an educated, lower class, a queer white woman in America. There are also intersections of identity that other people will place on me that I would not designate for myself but are none the less true. In these instances, though, my whiteness in America and my feminine presentation tend to overwrite any other label that a stranger might assign to me, and this would have been true seventy years ago as it is today. My identity as a woman in vintage-style clothing is also met with hesitation. Many people

who do not dress in vintage style tend to assume that I share vintage values of those periods as well, which for clarity I do not. My early adult life began just before the 2016 US election cycle and has had a major influence watching the Make America Great Again moment, also known as MAGA, take an extreme foothold in conservative white Americans. The idea that there was an American golden age is a bit of a misnomer, but the majority of folks wearing MAGA hats when asked will point to the 1950s and 60s as when America was last great. Which conversely also was a terrible time to be a person of color, or queer or poor. These blinders of simply choosing to ignore the issues of the past has led to the pervasiveness of toxic nostalgia.

In the article by Lynn Spiegel, she talks at length about the very strict social norms of the supposed American golden age and even upon a slight examination it's easy to see that most people were kept miserable by this ideology. The implication that you grew up, if you were a man who goes to college and get a salary job, a wife and a couple of children that you hardly know seems so both antiquated and still highly prevalent. The examples that Spiegel gives in the article are based more on later works depicting an earlier time such as *Mad Men* or its antithesis *Happy Days*. Even the title spells out the pervasive idea of times being easier and happier back then.

When looking back at retro-futurism properties like *Star Trek* the original series, we can appreciate that it was indeed an integrated cast, with men and women sharing the ship, but also point out how the show's black female lead Uhura was a glorified space secretary who answered the phone for the white charismatic Captain Kirk. Critiquing the things, we love and breaking earlier boundaries is not an attempt at cancel culture, as so

many people try to make it out to be, but a way of trying to interact with things that are dated responsibly. Simply ignoring these problems will only push those ideas into the future to cause more harm, but we can still celebrate them for the social norms they did push

On Nostalgia

In this thesis, I will explore the ideals of toxic nostalgia and how they manifest in our collective fascination with the retro futuristic. For the purposes of this thesis, toxic nostalgia is how we collectively glorify the past, choosing to overlook the issues with a given period and only glorifying the things that were nice about it. More than simply having rose colored glasses about something, it includes the absolute refusal to deconstruct an idea about a time and place that differs from the person's preconceived notions attached to it.

As I'm using the term nostalgia as it relates to retro and popular culture in the contest of media and cultural attitudes. In her 2013 article "Postfeminist Nostalgia for a Prefeminist Future", Lynn Spigel eloquently phrases the modern take on nostalgia, and specifically the obsession with the American 1960's, as such



From left to right

Figure 4: *Mad Men* promotional Material, Source AMC

Figure 5: *Happy Days* box art, Source IMDB

In the contemporary moment of postfeminism (in all its varieties of meaning), it seems crucial to think about how nostalgia for the baby-boom past has changed over the last few decades and to consider how contemporary culture glamorizes a different view of the period. As opposed to the hot rods, poodle skirts and shiny suburbs of *Happy Days* or *American Graffiti*. (Spigel 270)

While Spigel is referring more directly about the acclaimed series *Mad Men* (illustration 4) in opposition to more surface level appreciation of shows like *Happy Days* here (illustration 5), the point still stands. Even the title *Happy Days* leaves little to the imagination on what the general American television watching public perceived as pleasanter times. Her argument continues to spell out that

“Imagining a future where feminism never happened, but where somehow miraculously, without political struggle, everyone gets a great job, great clothes and great mixed drinks. The idea that women still do not get fair pay is not relevant in this fantasy future circa 1962, nor is the fact that not all women are born with access to the same privileges and/or sense of entitlement.” (Spigel 272) Even in 2013, when this article was written for Screen and published by Oxford academic, there seemed to be some sort of nostalgia around this ideal of the good ole days and what exactly women's places were in them. In the eight years since the Seigel article was published, we have

seen the rise and fall, that one still seems to be debated, through the uprising of the MAGA and Trump administration. In his paper “Media, Communication, and Nostalgia” Manuel Menke argues that

Nostalgia is often understood as a syndrome and a therapeutic mechanism for healing traumatic past experiences, a retrospective utopia of safety and stability, or a revisionist project of rewriting history in a more user-friendly and appealing way. The literature also highlights different uses of nostalgic sentiments, such as their commercial and aesthetic applications, affective nature, material dimensions, and political relevance. (Menke 6)

This correlation as to why the common answer to ‘when was America great?’ and most people answer somewhere in this broad context of pre-feminist suburban pre-Vietnam America, where Jim crow was rampant, and women didn't really have rights if they were unmarried. The thing that really strikes me about nostalgia in this context is that it is always weaponized, whether it is intended or not. Nostalgia creates a sort of blind spot for those that benefited from the status quo of the time, and it can become romanticized to the point that the reality of that time gone by is so distorted it can only be utopian and idealistic.

Toxic nostalgia, as it will be used in reference to this thesis project, is the blinders we collectively put on to over simply a devious time or place to only remember the good things. By doing so we fully deny the bad points that caused harm to marginalized groups, for my project I am highlighting this within the context of women and people of

color. Used specifically in the idea of “Make America Great Again” rhetoric, this is the best extreme example I can give of what happens when the past is glorified out of context. With this in mind for my thesis exploration of the American post WWII era, this utopian future fantasy that is so buried in layers of nostalgia, it becomes more fiction than science, but that does not mean we should not use some of the radical hope left over to our advantage. By Menke’s account, using something familiar and nostalgic can be used as a tool in any direction we choose. And for my intentions, nostalgia can be an immensely powerful teaching aid.

Children's Literature and Illustration

Children's literature, also called kid lit, is the genre of picture books created to teach kids language, and ethics, and provide enrichment and entertainment for early readers. Children's literature is further broken down by age category to determine the developmental appropriateness of the content, vocabulary, and visual style. Children's literature is primarily used for education or entertainment and most of the time both, its primary hallmark is heavy use of illustration and very simple words.

How children's literature fits into all of this is a bigger conversation around ideals we deem appropriate to tell and show children and more so what is deemed "inappropriate" but children and adults still must engage with. Shows like *The Jetsons* created by the Hanna Barbera company were set in the Saturday morning cartoon block and could be expected to be viewed by the whole family but targeted at children aged 6-16. Children pick up on a lot more of the culture than people realize, as evidenced by Florida's own "don't say gay" that is being passed around saying that any discussion or gender and sexuality are not appropriate but highlighting specifically LGBT+ being what is inappropriate. In sharp relief to that, any Disney film that features a prince and a princess sharing a kiss or getting married at the end would not be considered inappropriate because it is deemed 'normal' even though sharing a romantic kiss is an expression of gender and sexuality. Children play house and assume familial titles and roles such as mother and father and sister and baby from a very young age because they are emulating the things they see in their own lives. If children are not only not given a way to express these feelings but are also told they are taboo or inappropriate subjects it

will create shame and a desire to hide things that might require professional help later down the line.

My background before getting into design and theatre was primarily in illustration and comics. The use of illustration still colors my design tendencies and how I use legibility in my design work. Imagining the stage as a painting that needs to be instantly readable from a holistic perspective is a hallmark of my design and returning to narrative function for children's illustration was such a unique exploration of those combined skill sets. Much like theatre and foreshadowing, I was able to use more dramatic flair and Easter egg objects in the individual illustrations that tied the world together and gave slight depth to the characters.

Making the Book

After narrowing down my decade and topics I wanted to explore it then became a question of what medium would this be best suited for. An installation felt too removed and an exhibition seemed too large to produce on my own. After looking more at why I was drawn to certain properties the idea of creating more of a narrative story to follow along with seemed to be the best combination. I desired to encourage adults to re-examine their connection and nostalgia for things in their youth through a familiar format. A children's book and reading at the library offered a shared experience that many Americans had at one point or another in their childhoods and could hopefully help them retain childlike wonder while talking about more harsh subjects.

Once the premise of creating a children's book for grown-ups came about, I set to work trying to narrow in on the visual style and language of the book. My goal was to take shape and color influences from the decades I was exploring and hone in the big shape language of Googie style and the prevalent feature of the Hanna Barbera and Mary Blaire influenced character designs. Working my way through initial character sketches the family began to take shape. The ideals around the American nuclear family set up their roles for me, a mother and father and a sister and a brother, based primarily on the family roles in *The Jetsons* to parody them, and also to reflect on my own real-life family and their very normal problems.

At this point in the process, I needed more Assistance in the writing department, the plot and the characters felt so close, but the specific language of a children's book was

not something I felt comfortable inhabiting. I reached out to a long-time collaborator, Harrison Baxley, to co-write the book with me. Baxley's background in Theatre for young audiences, and K-12 English education made him a natural fit for the world I was working in for the Davies. Baxley and I even came from the same, very conservative small town in north Florida and knew exactly the kind of closed-mindedness particular to tight-knit communities I wanted to capture. When I first talked to him about the project I highlighted where I thought the characters were based, the flaws and strengths I knew they already had, and the topics I generally wanted to explore with each of them as well as the concept art. Most of it remained the same but there was some reworking with the little brother about halfway through the process since no matter how we tried it was not sticking. As much as I thought I knew these characters, Baxley's work on the language and dialog made them fully realize people to me.

I approached Baxley in the summer of 2021 with a general outline and an offer to work together with the express knowledge that due to the nature of this project I couldn't really compensate him or promise royalties or profits on this book, and he still entertained the offer. The rough outline and concept were based on the need for a children's book-like structure, and I used the first book in the *Berenstain Bears* as a touchpoint for introducing the family and their problems. Where the majority of the Berenstain bear books have a single family member as a focal point for the story, the first book in the series seeks to introduce the whole family unit and how they function together. This general outline seemed like the best structure to give a peek into the lives of all of the family members as well as a bite-size glimpse of the world.

After my first conversation with Baxley, he and I moved forward with the first draft of the script. Working in sections we segmented it into six smaller parts: introduction to the world and whole family, the Father's Day at the office and micro (Macro) aggressions, the mother's deep sadness and substance abuse problems, the daughter's day at school and how it allows her eating disorder, and the son at school and discussions around tokenism and exceptionalism. The last one was later totally reworked and altered.

WELCOME TO NEO NEW HAVEN

As with any other kind of major project it became a huge undertaking to simply illustrate this many images. Based on trends in Children's literature, I chose to go with a square page format at 8.5in x 8.5in with full-page bleed illustrations as my working standard. Once the characters were all set and designed, I broke the process of illustrating the book into a few basic parts. First, I set the storyboards up into two-page spreads and began to do very rough sketches and placed the text roughly into place. Picture books rely heavily on having a flow between the words and images on the page and I wanted to preserve that in my work here. After the initial sketches, I refined those and incorporated scenic elements of backgrounds and furniture, and then inking those images digitally. Once all of the images were inked, I was able to quickly color all of the line art images and shade them and color block the background. For the sake of transparency, I would spend an average of 4hours sketching, inking, coloring, and shading each image in the book. Across 51 full illustrations and the covers, I spent more than two hundred hours on

the illustrations and then began formatting the text for the final pdf submitted through Amazon's in-house publishing house, KDP. The final physical copy needed to have the same presentation quality as a standard kid's book, and KDP was the company that offered the color and paper quality I needed in a print-on-demand option.



From left to right

Figure 6: Diane's Diazepam pills, Source Courtney Rogers

Figure 7: Dossier's gun collection, Source Courtney Rogers

There are a couple of significant style breaks in the illustrations to make a point within the context of the narrative (illustrations 6 &7). These moments drew a lot of inspiration from hyperrealism within the context of animation, a good example of this would be earlier seasons of *SpongeBob SquarePants*' use of the technique for comedy.

Within the context of *Meet the Davies*, this was also meant to be a comedic moment in

the case of the hyper-realistic painted gun collection as well as Diane's many many pills. This off-color imagery was meant to take the reader out of the moment and make them very aware that even in this fantastical setting these real-world issues of gun control and substance abuse are still alive and well. The point of a harsh style change to hyperrealism also allowed for more open-air discussion of harsher topics within the context of the simplified language of Children's Literature.

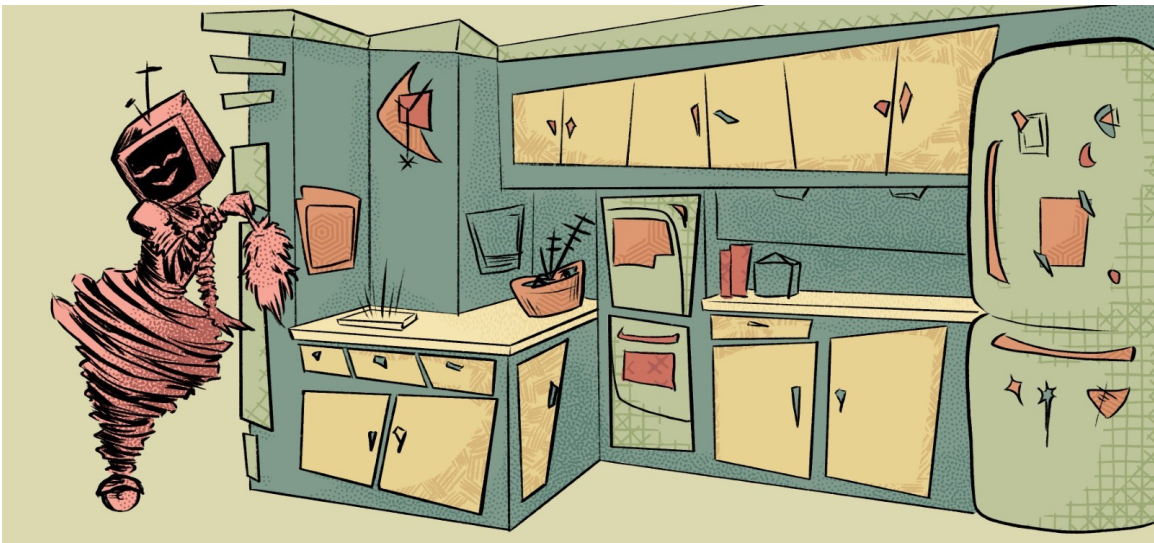


Figure 8: Concept art for the world of Neo New Haven, Source Courtney Rogers

The creation of the world of Neo New Haven, the New Republic of America was meant to be more of a dark mirror reflection of current American thoughts on politics and cultural norms. I am conscious of the decision to primarily focus on characters in this book, but the background of Neo New Haven was flushed out to provide fuller context to the world. It looks astonishing like a regular suburb north of New York, but it has the candy colors of the 1960s (Figure 8), with front lawns that do nothing but provide a status

symbol, picket fences that discourage community between neighbors, and two-car garages so your very expensive flying car can be parked idly in the driveway to make room for all of the lawnmowers and Christmas lights to have space. The moral superiority of private schools and tutors remains prevalent, and somehow the second amendment still exists for the security of mind for people like Dosier, who has a permit but no lockable case for his gun collection. Teen fashion magazines with weight loss tips are available at the checkout line at the grocery store to continue to encourage disordered eating, just like my own youth in the heroine sheik in the early 2000s and still today through the guise of genetically lucky fitness influencers, not actual dietitians. There are not enough sidewalks and public transport is not very reliable or easy to use and is certainly not ADA compliant. All of these elements were meant to parody how the future is supposed to be too bright and easier on society, but in reality, if it doesn't benefit capitalism, it isn't worth the money by corporate sponsors or lobbyists. Even though the landscape of the Davies was given very little room in this particular book, it was very important to me to have a fully fleshed out idea of how it all played together to influence the characters' everyday lives in ways that had become so normalized

THE CHARACTERS

As a unit they are meant to be a quincennial dysfunctional family, who are unable to communicate basic needs to each other for the expectations of maintaining social order and hierarchy; the father has a temper that must be feared, the mother is emotionally absent, and they must always present to the other families that they are doing

just fine. That they can afford the new model car and the private school fees, and that financial success means they are happy. We have a better understanding that this is a harmful ideology and does not garner any more happiness than any other kind of life.



Figure 9: Character designs for the family, Source Courtney Rogers

Exploring more of Dosier, he was originally intended to be a representation of masculine toxic anger and based very heavily on my father and paternal grandfather, as well as pop culture figures such as Don Draper from *Mad Men* (figure 9). His purpose in the family was to provide monetarily but not much else. His relationship with his children is expected to be limited to none, and his wife is meant to take care of all emotional and

domestic needs for both him and his children. In the sense that he is the only financial provider for the household, there is a chokehold on his wife's agency, creating a contrary relationship in which he both must have his wife take care of all of his emotional and sexual needs while being allowed to ignore hers, while simultaneously not allowing her any financial freedoms or relationships outside of the family unit.

The design for the father, Dossier Davies, came from several influences including George Jetson, Captain Kirk's yellow star fleet uniform, and my own paternal grandfather's flight suits from his career in the Air Force in the 1960s. I wanted a balance of more typically masculine colors of the decade in greens and oranges, while still maintaining a sense of balance and proportion with his family unit. The use of a turtleneck and cargo pants helped transition the look from textbook basics into something more science fiction appropriate. The combination of utilitarian boots and pockets, only to go and work a desk job seemed deeply funny and contradictory to the way most traditional masculine roles are during this era. The general shape language is based firmly on squares to heighten this feeling of a masculine edge. Dossier has a large square torso, large square glasses, a large square jaw, and a 1960s left parted squared-off haircut just to tie it all together. A feeling of authority was very important while creating this character and covering up his fragile ego seemed imperative in this kind of shape language.

To complement Dossier's squareness, Diane is based in the world of triangles. Her silhouette was very much inspired by the idealized hourglass figure of the mid-century fashion magazines and Dior's New Look. The cinched in the girdled waist, and layered petticoats of the women's skirts lead to a dynamic shape moment in relief to Dossier's

squared sturdiness. The red hair and styling are parodying Jane Jetson but styled more realistically, and her sleeveless colored shirts are a bit of an homage to my own paternal grandmother's closet of the 1960s. Rather than putting her in pedal pushers, which were also commonly paired with this type of shirt, the overt femme presentation of the fluffy skirt helped keep her seated more firmly in the traditional feminine roles I wanted to make commentary on with her character. Diane originally wore a pearl necklace and Lucite bracelets, but those ended up being cut to help with legibility as the images got smaller for print size. A simple pair of pearl earrings were enough to help her read as an elevated woman who stays at home with the children.

Dosier's wife, Diane is based firmly on traditional nuclear family values. She is intended to be the caretaker and emotional provider for her children and husband in this suburban paradise. Her relationships specifically with her children are meant to perpetuate the cultural norms and standards that she and Dosier represent. Diane's main point of contention is the value she brings to the family and the underlying consequences of her depression. Not to say that there still isn't a stigma around receiving help through psychological treatment or medication, but it has certainly evolved in the last seventy years. Diane as a character was meant to embody a large number of women trapped in unsustainable marriages with no way out due to financial insecurity and cultural norms. One of her few joys is driving, but she cannot drive for long since she does not have money for gas, since her husband does not allow her to work outside of the home. Her absent-mindedness with her children, namely in not noticing, or even encouraging her daughter's eating disorder, and her son's violent tendencies are due to her general

melancholy and substance abuse. Her situation is complicated and an unfortunate norm of the decade and there is also no real way out or around it.

After Diane, the next step in the character creation was the older sister, Lily. Lily was meant to emulate the fashion icons of the youth movement, primarily drawing inspiration from the fashion model and actor, Twiggy. Her miniskirts and large eyes showed off her very skinny legs and the idealized teen silhouette of the ultra-thin and petite model. The main source for Lily as a character was firmly based on the unintentional explanation of Judy Jetson's eating disorder that's spoken about in the pilot episode of *The Jetsons* with such a casual air. Drawing inspiration from my own disordered eating habits left over from the heroin chic black coffee, and cigarettes era of the internet. The main sadness I was trying to embody with Lily is the misconception that if someone looks thin they are healthy and how society's attitude towards skinny women perpetuates eating disorder culture and goes so far to celebrate it.

The older sister Lily is a character very close to my own heart. I based her primarily on my younger sister's appearance and namesake, and my own experiences with disordered eating. Being a young person in the late 1990s and early 2000s sure had an impact on my relationship with food and outward presentation, since diet culture has been around and the external pressure for women to be small does not seem to be going anywhere soon, I am sure this behavior will continue to be a problem that many young women face for the foreseeable future. The language used in her section of the book was meant to emulate being out of breath. The only time in the book that eclipses were considered was to capture that need to take an extra pause for a specific purpose. Lily is a

busy girl, who makes good grades, has a vibrant social life, and possibly a few admirers for the fact that she has the social currency of being thin and white. She cannot control her skin color, but she can control how much or little she eats to maintain her thinness.

Carson was a bit of a different case. His section of the story ended up being reworked as well to focus more on him and his role in the family unit. His original story included a friendship with the school's token student of color to receive funding, but that proved to be too much to try and express in a small section of the book as well as not saying much about him and more about the society as a whole. After some discussion with Baxley, we determined to move forward with a “boys will be boys” attitude and showcase how he will be expected to grow up and be just like Dosier. This reframing allowed us to focus more on the ways boys are allowed to express violent tendencies and not be seen as emotional, and his parents go so far as to encourage this behavior.

So Carson went home
and Maddy told his parents
and they laughed
and scolded him softly
with a little bit
of pride.



Figure 10: Image from *Meet the Davies* of Diane, Dossier and Carson, Source Courtney Rogers

The son was a bit of a mystery to me for a while. His obvious references come from Elroy Jetson, but more than that play clothing for young boys has not changed all that drastically in the last hundred years. I modeled this color scheme loosely off of his father to maintain a visual link and show that he does not change much he will presumably end up just like him seen in figure 10. The soft hair and soft features created an interesting juxtaposition between what he can be with a nurturing home, versus what he has been shown as violent and righteous examples in his father. Much like my own

younger brother, the blonde hair will eventually transition into the light brown of his father's and leave the boyish softness and blonde hair behind.

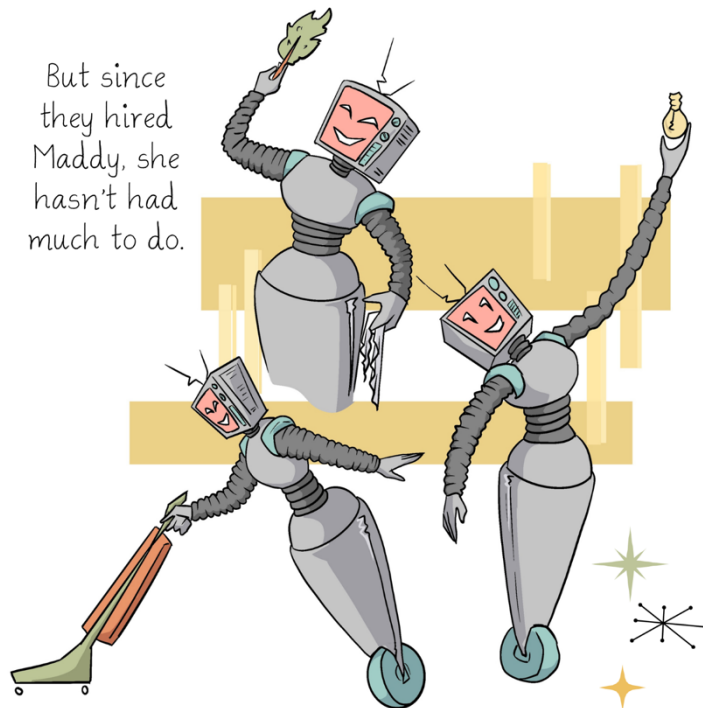


Figure 11: Image from *Meet the Davies* of Maddy 9000, Source Courtney Rogers

The last piece of the character design puzzle was the one I struggled with and redid the most. Maddy Maid Bot 9000 (figure 11) certainly drew inspiration from Characters like Rosie, Hal9000, and Eve from *Wall-E*, but she needed to fill several literal job descriptions and hint at being able to do a few others. This synthesis of the design was more complicated by the fact that robots can look like anything, and don't have the human constraints of needing limbs, hair, or even a face. I knew I wanted the main contrast to work with the triangles present in Diane's design but making her mostly

curves. A faux bosom and large hips hinted at her ability to do more than just clean the house, and her articulated arms were molded mostly off of real-life space suits from the later 1960s. As a concept, her development was to provide everything Diane does and then some, but in practice, much like Rosie from *The Jetsons*, she is ostensibly representative of a black woman hired maid in the house as was so common in the real-life suburbs. Interviewing other designers of robots and robot adjacent characters, the chance to explore how a person can be condensed into a programmable object feels truly like the next step in the objectification of women's bodies (especially women of color's bodies). When considering making one of the supporting characters a robot I had to take a few things into context. The ethics around boiling a person down to what their job is in a hierarchical system was certainly uncomfortable navigate but I thought ultimately necessary to serve a larger narrative point around the treatment of household hired help, and women of color at this time in the US.

THE LIBRARIAN AND THE PERFORMANCE

Moving more into the physical reality of the reading for the book, I wanted to create a sort of slice of life that could exist in the Davies universe. I worked to imagine what a library in Neo New Haven would look like and what activities would be featured in this kind of community space. Using real libraries in the Austin Texas area as a reference I realized a few key details were very important for me to replicate the feeling of being a child in those spaces. Activities like coloring pages, a community call board for local events, and a large colorful rug for the children to sit on were the major elements

I wanted to try and emulate in the same style as the Davies. The call to those Uber retro-futurism shapes of old bowling alleys and car washes, but in the decor helped me transition the modern world into something both old and new.



Figure 12: WCP Room the reading was hosted in, the handmade rugs, Source Courtney Rogers

Now that the book had been illustrated and written, the next step was to procure a space to show it to the public. A major influence in my life and a long-time love of mine is public libraries and the good they provide for a community. I wanted to create a faux public library reading of a book, reminiscent of those community events many Americans, including myself, attended as children. I wanted to capture the feeling of one of those community reading events and slightly pervert it in the way that the Davies was

a slight dark mirror of our nostalgia habits. The character of the Librarian was created as a facilitator of this nostalgia trip intersecting with our current moment in the form of a drag queen (figure 13). Performed by Matthew Schulz in conjunction with the reading, I enlisted the help of costume technologist California Thomson to help me construct the costume for the librarian.



Figure 13: Costume design of the Librarian, Source Courtney Rogers

Using the medium of Drag performance I was able to have the librarian be a larger-than-life and slightly cartoonish persona as well as another commentary on gender in performance as it relates to the feelings of nostalgia. The ability to poke fun at the Lucille ball housewife tropes is especially heightened when performed by a six-foot-tall adult man in high heels and an eleven-inch-tall wig. The colors of the costume were derived from the existing color scheme of Meet the Davies and the print was paired with the traditional watercolor techniques of earlier children's literature style renderings. Working with Schulz to create the persona of the Librarian as this nosy busy body helped inform the reading of the book.

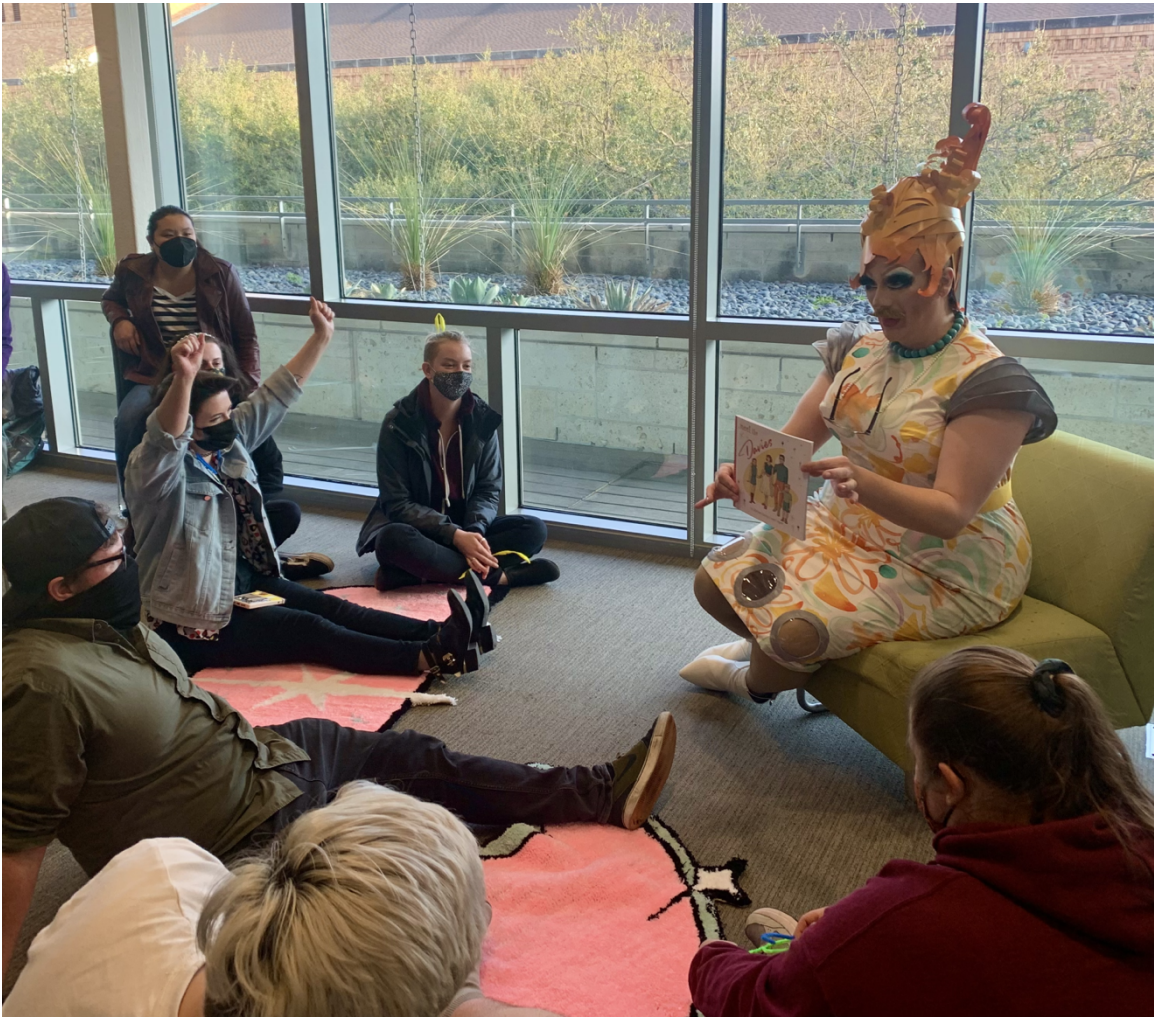


Figure 14: Picture from the March 11 Performance of the reading with the Librarian,
Source Courtney Rogers

I had made coloring pages before, so simply embracing some of the art from the book and creating some subversive new messages for the coloring sheets was simple enough. After some light research, I quickly realized it would be very expensive for me to buy a custom rug so I learned how to tuft rugs myself. With the help of the folks at interactive nature, I built a rug frame and purchased a rug tufting gun and created the

four-foot by five-foot rugs (illustration 12) that would be the essence of the reading time seating. I needed to invite the audience to embrace the childish joy of sitting crisscrossed on the floor to be told a story. I reserved a space at the William C Power Student activity center and planned for the reading. On March 10 and 11 (figure 14) I decorated the rooms with artifacts of the book, the rugs, magazines to resemble the one that Lily reads for teen weight loss tips, and friends and colleagues came to see the reading.

Reflections

The reading itself I think achieved my goals of trying to pose hard questions on long-lasting systems in a way that is fun and engaging. When I set out to explore the idea of retro-futurism I had several iterations as to how that would manifest, and the final idea I landed on was how pop culture collectively pushes current norms into the future, whether or not the next generations want or needs them. Through the act of making the book, I was consistently faced with the ramifications of how the mid-century ideals of the nuclear family have impacted our current abilities to have community with each other outside of the family unit.

Even beyond the reading, the life of the Davies extended even beyond what I had imagined. The ability to self-publish via KDP meant that I could publicly list the book for print on demand and anyone could have a copy for themselves. I'll be very clear here and state that I do not make any profits on the book, the list price is strictly to cover the cost of the printing and the shipping. But for that reason, so many more people than just the ones who came to the performance we're able to also meet the Davies. It blurs the line for me as far as my work as a visual artist and illustrator goes on how I define performance. But in looking at the two readings with the Librarian specifically, I would conclude that it met its goals. I asked the audience to sit with some challenging themes and ideas with child-like earnestness and ask good faith questions about the systems we live in.

The thoughts and feelings that came up while creating the Davies made me question a few things about my artistic approach. In theatrical training we are asked to

approach the text with reverence and serve it, or to serve the director's ideas, but should that be the default setting? Thinking back to my initial ideas and goals I had for this project it was intended to be an exploration of aesthetics trends and values in science fiction from the twentieth century and is manifested in this form of commentary on toxic patterns that occur when we engage with nostalgia. It seems counterintuitive to be nostalgic for something that has not even happened yet, but then again, the future is not really about how we imagined the future, it is a reflection of how we see our current selves.

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