

BOOKS & ARTS

Experimental fiction

Publishers could do a lot more to promote 'lab lit', a genre of novel set in the world of science.

Jennifer Rohn

Art may be said to imitate life, but when it comes to scientists in fiction, the picture is both minimalist and out of focus. Unexpectedly, a recent experiment suggests that publishers' marketing strategies are partly to blame.

Although science fiction thrives, novels containing realistic depictions of scientists plying their trade — a genre I call 'lab lit' — are rare, and those most heralded as literary scientific novels often contain the worst stereotypes of all. A notable example is *Atomised* by Michel Houellebecq, whose scientist embodied not one but all five of the most frequent boffin clichés: arrogance, asexuality, semi-autism, out-of-control experiments and concomitant downfall. Other novels occasionally contain more realistic scientists, but they and their science are rarely central to the plot.

In theory, science should be rich fodder for serious literary fiction if you consider its components: secret knowledge incrementally uncovered, the thrill of investigation, nothing less than the meaning of life and the Universe. The backdrops on offer are fabulous: bustling labs, gleaming machinery, vast telescopes trained on faraway stars, exotic viral epidemics. And the culture is a complex web of urgent human passions and behaviours. Why, then, is this creative treasure so consistently underused, especially in an era when science is immediately relevant to modern life and saturates our media?

One reason is undoubtedly that the adage 'write what you know' hinders the uninitiated, and in recent years a number of well-meaning organizations have tried to get scientists and writers together. These efforts are laudable and should continue, but there is another link in the chain that needs attention: the publishing and marketing phase.

I have spoken to several lab-lit authors who described stern resistance from agents and publishers — some fear that science won't sell, but the main impediment seems to be one of categorization. In a fiercely competitive literary market, genre — knowing what sort of novel one is dealing with — is an important way of helping a book stand out. Groupings such as 'chick lit' and 'historical fiction', made recognizable by characteristic cover designs,



Novel idea: describing fiction set in the laboratory as 'lab lit' could boost book sales.

can function as short cuts for overstimulated consumers.

But what happens when a novel is lab lit? There aren't many similar novels out there, so any that do get written and published are left to fend for themselves in a sea of other well-branded novels. And poor sales will feed back: next time, the publisher might think twice before taking a risk on such a work.

I wanted to know whether lab lit would sell if readers were made aware of it as a genre. To explore this, I performed an experiment with the cooperation of the Gower Street branch of the bookseller Waterstone's in London. The original plan was to display 30 or so lab-lit novels on a table under a promotional poster, but it soon became apparent that we couldn't find enough suitable titles. Even to

achieve the dozen books needed to stock a small upright display, I had to make some compromises. In an ideal world, I wouldn't have needed to venture into the grey areas between pure lab lit and other genres, with Greg Bear's exaggerated *Blood Music* or Patricia Cornwell's forensics-heavy *Unnatural Exposure*, for example. But key books such as Simon Mawer's *Mendel's Dwarf*, Neal Stephenson's *Zodiac* and Carl Djerassi's *Cantor's Dilemma* were deemed corporately "unavailable" (despite their presence on Amazon). After an exhaustive research and repeated liaisons with Waterstone's, I felt lucky to have even a few bona fide specimens, including Jonathan Lethem's *As She Climbed Across the Table*, John McCabe's *Paper* and William Boyd's *Brazzaville Beach*.

The display, initially intended to exist for only a few weeks, was ultimately so successful that it was kept up for five months. And for many of the books displayed, sales increased dramatically, even taking into account the likelihood that displayed books will sell better in general anyway. Of course, we can only draw qualitative conclusions from such a small and uncontrolled experiment. The fact that this particular branch is a major academic bookstore could also have played a role, so it remains to be seen whether we can extrapolate to a wider audience. But the results do suggest that people actually want to read stories about realistic scientists and scientific scenarios — there is a market for such fare, even if this market is not exploited by publishers.

The literary world would do well to recognize this lost opportunity. With millions of people engaged in global scientific research and the daily papers filled with science news, lab lit could be a lucrative new genre. And with public distrust of science as prevalent as ever, it certainly wouldn't hurt science's image to have more lab-lit novels — featuring positively portrayed, realistic scientists — on the best-seller list. ■

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