

BOOK REVIEWS

Routledge Handbook for Creative Futures Edited by Gabrielle Donnelly and Alfonso Montuori

Paul Z Jackson¹ 

¹ The Solutions Focus

Keywords: futures, global, climate, emergent, creative

<https://doi.org/10.59874/001c.89693>

Journal of Solution Focused Practices

Vol. 7, Issue 1, 2023

Here is a weighty tome, with 37 chapters from authors with many different interests and styles. It's a book that presents a choice: either a thorough scholarly read or a treasure trove for dipping into. It's the latter I'd recommend for an SF audience, and it's the approach I'll take in this review, selecting a few shiny nuggets for comment.

Routledge Handbook for Creative Futures edited by Gabrielle Donnelly and Alfonso Montuori

Routledge, 2023, 380 pages, ISBN 9780367897185, ebook £38.69 (hardback available)

Here is a weighty tome, with 37 chapters from authors with many different interests and styles. It's a book that presents a choice: either a thorough scholarly read or a treasure trove for dipping into. It's the latter I'd recommend for an SF audience, and it's the approach I'll take in this review, selecting a few shiny nuggets for comment.

The most SF-oriented writers in this compendium share the sense of agency that editors Alfonso Montuori and Gabrielle Donnelly remind us of in the popular saying among futurists: "You can't predict the future, but you can invent it." They provide a clear and concise context for the collection of essays. "Creative futures are needed because the current images of the future in the media, fiction, movies, and the news are often dismal". This reminds me that one of my favourite aspects of SF is its salutary counterbalance to the problem-saturated media in which we happen to wallow, contaminating our attention in the present and inevitably skewing our view of the future.

If the question then is how to do it better, we know that Solutions Focus contributions include:

- Taking a systemic view of the world
- Favouring constructionist descriptions

^a Paul Z Jackson is a solutions-focused consultant and trainer, whose books include *The Solutions Focus* (co-author with Mark McKergow), *The Resilience Pocketbook* (co-author with Janine Waldman), *Positively Speaking* (co-author with Janine Waldman) and *Easy – Your LIFE PASS to creativity and confidence*. Contact paul@thesolutionsfocus.co.uk

- Offering tools such as the Future Perfect and small experimental steps as valuable methods for dealing with complexity.

The Dutch futurist Fred Polak long ago argued that our image of the future is key to all choices in the present. And to reach better futures requires new ways of relating to each other, an emerging form of creativity that appreciates context and focuses on win-win outcomes of mutual benefit. “In an age of increasing polarization, the importance of creative, collaborative, connective communications and interactions cannot be overstated”.

Noting that mechanistic approaches sacrifice variety and creativity in favour of productivity, Montuori and Donnelly quote Gregory Bateson to make the point that significant relationships include not just humans, but also the environment. “When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise ‘What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,’ you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is part of your wider eco-mental system—and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience”.

As you might expect, the book contains many models for more usefully addressing the future, including the Art of Hosting (with an emphasis on the importance of participatory conversations), theatrical improvisation to bodily explore potential experiences, Raworth’s ‘doughnut economics’ and Benyus’ ‘biomimicry’, mostly (I guess) familiar to thoughtful SF practitioners. There’s plenty here to nourish and supplement our thinking about our work.

I enjoyed Angela Wilkinson and Betty Sue Flowers’ essay which shows how the future is always and only a fiction – and that thus if we imagine that better futures are possible we make different decisions in the present. They offer five principles of realistic hope: “Diversity has to do with the power of who’s in the room; dialogue describes how they interact with each other; experimentation is what they do; systems thinking is the context in which they approach problems and solutions; and futures framing relates to the purpose of creating a future together that’s different from the past”.

Good stuff, and yet they still don’t quite get it! “As in the case of climate change, there is no time to wait until we know the future for sure. We must engage with uncertainty in order to act. And we must act in the spirit of experimentation, with a willingness to observe results, accept and learn from failures, and change”. Yes, and we could learn perhaps even more from successes, couldn’t we?

Vlad P Glaveanu gives us the tastiest headline: “Social possibilities, possible sociabilities”, while positioning hope as crucial to anyone’s motivation to act.

Discussing the power of stories, Jennifer Berger and Zafer Achi contrast conversations that revolve around the competing narratives of progress, tradition and – their preferred modernist SF-like perspective – interdependence.

Anthony Hodgson's piece is one of several that are far too complicated either for the matter at hand or my limited brain, though he has the best 2x2 matrix with axes of Agency and Uncertainty, generating the four boxes of Roadmaps, Forecasts (extrapolations from analysis), Scenarios (of multiple possible futures) and the SF-flavoured Reflexive Futures (emergent pathways of transformation).

I noticed that the clearer writers are for me both more interesting and more persuasive. There's virtue in naked argument. One of the more obscure-style authors suggests, "The realm of the Unthought is not about visioning desired futures, it is about interrogating the plethora of offerings at hand through a diversity of perspectives. It is about laying out all the scenarios, visions, and images of the futures that have been produced before, and seeking and bringing forth everything from the synergies and the overlaps, to the complementary and the contrary". Or even more gnomically, "If you are studying an image of the future, you are not studying the future, you are studying a drop of rain that is an image of the future as climate". Mmm.

There's a fair bit of that kind of writing, but the book offers plenty of joy when you take a 'skip and dip' approach. It visits the past and present as well as the future: on the rewriting of history, we learn "nothing is as unpredictable as Russia's past".

And SF practitioners will be glad to note that with changes of thinking come changes of doing. "We replace the downstream focus on making predictions based on what has been to an upstream investment in cocreating what may become," Celiane Camargo-Borges and Kenneth J. Gergen pithily recommend in their lucid chapter, Social construction and the forming of futures. They say "There is a major difference, for example, between problem questions as opposed to possibility questions". And while their survey of constructionist emphases in future building includes "narrative, brief, postmodern and solution oriented" therapies, they make no mention of SF in organisations. One for the future, perhaps...

[Visit the publisher's website for a full list of chapters and authors in the collection.](#)

Submitted: November 01, 2023 GMT



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.