

Stranger than (science) fiction, how to get a head start on the future

 By [Bronwyn Williams](#)

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In an age where fake news is stranger to truth, and truth stranger than fiction, Bronwyn Williams provides insights as to why books and their authors are vital to understanding trends...

Elon, Bezos and Branson

If you want a glimpse into the future, you can do far worse than reading science fiction. Ideas are circular; those with the best imaginations need others to turn those ideas into reality. Much like how the ideas 1920's science fiction writers had about space travel and tourism are coming into reality at the hands of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson right now.

1996 The Sparrow predicts future currencies

This week, I have been reading [The Sparrow by Mary Doria Russell](#). It's a pretty weird book, set (mostly) in 2060, that mashes hard science fiction with theology, but the plot aside, as twisted as it is, what really interested me about the book was how prescient the author was about some key socio-economic ideas that are just now beginning to filter out of the realm of science fiction and into our very real lives.

The Sparrow was published in 1996, more than ten years before bitcoin and "the blockchain" were introduced to the world in Satoshi Nakamoto's famous white paper, and more than twenty years before the ground-breaking GPT-3 AI code became a reality. Yet, the author managed to describe two important use cases based around those very technologies that we are just beginning to understand today.

“ Things I read in July. Many of which were recommended by good people with good taste right here on this app. I in turn now recommend them to whoever happens upon this tweet. Would read them all again (except the Salinger. Who wants it?) pic.twitter.com/jBxCuNipr9— Bronwyn Williams (@bronwynwilliams) [August 1, 2020](#) ”

The rise of ISAs and NFTs

In the book, Russell describes a new form of indentured labour, where people voluntarily sell their future earning potential to a labour broker; exchanging freedom of occupation for a secure set income. In the book, characters' educations are paid for by their brokers who then contract their labour out to clients until such a time as the labourer has earned back the value invested in them and an agreed amount of interest.

Back in the real world, we are now seeing ISAs (Income Service Agreements) becoming a popular way for students to fund education through equity rather than debt financing. With these sorts of agreements, the student agrees for the institution or individual funding to claim an agreed upon percentage of their future income until they have paid back the value of the investment; unlike with traditional student debt, however, if the student does not find work or earn an income, they are not obligated to pay back the money. [Lambda](#) school, which teaches IT and coding is a pioneer of these new-generation ISAs. Taking this idea further, individuals have [started to issue NFTs \(non-fungible tokens\) on themselves](#), essentially issuing personal blockchain-based cryptocurrencies that allow investors to own a share in a living breathing human being's future worth.

Artificial intelligence clones

The second idea previewed in *The Sparrow* involves characters the book terms “vultures”, studying other characters as they work to copy their decision-making processes into bespoke artificial intelligent algorithms; that will eventually put the original human “subject” out of a job. This too has become a reality. Companies like [Merlynn](#) now offer to do exactly that: to create AI copies of your best employees. In other words:

“ *Life is just as strange as science fiction.* ”

The lesson here, though, is that the world needs builders as well as dreamers. The writers who give us a glimpse of what the world could be in the future, are seldom the same people who end up top profiting off those ideas by making them real.

“ *Is this not the greatest column title? 💎💎 (credit to [@terrylevin](#) for the name) - see you on [@Bizcommunity](#) in August. If there is anything you want my opinion, suggest away. Otherwise general weirding it is. [pic.twitter.com/0HILnoBOwP](#)— Bronwyn Williams (@bronwynwilliams) [July 30, 2020](#)* ”

After the cult movie title Pulp-Fiction, this column is inspired by the open secret that the up-to 10 books per week ordered by Williams are the raw material for a rigorous intellectual scope and welcome antidote to a sea of pulp opinion pieces.

Catch Pulp-Non Fiction every Monday exclusively on Bizcommunity, from the beginning of August 2020, for a glimpse into the unique insights of one of South Africa's most highly regarded business intellectuals and trend analysts.

ABOUT BRONWYN WILLIAMS

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