

“To the here and now, but from another place”: Reactions to the science-fictionality of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*

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Introduction

In a career spanning nearly 40 years as a writer of fiction, Kazuo Ishiguro has written only eight novels. In the same period, many of his contemporaries on the celebrated Granta Best of Young British Novelists list (1983) have been more prolific – William Boyd has published fifteen full-length novels, Ian McEwan thirteen, Julian Barnes and Rose Tremain twelve each, Salman Rushdie ten and Graham Swift nine – but few have captured media and public attention to the extent that Ishiguro has, even before he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017. Despite, or perhaps because of, the relative sparsity of his output, the publication of an Ishiguro novel is an event that attracts previews and interviews as well as reviews of the book, across the English-speaking world. As Ishiguro’s body of work gradually grows, an image has emerged of his books as simultaneously diverse and distinctive: all different, but somehow all similar. With his most recent novels, critical attention has begun to focus on this “literary” writer’s engagement with topics and techniques more usually associated with “popular” genres, namely fantasy in *The Buried Giant* (2015) and science fiction in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and, most recently, *Klara and the Sun* (2021).

“This is the story of Klara”: pre-launch publicity

Faber & Faber, Ishiguro’s UK publisher, announced the forthcoming publication of *Klara and the Sun* on its Twitter account on June 16, 2020, launching a dedicated website for the book.¹ This early publicity made no

¹ “klaraandthesun.com,” Faber & Faber, <https://www.klaraandthesun.com/>.

explicit move to place the novel generically as science fiction, but hinted at its non-mimetic content in two elements in the second line of Faber's tweet ("Klara, an Artificial Friend, remains hopeful a customer will choose her, but she is warned not to invest too much in the promises of humans") and at greater length in the website's description of the novel: "This is the story of Klara, an Artificial Friend with outstanding observational qualities, who, from her place in the store, watches carefully the behaviour of those who come in to browse, and of those who pass in the street outside. She remains hopeful a customer will soon choose her, but when the possibility emerges that her circumstances may change for ever, Klara is warned not to invest too much in the promises of humans" (my underlining). A tweet on the same day by Ishiguro's US publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, took a different approach with the tagline "A luminous tale about the human heart and what it means to love", a line also used on Ishiguro's Facebook page on June 16, and repeated by a Penguin Random House tweet from September 10. "Humans" is a loaded term in the Faber publicity (reinforcing the suggestion given in "Artificial" that Klara is not human) but "the human heart" could be a phrase from any fictional genre.

Concurrently with these press releases, news and media platforms such as the *Guardian* in Britain² and *Vulture* in the US³ carried quotes from a statement by Faber's editorial director Angus Cargill that clearly set out to position the novel as both realistic and speculative fiction: "a novel about the human heart that speaks urgently to the here and now, but from another place". Subsequent news reports and social media posts by publishers, booksellers, and the author himself kept up the momentum leading to the publication of the novel on March 2, 2021, with cover design reveals, announcements of the acquisition of movie rights, and reports on the featuring of the novel in various "Books to look forward to in 2021" lists, including both standard literary lists and those dedicated specifically to science fiction, such as Megan Crouse's selection for the website *Den of Geek*, which explained that "Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro is known for his

² Alison Flood, "Kazuo Ishiguro Announces New Novel, *Klara and the Sun*", *The Guardian*, 16 June 2020.

³ Zoe Haylock, "Kazuo Ishiguro Is Back to Make You Weep with *Klara and the Sun*", *Vulture*, 16 June 2020.

literary fiction like *The Remains of the Day* and high-brow science fiction like *Never Let Me Go*. His newest tackles robot sapience in a story sure to be as much about the human heart as about machines”.⁴

Arguing over genres

The generic territory of Ishiguro’s previous novel, *The Buried Giant*, was openly contested, both by reviewers of that novel and by Ishiguro himself, in his public interactions with critics of and commentators on it.⁵ The writer of the review of *Klara and the Sun* for the *Economist* concludes that *The Buried Giant* “confounded some critics. It was seen as a puzzling left turn into fantasy—a tag the author rejected, prompting accusations that not only had he raided a downmarket genre, he had done so ungraciously”.⁶ The review goes on to speculate about whether a similar controversy might result from Ishiguro’s choice of genre for his latest novel: “these arguments ... may resurface now that he has turned to science fiction—or rather turned back to it”. But has this in fact been the case? This paper will examine twenty-one reviews of *Klara and the Sun* published in British, Irish, and American “mainstream” newspapers and periodicals, both in print and online, along with five reviews from “genre” publications (that is, publications explicitly dealing with speculative fiction, including science fiction and fantasy). It will also examine eight interviews in which Ishiguro discusses the book. Its main aim is not to provide an exhaustive reading of *Klara and the Sun* either as literary fiction or as a work of science fiction, but to examine the extent to which the novel has been presented and received as science fiction both by reviewers and critics, and by the author himself.

Mainstream critical views: Is *Klara* science fiction?

Locating *Klara and the Sun* generically would seem, on the face of it, to be a

⁴ “Top New Science Fiction Books in April 2021”, *Den of Geek*, <https://www.denofgeek.com/books/best-new-science-fiction-books-in-2021/>.

⁵ Richard Hodson, “The Ogres and the Critics: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* and the Battle Line of Fantasy”. *Studies in English Language and Literature* 56, no. 2-3 (2016).

⁶ “More Than Human: Kazuo Ishiguro’s Rich Meditation on Love and Morality”, *The Economist*, 4 March 2021.

more straightforward task than had been the case with *The Buried Giant*. James Wood, one of the few critics to have reviewed both novels for the same publication (the *New Yorker*), and a long-time writer on Ishiguro, observes that Ishiguro's fiction encompasses many genres; he names Kafkaesque fantasy, horror, science fiction, and dystopian writing, as well as "unreliable narration ... the literature of flâneurial travel ... [and] the literature of exile and immigration ... sometimes combining them in a single book, always on his own singular terms".⁷ In his subsequent argument that Ishiguro's novel is a work of Nabokovian estrangement, Wood argues that one of the two main ways that this is achieved is through "the relatively straightforward defamiliarization of science fiction". Although only ten of the twenty-one mainstream reviews examined here use the term explicitly, many other critics concur that *Klara and the Sun* is, or uses the techniques of science fiction. Sameer Rahim in the *Literary Review*, for example, suggests that Ishiguro's novel provides a model that other "novelists urgently scribbling dystopian sci-fi" might do well to imitate.⁸ However, many of these generic attributions come with caveats. Thomas Jones in the *London Review of Books* says that the book is "just about, technically" a science fiction novel.⁹ Ron Charles in the *Washington Post* describes the book as "genre-straddling", although he does not state explicitly which genres it straddles; his concluding observation seems to show a certain reluctance to apply the science-fiction label too firmly: "tales of sensitive robots determined to help us survive our self-destructive impulses are not unknown in the canon of science fiction. But Ishiguro brings to this poignant subgenre a uniquely elegant style".¹⁰ Doug Battersby's observation in the *Irish Times* that the book is "one among a litany of novels about artificial intelligence" seems to be identifying the same

⁷ "Kazuo Ishiguro Uses Artificial Intelligence to Reveal the Limits of Our Own", *The New Yorker*, 8 March 2021.

⁸ "The Robot as Carer: *Klara and the Sun*, by Kazuo Ishiguro, Reviewed", *The Spectator*, 6 March 2021. The sub-title of Rahim's review ("The Nobel prize-winner is the latest novelist to join the AI debate and the possibility of creating a sentient machine") suggests that the phenomenon of literary novelists crossing into science fiction territory is a current trend.

⁹ Thomas Jones, "Oh You Darling Robot!", *London Review of Books* (2021).

¹⁰ "In Kazuo Ishiguro's 'Klara and the Sun,' a Robot Tries to Make Sense of Humanity", *The Washington Post*, 2 March 2021.

(sub)genre.¹¹ Anne Enright writes in the *Guardian* that the book is “set in a speculative future that feels quite like the present” but goes on to suggest that it might not satisfy all of the expectations of genre readers: “If you are waiting for a big sci-fi reveal about this future world then you are reading the wrong book”.¹² In the *New Republic*, Rumaan Alam also notes that, despite its “Sci-fi milieu” the novel does not give us “the specifics that clarify this invented world to be a version of our own—the very promise of science fiction”.¹³ Peter Kemp in the *Sunday Times* writes that, like *Never Let Me Go*, the novel uses “fitments of science fiction” to achieve affective goals: “a sci-fi scenario is used to stir emotions”.¹⁴

Reader views: Is *Klara* science fiction?

As we have seen, the pre-launch marketing of *Klara and the Sun* did not explicitly label the novel as science fiction, but key terms in that publicity, as well as Ishiguro’s form with *Never Let Me Go*, certainly hinted that it might be. To what extent has this generic association been made by general readers of the book? The popular book review website and social network *Goodreads* allows its users to tag (or “shelve”) books with user-generated labels giving generic, content, or other information. At the time of writing, *Klara and the Sun* had received 18,132 user reviews on the site and had been tagged as “science-fiction” by 1660 users, with 1558 users tagging it as “sci-fi”, 273 as “scifi” and 79 as “sf”.¹⁵ Expressing these four tags as a percentage of the total

¹¹ “A Girl, a Robot and the Vagaries of the Heart”, *The Irish Times*, 6 March 2021.

¹² “*Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro Review – What It Is to Be Human”, *The Guardian*, 25 February 2021.

¹³ “Kazuo Ishiguro’s Deceptively Simple Story of AI”, *The New Republic*, 12 April 2021.

¹⁴ “*Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro, Review — His First Novel since the Nobel”, *Sunday Times*, 28 February 2021.

¹⁵ *Goodreads*, “*Klara and the Sun* > Top Shelves,” <https://www.goodreads.com/work/shelves/84460796-klara-and-the-sun>. Other generic user-tags for *Klara and the Sun* include “literary-fiction” and variants (614 tags, 3%), “dystopian” and variants (571, 3%), “fantasy” (334, 2%), variants combining science fiction and fantasy (290, 2%), “speculative-fiction” and variants (228, 1%). The book was tagged as “contemporary” or “contemporary-fiction” by 461 users (3%) and as “adult” or “adult-fiction” by 355 users (2%). It is not possible to determine whether these particular tags involve generic and/or content judgments, or more general information about

number of reviews can give us a crude measure of the extent to which users of the site perceive the book to be science fiction: 20%. This is the same percentage as *Never Let Me Go* (38,412 reviews, 7766 tags). Equivalent figures for four books featuring android or A.I. protagonists, classic and contemporary, by authors usually regarded as primarily science fiction writers, are much higher: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick (1968) 128%; *Idoru* by William Gibson (1996) 269%; *The Holy Machine* by Chris Beckett (2004) 91%; “The Lifecycle of Software Objects” by Ted Chiang (2010) 121%.¹⁶ Readers, then, do reach for the “science fiction” tag to describe Ishiguro’s work, but at a much lower rate than they do texts dealing with similar concerns written by established “genre” novelists.¹⁷ The level is similar, in fact, to that of another book about an android from a “literary” novelist and one of Ishiguro’s Granta list contemporaries: Ian McEwan’s 2019 novel *Machines Like Me* (25%).¹⁸ Similarly, *Goodreads* readers of *The Buried Giant* tagged its main genre as “fantasy” at a roughly equivalent level: 25%.

Insights from speculative fiction reviewers

Among the five speculative fiction-specific reviews surveyed here, there seems to be little debate about admitting *Klara and the Sun* as a work of science fiction, although the degree to which it is regarded as a success, either generally or as a science fiction novel, is mixed. Nic Clarke of *SFX*

the audience of the novel, the time of its writing, etc. Because *Goodreads* tags are user-generated, the number of potential tags is huge; in fact, *Klara and the Sun* has more than 12,000 different tags, many of them applied by only one person. This analysis looked only at the top 100 tags. It is also possible for users to attach multiple tags to a book, or indeed none at all.

¹⁶ The greater-than 100% figures can be explained by the fact that *Goodreads* allows users to tag and rate books without reviewing them. *Idoru*, for example, has 22,627 ratings and 1607 science fiction tags, but only 598 reviews on the site.

¹⁷ Peter Stockwell speculates that “the more you read science fiction, the more likely you are to read *as* science fiction”; *The Poetics of Science Fiction* (Longman, 2000), 7. Following this reasoning, it may of course be possible that (more) readers of, say, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* are (more) likely to tag that novel as science fiction because they read more science fiction.

¹⁸ McEwan’s novel has a much lower number of science-fiction tags (768) and a much lower overall number of ratings: 3124.

Magazine describes it as Ishiguro’s “latest foray into SF”.¹⁹ Writing for *Tor.com*, the website of a primarily science fiction and fantasy publisher, Em Nordling describes the novel as Ishiguro’s “return to the science fiction genre”.²⁰ Writing for the science-fiction magazine *Locus*, Ian Mond begins his review by setting Ishiguro’s book within the context of the publishing trend that it represents: “Over the last couple of years, it’s been surprising to see literary authors ... raise concerns about machine consciousness”.²¹ Mond goes on to imply that Ishiguro’s engagement with the issue is far from groundbreaking: “Klara’s observation of human interaction ... isn’t something we haven’t seen many, many times before in genre fiction and popular media”. Paul Kincaid, writing in the speculative fiction magazine *Strange Horizons*, also ends up reviewing the novel negatively, but not on account of any of its perceived failings as science fiction; he notes that “Ishiguro is not interested in worldbuilding; he is interested in character building, in emotion building”. This is a point also noted by Clarke: “Some readers may be frustrated that Klara’s limited perspective results in not everything being explained, but ... this is a quiet, beautifully written triumph”. Kincaid argues, instead, that the novel fails to meet other generic expectations; for Kincaid, the book’s ending is “feeble, unearned, and fatally undermines the novel, as if his characters have gone through the tragedy of learning without actually learning of tragedy”.²² Norman Spinrad, reviewing the novel for *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*, is less critical, locating it within an established genre tradition: “Kazuo Ishiguro makes it at least ‘rubber science’ clear that something like Artificial Friends sooner or later could be created ... He leaves it to the reader to ponder whether or not such robots would be entities, sentient beings, with souls, and therefore, in moral terms, how they are to be regarded. That has certainly become a central theme of legitimate hard science fiction one way or another all the way from R.U.R. to Star Trek”.²³ It is notable that, like

¹⁹ “*Klara and the Sun*: Our Friend’s Electric”, *SFX Magazine*, April 2021.

²⁰ “Ian Mond Reviews *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro”, *Locus*, 7 July 2021.

²¹ “Kazuo Ishiguro Returns to Sci-Fi with *Klara and the Sun*”, *Tor.com*, <https://www.tor.com/2021/08/27/book-reviews-kazuo-ishiguro-klara-and-the-sun/>.

²² “*Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro”, *Strange Horizons*, 19 July 2021.

²³ “What Is Consciousness?”, *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, March/April 2022. “Rubber science” is Spinrad’s term to describe “literary tricks to turn scientific disbelief into

many of the mainstream reviewers cited above, these speculative-fiction reviewers do not see Ishiguro's vagueness in hard-science worldbuilding as an insuperable obstacle to placing the novel within the generic territory of science fiction.

Mainstream critical views: other generic locations for *Klara*

What has emerged from this study so far is some way from the arguments about genre that the reviewer from the *Economist* had foreseen as a possible reaction to the book. However, further examination of the twenty-one selected mainstream reviews makes it clear that, although some reviewers, including Radhika Jones in the *New York Times*²⁴ and Alex Preston in the *Observer*²⁵ make no generic attributions, generic locations for *Klara and the Sun* other than science fiction are clearly available.²⁶

Some reviewers focus on the affinity that the novel has with other textual genres, either in its aims and subject matter, or in its narrative techniques. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Charles Finch writes that Ishiguro "is almost incidentally one of the best pure mystery novelists around".²⁷ For *Slate*, Laura Miller notes that "It's not a mistake to view Ishiguro's novels as works of social criticism",²⁸ with the reviewer for the *Economist* suggesting that the "speculative scenario of technological innovation" of this particular novel "is also a domestic satire on aspirational parenting" among other things. A number of reviewers go further. Edmund Gordon in the *Times Literary Supplement* compares *Klara and the Sun* in part to a Bildungsroman,

literary belief".

²⁴ "A Humanoid Who Cares for Humans, from the Mind of Kazuo Ishiguro: Fiction", *The New York Times*, 23 February 2021. Jones notes that the novel "takes place in the uncomfortably near future".

²⁵ "*Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro Review – Another Masterpiece", *The Observer*, 1 March 2021.

²⁶ This diversity is reflected in the range of references to other works made by the reviews, taking in popular film franchises, children's stories, and literary fiction. It is significant that less than a quarter of these references, listed in the appendix, are to works usually viewed as science fiction.

²⁷ "Review: Kazuo Ishiguro's New Novel Is One of His Very Best", *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 2021.

²⁸ "Unprecedented Input", *Slate*, 24 February 2021.

“structured around Klara’s growing awareness of her world and how it works”.²⁹ Jane Hu in the *New York Review of Books* also describes the novel as a “thwarted bildungsroman”—but also describes it as a cautionary tale with “dystopian landscapes” and “with all the technological contraptions and gimmicks of science fiction”.³⁰ In the *Literary Review*, James Purdon likens it to a fairy tale “in which Klara begins as the orphan servant and ends up playing the Fairy Godmother”.³¹ This reading is taken further by Judith Shulevitz in the *Atlantic*, who acknowledges that “I guess you could call this novel science fiction ... [that] certainly makes a contribution to the centuries-old disputation over whether machines have the potential to feel”—the very tradition identified by Spinrad. Her review focuses, though, on the novel’s “fairy-tale logic” and on Klara’s resemblance to characters from C.S. Lewis’s Narnia books or the stories of Hans Christian Andersen.³² In *Vulture*, Helen Shaw writes that “Klara’s pure, rather formal phrasing makes the book seem like a fable” and concludes that the book reminded her more of a story by Oscar Wilde “than all the sci-fi on my shelf”.³³ For Leo Robson in the *New Statesman*, it is “a sort of tone poem”.³⁴ For Alam, it is a parable;³⁵ for John Self in the *Times*, it “feels like a new definitive myth about the world we’re about to face”.³⁶ A more critical note is sounded by Allan Massie in the *Scotsman*, who describes the book as “an uneasy hybrid” between “the sort of domestic coming-of-age novel that Josie’s character and circumstances seem to call for” and “writing about Big Themes: cloning, harvesting of human organs, artificial intelligence”, which Massie characterises as Ishiguro’s having “moved ever further from the novel of character and social observation

²⁹ “Faith in the Bildungs-Robot”, *The Times Literary Supplement* (2021).

³⁰ “Portrait of the Robot as a Young Woman”, *The New York Review of Books*, 4 November 2021.

³¹ “Our Virtual Friend”, *Literary Review*, March 2021.

³² “The Radiant Inner Life of a Robot”, *The Atlantic*, 2 March 2021.

³³ “In *Klara and the Sun*, Artificial Intelligence Meets Real Sacrifice”, *Vulture*, 6 March 2021.

³⁴ “How Ishiguro Rewrote Himself”, *The New Statesman*, 3 March 2021.

³⁵ Alam, “Kazuo Ishiguro’s Deceptively Simple Story of AI”.

³⁶ “*Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro Review — a Novel That Is Tender, Touching and True”, *The Times*, 24 February 2021.

towards”.³⁷

Is *Klara* science fiction? Insights from the author

Does Ishiguro himself regard his novel as “science fiction”? As part of the extensive pre- and post-launch publicity, Ishiguro took part in a number of interviews about his book. Many of them touch on, but do not focus primarily on its genre. His *Sunday Times* interview with Bryan Appleyard is one that does tackle the genre issue directly, with Appleyard reporting that “Like *Klara*, [*Never Let Me Go*] was a form of science fiction, a term [Ishiguro], unlike some posh authors, embraces. ‘The stigma has reversed itself. It’s become a kind of a sign of something cutting-edge. We now feel a real need to look at science and technology. We’re hungrily looking around for people who give us some insight into it’”.³⁸ The reason for this feeling of urgency is a key common theme of other interviews. The children’s story origins of the book are addressed in Ishiguro’s interview with Dan Stewart for *Time* (which, although it refers to the novel’s “dystopian backdrop” does not refer to the book as science fiction),³⁹ and in his interview with Anne McElvoy for the *Economist*.⁴⁰ In this interview, McElvoy notes that “science fiction is littered with examples of intelligent computers” and gives a number of examples. When she asks where *Klara* fits within this tradition, Ishiguro’s response is that: “*Klara* comes from a different tradition altogether. I think she’s more like a doll, or a soft toy ... in young children’s literature”. A similar emphasis can be seen in his interview with Lisa Allardice for the *Guardian*, which describes *Klara and the Sun* as a visit to “what [Ishiguro] calls ‘children’s

³⁷ “Book Review: *Klara and the Sun*, by Kazuo Ishiguro”, *The Scotsman*, 5 March 2021.

³⁸ “Kazuo Ishiguro Interview: ‘We Can Fly Too Close to the Sun’”, *Sunday Times*, 21 February 2021. The print version of the interview does not make it clear whether the term “science fiction” was actually used by Ishiguro himself. According to Appleyard (personal correspondence), the interviewer himself introduced the term, but Ishiguro said that he was “not at all” sensitive about his novel being called science fiction.

³⁹ “Kazuo Ishiguro on How His New Novel *Klara and the Sun* Is a Celebration of Humanity”, *Time*, 2 March 2021.

⁴⁰ *Is AI Capable of Falling in Love?*, podcast audio, *The Economist Asks*, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/podcasts/2021/03/04/is-ai-capable-of-falling-in-love>. Accessed 3 March 2022.

storyland”.⁴¹ In this and other interviews, however, he is keen to stress the plausibility of the novel’s scenario: “This isn’t some kind of weird fantasy ... We just haven’t woken up to what is already possible today”. Terry Gross’s introduction to her NPR *Fresh Air* interview with Ishiguro does not mention the term “science fiction” and Ishiguro does not do so during the interview, but here too he is keen to stress that some of the technological innovations depicted in the novel (specifically gene editing) are already within our reach.⁴² The “just around the corner” potential of A.I. and genetic technology is also mentioned in Ishiguro’s *Waterstones* interview with Anna Orhanen,⁴³ (in which he also talks at greater length about the influence of children’s stories on the book); he also acknowledges that there are “dystopian features” to the world of the novel⁴⁴ and rejects the description of some elements of the book as “surreal”. Ishiguro also stresses the technological immediacy of the novel in an interview with Rege Behe for the *Pittsburgh City Paper* (“All these huge new changes ... are actually happening now”) in which he expands on his choice of an American setting for the book: “I thought America was a more suitable place [than England] because many of these innovations are coming from America, but also because it’s a country that’s always trying to reorganize itself. It is a country that’s asking questions about, how do we organize our society, and it’s often changing. I thought it was a more apt place to set a story with a backdrop that could turn dystopian, or it could be okay”.⁴⁵ Ishiguro’s most prolonged discussion of the scientific background to

⁴¹ Lisa Allardice, “Kazuo Ishiguro: ‘AI, Gene-Editing, Big Data ... I Worry We Are Not in Control of These Things Any More’”, *The Guardian*, 20 February 2021.

⁴² Terry Gross, *Kazuo Ishiguro Draws on His Songwriting Past to Write Novels About the Future*, podcast audio, *Fresh Air*, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/17/978138547/kazuo-ishiguro-draws-on-his-songwriting-past-to-write-novels-about-the-future>. Accessed 3 December 2021.

⁴³ Anna Orhanen for *Waterstones Blog*, 24 February, 2021, <https://www.waterstones.com/blog/an-exclusive-qanda-with-kazuo-ishiguro-on-klara-and-the-sun>.

⁴⁴ However, he qualifies this by saying that these features are “to the world as seen through [Klara’s] eyes, but there are, as you say, visions of fields and trees and grass and the sun which are largely benevolent and hope-giving”. This qualification seems to suggest that Ishiguro does not categorize the book as purely, or even largely dystopian fiction.

⁴⁵ “A Conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro on Latest Novel *Klara and the Sun*”, *Pittsburgh City Paper*, 11 April 2021.

the novel comes in his interview with Will Knight of *Wired* magazine, in which he again sounds the key notes of immediacy and urgency: the novel “just accepts a world in which big data, algorithms, these things have become so much part of our lives ... we need the conversation to get more urgent and more serious”.⁴⁶

***Klara* as science fiction: not “Is it?” but “How (much) is it?”**

In the views of its reviewers, then – both mainstream and speculative fiction-specific – although this is clearly not all that it is, *Klara and the Sun* can indeed be labelled as a work of science fiction. Similarly, as it is his second novel in the genre after *Never Let Me Go*, the novel most cited by reviewers of *Klara and the Sun*,⁴⁷ the “genre-hopping”⁴⁸ Ishiguro can be plausibly claimed as a science fiction writer.⁴⁹ In fact, he has his own entry in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*—an entry which takes a clear position on where its authors place him in relation to the genre: “[Ishiguro] soon became known as a novelist of fictions only superficially obedient to the strictures against the fantastic maintained (in the twentieth century) by an insecure British literary establishment. Indeed, [since the publication of *The Remains of the Day*] ... none of his subsequent novels has adhered to traditional canons of realism”. The entry goes on to emphasize that *Klara and the Sun* “is sf” twice (as well as referring to the “subtle sf narrative” of *Never Let Me Go*).⁵⁰ Finally, although he does not use the term himself in any of the interviews

⁴⁶ “*Klara and the Sun* Imagines a Social Schism Driven by AI”, *Wired*, 8 March 2021.

⁴⁷ In fact, all but one of the twenty-one mainstream reviews surveyed here mention *Never Let Me Go*. The exception is Massie, who does refer to cloning in his review. Of the speculative fiction-specific reviews, Clarke, Kincaid, and Nordling all mention *Never Let Me Go*, but Mond and Spinrad (neither of whom refer to any specific work by Ishiguro in their reviews) do not.

⁴⁸ Allardice, “Kazuo Ishiguro: ‘AI, Gene-Editing, Big Data ... I Worry We Are Not in Control of These Things Any More’”.

⁴⁹ One possible dissenting voice here might be that of Spinrad, who argues that *Klara and the Sun* has not “really been published as “science fiction” or written by a novelist with a background as a science fiction author.

⁵⁰ Ishiguro is also referenced in the encyclopedia’s entry on “Mainstream Writers of SF” which concludes that “A Nobel Prize winning author like Kazuo Ishiguro, almost all of whose work since 1995 has been non-mimetic, can still scandalize the more tedious critics”.

examined here, there is no evidence to suggest that Ishiguro would reject the label as a description of the book.

Case closed, then. Perhaps not quite. Shulevitz wrote that “I guess you could call this novel science fiction” (my underlining); Jones that *Klara and the Sun* is “just about, technically” a science fiction novel; there were plenty of other caveats among the reviews and, as we have seen, readers have tended to tag the book as science fiction at a much lower rate rather than other works in the genre. The degree of the novel’s science-fictionality seems to be open to question. In seeking to assess this, it may be thought desirable to be clear about precisely what science fiction is; but Stableford, Clute, and Nicholls sound a cautionary note: “There is really no good reason to expect that a workable definition of sf will ever be established. None has been, so far. In practice, there is much consensus about what sf looks like in its centre; it is only at the fringes that most of the fights take place”.⁵¹ Might *Klara and the Sun* be found on those fringes, and if so, why?

Ishiguro’s own comments on the novel give some valuable insight here. If science fiction is, to use one basic description of the genre, “a literature of ideas predicated on some substantive difference or differences between the world described and the world in which readers live”,⁵² the world described in *Klara and the Sun* is, in the words of its creator, “actually happening now”. The nova⁵³ of his novel – Artificial Friends and the technology of “lifting” – may be innovations, but they are innovations that are already with us, not glimpses of a future that is yet-to-be realised and indeed might never be. We do not buy Artificial Friends from shops yet, but Klara is clearly much closer to our lives than the artificial people of classic science fiction, such as Andrew in Isaac Asimov’s “The Bicentennial Man”.⁵⁴ We do not yet “lift” our children, but the “baby steps” that put us “on our way to a genetic child catalogue” are

⁵¹ Brian M. Stableford, John Clute and Peter Nicholls, “Definitions of SF”, in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. Brian M. Stableford, John Clute, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (2020).

⁵² Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction*, The New Critical Idiom (Routledge, 2000), 3.

⁵³ Darko Suvin’s term for scientifically plausible devices, the presence of which is a necessary and defining feature of a work of science fiction; *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Yale University Press, 1979).

⁵⁴ *The Bicentennial Man and Other Stories* (Doubleday, 1976).

already being taken.⁵⁵ Some of this “actually happening now” immediacy is undoubtedly intentional, but some is serendipitous: Ishiguro’s interviews make it clear that the book was written before the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁶ but, as Hu summarises it, “the novel is eerily prescient, taking place in a future where jobs are in decline, social conflict is on the rise, and children increasingly stay at home, taking virtual classes over their ‘oblongs.’ It depicts isolating times of technologically mediated distances and dwindling material resources”.⁵⁷

Immediacy of content, then, might be one reason for the perceived liminality of the novel’s science-fictionality. Lack of plot and thinness of worldbuilding might conceivably be others. There is no consensus among the reviewers on the former,⁵⁸ but the relative vagueness of the setting of the novel is a point that many of its reviewers pick up on.⁵⁹ Wood, for example, notes that “Ishiguro only lightly shades in his dystopian world, probably because he isn’t especially committed to the systematic faux realism required

⁵⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Vintage, 2017), 63. Ishiguro himself selected this book as one of his choices for the best of the year in an article for *The Guardian*. “Best Books of 2016 – Part One”, *The Guardian*, 26 November 2016. The number of references to A.I. algorithms, “big data”, genetic manipulation, and the potential implications of a post-employment world suggests that Harari’s work is a major influence on *Klara and the Sun*, although Ishiguro does not mention Harari specifically in any of the eight interviews examined here.

⁵⁶ “‘I finished the book before the pandemic, and I have to say, [the pandemic] took me completely by surprise,’ he says. ‘I couldn’t have dreamt that something like this would happen’”; Gross, *Kazuo Ishiguro Draws on His Songwriting Past to Write Novels About the Future*.

⁵⁷ “Portrait of the Robot as a Young Woman”, 15.

⁵⁸ Jones, for example, although conceding that “It’s not a requirement of sci-fi to be action-packed” writes that “Unlike a lot of sci-fi, but as in most of Ishiguro’s novels ... not much happens (“Oh You Darling Robot!”), but Self argues that the book is “surprisingly spry, with some hectic plot turns and a quest Klara sets for herself that seems ridiculous until suddenly it doesn’t”. For Charles, the novel shows “flawless control of dramatic pacing” (“In Kazuo Ishiguro’s ‘Klara and the Sun,’ a Robot Tries to Make Sense of Humanity”) whereas for Rahim, “there isn’t much intrinsic drama” (“The Robot as Carer: *Klara and the Sun*, by Kazuo Ishiguro, Reviewed”).

⁵⁹ Nordling’s characterisation of the novel as “reality with a filter on it” offers a reading that covers both its immediacy and its vague worldbuilding: “it takes place near enough in the future to feel unsettlingly close to our own reality ... Despite the presence of robots and climate change, it is not a dystopia”.

by full-blown science fiction”.⁶⁰ As I have argued earlier, for most reviewers (whether in mainstream or in speculative fiction-specific publications), this is not a deal-breaker: it does not disqualify the novel from being science fiction, but it may make the novel feel less like “full-blown” science fiction than other genre works dealing with similar content. According to Adam Roberts, “science fiction possesses an ‘encyclopedic’ logic ... its synchronic encyclopedic impulses exist in dynamic tension with its diachronic narrative impulses. One of SF’s main activities is ‘worldbuilding,’ a totalizing project”.⁶¹ This is very clearly something that *Klara and the Sun* is not; and indeed for some critics, it is a potential barrier to full appreciation of the novel. Clarke, for example, writes that “Some readers may be frustrated that Klara’s limited perspective results in not everything being explained”;⁶² Alam admits that “I kept trying to see past Klara and into the world of the book. But the narrative gives Klara no reason to provide the exposition we want: what year it is, what nation we are in ... the specifics that clarify this invented world to be a version of our own—the very promise of science fiction”.⁶³ This concept of the “promise of science fiction” is, however, the promise of a genre, whereas *Klara and the Sun* may in fact be an example of science fiction as a mode. Veronica Hollinger’s explanation of this distinction might stand in as a description of Ishiguro’s novel: “There is certainly a case to be made that SF is increasingly being read as an ‘attitude or stance’ towards contemporary technoscientific reality, less concerned with extrapolating ‘fully imagined features’ ... and more concerned with examining, in estranged terms, the technoscientific features of the everyday ... reading SF as a figural discourse about the constantly shrinking distance between the present and the future”.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Wood, “Kazuo Ishiguro Uses Artificial Intelligence to Reveal the Limits of Our Own”.

⁶¹ “The Enlightenment”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (OUP, 2014), 453.

⁶² Clarke, “*Klara and the Sun*: Our Friend’s Electric”.

⁶³ Alam, “Kazuo Ishiguro’s Deceptively Simple Story of AI”.

⁶⁴ Veronica Hollinger, “Genre vs. Mode”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford: OUP, 2014), 143.

Science-fiction substance, science-fiction style

Even those reviews with reservations about the novel's lack of "fully imagined features" have something in common with many of the other reviews in locating the reason for this lack of expository worldbuilding in a deliberate structural choice: the use of a limited first-person narrator, Klara herself, to tell the story and present the novel's world to the reader. This is a choice both characteristic of Ishiguro's fiction in general – with the exception of *The Buried Giant*, all of his novels have featured first-person narrators, many of them with only partial viewpoints on the realities of their worlds – and one particularly suited to the setting, themes, and content of this particular novel. It is the primacy of the novel's presentation of Klara, rather than its limited attempts to paint a detailed picture of her world, that forms the focus of most reviews of the novel, from genre critics such as Kincaid (quoted earlier: "Ishiguro is not interested in worldbuilding; he is interested in character building, in emotion building") to those mainstream critics who have interpreted the novel variously as a fairy tale, a parable, a coming-of-age tale, or a fable.⁶⁵ To some extent, this is a corollary of Klara's child-like nature and is not in itself a marker of science fiction. As we have seen, some reviewers regard the novel as a bildungsroman, and several interviews have revealed its origins as a children's story; in his interview with the *Economist*, for example, Ishiguro refers to Klara as a "tabula rasa", resisting the interviewer's comparison with robots from the science fiction tradition and comparing her instead to a children's toy. Others have noted that Klara's very artificiality is in fact a characteristic shared by all fictional characters, regardless of genre.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ One notable exception is Massie, who laments what he sees as Ishiguro's "move away from the merely human" in his most recent novels. In Massie's view, "he has moved ever further from the novel of character and social observation towards writing about Big Themes: cloning, harvesting of human organs, artificial intelligence – all, as I say, matters for discussion, leader-page articles, blogs, lectures, debates". Massie's criticism seems to be that Ishiguro has turned to writing the literature of ideas—which is, according to Roberts (3), one of the characteristics of science fiction.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Jones, who argues that Klara "isn't really a robot. She's a much older form of artificial intelligence: she's a fictional character" ("Oh You Darling Robot!," 33). Ishiguro himself, in his *Fresh Air* interview, makes the point that "characters in books are artificial".

However, Radhika Jones argues that Klara’s narration is a marker of socio-scientific immediacy: “Seeing the world from Klara’s point of view is to be reminded constantly of what it looks like when mediated through technology. That might have felt foreign a century ago, but not anymore”.⁶⁷ One of the most striking manifestations of the novel’s representation of Klara’s point of view is those scenes in which her vision “seems to fracture into segments where different elements appear magnified or repeated”. This technique can be seen as one characteristic of science fiction, an example of what Roberts refers to as an “inverted novum”.⁶⁸ Roberts goes on to compare the technique to Martian poetry, and two of the critics of Ishiguro’s novel make the same comparison. Striking as this particular example is, though, it is in fact the relentless ordinariness of Klara’s narrative voice that establishes the novel most firmly as a work in the science fiction mode. Rahim makes the case that “textureless sentences and awkward dialogue are partly the point” of Ishiguro’s approach here and elsewhere in his work;⁶⁹ Clarke argues that “Since this is an Ishiguro novel, delicate emotional restraint is the order of the day. The author’s characteristically smooth and even tone and focus on everyday details ... are a perfect match for the narrative voice of an AI”.⁷⁰ Roberts writes that “because SF, by definition, deals with various fantastic things ... it needs to be balanced by a certain mundaneness in content and style. A plain, functional style may serve usefully to offset the estranging power of the SF novum”.⁷¹ This description might almost have been written with *Klara and the Sun*, and indeed with *Never Let Me Go* before it, in mind.

Conclusion: Ishiguro answers his own call

Klara and the Sun is clearly Ishiguro’s fictional writing-out of the concerns he had expressed in his Nobel Prize lecture a couple of years earlier: “And around the corner – or have we already turned this corner? – lie the

⁶⁷ Jones, “A Humanoid Who Cares for Humans, from the Mind of Kazuo Ishiguro: Fiction”.

⁶⁸ p. 22. Roberts also references Martian poetry here, as do Robson’s and Wood’s reviews of *Klara and the Sun*.

⁶⁹ Rahim, “The Robot as Carer: *Klara and the Sun*, by Kazuo Ishiguro, Reviewed”.

⁷⁰ Clarke, “*Klara and the Sun*: Our Friend’s Electric”.

⁷¹ Roberts, *Science Fiction*, 21.

challenges posed by stunning breakthroughs in science, technology and medicine. New genetic technologies ... and advances in Artificial Intelligence and robotics will bring us amazing, lifesaving benefits, but may also create savage meritocracies that resemble apartheid, and massive unemployment” and an answer to the question that he posed during that lecture: “Do I have something left that might help to provide perspective, to bring emotional layers to the arguments, fights and wars that will come as societies struggle to adjust to huge changes?”⁷² It is also, in its use of the genre/mode of science fiction, clearly his attempt to respond to the appeal that he makes for the literary world to embrace greater diversity, not only of cultures, but also of forms: “we must take great care not to set too narrowly or conservatively our definitions of what constitutes great literature. The next generation will come with all sorts of new, sometimes bewildering ways to tell important and wonderful stories. We must keep our minds open to them, especially regarding genre and form, so that we can nurture and celebrate the best of them”. Harari writes that “in the early twenty-first century, perhaps the most important artistic genre is science fiction”.⁷³ Ishiguro’s lecture, and his fictional answer to his own call made in it, suggest that he might agree—and the reactions of most reviewers of *Klara and the Sun* show that this particular generic choice is a timely and not an especially divisive one.

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⁷² *My Twentieth Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs: Nobel Lecture Delivered in Stockholm on 7 December 2017* (Faber and Faber, 2017), 34.

⁷³ *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (Spiegel & Grau, 2018), 250.

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Appendix: Review references

The table below lists texts (including films and TV series) and authors cited in the twenty-one mainstream and five speculative fiction-specific reviews of *Klara and the Sun* examined in this paper. An asterisk by the name of a reviewer indicates that the reference was to the work of an author as a whole, or to an author’s style, rather than to a specific text. The names of speculative fiction-specific reviewers are given in bold.

author, creator, director, etc.	text	reviewer
Amis, Martin		*Wood
Anderson, Hans Christian		*Shulevitz
Asimov, Isaac	[<i>Robots</i> series] reference to the Three Laws of Robotics	Spinrad
Beckett, Samuel		*Wood
Brooker, Charlie	<i>Black Mirror</i>	Nordling
Capek, Karel	<i>R.U.R.</i>	Charles, Spinrad
Brontë, Charlotte	<i>Villette</i>	Robson
Coetzee, J.M.	<i>Disgrace</i>	Robson
Coetzee, J.M.	<i>Jesus trilogy</i>	Robson, Self
Descartes, René		*Purdon
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor	<i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>	T. Jones, Robson

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor	<i>The Idiot</i>	Robson
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor		*Finch
Du Maurier, Daphne	[<i>Rebecca</i>] reference to Mrs Danvers	Massie
Erdrich, Louise		*Finch
Freeman, Don	<i>Corduroy</i>	R. Jones, T. Jones, Wood
Forster, E.M.	<i>Aspects of the Novel</i>	Robson
Golding, William	<i>The Inheritors</i>	Rahim, Self
Haddon, Mark	<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i>	Miller
Hardy, Thomas	<i>Tess of the d' Urbervilles</i>	R. Jones
James, Henry	<i>What Maisie Knew</i>	*Charles, Miller
James, William	"The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"	T. Jones
Lasseter, John	<i>Toy Story</i>	Self, Wood
Le Guin, Ursula	"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"	T. Jones
Lewis, C.S.	<i>The Chronicles of Narnia</i>	Shulevitz
Lucas, George	[<i>Star Wars</i>] reference to C3PO	Rahim
Kafka, Franz	<i>The Trial</i>	Robson, *Wood
McEwan, Ian	<i>Machines Like Me</i>	Kemp, Mond
Melville, Herman	"Bartleby, the Scrivener"	Hu
Mitchell, David	<i>Cloud Atlas</i>	Kemp
Nabokov, Vladimir	<i>Pnin</i>	Wood
Pascal		*Wood
Plato	<i>The Republic</i>	Hu
Raine, Craig	<i>A Martian Sends a Postcard Home</i>	*Rahim, Wood
Roddenberry, Gene	<i>Star Trek</i>	Spinrad
Sebald, W.G.	<i>The Rings of Saturn</i>	Wood

Shelley, Mary	<i>Frankenstein</i>	Hu, Shulevitz, Spinrad
Shklovsky, Viktor		*Wood
Silverstein, Shel	<i>The Giving Tree</i>	Alam
Spielberg, Steven	<i>A.I.</i>	Shaw
Tolstoy, Leo	<i>War and Peace</i>	Wood
Vinge, Verner		* Spinrad
Wilde, Oscar	“The Nightingale and the Rose”	Shaw
Winterson, Jeanette	<i>Frankissstein</i>	Mond