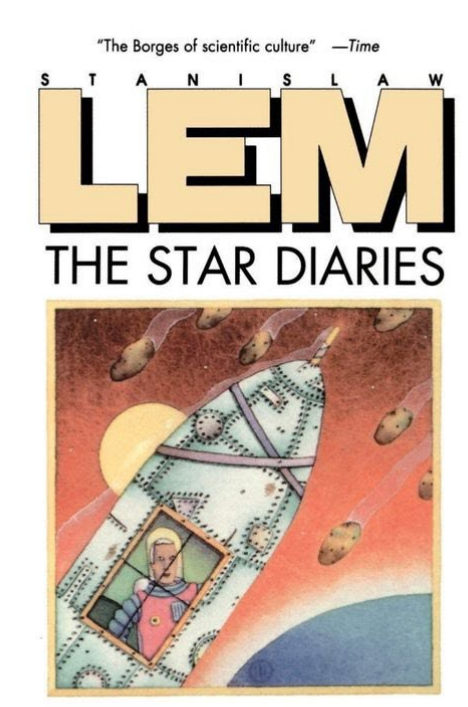


The Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk's fiction is known for its interest in the porosity of boundaries—between nations, between ethnicities, between fiction and reality, consciousness and dreams. As her novels and stories stage the constant flux of national borders, particularly in Eastern Europe (Tokarczuk is Polish), they also delight in supernatural and science-fictional elements. In “House of Day, House of Night,” out from Riverhead this week, she writes, “All over the world, wherever people are sleeping, small, jumbled worlds are flaring up in their heads, growing over reality like scar tissue.” Not long ago, Tokarczuk sent us some remarks about a few of her favorite sci-fi and speculative-fiction writers, whose books mix the fantastical and the prosaic masterfully. Her notes were translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.



[The Star Diaries](#)

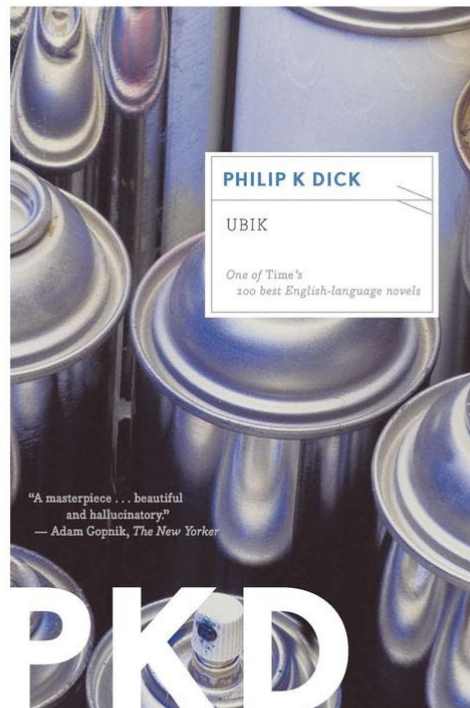
By Stanisław Lem

I started reading science fiction at an early age. I was quite sure that by the time I grew up we'd be flying to Mars and the moon without a second thought. I was going to work in space medicine or as a physicist. At first I read books for young people, but Stanisław Lem was my true initiation into the genre. My favorite of his books are “The Star Diaries,” about a lone space traveller and scientist named Ijon Tichy, and “The Cyberiad,” a set of stories about robots and intelligent machines.

Lem was way ahead of his time, especially on the topic of machine intelligence. He had a superb sense of humor and a unique genius for discovering all sorts of paradoxes; his writing challenges the imagination, posing the sorts of questions that are the subjects of philosophical studies. In the story “The Seventh Journey,” Ijon's spaceship falls into a time loop, resulting in a

swarm of different lions from different parts of the same day. Which is the “real” one? Nowadays, I’d tell myself the real one is the one who’s telling the story. The real one is the observer.

As we’re mesmerized by artificial intelligence today, going back to Lem’s stories, which anticipated every kind of intelligent machine, is a must.



Ubik

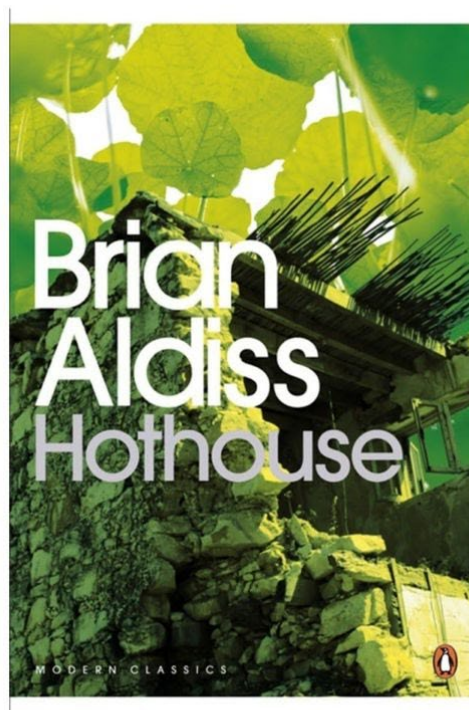
By Philip K. Dick

Most sci-fi doesn't depend on literary refinement. It's more about conveying a concept, a paradox, a vision. Sometimes the vision is so powerful, and the desire to express it so intense, that it reduces language to its most pragmatic role: pure communication. I think Philip K. Dick was a great visionary. He was the first writer to create a truly moving vision of a disintegrating world, and of the thin line between what's real and what's produced by our brains. The multiplicity, diversity, and innovation of his work changed not just sci-fi but literature in general. In an incredibly modern and acute way, it considers questions that humankind has been asking itself for centuries.

In Poland, Lem was a great promoter of Dick, and they corresponded until Dick decided Lem wasn't a person but a spy network called L.E.M. I started with “Ubik,” and will never forget its depiction of reality coming apart: modern objects suddenly change into ancient ones, food instantly goes bad, technology loses its power. Only the temporarily awakened dead, and a

polymorphous product known as Ubik, can help. We may read the story as a metaphor for a disintegrating mind, but also for a “fallen cosmos” that must be constantly kept going by an unknown force.

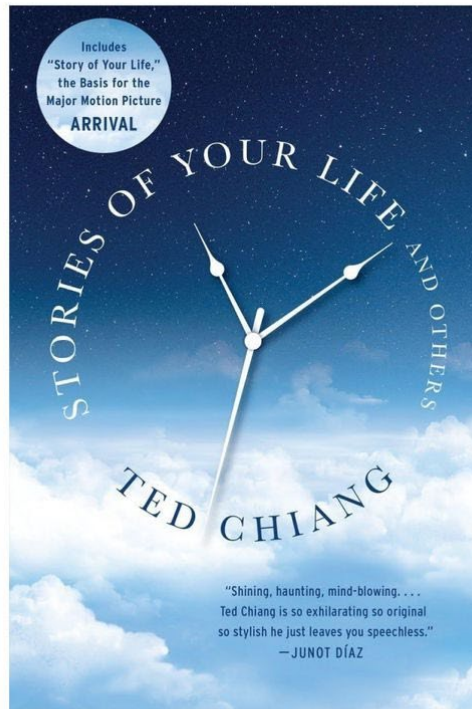
Dick’s work hasn’t aged at all. He is probably read even more keenly today, when the loss of so many realities at once makes us yearn for what’s true and real—for some sort of metaphysical order to combat the depression that’s grown ubiquitous.



[Hothouse](#)

By Brian Aldiss

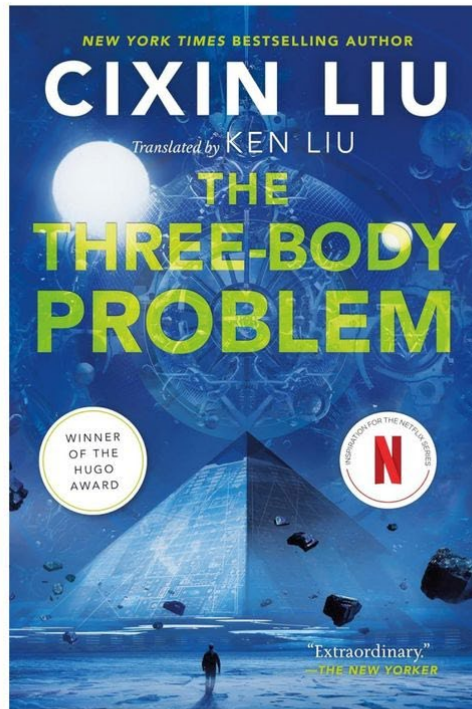
I still remember my first encounter with “Hothouse,” a farsighted, hallucinatory, surreal book about the Earth billions of years from now. Humans are no longer the masters of creation; that role belongs to small mammals amid highly evolved, intelligent plants. The Earth resembles one large vegetable organism, and plants are also colonizing outer space. This book, written in 1962, introduced the idea that trees are a single vast intercommunicating organism, a reality that science confirmed sixty years later. I infected my father with my love of this book, and it has left me with one of my tenderest memories: swapping the same much-read copy of it with each other and discussing Aldiss’s ideas.



[Stories of Your Life and Others](#)

By Ted Chiang

I still read sci-fi, but now I swap books with my son, who's well-versed in it and often recommends books to me, like this one. I was highly impressed by this collection, and especially by the story "Story of Your Life." It's a fascinating philosophical reflection on the nonlinear nature of time and the role of language in perceiving reality. There's no fast-moving action here, no blood-curdling adventures, but this story gave me plenty to think about and will remain with me.



[The Three-Body Problem](#)

By Cixin Liu

Any sci-fi fan who dreams of escaping into an epic represented world—the strange world suspended between collapsing and appearing—has probably read Cixin Liu’s “Remembrance of Earth’s Past” trilogy, of which “The Three-Body Problem” is the first volume. Its sweep and visionary nature caused me to drop my own writing for a time and immerse myself in questions of cosmology, the history of civilization, and the Earth’s future.

As Philip K. Dick would say, there’s more to science fiction than we imagine.