
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Science fiction



NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Finn

Hello I'm Finn and welcome to 6 Minute English. Rob's here today. Hi Rob.

Rob

Hello Finn – are you well?

Finn

Very well, thanks. Rob, tell me – do you have a favourite **science-fiction** movie?

Rob

Ahh, science fiction – stories about an imagined future ... well my favourite was and always will be *ET: Extra Terrestrial*, and you Finn?

Finn

Mine would probably be *Blade Runner* – the movie with Harrison Ford set in a dark, scary Los Angeles where he hunts robots called replicants. You know the one?

Rob

I do – and come to think of it, lots of movies and stories about the future are quite dark and negative ...

Finn

But perhaps this might change. A new project wants to use the power of science fiction to do something very different: to inspire people to create a better future. It sounds very grand. We'll be discussing the project and learning some language to talk about the future in this programme.

Rob

But before we get *too* far into the future, I'm sure you have a question for me, Finn?

Finn

Yes indeed. It's about the film *Blade Runner*. It's set in the future – but in which year?

a) 2000

b) 2019

c) 2056

Rob

I think I'm gonna go for the far future, c) 2056.

Finn

Well I'll tell you if you're right or wrong later **in the not-too-distant future.**

Rob

Very good. So, as we were saying: lots of science fiction is negative.

Finn

Yes, there's a word to describe the kind of future world which often appears in science fiction: **dystopian**. The noun 'dystopia' means an imagined place where things are unpleasant or bad. The opposite is **utopia** and **utopian**.

Rob

But why is so much science fiction dystopian? Dr Braden Allenby from Arizona State University.

Braden Allenby, Professor of Engineering and Ethics, Arizona State University

The **downside** of both of science fiction and movies is that they tend to be dystopian, they tend to be very negative, they tend to be very noir. Dystopian is easier to do. It's easier to write a dystopian story than it is to write an optimistic story.

Rob

He says dystopian stories are easier to write. I can see that – there's more conflict in a world which has problems – and good stories often have a lot of conflict and problems to resolve.

Finn

Yes, but Braden thinks being negative is the downside of science fiction. A downside is a disadvantage, a bad point. He would prefer to see more **optimistic** science fiction.

Rob

Optimistic, more positive about the future, which is why Braden is taking part in something called Project Hieroglyph. It brings together writers, scientists, engineers and artists to create optimistic stories about things which really could happen in the next 50 years.

Finn

So let's talk about the kinds of things are happening in these stories?

Rob

Well, there's one about a huge tower 20 km tall – going all the way into space. Apparently, building the tower is good for the US steel industry ... and they invent a new kind of energy in the story too.

Finn

Sounds very interesting – but is it **plausible** – could it really happen? Could they really build a tower that big?

Rob

Well, there's another about **environmentalists** who fight to stop people building the first hotel in Antarctica.

Finn

Environmentalists – people who care about the environment. Well there's conflict there ... and it's plausible, so it could be a good story. But I can't help thinking – will these stories actually change anything?

Rob

Ed Finn, who edited a book of these stories, thinks so. He says: "A good science-fiction story can be very powerful". "It can inspire hundreds, thousands, millions of people to **rally around** something that they want to do."

Finn

To rally around something means to come together in support of a cause.

Rob

And Braden Allenby says you can already see the influence of science fiction in modern research. Which item is being worked on right now?

Braden Allenby, Professor of Engineering and Ethics, Arizona State University

"Why are people working on, for example, invisibility cloaks? Well, it's Harry Potter, right? That's where they saw it."

Finn

An invisibility cloak – a long coat which makes you **invisible**, in other words unable to be seen – which people first saw in one of the *Harry Potter* movies.

Rob

Interesting ... so will the stories from Project Hieroglyph inspire people to do and invent new things that can help others? Can they help create **a bright future** – that's a good, positive future? Or will they just be good stories?

Finn

Time will tell – that means we'll find out as time goes by. One thing that we're going to find out right now is the answer to when the movie *Blade Runner* was set?

Rob

I said the answer was c) 2056.

Finn

And the answer was in fact b) 2019. A little bit earlier, Rob.

Rob

Quite soon, then?

Finn

Yes, it's in a couple of years. So, watch out LA. But, Rob, can you remind us of some of the words we learned today?

Rob

We had ...

science fiction

dystopian

downside

optimistic

plausible

a bright future

time will tell

Finn

And that's it for today's programme. If you want to listen to more programmes like this one, visit bbclearningenglish.com.

Vocabulary

science fiction

a kind of story about an imagined future, often involving technology and space travel

in the not-too-distant future

soon; in a time not far from now

dystopian

describes a future situation which is very unpleasant

utopian

describes a future situation which is ideal

downside

disadvantage; bad point

optimistic

positive about the future

plausible

with a good possibility of happening

environmentalists

people who fight to protect the environment

rally around

come together in support of a cause

invisible

unable to be seen

a bright future

a good, positive future

time will tell

things will become clear as time passes