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Why the world needs more lab lit: On the rise of realistic fiction about scientists and their profession

Science is integral to modern life; its products are interwoven into daily life and have become indispensible to our existence. Indeed, with the coming storm of various global-scale calamities, from climate change and infectious diseases to dwindling fossil fuels and scant food supplies, scientific solutions will become increasingly imperative as we navigate towards a perilous future. But recent years have witnessed the rise of anti-science sentiment and an insouciant disregard for the advice of ‘experts’, fuelled and disseminated by the charlatans and snake-oil peddlers who roam the wild internet frontier. So at a time when it’s never been more important for key messages to get across, society seems poised to turn away from the rational approach that may well be necessary for long-term comfort and, possibly, survival.

When wondering why scientific messages aren’t being heeded, it’s helpful to understand the human tendency to weigh up the reliability and trustworthiness of the messenger. So what does your average person think about scientists? Despite the fact that millions of people worldwide practice science as a regular profession, odds are that most people have never met one in real life. This void in familiarity is filled by popular conceptions, and misconceptions, about what scientists are ‘like’. Since the beginning of storytelling, people of wisdom have been portrayed as conflicted characters who meddle in the sphere of the gods, a dangerous act that carries a steep price. Science is seen as hazardous and its practitioners, reckless. Stereotyped depictions of scientists in fiction over the past century have
fuelled the idea that they are arrogant, sterile, unemotional, sexless beings of pure logic – superhuman or subhuman. Why would anyone want to take their advice?

Fiction depicting scientist characters plying their trade – a genre known as ‘lab lit’ – is vanishingly rare, but it is on the rise and may well hold the key to dispelling the myths about scientists that prevent their important messages from getting through. Such depictions lay bare the processes of science and hold up a more human mirror to the people who practice it – whether that reflection be good, bad, or ugly – making scientists more sympathetic and recognizable. Scientists are also mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, neighbours and friends, and their research is part of an important process that deserves to be better understood by those who use and enjoy its fruits.