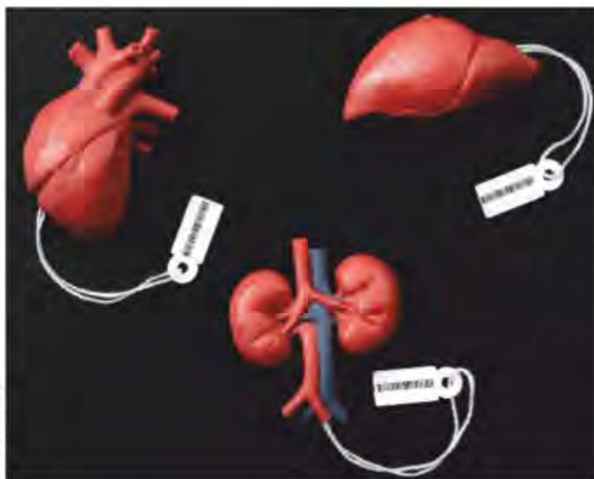


The science fiction column

A world of redemption The unfolding story of what happens to a young man whose tongue has been cut out during a brutal civil war provides an unmissable but hard to read lesson about the morality of forgiveness, says **Sally Adee**



Sally Adee is a technology and science writer based in London. Follow her on Twitter @sally_adee



Body parts are key to a tale of inhumanity and forgiveness



Book

The Book of Malachi

T. C. Farren

Titan

Sally recommends...

Book

The Ministry for the Future

Kim Stanley Robinson

A blueprint for the future that is as obsessively researched as his Mars trilogy. Instead of colonising Mars, The Ministry for the Future is about recalibrating humanity to live properly on and with Earth rather than terraforming it into a climate hell.

THE main problem with this book is you aren't going to want to read it. But it's good and you should.

Malachi Dakwaa, the eponymous character in T. C. Farren's novel, is a young man whose tongue was cut out in a brutal civil war. In the years since, he has eked out a half-life as a quality control manager at a chicken processing plant, ensuring the uniform compliance of shrink-wrapped body parts.

One day, he gets an offer for a job he didn't apply for, with a payment he could never have hoped for. Do six months at a secret facility run by a pharmaceutical multinational that does research that isn't supposed to exist and he walks away with a new, perfectly grafted tongue. The NDA is particularly tough: if he ever discusses what he saw in the facility, the company can repossess his payment.

At the facility, he finds a body-horror experiment, but one a strict utilitarian might find morally uncomplicated: the people deemed the worst in the world (like "the monsters" his boss labels those who took Malachi's tongue)

have been spirited to the place to become incubators for organs. Here, some life-saving good is forcibly extracted from existences that only made the world a worse place. Fitting penance, the boss argues, and as overseers go, Malachi is ideal. To receive his tongue, he needs to make sure he never makes the mistake of seeing

"Sci-fi can put you at a slight remove that may actually improve your ability to engage with difficult material"

the people as anything other than inhuman lest he try to save them from their grisly fate.

The book is thrilling, high-stakes world-building, but it took me a couple of months to finally commit to reading it. This is no grand escape from reality, but a searing overexposure to the worst things that can happen to people who may or may not deserve them.

This isn't why we read science fiction, or at least, not to judge by a recent dust-up when researchers

claimed sci-fi turns you into a credulous, uncritical reader who isn't able to fully inhabit the mind of the characters. A more recent study takes issue with this, arguing that what happens is more complicated: sci-fi can put you at a slight remove that may actually improve your ability to engage with difficult material.

I thought of these studies often as Farren's beautiful, spare prose dragged me on. I did cry, but the tense plot kept the characters distant enough that I didn't drown in their darkest moments.

It does leave an imprint, though. In the original, biblical Book of Malachi, Malachi isn't a real person but a "messenger". Farren's mute messenger tells us a lot about our world. The book may be near-future sci-fi, but it doesn't seem implausible when prisoners in China are reportedly killed for their organs and inmates in the US are used as firefighters.

Withdrawing empathy by categorising people into cases outside our moral responsibility makes it easy to let them suffer. How readily we turn each other and the natural world into things to be consumed.

This book shows how a small tear in the label you give a person can reveal shared humanity. Once you see it, the tear can only get bigger and let in the possibility of unexpected redemption and maybe a whole new world.

This grace and hope elevate *The Book of Malachi* from the foundations of its sci-fi action-thriller narrative. The questions Farren asks about who controls our ideas of forgiveness, who deserves it and why could stay with you for a long time. ■