

Tales of the future

by *Tricia Lustig*

We've had some discussions lately about how important storytelling is in futures work and in building community. Here is a book that at its heart uses stories to share different potential futures of the largely rural county of Suffolk.

In 2010, around the change of ruling party in government, several local government groups in Suffolk approached Stephen because they knew that they would now have to cut budgets. They felt they needed some foresight to help them to make decisions in a way that would mitigate the impact of fiscal austerity over time.

The demographics they faced indicated that there would be increasing demands on public services as the population aged, while funding would be reduced. As Stephen said, "A phrase that was much used at the time was that service delivery needed to be much smarter in its focus, and that foresight could help in the process of making it smarter."

From the different scenarios that were developed then, Stephen and Joanne have put together a book of stories around those scenarios, in the hope that it will benefit other people in smaller public bodies who are facing similar challenges. It is also an experiment of sorts, in putting different potential futures across to its audience using a range of stories.

They focused on both dystopian and utopian futures, in the hope that the dystopian futures would provide a warning and the utopian futures would act as inspiration. It isn't, however, science fiction; they want these futures to inspire people to action so they can proactively work towards a preferred future.

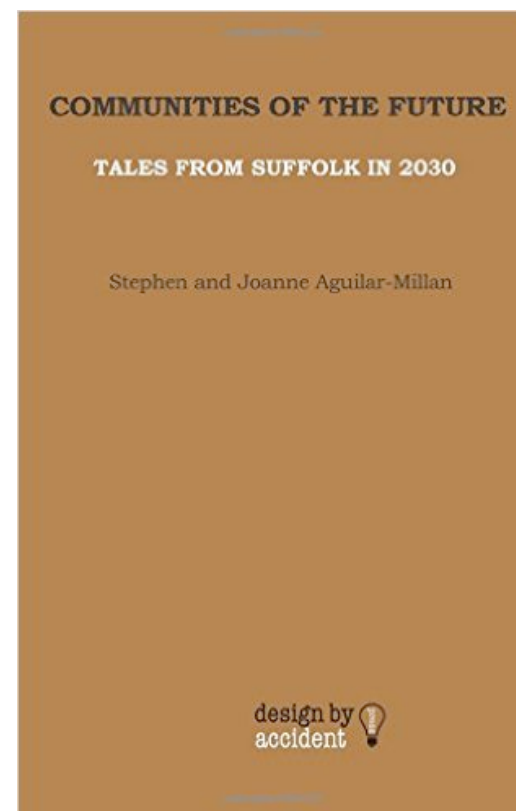
The background assumptions used are stated up front. The main two are that climate change will be much more obvious in 2030, and that resources will be scarcer than they are today, which would mean higher prices and stressed social structures. Another factor that they cannot ignore is the road/rail links between Suffolk and London. Today these are not sufficient for the need—different futures addressed this by assuming improved infrastructure or not, as we see when the stories unfold.

Five communities are identified and for each there are two stories about a potential future; one utopian and one dystopian. Each story is different, but they describe the same community, often with the same characters. Stephen and Joanne vary the way they describe each story, for instance "West Suffolk Creative Ltd" (part of The Creative Community) tells the story via the minutes of the AGM for a company that you discover is a creative hub—something which has been tried and has failed in the past. This story centres around the

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difference for this hub—that it as well as encouraging creativity and prosperity, it also promotes community cohesion, an ingredient which had been missing in the past.

The second story in *The Creative Community*

is called “Banking on a Change.” It is the dystopian future where we are introduced to some characters who are also part of some of the other stories. It follows James Godbold as he asks the bank for a loan for new premises for his creative community centre, a business community based on creativity and knowledge. He is forced to do this because his family have lost their farm, where the business had been located, due to repossession and as fuel became more and more expensive (the assumption here is £15 a litre—really frightening to consider), some of his clients relocated to the town centre with its good transportation links.

In each tale, further assumptions made are shared via footnotes. Each story is told in a different way, from a different viewpoint. Some are first person, some are third person and some are reports. Each sketches a different future. Each future is clear and I found them plausible (I know the area reasonably well, and perhaps that makes a difference). Each story is short, and I would have liked some of them to go on longer, since they they captured my imagination and I wanted to know more. It is an interesting experiment, which I think succeeded in sharing differing visions of the future, clearly and efficiently.

This is a short book. I have not come across anything like it (though it may exist), in particular because each story varies a few variables and it is made clear to the reader what these are. You can see a vision of how these particular trends may play out—and what Suffolk will look and feel like if a trend plays out one way or another. In writing a book in this way, I



Heading east on the A12. Image: Wikimedia.

think Stephen and Joanne make clear to readers how futurists develop different plausible futures. What many may think of as a black art (and it can seem that way to some of our clients) is shown to be based on solid foundations: we know what the assumptions are, and based upon those assumptions the futures which emerge are credible. This allows the reader to see the differing effects that a particular trend can spark off by unfolding one way or another

I'd like to see more futures shared in this way; it is easy and accessible for the reader to get into each particular scenario. If more people (not just futurists) would be willing to read a book like this and consider what it might mean to them, we would have a much better chance of not just building a cohesive community through a shared vision, but also of achieving a preferred future.



Tricia Lustig is a European futurist and author, based in the UK.