Public Humanities (2026), 2, e136, 1–3
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10193

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

INTRODUCTION TO ROUNDTABLE 4: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial Intelligence in Literature: Introduction

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(Received 05 March 2026 UTC; revised 05 March 2026 UTC; accepted 05 March 2026 UTC)

A new technology explodes into our lives, seemingly from out of nowhere, affecting society both visibly and invisibly. Policy decisions need to be made. Laws need to be enacted. People need to be informed. But about what exactly? Fortunately, the creators of this new technology have used a term that hundreds of books, films, games, even songs have made excitingly familiar: artificial intelligence (AI).

It is fiction that provides an anchor for the uninitiated, not the highly technical publications coming out of the Association for Computing Machinery. The influence of fiction on public policy surrounding AI is highly visible and immediate, with international ramifications. Fiction has determined which issues get attention, which legislative approaches get preferred treatment, and most importantly, which futures seem possible.

Sometimes, such stories remain astonishingly insightful, even after a century of radical technological transformation since their first publication. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that their messages are heeded. *The Onion* writer Alex Blechman put it more aptly in his tweet than any scholar:

> Sci-Fi Author: In my book I invented the Torment Nexus as a cautionary tale
> Tech Company: At long last, we have created the Torment Nexus from the classic sci-fi novel Don't Create The Torment Nexus.[1]

The author in this scenario is the wise harbinger of doom, misunderstood by those who read and admire him (the tech companies inevitably admire *men* who dream of Torment Nexi). Yet we cannot be overly generous to literary history as the misunderstood fount of genius insight into the future. The AI we have today, and the expectations we have for it, are equally shaped by a thousand stories that really did want the future to be a whitewashed techno-optimist utopia, or genuinely did want to warn against the apocalypse that the development

[1] Blechman 2021.

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of AI inevitably would bring.[2] Even if they are purportedly about the future, these stories ask the questions that were important at the time in which they were written. Those who work on AI today must come to terms with the extent to which last century's literature has shaped their field.

But new stories continue to develop: stories that respond to the important questions of *our* time, shaped—sometimes literally—by the technologies that we share our lives with now. In this section, Laura-Jane Devanny, Jay Labinger, and Sowon Park all approach from different angles the fundamental, urgent question around AI in our time: Who is AI *for*?

Laura-Jane Devanny discusses the idea that AI may not be created for women through an analysis of three of Jeanette Winterson's recent works. Winterson is a compelling voice in a contemporary debate in which authors tend to pitch themselves as diametrically opposed to AI. She is instead a strong advocate of AI's potential: reading the acronym as "alternative intelligence," she argues in favour of human–AI coexistence, seeing the potential for mutual enrichment rather than outright replacement.[3] However, Devanny points out that Winterson's books depict AI "as the inevitable perpetuation of female oppression." AI may have huge *potential*, but her works show that our reality today and our most likely futures do not involve this alternative intelligence yet. Rather, AI is made by and for men whose interests—particularly sexual—are served by the technology at the cost of improving the position of women. The sex robots that exist today and are imagined for tomorrow are in no way helpful alternatives for women.

Richard Powers's *Playground* (2024), the focus of Jay Labinger's essay, foregrounds one such man who thinks AI is for him: Todd Keane, a white American tech billionaire with a passion for expensive, eccentric, techno-optimist mega-engineering projects—a figure we know all too well from real life. In Labinger's words, the book contains "a good deal of explicit commentary… about what AI will do *to*, not for, humanity." Todd creates the kind of generative AI chatbot of which ChatGPT and the likes are considered "grandfathers." The twist in this story is that the AI turns out to be the "you" Todd is addressing in the sections of the novel which are written as his autobiography. The AI is the narrator of the other storylines. This makes it a truly creative force—yet one that serves only its maker, who, Labinger argues, is the only human permitted to have a voice of his own in this story: the AI has written what we, the readers, until that point thought were the stories of Evelyne Beaulieu, Rafi Young, and Ina Aroita. The voices of two women and an African American man turn out not to be their own.

Sowon Park provides a welcome element of hopefulness to counterbalance these two narratives. Like *Playground*, her article is about AI being a creative force in itself. But rather than focusing on literature *about* AI, she describes a competition that permitted writing literature *with* AI. She notes how this competition was received with scepticism and much "man versus machine" rhetoric, but the end results spoke for themselves: the winning story was the product of human–AI collaboration. Park points out that many participants were new to writing fiction. Her answer to the "Who is AI for?" question is one of openness and inclusivity. AI here works as a democratising force, providing access to a world of literary creativity for those who, without AI, would not have the cultural capital, linguistic skills, or simply confidence to participate. This is AI as "alternative intelligence" at its best.

[2] Cave and Dihal 2019, 2020.

[3] Winterson 2025.

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In imagining a desirable future with AI, we need both of these types of stories: the critical and the collaborative. Literature can offer us a way to see the undesirable futures we need to push back against, but also a way to imagine what we do want from AI. These essays show how both established and new writers can do so, and through their explanations hopefully make another Torment Nexus interpretation just a little less likely.

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Author contributions. Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing: K.D.

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Cite this article: Dihal, Kanta. 2026. "Artificial Intelligence in Literature: Introduction." *Public Humanities*, 2, e136, 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10193

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