**A history of time travel fiction**

Time travel fiction takes many forms, we list ten of the genre's most important works

by Jeremy Gordon

[](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/hgwellsthetimemachine.jpg)

**HG Wells wasn’t the first literary inventor of the time machine, but he is still the most famous**

*In his Prospect article “*[*The rise of time machine fiction*](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/the-rise-of-time-machine-fiction)*,” Sam Sacks identified that “once a sci-fi plot conceit, time travel fiction has become among the most popular structural devices in contemporary fiction.” There is a distinction to be made between time travel fiction, where there is a physical device such as a time machine involved, and the “time machine fiction” that Sacks discusses. In the latter, time travel—in many different forms which reject linear narrative—tends to be used less as a device to drive plot than as a means to explore universal human relationships and themes. Contrary to intuition, it might be seen as the very opposite of the specificity of historical fiction.*

*Here we present a potted history of time travel in literature from the best to the most original to the downright bizarre.*

**The obscure original**

***Enrique Gaspar’s El Anacronópete, 1887***

Spanish writer Gaspar wrote *El Anacronópete* (meaning something that “flies backward through time”) in 1887, a full eight years before HG Well’s *The Time Machine*, making him the first literary inventor of the time machine. While Well’s novel has never been out of print, however, Gaspar’s fell into obscurity for over a century before being rescued by a Spanish science fiction club in 1999. The protagonist Don Sindulfo García, who ostensibly invents the machine so he can go back in time and marry his niece, and ends up travelling to several places in history, before finally crashing at the moment of creation itself. Much like Dr Who’s Tardis, Gaspar’s time machine is bigger on the inside than out, coming complete with a kitchen and observation deck. El Anacronópete was published in English in 2012 as*The Time Ship*.

**The bestselling one**

***HG Wells’ The Time Machine, 1895***

While Wells may not be the creator of time machine fiction, he is certainly the author who popularised it in the public imagination. Unlike Gaspar’s travellers, who go back in time, Wells’ lone time-traveller heads to the year 802,701 AD. The plot of Wells’ classic is undeniably strange. The time traveller meets two competing races, imagined to have evolved from humans, the elegant Eloi and the troglodyte Morlocks, before, in a trope that will become a classic of the genre, his time machine goes missing. Wells’s enduringly popular novel has been adapted for screen and radio on countless occasion, including two films, in 1960 and 2002.

**The satirical one**

***Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, 1889***

**“You can’t depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”**

Twain’s novel is an early example of “time machine fiction,” where time travel occurs without the use of a time machine. The hero, Hank Morgan, from Hartford, Connecticut, gets hit in the head with a crowbar and wakes up in the year 528, where he is immediately taken prisoner and taken to Camelot. In a bid to save himself from execution, Hank passes himself off as a magician more powerful than Merlin and proceeds to use all manner of future inventions which wreak havoc in Arthurian England. In the final battle scene, 25,000 knights are massacred as they attempt to storm a position defended by electrical fencing and machine guns, which Hank has “invented”. Critics have used this scene to identify a dark side to this satirical comedy, noting that it could be construed as a prediction of a typical First World War battle scene.

**The one about golf**

***J McCullough’s Golf in the Year 2000, 1892***  
Ever wondered how the game of golf will have changed in a hundred years’ time? No, me neither. In his novel, *Golf in the Year 2000*, Scottish author J McCullough explores this possibility in a surprisingly amusing fashion. The protagonist lies sleeping in the same house for 108 years. When he wakes up he sees how the world, and particularly how the game of golf (he imagines, not outrageously, clubs which automatically keep the score and driverless golf carts), has changed in the interim. Among other things, this truly bizarre book predicts the advent of high-speed rail travel, televisions and the decimalisation of the pound, as well as increased gender equality (women now run the country, while men play golf full-time). A rare first edition was sold in 2005 at auction in January for $2,240 to an American collector of golf memorabilia.

**The one about the “butterfly effect”**

***Ray Bradbury’s A Sound of Thunder, 1952***

This science fiction short story, which is one of the most republished of its genre, was the first to popularise the idea of the “butterfly effect” (although it predates the scientific concept), which suggests that time travellers’ actions in the past could alter the present. The story starts on the eve of an American presidential election, a party of rich businessmen undertake a time travel safari to the past to hunt dinosaurs. Despite the organisers taking every precaution to minimise the impact of the hunting party on the past, one member violates the rules and chaos ensues. When the party returns to the present, they find to their horror that a different, fascist president has just been elected and the English language altered.

**The one with quantum physics**

***Isaac Asimov’s The End of Eternity, 1955***  
Despite being relatively unknown, science-fiction godfather Isaac Asimov’s brain-bending novel is regarded by devotees as his finest work. The genesis of its complicated plot is shrouded in mythology of its own—apparently while perusing an issue of *Time* magazine from 1932 Asmiov came across an illustration which resembled the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion (but was in fact Yellowstone’s park famous Old Faithful geyser). Still, he began to wonder what the implications would be if there had been a drawing of a mushroom cloud in a magazine from 1932. Thus the complicated plot of *The End of Eternity*, which incorporates concepts such as quantum physics and infinite parallel universes, was born. It tells the story of the Eternals, who live outside time but try to manipulate it create the “best” possible version of history. Part futuristic thriller, part straight-up mystery, this is science fiction time travel at its purest.

**The one with aliens**

***Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five, 1969***

**“There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again.”**

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is closely based on Vonnegut’s own experiences of the Second World War. During the Dresden bombings, the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, captured during the Battle of the Bulge, hides in an underground meat locker on the grounds of a slaughterhouse, where he is being held as a POW. After emerging to scenes of unbelievable devastation, he is put to work digging bodies out of the rubble of the city. Vonnegut struggled to write the book for 20 years with a more straightforward, linear narrative. *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s erratic and engaging time shifts act as a mechanism for dealing with the unfathomable destruction and loss of life that Billy sees. He is also abducted by an alien race, the Tralfamadorians, who are green and shaped like toilet plungers. So it goes.

**The romantic one**

***Audrey Niffeneger’s The Time Traveler’s Wife, 2003***  
Niffenger’s 2003 novel, made into a film in 2009, is the story of one couple’s life together, with a twist: due to a genetic mutation, the husband, Henry, uncontrollably and spontaneously travels either forward or backwards in time. Often he travels to past or future points in his own life. As you might imagine, this leaves his wife, Clare, in something of a fix. For example, the first time they meet in the book, a younger Henry has travelled forward to Clare’s past, and thus has never met her before let alone fallen in love with and married her. Complications ensue but it is ultimately all both gripping and, ultimately, heart-breaking. This is the novel that elevated time travel fiction from the realms of a niche, sci-fi concern to bestseller status.

**The dystopian one**

***David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas, 2004***  
This award-winning novel, which became a cinematic blockbuster in 2012, is the best-known work by this British author whose latest novel made the longlist for the Man Booker Prize. Mixing styles, genres, periods and location in masterful fashion this breathtakingly innovative novel won plaudits for its sheer scale—incorporating the stories of six central characters whose fates are mysteriously linked. Mitchell does not write time travel fiction in any traditional sense, he has coined his own distinctive style which marries science fiction with history, crafting what the*New York Times* has described as the “perfect crossword puzzle.”

**The one with a foodie twist**

***Douglas Adam’s Restaurant at the End of the Universe, 1980***

**“The Universe as we know it has now been in existence for over one hundred and seventy thousand million billion years and will be ending in a little over half an hour”**

Douglas Adams’ second book in his “trilogy of five”, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, introduces the delicious conceit of its title when Arthur et al escape to the “nearest restaurant” (in space if not time). The restaurant’s bill can be paid by depositing a penny in any bank account of the present time because, by the end of the universe, the compound interest in interim always being more than enough to cover the cost, and reservations can always be made retrospectively, once you have returned to your original time period. Following the universe’s spectacular finale, dessert is served. Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide* series takes a playful attitude to pretty much everything and time travel is no exception.