

# The Retrograde Impulse: William Gibson Probes His Southern Roots in His Latest Novel

written by Guest Contributor | December 9, 2014



*The Peripheral* by William Gibson  
G.P. Putnam's Sons, October 2014  
496 pages – [Amazon](#)

William Gibson is a magpie and a seer. His father poured concrete for the foundations of hidden military installations while he hoarded fragments of a future he hoped would scoop him from the sticks and deliver him a life worthy of his probing, greedy brain. Gibson moved to Canada to dodge the draft, became a grad student, then a writer—a cyberpunk, writing hard-boiled, media-savvy stuff that thumbed its nose at fat boring space operas starring silver-suited princelings. Cyberpunk science fiction eschewed rocketships for computers, eschewed aristocratic protagonists for guttersnipes. His first novel *Neuromancer* (1983) coined the word “cyberspace” and gave us a working definition of the Internet as shadow-world: “a mass consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators.” His hero was a console cowboy named Case, helped out by a femme fatale—an assassin armed with retractable claws, sporting a blob of mercury instead of eyes. Subsequent novels were also influential: Gibson called himself a “technological determinist” and each novel seemed to hinge on an intriguing, totally plausible techno-MacGuffin. His stories have been made into movies, influenced scientists and engineers, and sold millions of copies. But buried beneath the holograms and glowing monitors, seeping pathos into his prose, have been Gibson’s Southern blue-collar roots—unacknowledged until now.

His latest novel, *The Peripheral*, exposes those roots. Gibson’s great talent is his ability to articulate very clearly the intersection of technology and perception. An early short story, “The Gernsback Continuum,” describes an exhausted photographer drifting between amphetamine hallucinations of floating cities and “raygun gothic” and a lonely desert highway. *Neuromancer* described cyberspace and computer viruses at work. *Pattern Recognition* (2003) featured a protagonist who was allergic to corporate symbols. His last novel, *Spook Country* (2010), depicted a world in which mobile technology was “everting,” meaning it was unfurling itself from cyberspace into an invisible layer on top of reality. This time Gibson raises the stakes. He’s exploring the idea of “forking,” this being the idea that multiple timelines and futures exist, and at critical moments, such as when making a decision, the universe splits, tracing different outcomes like tines of a fork. This time Gibson’s techno MacGuffin is a mysterious server located in China that bored kleptocrats use to make contact with the past. Contact causes a new tine of the fork, a “stub,” to form (presumably preventing a recursive error in reality). These “klepts” manipulate “stubs” as a hobby. They have enormous power since they know the inflection points of history,

and are untouchable since the only thing that can pass between stubs is information. Yet this flow of information is enough for plenty of mischief. They create companies and use hedge funds (herding predatory trading algorithms using technology seventy years more advanced than their rivals) to generate money and hire henchmen to do their bidding. It's a bit like a game of SimCity, only played with entire universes filled with real people in an alternate timeline.

Keeping track of different timelines is an enormous literary challenge, particularly if there's feedback between them the way there is in *The Peripheral*. Gibson tends to be vague about place and time, particularly when he's setting a story in the future; but time travel demands serious grounding, so this time he's set his story in a rural Virginia town around 2020, and his protagonist, a twenty-something woman named Flynn, communicates with a (not "the") City of London that exists in a timeline about seventy years in the future. Gibson was born in South Carolina and grew up in western Virginia, so it doesn't seem like too much of a stretch to surmise that Flynn lives someplace similar to Gibson's childhood hometown. There's another sort of grounding at work too, as there are so many references to Gibson's earlier work, particularly *Neuromancer*, that the story feels as if it were a palimpsest, which it may well be. He's done it before.

I have a theory about *Neuromancer*: There's an 18-year-old Bible salesman we meet in the first scene of Robert Stone's (1967) *A Hall of Mirrors*, who later reappears in the final scene—which is a patriotic revival and an attempt to incite race riot—dressed as a “white hat” good guy gunslinger. As he turns to walk out on stage, someone says, “Good luck, Case.” I think *Neuromancer* is an homage to *A Hall of Mirrors*. I suspect Gibson made off with young Case and placed him in a dystopian future, not unlike what Robert Stone was envisioning happening in the sixties. *Neuromancer*'s main character's name is Case, he's a cowboy; *Neuromancer* begins with the words “the sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel;” *A Hall of Mirrors* also begins on a grey day by a port city (New Orleans); both novels feature an ominous weapon shop (selling razor blades in *A Hall of Mirrors*, shuriken in *Neuromancer*). For Case, the shuriken are like a constellation, “his destiny spelled out in cheap chrome”; for Rheinhardt, Case's counterpart in New Orleans, the “emperor and champion of razors” is the “great American Razor,” and “somewhere in the heart of a stone mountain sits a scarred and demonic old man with a striped shirt and one suspender, and with teeth clenched and spittle on his chin he takes that razor and cuts a dirty piece of string. And he kills me. The American Fate, the angel of American Death, His Razor.” Both men have doomed lovers and substance abuse problems, both participate as unwitting tools of strange, syphilitic plutocrats, hired to wake something spooky and big... Which is not to imply Gibson did anything unethical by sniping young Case, just that as a young author he probably took the bones from a book he loved and hung cybernetic flesh over it (and besides *A Hall of Mirrors* probably did the same thing with Nathaniel West's 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*.) This wasn't a scavenging. It was an archeological excavation: deep scholarship, and reinterpretation too, like a skyscraper using an old building as a pedestal. So when William Gibson tunnels back into his own old work there's bound to be more going on than a

mere Easter egg hunt for the fans.

At its core, *The Peripheral* is a detective story, albeit one with geopolitical and cross-dimensional consequences. Our heroine Flynne is a videogamer for hire and she subcontracts a surveillance drone piloting job from her brother, Burton, a disabled veteran of U.S. Marines Haptic Recon group (implying he fought while stitched into sophisticated touch-sensitive electronics). There, in what she thinks is a computer game (and is really an electronic tether to the future), she is the only witness to a murder, evidence that could radically disrupt the finely balanced relationship between Russian kleptocrats and old City of London bureaucrats who rule future London. Factions form, each manipulating Flynne's stub. A contract is taken out on Burton's life. Another faction sends lawyers, guns and money to counter the hit. The factions check each other, bribing ever more senior officials, sending ever more complex technologies, and gobbling ever-larger shares of the economy. Flynne is summoned to London (via telepresence) to identify the killer. The whirling motion of the two factions facing off is reminiscent of Tom McCarthy's (2004) *Remainder*, where a brain-damaged narrator attempts to recreate a memory by hiring actors and keeps expanding his efforts until it too eventually spirals out of control. The detail is extraordinarily believable. All the meticulous grounding works. William Gibson renders the technology and the two timelines in a way that's absolutely plausible. The villains are sexy and horrible. *The Peripheral* could have been a great novel if only he weren't so attached to his poor Southern characters.

It's not just that none of the main characters die (nor any of the good guys, for that matter) that hurts this story. His characters are too precious. With the exception of a Lady Gaga-like performance artist, the principal villain, and a pathetic public relations agent who sets the London story in motion, the characters are almost cutesy; they are practically cartoons. The townspeople have hearts of gold and hidden expertise (except for the evil Tesla dealer turned meth mogul and his Homeland Security henchmen). Flynne's mom is stubborn but wise and old but she's on a ventilator and has a cancer whose medications keep Flynne tethered to her hometown. (She's a bit of stereotype.) There's an arbitrary cuddling scene between two techs: who are not only gay, black self-taught engineers who are so good that they never once flub the fabrication of technology from the far future—which might be plausible if it weren't for the fact that these two also volunteer their services to the local deputy sheriff and the cocky disabled good-guy veterans and the Indian franchise owner but refuse to ever help the neighborhood meth makers, the only people in town with money, which makes them feel more like finger-wagging lessons in social justice than characters in apocalyptic time traveling noir; and there's an epilogue at the end which I won't spoil but is pandering and gross and feels sliced off from a pastoral romantic comedy.

Gibson's early heroines were noirish femme fatales and much like Robert Stone, he was criticized for painting his women as either Madonnas or whores, and nothing in between; but he's tilted too far in the other direction: it's practically young adult fiction.

Noir (and its android kin cyberspace) demands lust and fucked up power

dynamics, which means characters ought to be conflicted, imperfect and occasionally unappealing. There isn't a whisper of sexual tension or dread between any of the characters, male or female. Maybe the problem is that his world is engineered too well; maybe it's like a cuckoo clock, there's only space for a robotic cut-out. Maybe it's the idea of stubs: threatening an entire alternate dimension's population with annihilation is at once too large to contemplate yet also begs the question: would it really matter if you colonized a stub and wrecked it, if you could make an infinite number of others?

Beneath his cartoonish characters, you catch glimpses of the weird postmodern social realist story Gibson wants to write. The key is in the stubs. The idea of rich hobbyists manipulating the past and watching it deteriorate or bloom like bored kids pattering around a game of SimCity is indeed spooky. There are nice sociopolitical reverberations: hedge fund analysts aren't monsters, merely callous jocks who look at things like a videogame; town-crippling corporate decisions are made not by sociopaths but regular folk who are just trying to do a good job. Gibson moved away from technological determinism by adding the corollary that "the future is unevenly distributed." Now he gives us gentle doses of his new philosophy: evildoers aren't psychopaths but everyday assholes who've accumulated power and influence and wreck havoc by meddling with other people's lives.

But it's also hard not to imagine one of Gibson's stubs as a proxy for writing fiction. You build a home and fill it with people; wind them up and watch them go. But a novelist's job is to torture his creations, and drive them to the very limits of human experience. Gibson's command of detail and verisimilitude and his keen instinct for what will happen next suggest he could do awesome things with his work, if he would only take a lesson from Flannery O'Connor and let unreasonable things happen to the reasonable people he's created. But William Gibson is trying. He's only just revealed his Southern roots to us, so maybe he eventually might. All that having been said, *The Peripheral* is a good read; it's entertaining and important, and though his characters are saccharine, they could have been far worse. You can live with them, and sometimes you'll even be charmed by them; it's just that this book could have been so much better.

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✘ James McGirk is the author of [American Outlaws](#). He teaches creative nonfiction and composition at Northeastern State University Tahlequah. For more information see [jamesmcgirk.com](#).