

**The University of Essex ran a Challenge Lab in July, bringing academics together with a range of partners to help develop projects to apply our research to the challenges that are emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic.**

**In preparation for this event the University ran an Impact Dialogue which brought together a wide range of stakeholders, from solicitors and agricultural innovators to theatre directors and social services managers and helped us think broadly and innovatively about where we should focus our efforts.**

**As part of this, Matthew De Abaitua, a Lecturer in Creative Writing, produced some short stories, to help stimulate the thinking of everyone involved and provoke new ideas and perspectives.**

**We caught up with him about the experience.**

**Q: Tell us about your work as an author. What do you write about and why?**

A: I write science fiction and memoir, which are very different modes: one works in the speculative realm of what might happen, at the very edge of probability; the other assumes a fidelity to what actually happened. My first three science fiction novels *The Red Men*, *IF THEN* and *The Destructives* concern the influence of new and imaginary technologies upon culture and psychology.

**Q: Why did you want to write about the pandemic? What inspired you?**

A: For this project, I was inspired by the eerie stillness that fell upon Hackney, where I live, in March and April. Traffic was replaced by the silent blue lights of ambulances speeding east and west along the road outside my front window. I drew primarily the pandemic stories and experiences of other people. It was an opportunity to set down this testimony while it was still warm from experience. I participated in a COVID working group at the University of Essex that helped me identify common themes, and I chose testimonies that spoke to these themes.

**Q: Did you find it easier writing about the pandemic as we are amid one?**

A: Our experience of the pandemic is very different from how it might have been depicted in the past. For example, no Hollywood film could have anticipated the indifference of some governments to the virus and its suffering.

**Q: What do you think the greatest challenges society faces are with the pandemic?**

A: The pandemic is a lens that reveals fissures, existing injustice, structural racism: it has also revealed community spirit, great kindness, and heroism: the challenge is to preserve these positives, while ensuring there is no return to the exploitation of the old normal.

**Q: How can the arts help society come to terms with the aftermath of the pandemic?**

A: I use stories and narrative as a way of thinking about the future. The role of characters in stories, and the way narratives pose agonising choices to those characters, exposes imaginary people to the social and psychological pressures of the future. As the writer William Gibson has observed, it is the integral role of characterisation that bakes moral context into narrative. So many of the future visions of the last decade were boosterist narratives of tech companies that glossed over the likely moral consequences of that technology. Futurism has to be more diversely informed than that, and so bringing in testimony into a speculative work allows the writer to imagine a future from a broader base of experiences.