

TIMEY WIMEY WARNING

FROM :

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"I don't have much time," says the ambiguous title character of Emily St. John Mandel's short story "Mr. Thursday." Time passes quickly whether we use it or not; however, Mandel use time to spin a peculiar, not-quite science fiction—but also not not science fiction—story about time-travel.

This science fiction story has three different perspectives at varied times, and it is told in three different perspectives situated in two distinct moments, the present and the far-off future. It is set in what appears to be present-day New York where the reader is first introduced to Victor, a lawyer, who yearns to own a yellow Lamborghini. One night while Victor is staring at the Lamborghini, he is approached by a man in a beige suit and grey trench coat who offers him \$10,000 to not buy the car. Victor ignores the man's pleas and buys the car the next day.

The reader next meets Rose, who starts a new job at a law firm. She is also recently divorced: her former husband is in jail for something that was never specified, and she is adjusting to her new life as a working single woman. Rose too sees the man in the beige suit and grey trench coat at her work and dubs him Mr. Thursday because she always sees him on Thursdays. This is the initial link between Victor and Rose that Mandel has the readers ponder. Later we learn that the two are connected by Rose's ex-husband and his trial, as well as the yellow Lamborghini that Victor gives Rose a ride home in.

At the end of the story the perspective shifts to the man in the beige suit where the readers learn more about him and why he did not want Victor to buy the car. Since this story does have major reveals in it, I will abstain from spoiling anything. "Mr. Thursday" is classic Mandel with a slow burning plot whose sharpness is located in its strategically placed twists, and a keen eye for character development.

“Mr. Thursday” was published in March 2017 and was commissioned and edited by Future Tense, a collaboration between Slate Magazine, New America, and Arizona State University. Before “Mr. Thursday” Mandel successfully published four other novels, including *Last Night in Montreal* and *Station Eleven*. The latter novel has picked up in popularity since the pandemic and its HBO Max adaptation. Mandel wrote in a 2014 email to Washington Post journalist Ron Charles that she never considered what she was writing as anything other than “literary fiction.” “Mr. Thursday” is not an outright science fiction story, or at least not what one would typically consider science fiction.



It does not have much action, futuristic technology, or takes place in space. Mandel says of her novels that by putting them into specific categories like crime or sci-fi “there’s a real risk that readers who only read ‘literary fiction’ won’t pick it up because they think they couldn’t possibly like sci-fi, while sci-fi readers will pick up the book based on the sci-fi categorization, and then be disappointed because the book isn’t sci-fi enough” (Charles). “Mr. Thursday” is a good reflection of what Mandel is talking about when she says she does not see her stories fitting neatly into little labeled boxes. This may also account for why some readers may find “Mr. Thursday” difficult to place, or if they consider it sci-fi then they are disappointed that it is not sci-fi enough.

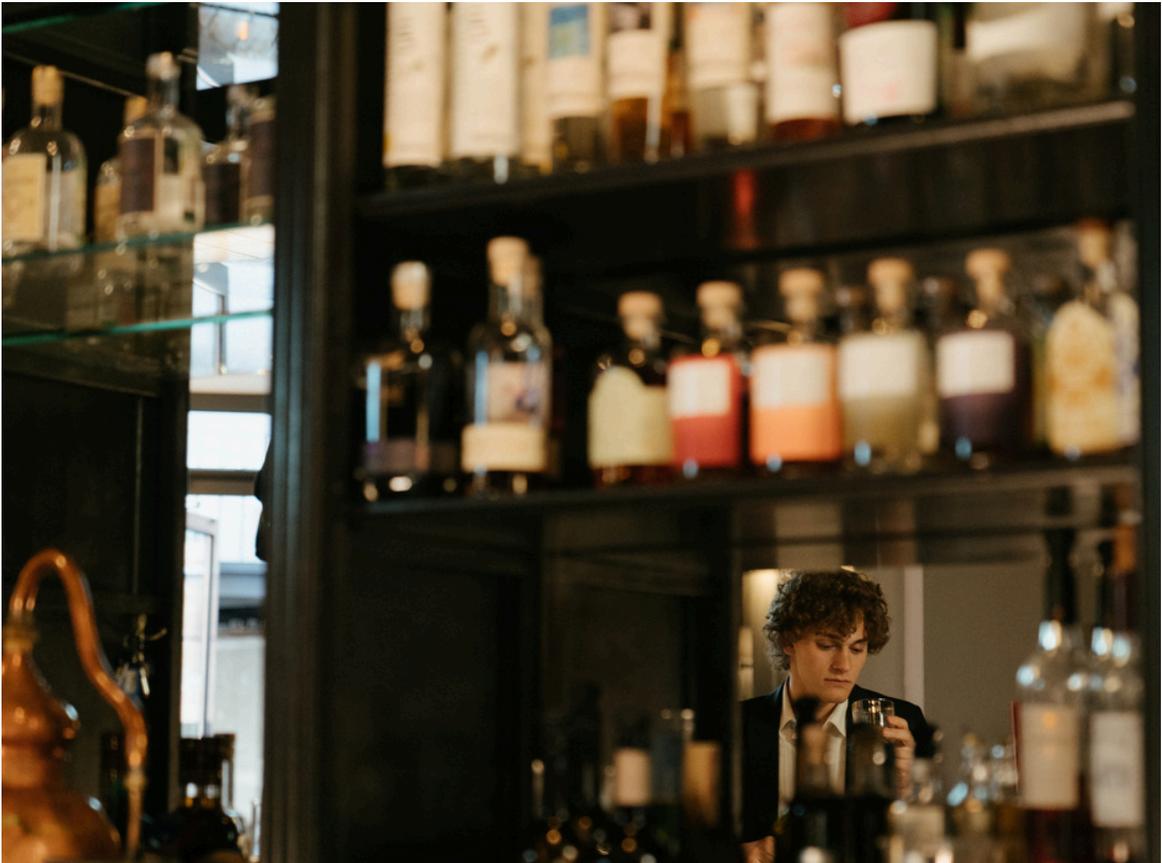


Whether readers consider “Mr. Thursday” sci-fi or not; one thing that Mandel does exceptionally well is incorporating symbolism into her work. She leans heavily on symbolism in “Mr. Thursday,” which, along with her lavish characterization, imbues “Mr. Thursday” with much of its richness. The story’s main symbolism comes from the yellow Lamborghini. The Lamborghini symbolizes the want for freedom and risk, while Mr. Thursday symbolizes caution and foreboding. Freedom feels important to both Victor and Rose, but readers only understand Rose’s need for freedom after relying on her husband for years; we do not understand why Victor wants the car for anything other than a status symbol. The car becomes important at the end of the story, but Victor just seems like the between-man for Rose and the car. However, on closer examination he is more important than that, he fails her not once but twice, and it is that second failure that the story plays with.



Even more clever is Mandel's use of time as a motif in "Mr. Thursday," and this makes sense this this is a story about time travel. Time is everywhere in this story because that is what it is all about. It is more than just a basic conceit, in life as well as in the stories we tell about life. Jumping through time allows Mandel to pick and choose what she wants to tell the readers, by zeroing in on specific moments. For example, the first sentence of every perspective shift establishes the time. Victor's section starts with "A strange incident in October" (Mandel). Right after this opening line the reader is given even more precise details, "Victor returned to the showroom for the fourth time in two weeks, after hours" (Mandel). The same thing is being done in Rose's section, "Three weeks later, at 2 a.m. on a Thursday in November," and again at the end of her section, "she didn't recognize it for another 47 minutes" (Mandel). The specificity of time is carried through the story. The last moment is in Mr. Thursday's section "Three-hundred and forty years after" (Mandel). Taking together all these reference to time is a very clear reminder how time rules our lives. These examples display how fantastically Mandel brings time into play in ways that one could take away from that time marches on and it is always there.

While readers only see Mr. Thursday try to prevent the events at the end of this story, that is all they need as readers to move forward in the story and realize that no matter what you try to do: if you are privy to future events, you cannot change the events that must take place. The story uses time travel as a literary form, but the reader is not aware of this until the very end when the perspective shifts to Mr. Thursday. It is in the future bar that the reader discovers what he was doing and why he was doing it. He does not keep in mind the golden rule of time travel: do not mess with time. No matter how insignificant the act of trying to save Rose may be, it could have larger ripple effects for the future. Mandel does dispense with some deeper framing. Readers don't know what the purpose of Mr. Thursday's trips into the past really are, why he does this, and why there appears to be an entire agency dedicated to doing this. It is a noteworthy omission whether it spoils the story or undermines what Mandel is trying to communicate.





The only downside to this story is that it is a short story—emphasis on short—so there are some questions that will remain unanswered when readers finish. The interconnectedness of the story was a major plus for me. It is not understood at the beginning but in the end, readers come to realize how these three characters are all connected to each other and to other minor characters in the story, like Victor to Rose's husband and Mr. Thursday to Jared Gattler. The story is divided into three parts, going from Victor to Rose and ending on Mr. Thursday; jumping through time as it goes. The way that these three narratives weave together make for a great story and stunning reveals. I believe that the attention to details like month, day and even time makes up for the gaps in the plot this way. Victor is the catalyst for what is to come, so I agree with Mandel when she decides that the readers do not need to know what was going on with him in that missing time between October and three weeks later with Rose in November.

This story is not really concerned with world building so much as it is a character study, especially with Rose trying to put her life back together and Mr. Thursday's character who may have some emotional attachment to her because she reminds him of his daughter and just general sympathy for her because he knows what she has been through, and he wants her to have that chance. It is that little bit of justice for Rose that he wants to have for her. That sympathy and compassion are what cost him his job.

Mandel does have a tendency in this to drop tantalizing details or incomplete details and never completes them or explain them. Why is Mr. Thursday visiting the particular point in the past? That is a lack of its own kind of closures, and some readers may find that really frustrating or off-putting. I for one really want to know what Rose's husband did to get himself put in jail and have all their assets taken away. But does this ultimately cripple the story in a significant way or is it more of a nuisance? Some readers may see it differently. There are still some mysteries left unresolved at the end of the story.

This is a great introduction to Mandel and a great lead-in to her other works like *Station Eleven*. I enjoyed the mystery of "Mr. Thursday" and trying to figure out what was going to happen next. Aside from my personal gripes about plot holes I still really like the story and the way Mandel writes. There is so much to dissect and analyze, making this the perfect story for re-reading.



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