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'The Before Time': A Sci-Fi Idea That Has Made Its Way to Real Life

The shorthand phrase for an era before a catastrophe has now become part of our pandemic vocabulary

In 1985's post-apocalyptic "Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome," a character talks of "looking behind us now, across the count of time."

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Do you remember what life was like before, say, March? It can seem like a foggy memory, back before the coronavirus pandemic made social distancing and self-isolation the ruling principles of everyday life.

When referring to that pre-pandemic era, many people have seized on a darkly humorous phrase with an air of science fiction: "the Before Time," or alternatively "the Before Times."

As early as mid-April, Marina Koren wrote in the Atlantic about the sense that "the days before the coronavirus swept across the country—the 'Before Time,' as many have taken to calling it—feel like a bygone era." More recently, the Gothamist website reports, "As people eagerly anticipate a return to the Before Time, without masks and with other people, Dr. Anthony Fauci has a reality check." And a Washington Post article about hosting get-togethers advises, "As a host, you should communicate ground rules for guests in a way that seemed incomprehensible in the Before Times."

"The Before Time" has quickly become a standby of coronavirus conversations, in turn drawing on a longstanding trope in fictional accounts of life after some apocalyptic event, as portrayed in novels, movies, and television shows.

The words "before" and "time" have long gravitated toward each other, even before they found a home in science fiction. Beginning in the Middle English of the late 14th century, "beforetime" or "beforetimes" could be used as an adverb meaning "in the past, formerly." "Beforetime" shows up frequently in the King James version of the Bible, as in this passage from the Book of Samuel: "Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer: for he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer."

This usage has been rare in modern English, with the notable exception of the

The phrase describes a science-fiction scenario that dates back to Mary Shelley's 1826 novel "The Last Man" about life in the late 21st century after a plague.

Caribbean. In "The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage," Richard and Jeannette Allsopp note that the persistence of "beforetime" in Caribbean speech is "probably due to its presence in the Psalms" and the King James Bible. It can also be used in parts of the Caribbean as a noun referring to an earlier era, as in a Jamaican folk tale recorded in 1899 that begins, "In a long before time in dis country..."

Independently, the notion of "the Before Time" developed on its own path in popular representations of a post-apocalyptic world—a common science-fiction scenario since Mary Shelley's 1826 novel "The Last Man" about life in the late 21st century after a plague has killed most of the earth's population.

The "Before Time" trope pops up in many dystopian stories even when that exact phrase isn't used. In the 1985 movie "Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome," for instance, a group of children born before the collapse of society commemorate

their past, with <u>one girl saying</u>, "I'm looking behind us now, across the count of time, down the long haul, into history back."

In the 1966 "Star Trek" episode "Miri," the title character (right) uses "the Before Time" to describe her world before a devastating plague.

We likely owe the "Before Time" label to an episode of the original "Star Trek" series broadcast in 1966, in which the crew of the Enterprise encounter a planet populated by children who survived a man-made plague. A young girl name Miri (whose name also serves as the title of the episode) explains how the planet's grown-ups, known as "Grups," disappeared: "That was when they started to get sick in the Before Time. We hid, then they were gone."

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In 2000, an episode of "South Park" parodying "Star Trek" repopularized the expression, <u>with lines like</u>, "That was in the Before Time, in the Long Long Ago."

As used during the coronavirus era, the "Before Time" trope makes it feel like we're living through our own post-apocalyptic science-fiction plotline. At the same time, the phrase pokes fun at how we sometimes treat changes to our lifestyles since the pandemic in a melodramatic fashion—and how our memory plays tricks on us as we try to piece together the dimly recalled world from a few

months ago.