



## Nowhere Fan

### The Secret Life of Utopias

I've been thinking about how no-one really makes a career out of writing utopian fiction. Edward Bellamy did write a follow-up to his bestselling utopian novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* but by then he'd turned the franchise into a political programme and it read more like a manifesto than a novel. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote three utopian novels, but had to publish them all herself. Perhaps the only exception to the rule of diminishing utopian returns might be H G Wells, but how many of his books really count as utopias? *A Modern Utopia*, *Men Like Gods* and *The Days of the Comet* are the most obvious. Wells also wrote dystopias but that's different. You can write any number of dystopias because, to paraphrase Tolstoy, happy worlds are all alike; every unhappy world is unhappy in its own way. Once you've defined utopia, it's rare to come back and do it again. Wells tried out different settings for his utopias – an idealised Switzerland, a portal to another world, and a comet which turned people into utopians, but I don't think his ideas of what constituted utopia changed much. Bellamy, in his sequel to *Looking Backward* just filled in some of the gaps in his original utopia, notably the role of women. Gilman went from a "baby utopia", as she called it, set just 30 years ahead of her own time, to *Herland*, a lost world utopia, populated entirely by women. This shift to an imaginary space did change the dynamics of utopia and actually allow for plot development, but her premise that society could be improved by providing a role for women was the same.

It has to be said, that from the point-of-view of originality, utopian fiction began to feel like a dead end of a genre, a one-trick pony. It was the devices for achieving utopia that came to be more interesting, like the

surrounding time travel story, the journey across undiscovered lands, the journey into space. All of which eventually became part of science fiction, and the utopian element was consigned to the scrapheap of history. Not that there isn't utopian science fiction. Le Guin is often cited here, and Kim Stanley Robinson. But more frequently science fiction tends towards the dystopian, and utopian fiction is kept in the margins, apart from occasional resurgences.

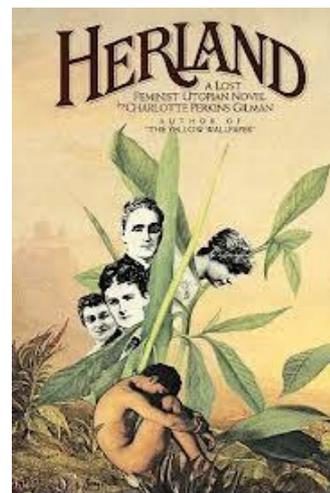
All the same, there is something of a hobbyist approach to utopian fiction which makes them an endless source of fascination. What I like about these books is that they were generally one-offs, often written by amateurs or obscure, forgotten writers. The plots are often minimal and the characterization non-existent but the writers always had something to say. The late nineteenth-century utopianists thought they knew how to improve the world and were confident that the future would be rational, scientific and progressive. This was a game women could play too. They didn't have the vote, but they could write books that showed how the world would look if women were in power. So Elizabeth Corbett's *New Amazonia* (1889), set in a future Ireland run by women, used science and common sense to establish a society which prioritised health, happiness and spiritual growth. It was also very repressive – no alcohol or tobacco products were allowed, vegetarianism was mandatory and men caught committing adultery were deported. But Corbett did have some fun science, like nerve transplants to keep people young, a potion which had the power of instantaneously arresting sense and movement, weather control and hydraulic roadways. Mary E. Bradley Lane took weird science even further in *Mizora*, where the women of her hollow-earth utopia killed off all the men, after discovering the secret of

reproducing without them. Since Lane wrote *Mizora* as a serial for the local paper, she might have felt the need of a spot of androicide to spice up the story, but it didn't do much for its utopian credentials. Similarly, Lady Florence Dixie added a good dose of melodrama and adventure to her imaginary tale of female rule *Gloriana*, the frankly implausible story of a girl who poses as a man to avenge wrongs done to her mother and becomes the first female prime-minister of Britain, many years before Thatcher.

Even Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who was an established writer, can be seen as a bit of a hobbyist when it comes to her utopian fiction. By the time she wrote *Herland* in 1915, utopian fiction was out of fashion. Gilman herself, despite the success of *Women and Economics*, her hard-hitting feminist analysis of the disadvantages to society of women's economic dependence on men, found it increasingly difficult to be published. Her work was just too confrontational, so she set up her own magazine *The Forerunner*, which ran from 1909 to 1916. Gilman wrote it all herself – 28 pages every month, and sold it at 10 cents an issue, mainly on subscription or via political organisations. I think it's interesting that *Herland*, which is now seen as a classic of feminist utopian literature was not published in book form till the 1970s. At a generous estimate, *The Forerunner* had around 5,000 to 7,000 readers and never made much money. So, at best, *Herland* was published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of a semi-prozine, and seems to have had very little impact. Gilman herself never rated her fiction very highly, saying that writing seven novels for *The Forerunner* over its seven year history had definitely proved to her that she was not a novelist. But utopian fiction suited her writing because it provided a setting for the didactic social commentary which was her main interest. Maybe that's why Gilman went on writing utopian fiction even as the First World War turned the political climate of Europe and then America increasingly pessimistic. By the time Gilman wrote *With Her in Ourland*, the sequel to *Herland* in 1916, she was more interested in what had gone wrong with our

world, than inventing another imaginary land. Ellador, one of the women of Herland, tours the world with her new husband Van, stopping off en route to criticise the war in Europe, the treatment of women in China, and finally immigration in America. Utopia was still only three generations away, Gilman continued to maintain, but her character Ellador refused to bring up a child in twentieth century America and retreated to the inaccessible plateau of Herland to wait for the world to be ready for her feminist society.

But perhaps she wasn't so wrong after all, as approximately three generations later, in 1979, *Herland* was finally published in book form and began its new life as a feminist classic.



## The Melton Mowbray: or nine types of pie

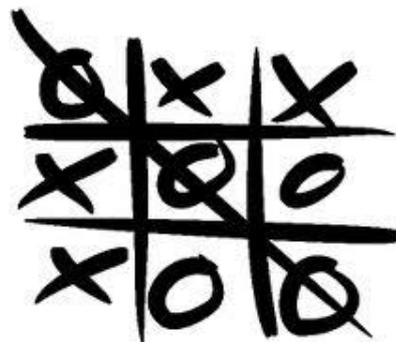
London fandom has been driven into a basement in a pub where the pie menu is more varied than the beer selection, leaving me wondering, where are the great One Tuns of yesteryear? Those thriving gatherings where not only was there no pie, but no place to sit down and eat pie? And nobody cared much what the beer was like because beer was a means to an end, getting drunk, talking, turning the wheels of fannish conversation, lubricating the exchange of fanzines.

But here in February 2013 I am entering the basement of the Melton Mowbray for the first time, and all I can think is that it's rather empty. Mark Plummer has rescued me from the upstairs bar where indeed there is no room to sit down and barely room to stand, and certainly no place for pie. But it's still only early and I'm happy to join Tony Keen, Mike Scott and Mark at a table in the corner where my bags won't be in the way, and I can watch what's going on in the room. There's a big crowd of people in the other corner, who through certain clues, I ascertain to be ZZ9 (the Alan Sullivan fanzine is a dead giveaway). They all seem to be having fun and form a larger group than any of the more familiar faces around my table. But people arrive and depart. Tony Keen invokes the law of conservation of Tonys and departs when Tony Cullen arrives. Flick appears, bringing tidings of a kickstarter for a huge convention in London in August. Mike looks worried until Flick ascertains that, unlikely as it might seem, the convention which will be larger than Comicon and Phoenixcon really is scheduled for just over six months away in summer of 2013, and not pitting itself against Loncon in 2014. At the other end of the scale, Picocon has courted controversy by extending its programming to two days. This move is treated with what seems to me to be undue scepticism. It looks like a good programme, but perhaps the issue is that they're diluting the brand, and no-one will know which day to attend any more.

Caroline Mullan joins us, to enthuse about the latest BSFA mailing. To be honest, I never thought I'd hear someone speak of *Focus* in such glowing terms. But then, back in the day when I was a BSFA member it was just a small fanzine giving a few tips on how to write. Now apparently it is jam-packed with interview with top writers. When I interrogate Caroline over which would be best for me to invest in, if I was so inclined – the BSFA or the Science Fiction Foundation – she refuses to be drawn, so I'm left to make up my own mind. Which, as usual, will probably result in me joining neither!

Mike and Flick leave, and I begin to wonder if we will run out of people to talk to before nine. But then Rob Hansen arrived, followed shortly later by Avedon Carol and Alun Harries. Now that the pies are definitely off the table it feels more like a real First Thursday pub meeting. The gaps between ZZ9 and the other fan groups are beginning to fill in, and I find myself at the bar having my standard conversation with Dave Lally (the one about our alphabetical propinquity in convention listings. Dave clearly sees us as being in a competition for the prized position of the person whose name comes closest to Dave Langford's).

By the time I leave at around ten pm I'm pretty sure I've had a good time. But it feels like there's something missing. Caroline puts her finger on it. There are none of the pros around any more. The First Thursday is no longer where London fandom and associated pros come to do business. That has all moved online, or to a pub with better pies, or indeed better beer, and while there was a certain amount of light smofing going on, and the selling of conventions, there was no sign of Langford, Roz Kaveney, John Jarrold, Geoff Ryman or the many others who used to turn up at First Thursday meetings in the old days. Maybe what London needs it not so much an all-singing, all-dancing mega convention like *Nine Worlds*, but a new, more diverse and happening social gathering? Or perhaps it has this already, and it's just people like me who are out of the loop?



## Not so black and white

I recently picked up a copy of *Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman in a charity shop. All I knew was that it was a children/teen dystopian book and that it tackled issues of racism. In fact, the story is based on the simple stratagem of reversing the racial power structure, so that blacks are the ruling class and whites the underdogs, a device which allows Blackman to defamiliarise racism and shock her audience out of complacency over racial politics. It puts white readers in the position of being on the receiving end of racial abuse, and forces them to relive some of the worst excesses of the history of racial oppression. All this I liked, but I was a bit disappointed not to find more of a rationale for the reversal in the book itself (though there is more about it on Wikipedia, presumably garnered from details developed in later books in the series). After all, there have been white slaves – some even kidnapped from the coast of Cornwall – so it would have been quite possible to build up an alternate history where white slaves became the underclass. But *Noughts and Crosses* appears to be set in 70s Britain, where the only difference is that white people have been slaves instead of black, and Christmas is called Crossmass (presumably a dig at Christianity's role in racial oppression). But perhaps the lack of a strong historical basis is part of the difference between alternate history and dystopian fiction? SF and alternate histories need to make their worlds convincing because extrapolation and world building are central to their raison d'être. Dystopias are more like fables, and their focus is on nightmare scenarios of misplaced power and futile (and often naive) attempts to overthrow it.

*Noughts and Crosses*, in this respect, is relentlessly dystopian. Its Romeo and Juliet theme of cross-racial love promises reconciliation, but instead Blackman uses the misunderstandings and insecurities of teenage love to intensify the divide between the two races. Keeping one foot in the teen romance genre allows her to raise the stakes in the romantic element of her story, while

maintaining the dystopian narrative of racial oppression. The teen romance element might also be a reason why there is no detailed backstory. The story is told by alternating teenage narrators, Sephy and Callum, who are more concerned with the impact of prejudice on their relationship and their families than with its history. However, leaving this knowledge gap makes it harder for Blackman to convincingly depict a dominant black culture and a white underclass. I found it difficult not to visualise Callum and his family as black. Blackman does have him eating a lot of British junk food, like burgers and chips, but his family don't have any kind of white trash vibe, and she doesn't use any of the white male gang stereotypes she could have tapped into, like skinheads or football hooligans, to make Callum seem more white. Instead, he and his family are clearly black in all but name. Just as Sephy is clearly white. She is a rich kid, daughter of a government minister. Her mother is a desperate housewife, whose only interests are drinking white wine and going shopping. The names are a little less British – Kamal, Jasmine, Persephone and Minerva – but since the characters are mostly referred to by their last names – Mr and Mrs Hadley – or diminutives of their first names – Sephy & Minnie – the impact is diluted.

Malorie Blackman is herself black, and clearly has put a lot of her own experience of racism into the story. This is probably why Callum feels so black, as Blackman has lived some of the school incidents described in her own school days. She can also relate to Sephy, as a young female growing up to a mission to fight racial oppression. Perhaps the lack of cultural specificity in Sephy's background represents the assimilation of many cultures of Asian or African origin into a generic British middle-class lifestyle? Blackman herself says that she was deliberately playing with the readers' preconceptions of which side was which, and the slippage between black and white clearly works as a device for unsettling readers, but leaves the book teetering on the edge of reinforcing racism in some places, specifically for me, in an incident towards the end of the book.

I would also have liked there to be more on what that this seriously divided society thinks of mixed race children. Historically, fear of miscegenation was a big element of racism. Callum has a teacher who hides that he has white blood and picks on Callum for being white. Also Callum's own family have a bit of black blood. These are both secrets, suggesting that there is some shame in racial mixing, but I get the impression that the reason for the secrecy is mainly to do with racial identification, and wanting to be seen as one race or the other, rather than because of a specific prejudice against people of mixed race origin. The same is true of Sephy and Callum dating. The issues are political, relating to the power relationship between the two sides, not racial. But perhaps this is an issue that is dealt with in the later books which I haven't read.



*Noughts and Crosses*, like most dystopian texts, ultimately uses resistance to the dystopian vision as the basis for the plot. Blackman introduces a liberation movement which targets the dominant black race with acts of terrorism. This element of the book delayed publication in the US, where post-9/11 sensitivities made it difficult to sell a teenage protagonist who joins a terrorist group. It also turned the book into something harder hitting, and far from black and white in its outlook on either side of the racial divide. Public executions ensure that sympathy remains with the oppressed minority, but there's a sense that it could easily swing the other way in the next book, if the white terrorists become too hard-line. All of which begs the question - at what point, does a book stop being dystopian fiction, and become more of a political thriller? I might just have to read the rest of the series to find out!

## Easter Break

Instead of going to Eastercon we had fans come to stay with us – specifically Lilian Edwards, Ian Sorensen and Yvonne Rowse – and held our own alternative convention. There wasn't much by way of programming, but we had plenty of time in the bar, and a good room party or two in our front lounge. Lilian even discovered the overflow hotel when it turned out that her back wasn't up to sleeping on our new chair bed – though unlike in Bradford she didn't need to hang around for buses as it was only a five minute walk away (though in the next fare zone on the taxis, we discovered, putting an extra £2 on to the fare from town!).

The nearest we came to attending a programme item was a trip to the Poldark Mine (named after the 70s TV series which allegedly was filmed down there) where we learned about ores and Cornish mining techniques, but not much of an SF nature unless you count Ian quizzing our guide Kenny about mining the asteroids. The book room was the second hand book shop in The Beerwolf Books pub, and the banquet – well, Eastercons don't have a banquet – but we had a pretty good one at Samphire . There were no awards, though Ian must have won at "Yellow Car" (rules very simple – when you see a yellow car, you say "yellow car" but Ian and Yvonne turned it into something very competitive) and Doug probably earned the Doc Weary award for putting up with so many people in the house for so long. Lilian made a DIY fan programme by reading all our fanzines. On Tuesday morning Doug and I went back to work feeling pretty tired, but maybe not quite as tired as we would have been if we'd gone to Bradford.

*Nowhere Fan* is a fanzine with its head in the clouds, its feet in the mud, and its readers en route to the bar. All content is by Christina Lake - 4 West Rise, Falmouth, Cornwall TR11 4HJ ([christina.l@virgin.net](mailto:christina.l@virgin.net)). Published for distribution at Corflu XXX in Portland, Oregon. April 2013