

Utopia and the Future

I have only written a Utopian story once. In November it will be published in Japan with the title “My Heart is Yours” as part of my next short-story collection. As I was writing that story, I was debating whether or not I should have children. I’m still wondering that, actually. There are a lot of things to worry about when it comes to that decision, but the most pressing problem is that I don’t think of myself as a person overflowing with physical strength or motivation. I become exhausted and discouraged very easily. That being the situation, would I be able to have a child and then continue to raise it to adulthood? And what about my career? I find marriage to be delightful, but pregnancy and birth are like a kind of death to me. If it were to happen I think that part of the “me” who’s existed until now would cease to be. That got me thinking. What kind of body would I need to have to want to give birth to a child?

It was then I thought of the Atlantic Footballfish, also called a man-gobbler. Do any of you know how these anglerfish reproduce? First off, the female is by far much larger than the male. So big, in fact, they almost look like different species. The little, tiny males swim about the bottom of the ocean, and when they find a giant female they bite her in the abdomen. The male becomes adhered to the female’s body and absorbed into her starting with the area around its mouth. Before long the male has completely lost his own identity and become merely an extra organ on the female. From our perspective, a male in that situation doesn’t appear to be anything other than a tumor on the side of the female’s body. And so, the male ends up being only an organ that releases sperm to the female during the spawning season. If you look up pictures of these fish on the internet, you’ll be able to see specimens of females with the ruined bodies of many males attached to them.

With this in mind I wrote “My Heart Is Yours.” In this short story, people appear to lead lives not so different from ours today, but the actual circumstances turn out to be quite different. In the society and the workplace it is the women who take the lead and wield all of the power and advantages. For example, women prefer their men to be young and adorable, with a slim figure. This is because once a woman chooses to become pregnant the husband must stay attached to her stomach until she gives birth. In this world, sex happens with a woman sprawled on her back and the petite male face down on top of her. His body starts to break down in the area of contact to become one with the woman. This is when fertilization occurs. Immediately following conception is when the belly is at its largest. As the pregnancy progresses, the husband continues to be absorbed as nutrients until the time of the birth, when he will be completely gone. For males, sex is a once in a lifetime activity that results in death. As such, the women don’t rely on any support from the men after the birth. After all, the male partner has already been completely dissolved and digested. Raising the child does not require a partner. Society has created a welfare system for this purpose. Birth wouldn’t take away from a woman’s stamina either. With their bodies as robust and strong as before, the women are able to support each other and energetically continue with their professions.

However, my husband shuddered as he read this short story. To me it doesn’t sound like a bad world to live in, but apparently to him it was a frightening dystopia. But if I really think about it, even I wouldn’t say it’s a perfect utopia. In the story, the men are on the receiving end of much of the same sexual discrimination that women face every day in reality. I want to get eradicate sexism, not make men deal with it. And I definitely don’t think that men should die and cease to exist after fulfilling their reproductive role. And so, I may have made a terrible mistake at the beginning when I said I wrote a utopia. It seems this is in fact a dystopian story.

Is it possible to really create a utopian novel? I think it's one of the most difficult things to do. When people evaluate novels, one of the criteria they often use is to look for how closely it depicts reality. Deep down, I think that by itself is pretty meaningless. Really what I want to try to write are things that no one's thought of yet and stories that even I as the author don't fully understand. However, there are limits to what we can do as humans. We can only write about our own experiences and whatever imagined world we can build on top of that. We can only really deal with our current reality.

So now I would like to talk about one of the books I love the most: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. It's one of the most famous dystopian novels. A coup d'état has taken place and America's government has been overturned. However, it's not called the United States anymore, but the Republic of Gilead. Before the coup happened, there was some event that caused birth rates to decrease dramatically. And so, the Republic of Gilead created a strict system to classify and control the women, to ensure that the women who could still reproduce were given to the men with the most power and influence. The women who were still fertile were called "handmaids." The handmaids received tutelage in accepting their new roles in society, and in how to be obedient. In order to prevent united action and rebellion the handmaids are no longer allowed to read or write, and to erase individuality they all must wear the same clothes. The most truly horrifying scene in the whole terrifying novel comes near the end. A high-ranking man known as the Commander gives a speech to our main character, a handmaid named Offred:

"We've given them more than we've taken away, said the commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. He waved a hand at his stacks of old magazines. They were always complaining. Problems this, problems that. Remember the ads in the Personal columns, Bright attractive woman, thirty-five...This way they all get a man, nobody's left out. And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they'd have to go on welfare. Or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, and they'd have to pay for that themselves, out of their wretched little paychecks. Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement. Now, tell me. You're an intelligent person, I like to hear what you think. What did we overlook?" (Atwood 219-220).

I was so shocked! In this dystopian story, the world he presents as dystopian was the world in which I living and reading this very book! While the Commander's thinking was wrong, the problem was not in his depiction of our reality. In fact, his description was spot on. This is an awful world. I dwelled on this thought. If that's the case, this world really is a dystopia. I am now living in a dystopia.

So long as we only try to depict things exactly as they are, even using our abilities to their utmost, we will never be able to escape the dystopia. Utopia is too much for us to handle. While we are busy chasing Utopia, it will surely flip like a mirror image into Dystopia. If a utopian novel is to come into existence, it will be something that no one has ever thought of before and something that even the author herself doesn't understand. The question is, will we acknowledge the value of that work, and will we have the ability to truly appreciate it? Thank you.

Translated by Mac Gill

