

Daily Life in Revolutionary Utopia:

Feminism, Anarchism & Science Fiction

By Lessa, Takver
and Alyx

Whileaway, Amazonia, Canbe, Precipice, Gethen, Anarres, Matopossett, Ecotopia—nice places to visit... you might even want to stay awhile!

SCIENCE FICTION HAS A PARTICULAR appeal for those who are committed to radical social change. The construction of a parallel world embodying the worst of our fears and the finest of our hopes delights, terrifies, stimulates and inspires us. Fantasy worlds are powerful tools. As ideas crystallize in the details of future societies, a psychological acceptance of certain possibilities is created. Attention to the unfolding of the fantasy worlds can be a practical political exercise for the readers as well as for the writers.

What it boils down to is that a vision for the future is an intrinsic part of our political position—how can we act to transform society without a conception of what we want to create?

Feminists have noticed that in most science fiction, the condition of women has not been a major focus for creative change. In fact, the "future" for women has been all gloomy: classic sex-role stereotypes abound, all the more appalling because of their persistence in the midst of technical marvels and incredible biological leaps.

It is suggested by Ursula K. Le Guin that the subjection of women in science fiction is "merely a symptom of a whole which is authoritarian, power-worshipping and intensely patriarchal." (in *Science Fiction Studies* #7, 1975). To demonstrate her analysis, LeGuin creates an anarchist society in *The Dispossessed* where the role of women corresponds to feminist ideals. A similar mutual reinforcement of feminist and anarchist principles is apparent in several other science fiction books.

Male-Female Roles

FEMALES AND MALES ARE virtually indistinguishable in Matopossett—the future anarchist village in *Woman On The Edge of Time* (by Margie Piercy). Connie, a chicana woman living in a mental hospital in present-day New York City, is guided to the future by Luciente who appears at first to be male.

Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking of how her body was displayed.

Not only do men and women in Matopossett share all the possibilities and choices of life, but they are also referred to by a common pronoun, "pers," for person.

Anarres, the anarchist world in *The Dispossessed*, is also anarchist. Shevek, an anarchist scientist, visits Urras, the parent world, and is constantly amazed and disgusted by the roles adopted by men and women there. He is asked, "Is there really no distinction between

men's and women's work [on Anarres]?" and replies, "Well, no, it seems a very mechanical basis for the division of labour, doesn't it? A person chooses work according to interest, talent, strength—what has the sex to do with that?" As in Matopossett, people's names give no clue to their sex. On Anarres, every person receives a unique name from the central computer. (Androgynous names always confuse and upset alien visitors who don't know how to act without information about gender.)

In Ecotopia, which is an environmentalist's dream come true, author Ernest Callenbach explores male and female differences rather than eliminating them. An American reporter describes the society as women-dominated: *While a majority of Survivalist Party [party in 'power'] members are women, many men are members also... The basic co-operation and biology-oriented policies... are usually considered to be derived mainly from female attitudes and interests; the chief Opposition party... continues to express what are alleged by Survivalists to be out-dated and destructive male attitudes towards individualism and productivity.*

Le Guin's fascinating exploration of an ambisexual world in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is aptly described by Pamela Sargent (in *Women of Wonder*):

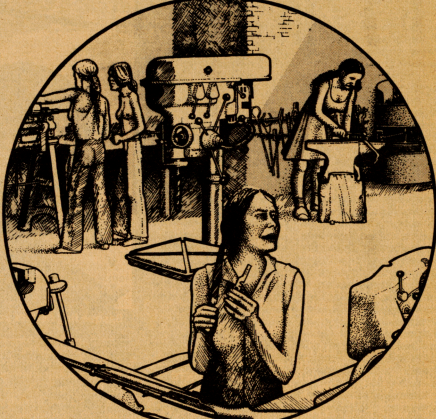
The human narrator... is sent as an envoy to the Gethenians; inhabitants of the planet Winter.

In all of Whileaway there is no one who can keep you from going where you please, no one who will follow you and try to embarrass you by whispering obscenities in your ear, no one who will attempt to rape you, no one who will warn you of the dangers of the street.

— The Female Man
by Joanna Russ

The Gethenians are neuter, but are subject to a monthly fertile season, called kemmer. Each Gethenian finds a partner; hormonal secretions make one Gethenian male or female. The other then becomes a member of the opposite sex and they mate. No Gethenian knows which sex "he" will become during kemmer.

Genly Ai, the Earthman, considers the implications of this physiological development: rape is not possible, since all sex must be by mutual consent. Since the Gethenians are neuter most of the time, sex plays no role in their daily lives except during kemmer when everything else is subordinated to it.



Genly Ai misses:

Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that every one between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be tied down to child bearing implies that no one is quite so thoroughly "tied down" here as women elsewhere are likely to be—psychologically or physically: everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. Therefore, nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else.

Consider: There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves; protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened or changed on Winter.

One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience.

Living Together

Some science fiction presents familiar feminist values in radically changed family structures. There are surprises, too!

In *Woman On The Edge of Time*, Connie is horrified to see a man breast-feeding an infant. Later she visits the "brooder" where several fetuses are "giggling slowly upside down each in a sac of its own, inside a larger fluid receptacle."

Luciente explains:

It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking up the old hierarchies. Finally, there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had in return for no more power for any one. The original production. 'Cause as long as we were biologically enclosed we'd never be equal. And males would never be humanized to be loving and tender, too. So we all became mothers. Every child has to. To break the nuclear bonding.

In *The Female Man*, Joanna Russ creates Whileaway, a world of women-only where advanced biology has made reproduction possible:

Whileawayans bear their children at thirty... These children bear as one genotypic parent the biological mother title ("body mother") while the non-bearing parent (the "other mother") contributes the other ovum.

...A family of thirty persons may have as many as four mother-child pairs in the common nursery at one time. Food, cleanliness and shelter are not the mothers' business.

In Ecotopia, people live in groups of between five and twenty members where "women exert a power which in other societies is covert or non-existent: the right to select the fathers of their children... men participate extensively in the care and upbringing of the very young, but in cases of conflict, the mothers have the final say."

The Canbe Collective Builds a Be-Hive is a beautiful book for older children produced by Dandelion Press (see review in *Open Road* #8) about an anarchist community in the future. Employing the non-sexist pronoun, "se," throughout, the book describes life in one collective which is composed of three "affines" each including adults and children. As Pru and Able talk one evening about two of the children, Able wonders if they're getting possessive. Pru says:

...some of the collectives have tried to abandon the affine idea and have not liked it. I think it's not so much the possession idea, but the small group idea that matters... my base is my affine when it comes right down to it.

Sweet Friends

In these days of Anita Bryant and Jude Sunsum, even *matrism* about sexually liberated future worlds is heartening.

In Matopossett, "all coupling, all be-friending goes on between biological males, biological females, or both." Persons have close friends ("sweet friends"), lovers ("pillow friends") or co-mothers ("coms") of either sex. No one shares a room, "only babies share space."

On Anarres, partnership is a "voluntarily constituted federation like any other. So long as it works, it works; and if it doesn't, work it stops being." Both homosexual and bisexual couples move from the public dormitory to a single room as, the only social limit on sexual activity is a mild pressure in favour of privacy. There is always the possibility that a partnership will be broken up if the people are needed for work in different areas. Many people choose not to partner but to be "promiscuous."

Amazon Planet by Mack Reynolds describes a world once dominated by women that has since chosen to become consciously non-sexist. A