

After the Deluge, Processed World

Review

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2005

a review of

After the Deluge: A Novel of Post-Economic San Francisco by Chris Carlsson. Full Enjoyment Books, 2004, \$14 from the Barn or available for free download at fullenjoymentbooks.com

Processed World, 2005 edition, \$7 from the Barn, or processedworld.com

Even alienated office nerds and overachieving, working class intellectuals need an anti-authoritarian forum. That's how I remember *Processed World* (PW) from my immersion in the anarchist zine scene of the 1980s. Unmistakably Bay Area in its bad attitude and aesthetic orientation, it was as much a staple of the Reagan-era underground and its left coast, printed propaganda as *Homocore* and *Maximum Rock n Roll*.

Against the odds that annihilate many fringe magazines after a few seasons, *Processed World's* most recent (and reportedly last) installment of the new century (and first since 2001) is a tough and polished testimony to the endurance of basing one's publishing forays on faith in tenacious temp slaves everywhere slaying the boss within. The eternal humiliations of work not being so different in 2005 as they were in 1985, this glossy salvo is more than welcome salt in the gas tank of permanent greed.

If you are unsure about sacrificing almost eight dollars on a mere 'zine, don't let the lovely format fool you. Hugh D'Andrade's delicious and defiant art is worth the coated cover stock and that's a mere appetizer to the fortifying and ferocious ingredients inside of what the editors' claim is the last PW ever. In keeping with PW's previous reputation, most of the essays deal in some way with economic critiques. But don't confuse this effort with the claptrap likely associated with your local chapter of the Boring-as-fuck Workerist Party.

This effort somehow eludes the dreariness associated with leftism and the pretentiousness affiliated with post-leftism alike. Who said that understanding libertarian socialism had to come in the form of reading some bureaucratic platformist gibberish that makes the day job seem fun? Personal favorites for me include the sobering slam on the sex positive workplace in "Fucked by the Dildo Shop," by Zoe Noe, and Chris Carlsson's in-depth, intelligent, and invigorating frame for the bacchanalia of Burning Man, "A Working Class, Do-It-Yourself World's Fair."

For Carlsson, that annual festival held in the Nevada desert might comprise one of many templates for what he likes to call a "post-economic life," a model for a more than-temporary autonomous zone. Such an intelligent gift economy of no-nonsense, sensual socialism translates nicely to the realm of fiction, as Carlsson proves with his first novel, *After the Deluge*. The clunky but descriptive subtitle "A Novel of Post-Economic San Francisco" serves to outline the book's agenda—but does little to suggest the vivid vision provided by this provocative and speculative journey to the Bay Area of 2157.

In the tradition of other Northern California critical utopias like Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* and Starhawk's *Fifth Sacred Thing*, *After the Deluge* is more imaginary treasure map than utopia-by-the-numbers blueprint. In fact,

taken together, Starhawk, Callenbach, and Carlsson form a sort of trilogy, with all three books possessing overlapping flaws and flourishes. As a person well-versed in his surroundings and invested in the book's sense of place, Carlsson weaves a narrative where setting is a character. Since many of his readers do or have lived in the Bay Area, they will recognize the real yet imagined places Carlsson describes even as they have changed over time.

Carlsson's intricate and entertaining tale generates conflict and creative tension between two parallel protagonists who might represent the author's archetypal and battling alter-egos. One is an earnest Midwesterner discovering San Francisco with eager enthusiasm and the other is a young, jaded Bay Area native living as a nihilistic pyrotechnic saboteur.

Both represent rhetorical poles in an abundant society where all work is voluntary and everything is free. And, with readable and moving drama, these characters pose some complicated dilemmas for the critical reader visiting Carlsson's future. While not an explicitly anarchist utopia, the new world depicted here constructs some bizarre similarities to the civilization it left behind.

No luddite, Carlsson shares with Callenbach and his cheesy cult classic a penchant for fanciful eco-technology and soft-core heterosexual fantasy. In a book overpopulated by strong women, many of them lesbians, the main characters are sensitive straight guys who get plenty of hot alternaporn action, including attending at least two over-the-top orgies that make the steamy stroke scenes in *Ecotopia* seem prude, tame, and outdated by comparison. But I hope Carlsson's well-crafted erotic elements do not offend feminists like Callenbach's did. In the San "Fransexual" counterculture where this book was born, Carlsson's eroticism might even be seen as "vanilla" compared to what the hard-core sex scenesters can churn out in terms of fiction.

As a contemporary of Starhawk, Carlsson draws from many shared activist experiences and collective memories. But his book might show much more in common with *Fifth Sacred Thing* if Carlsson weren't so precisely and persistently allergic to the kind of earth religion Starhawk promotes. After the Deluge is a Fifth Sacred Thing for atheists and agnostics and activists who don't need the goddess to get their revolutionary groove on.

Putting post-economic values into practice, Carlsson has made *After the Deluge* available for free on the web (although he announces at the site that over 10,000 people have downloaded the book, I would say the print edition with another amazing Hugh D'Andrade cover is well worth the \$14 price of admission).

With battles over the legitimacy of science and whether revolutionaries should support experimental research providing one of the novel's many subtexts, this story reminds me of one more of my favorite utopias, Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*. As amazing as post-economic San Francisco seems, some readers may not want to move to Carlsson's new world full time. But it's definitely worth reading about—and at least visiting.

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