

Life in the Margins

Man eating mermaids, demons, ghouls & thieves

Robert Knox

2022

a review of

We Won't Be Here Tomorrow (and Other Stories) Margaret Killjoy. AK Press, 2022

We Won't Be Here Tomorrow (and Other Stories) is a promising work by Margaret Killjoy, who has written novels in the steampunk and folk horror genres and whose stories have appeared regularly in science fiction and fantasy magazines. She is described on the book's back cover as a transfeminine author with no fixed adult home.

The collection starts out well, capturing both the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic ambience prominent in a great deal of contemporary storytelling. Gee, I wonder why!

An early story with the fetching title of "The Free Orcs of Cascadia," perhaps my favorite in the volume, is set among what its narrator describes as "post-civilization culture" with reference to some event taking place back in 2020. We don't know how far back 2020 is from the story's present, but it is telling that its events take place as one survivalist walled village of "Orcs" seeks to fend off extinction from a genocidal attack by a larger group of so-called Orc living on the next mountain.

Since in Tolkien's world (a far more hopeful universe) Orcs, or goblins, are not a force for the survival of positive values, in this story we find ourselves in a universe marked by what Nietzsche called a "transvaluation of values." In other words, punk, or radically super-punk, is the ideal here, and the violence is not limited to what happens on stage.

The story has us rooting for the "free Orcs" who stand for authenticity, and trusting a journalist narrator who describes the Orcs' region as "post-civilization" and confesses that she loves "the stupid fucking weird world we live in." The self-sufficient, post-civilization survivalists living on the edge somewhere in the Cascades struck me as an anarchist community, surviving off the grid, with no dependence on the laws or institutions of a greater governmental system. Unhappily, they are about to get wiped out by a larger horde of Hobbesian gangsters who also call themselves Orcs.

This close at hand violence is a recurring issue in these aptly titled "We Won't Be Here Tomorrow" stories. They take place in what might be called banditry country (or a Hobbesian state of nature) in various regions of what had once been the U.S., where a kind of Dark Age violence is both feared, foreshadowed, and often enacted.

Some are essentially war stories. Brave, sympathetic, but doomed rugged individuals holding out against a Big Brotherish totalitarian system or the murderous factions of that Hobbesian regression to the law of the jungle.

The stories' heroes are free agents who expect to die young, an expectation often delivered by the story's end, and mostly think about who they're having sex with or wish to have sex with. They talk and think like the permanently young who resist growing up in evil or corrupt world orders (or disorders). They may kill themselves. They may kill their lovers.

In "Mary Marrow," a title explained by the story's frequent reference to bones, characters are offered the choice to "make a copy of yourself to live inside a computer, forever." But if you do, your physical body dies at once. If

you choose instead to go on living a physical existence, when your real body “dies in the world,” nothing of you will endure.

In this as in so many of these stories, a youthful first-person narrator confronts a world without true community, or memory. If no one will remember you, the story tells us, no one will profit from the wisdom of your experience. The word for this condition may be “existential,” but some of these tales make Camus’s *The Stranger* read like a day at the beach.

A story titled “The Northern Host” consists almost wholly of two army units fighting with firearms. The collection as a whole expends a lot of ammunition. As in legendary tales such as “The Alamo,” the more numerous army will win; but here there’s no redemptive second act.

Also, no sentimentality in these war stories. After a few of these the reader may think (as this one did), “OK, I get it.” By the second half of the book, the stories began to wear this reader out with too many characters and plot lines that appeared to be riffs on the same few themes.

In the state of nature, the bigger stick wins. The good person faces death bravely, or with philosophical resignation. Only sometimes they take their lover with them.

Other stories draw on the noir-detective genre of black humor. Since the book takes place in something like our own pre-apocalyptic days, these stories also draw on the digital universe, which no doubt plays better with younger readers. In a typical exchange, a fleeing narrator greets his would-be rescuer like this:

Narrator: “You’ve got face-reg on your fucking door.”

Reply: “Good to see you too.”

This dialogue comes from “Invisible People.” One of my favorites, the story’s plot helped me to realize what I liked best about this collection and hoped to find more of.

The digital maven with “face-reg” on her door is faced with using her skills to mislead the narrator’s police-state pursuers. The narrator is forced to try to keep up on his “old laptop.” He thinks: “no one remembered how they worked any more...I couldn’t just shift my eyes across the screen to shift its focus. I had to drag a little arrow of an icon around the screen and I had to press buttons on the keyboard.”

So passé!

But this time the plot doesn’t leap to a quick, fatal exit. The narrator takes us back to a recollection of a squatters’ demonstration in Portland, in what appears as a shift toward real-world truth-telling. He recognizes that the experience had value “because I was part of something greater than myself.”

The demonstration ultimately fails in its act of resistance when the participants are faced with a loaded shotgun. Still, it teaches our hero a valuable lesson about the threat to community posed by unjust power.

In “Invisible People,” we see the community rebound as our narrator and his friend (and, perhaps, lover) are rescued from police pursuit by a flash mob of locals who respond at once to a digital appeal and obstruct the cops long enough for our geek heroes to get away. When the people battle the state, this story suggests, sometimes the people win.

It’s the sort of tale *We Won’t Be Here Tomorrow*, at its best, is able to deliver. Maybe the kind of story real human beings in our current pre-apocalyptic state need to learn from, if we hope that some of us, at least, actually will be here tomorrow.

Robert Knox is the author of *Suosso’s Lane*, a novel of the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and *House Stories*, a collection of linked stories about life in the early 1970s, both available from Adelaide Books and Amazon.

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