

Anarchism & Science Fiction

Some Suggested Best Reads

Ben Beck

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Most anarchists are familiar with Ursula K. Le Guin's utopian science fiction novel, *The Dispossessed*. But its fame has somewhat served to overshadow other works of science fiction that are also of great interest. Here are a few of those.

* Eric Frank Russell's 1948 story, "And Then There Were None," was the nearest sci fi work to an anarchist utopia prior to Le Guin's 1974 novel, and was praised as such in the pages of *Freedom and Anarchy* at the time, starting with a full-length review in 1954, under the headline "An Anarchist Utopia," saying it "makes an anarchist society not only attractive, but also eminently practical." John Pilgrim, writing in 1963, speculated on "just how much influence this much anthologised tale has had in forming the political opinions of the fallout generation."

* In Robert Sheckley's 1954 short story, "Skulking Permit," a backwater planet is re-contacted by Imperial Earth. The inhabitants attempt to revive old Earth customs—crime, police, etc.—but fail by misunderstanding the point of it all. It's a splendid anarchic story. The colonists have lived without authority so long that there's manifestly no need for it. Most recently included in Hank Davis and Christopher Ruocchio's 2020 anthology *Overruled*.

* Robert Nichols's *Daily Lives in Nghsi-Altai* is a short tetralogy, published in 1977–79. Set in a near-future alternate-world central Asian land, it's strong on ecological values, and the anarchist influence is explicitly acknowledged. Written in a fragmented, poetic, and impressionistic style, it was a significant influence on Le Guin, who said that "... *Nghsi-Altai* is in some respects the very place I was laboriously trying to get to, and yet lies in quite the opposite direction..."

* Hans Widmer's *bolo'bolo*, published in 1983 as by p.m., is regarded by Ruth Kinna, British anarchist author of *The Government of No One*, as among the most influential modern anarchist utopias. For Kinna it resonates with Kropotkin's utopianism, though is clearly distinct from it, as imagining "fleeting possibilities rather than enduring alternatives."

* Peter Lamborn Wilson's *False Documents* is a diverse collection of pseudo-real fictions rather in the Borgesian magical realism vein. The best of these, and certainly the most relevant here, is "Visit Port Watson!," which is a spoof travel-guide to the utopian island of Sonsorol, playfully combining ideas from various libertarian strands. It was first published in 1985, in Rucker, Wilson & Wilson, eds: *Semiotext(e) SF*.

* Mike Gilliland's *The Free* (1st edition 1986; 5th edition 2021) is described by its publisher as "A novel of love, hope and revolution, set in the very near future, on an island off the coast of Britain. From the underground to revolution, repression, and resistance!" In his list of the novel's themes (at the end of the text) Gilliland says, "The Free are inspired by the anarchist fiesta, trying out Pete Kropotkin's cut on Darwin. Cooperation in tooth and claw."

The Free gives an exceptionally vivid account of the exhilaration of the revolutionary process, with strongly imagined characters and very believable dialogue.

* Steve Cullen's *The Last Capitalist: A Dream of a New Utopia*, published in 1996 by London's anarchist Freedom Press, is an anarchist utopia set in a future Britain. The story involves a quest for the eponymous capitalist where

England has been renamed “Atopia,” and is explicitly anarchist, and the state and capitalism have crumbled worldwide.

Alternative polities exist, to reflect local conditions and aspirations. Among these is a republic on the Isle of Man, based on delegate democracy. In Atopia, everything is voluntary, education is through free schools, and the economy is based on barter. Informed by green principles, technology is nevertheless sufficiently sophisticated to include high-altitude remote-controlled airships, to maintain satellite communications. Social life is fueled by plenty of ale and an easy attitude to sex. The book is joyful and optimistic.

* Dennis Danvers’s *The Watch: Being the Unauthorized Sequel to Peter A. Kropotkin’s Memoirs of a Revolutionist—as Imparted to Dennis Danvers by Anchee Mahur, Traveler from a Distant Future; or, A Science Fiction Novel* (2002) is supposedly written in the first person by Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist, who has been plucked from his deathbed, rejuvenated, into a future in which he has the opportunity to foster anarchism once more. The plot is on the weak side, but the writing is first rate, and the Kropotkin character thoroughly researched, as is historical anarchism with references to more recent figures such as Murray Bookchin and Noam Chomsky. A wonderful introduction to anarchist ideas for anyone not familiar with them.

* *The premise of Anarquia. An Alternate History of the Spanish Civil War*, by Brad Linaweaver and J. Kent Hastings (2004), is that, instead of being defeated by a combination of Fascists and Stalinists, the Spanish anarchists prevail, thanks to an alternate Wernher von Braun, who—with 1940s actor Hedy Lamarr—designs a rocket-based weapon which he puts in their hands.

The book is so well-researched, and the setting so comparatively unfamiliar, that it’s easy to suspend disbelief in an uncertainty as to what relates to the actual history of the civil war and revolution and what to the alternate history the authors create. In the course of the narrative there is much discussion of the various flavours of anarchism active in Spain of the 1930s.

* In L. Timmel Duchamp’s strongly feminist *The Marq’ssan Cycle—Alanya to Alanya* (2005), Earth women, including some anarchists, are actively supported by the Marq’ssan aliens, who, with technological superiority on their side, vigorously promote “non-authoritarian self-governance.” It examines relationships of power at many levels, especially the interpersonal.

* *Duchamp’s Blood in the Fruit* (2007) includes a sequence in which the North West Free Zone celebrates Emma Goldman Day. Three Goldman quotations serve as epigraph to the novel, and the front cover features a photograph of her speaking in New York City’s Union Square. The author said that “Most of the Free Zone activists are working-class women who embrace a philosophy of life and politics very close to Goldman’s...”

* Kes Otter Liefte came to SF with an unusual and rather refreshing perspective. *Margins and Murmurations* (2017) is the first in a trilogy, each book of which is readable as a standalone novel, presenting a not-too-distant future dystopia in which the LGBTQ+ community, sex workers, and disabled people are centre stage in the Resistance.

Their *Conserve and Control* (2018) is set in the same future, but further ahead (a hundred years from the publication date), and, in the author’s words, the second book “looks superficially like a liberal utopia—all permaculture gardens and trans-inclusive corporations—but is very much the most sinister world I could find the power to write in 2018.”

Dignity (2020) is at a nearer stage in the same future, when the pandemic of the 2020s is still within living memory. Liefte says their intention was for *Dignity* to be “the most utopic writing I could find within myself.” In a 2021 interview, the extent to which their work can be described as anarchist is explicitly discussed; rather evading the word, she replied “If book shops create a ‘radical, sex work positive, trans feminist, speculative fiction’ genre section just for my work, I’m okay with that.” The discussion makes it clear that their intention is to present visions of a revolution to which people could relate.

* D.D. Johnston’s *Disnaeland* (2022) describes the first few months after the apocalypse in which mutual aid comes to the fore among survivors who realise in due course that the true dystopia was what went before. The book is joyfully warm and funny, the earthiness especially brought out by the Scots-inflected dialect employed throughout.

Johnston is himself an anarchist, with a strong background as an activist. The 2023 *Freedom* review, describing the novel as “perhaps the most hopeful apocalyptic novel you’re ever likely to read,” concludes that “It’s not necessary to be an anarchist to enjoy Disnaeland, but it’s certainly a novel that has a lot to offer anarchist readers.”

* M.E. O’Brien & Eman Abdelhadi: *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072* (2022). This remarkable novel is structurally unique in SF in being presented as an edited collection of oral history interviews with New Yorkers living in 2072, in which no single story predominates, but collectively the reader learns of the extraordinary societal changes that have taken place in the previous years (i.e., the fifty years since the date of publication).

The response to climate change and complete economic and political collapse has been global apart from an unreconstructed Australia, and radical in the extreme. It has taken place with extraordinary rapidity, and without any utopian consistency, so that in some instances the transition has been far from peaceful. But the world in 2072 is now essentially communist, in a vision which is essentially anarcho-communist, though the term isn’t used. The vision, as well as the history, is well realised, and largely credible. This may be a premature judgment on my part, but this is perhaps, for anarchists, the most significant work of SF written since *The Dispossessed*.

There are so many more that could be mentioned. Go to the **anarchySF.com** website, which has the most comprehensive coverage anywhere of this subject.

Ben Beck lives in London, where he worked supporting community housing management projects. He is still active in his own cooperative. He has followed the association between anarchism and science fiction for many years. See **anarchySF.com** for anarchist sci fi; books, movies, other media.



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