

A Conversation With Allegra Hyde

author of

Of This New World

All of the stories in *Of This New World* are connected by the theme of utopia. What makes this topic especially relevant now?

On a purely historical note, 2016 marks the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's *Utopia*, the book responsible for the word's coinage. Lingual lore suggests the word was meant to be a pun, meaning both "good place" and "no place." A paradox by definition. My book takes this paradox to heart by exploring the strained coexistence of lofty ideals and practical concerns. In a global society evolving as rapidly as ours—technologically, demographically, environmentally—the way in which we navigate these issues is of increasing significance. *Of This New World* explores some of the ways in which individuals and communities do that navigating.

Do you think utopianism is particularly American?

Definitely. When Christopher Columbus arrived in the would-be Americas, he described the land as Edenic. In his letters to Ferdinand and Isabella, he even goes so far as to say he was close to locating Biblical paradise itself. Columbus was, of course, a megalomaniac who massacred indigenous people, but this initial conception of America as the Promised Land has stuck. My collection steers, roughly, through a large span of the American imagination. Starting with a retelling of Genesis, the stories touch on everything from Puritan colonizers to hippie communes to life in a futuristic Mars Colony. So much of what makes Americans *Americans* is that we believe paradise is possible if only we work harder, push farther, continue believing in our dreams. This is, if anything, fiercely utopian.

How did you become interested in utopianism?

When I was seventeen, I made my mother drive me two hours to the site of Fruitlands, a short-lived proto-vegan community in Harvard, Massachusetts. Ostensibly, I was writing a history paper. Really, I was fascinated by the sheer bravado these antebellum utopianists, who planned to live off fruit through a New England winter. The whole enterprise seemed admirably courageous, but also inexplicably foolish. I was hooked. Since then, I have continued to study and even participate in numerous utopian endeavors. I worked at an eco-community in the Bahamas, for instance, and backpacked through New Zealand hippie communes (the country has more per capita than anywhere else). Just recently, I completed a Fulbright Fellowship in Bulgaria, which was part of the largest utopian effort ever: Communism. I am continually captivated by utopianism in part because it can be considered on such a large scale—in relation to nation-building, civilization—but also because it has profound implications for our inner lives. As individuals, we constantly have to reconcile our expectations for ourselves with our abilities and circumstances.

The stories in *Of This New World* are written using a wide variety of genre conventions and narrative perspectives. Why?

My writer friend, Matthew Baker, introduced me to the idea of the scientist-artist. If you treat every piece of creative work like an experiment, each experiment offers a chance to learn something new. For me, writing in different modes allows the book to examine notions of utopia from different angles. “Delight[®],” for instance, borrows from an absurdist tradition. This allowed me to explore how the language of a Disneyfied American Dream might buckle under its own weight. On the other hand, I used techniques of historical fiction to write “Future Consequences of Present Actions.” This granted the opportunity to reanimate the lives of figures like Charles Lane and Louisa May Alcott, and to thereby consider the legacy of their utopian experience. As a whole, *Of This New World* should present a depth of voice and perspective that speaks to a more rounded understanding of “paradise.”

Who are your influences?

I am grateful to many authors for infusing my words with their own. Among them stand Jim Shepard and Andrea Barrett, who seamlessly blend fact with fiction. Both authors write stories and novels that are charged with a profound—and often pleasantly esoteric—knowledge of our world. Shepard’s ability to add humor to work that is also poignant, moreover, has long inspired me to push the emotional range of my own writing. In terms of formal innovation, I draw a lot from works in translation. Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Visitation*, for instance, taught me about the effects of repetition, the language of claustrophobia. Lastly: Claire Vaye Watkins. Her story collection, *Battleborn*, had a tremendous influence on my writing, thanks to its masterful attention to history, the psychology of landscape, and its rich lyrical prose.

Speaking of landscape, there is a strong emphasis on the natural world in your collection. “Shark Fishing,” the longest story, is a sweeping study of environmental ethics. Can you speak on this interest?

A case could certainly be made that *Of This New World* is a climate change book. After all, we begin with the Garden of Eden and end in a Mars colony, founded because Earth has gone to hell. To me climate change is THE issue of our time. As a writer, I have often worried that I’m not doing enough to help. I spend much more time alone in a room writing than I do marching in the streets. My writing isn’t even highly pointed journalism, like Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything*. That said, stories and narratives are important. They are how we engage with the world. While a story like “Shark Fishing” certainly addresses climate change in a direct way, I draw on elements of nature in all my stories because, for me, that is a way of making the natural world relevant. Sometimes relevancy means using figurative language in stories, sometimes it means moving through a variety of biomes as settings, sometimes it means having characters like Madeline in “Bury Me,” who works in a botanical field. I evoke the natural world in my writing because I value it. Climate change is fundamentally depressing, but I’m a utopianist. I live to hope. And my book, at the end of the day, is about the willingness to dream, even in the face of impossible odds.