

Review of 'Beacons: Stories for Our Not So Distant Future', ed. Gregory Norminton, published in *Transition Free Press*, issue 2

Beacons can be signs of illumination, or signals of danger. The latter best defines this anthology of twenty-one short stories, whose award-winning authors were challenged to devise original responses to the climate crisis – with around half imagining post-apocalyptic scenarios or techno-dystopias.

Some are powerful. Liz Jensen (author of eco-thriller *The Rapture*) generates intense pathos as a young boy, from the island-dwelling, socially stigmatized 'Zeroes', comes to terms with his mother's suicide. Jem Poster vividly depicts soldiers descending on a Welsh smallholding, where a woman lives alone with her animals. Taking precautions against 'crazies'/'rebels', the soldiers' activities are set against "olive groves splintered to matchwood beneath lurching tanks, the blazing refineries...."

In 'What is Left to See', James Miller's narrative opens with a whirl of Internet babble, all hash tags, web aliases and live chat, as a young woman describes a helicopter flight over a devastated Miami in 2037. Later the scene shifts to an encounter between a young American (the creator of this 'girl from the future') and an African environmental refugee trying to survive on the streets of Athens.

Other stories are less successful – Joanne Harris, of *Chocolat* fame, opens with a whimsical piece. In 'A is for Acid Rain, B is for Bee', the former keeps everyone indoors and the latter is extinct, while the ending hints at the old idea of a cockroach-dominated planet. Janice Galloway's Darwinian parable 'Fittest' shows a Loch Ness entity menacing spectators.

I was soon reflecting on the influence of Hollywood's apocalypse industry, and whether these fictions play into audience/readers' fears that we're powerless in the face of global forces. And I longed for clever narratives with compelling characters that depict positive change – of the kind that the Transition Movement promotes.

Other stories did balance things out – Alasdair Gray's headmasterly God attempting to create an alternative, utopian universe is deliciously humorous; while Adam Marek's 'The Great Consumer' is a hammy blend of Doctor Who and The Matrix, featuring time travellers and a naked cyborg. Toby Litt's 'The Gloop' is as the title suggests.

In his afterword, Mike Robison from Stop Climate Chaos says: "We need to... develop an inspiring vision which people can rally around... to interpret what the future might look like and take the fear out of behavioural change... We need more positive role models which reflect the values we think are most important."

So where were these beacons? Maria McCann describes a family grappling with whether or not to let their daughter fly to Iceland, but her characters are unconvincing. Only Gregory Norminton's masterful tale 'Almost Visible Cities' makes a serious move in this direction, evoking various scenarios for urban dwelling – 'Iduba', a neat parody of Dubai,

contrasts with cities such as Miranda, where houses are “topped with meadow grass and sedum”, or Gardenia, a restored wasteland.

Perhaps *Beacons*' inherent flaw lies with Norminton having commissioned stories from writers who (aside from a few notable exceptions) appear to have at best flirted with green issues? Ecologically visionary work, of any kind, requires commitment.

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