

TEXT review

Are you there? Can you forgive me?

review by Nike Sulway



Patrick West and Om Prakash Dwivedi (eds)

The World to Come

Spineless Wonders, Strawberry Hills, New South Wales 2014

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In the early eighteenth century, Isaac Watts published the religious treatise from which this collection takes its title. His work, which was subtitled ‘Discourses on the Joys or Sorrows of Departed Souls at Death, and the Terror of the Resurrection’, was a 453-page exploration of the world that would come after the apocalypse. The text was deeply concerned with what that world to come might look like, and with what ‘portion of paradise’ (Watts 1811, 40) the dead (most particularly the Christian dead) would receive when they were resurrected in this other place.

Watts took as his starting point the theological debates of his time; the writers in this anthology take as their starting point for imagining the world to come, the various personal and cultural debates of our time. As the editors note in their introduction, the intention was to publish works that reflected on ‘what the world to come looks like from where they are writing, in place and in time’ (2).

The anthology brings together 21 stories from a range of cultural backgrounds. Despite the overt focus on cultural and geographic diversity, Anglophone voices dominate the collection, with eleven of the stories from Australian writers (including Marcus Waters, a Kamilaroi man), three from the US, and the rest a smattering of European (French, British), African (Ugandan), Caribbean (Jamaican) and Asian writers (Malaysian, Indian).

The world to come, as imagined in the 21 stories, will be an enactment of both our

deepest fears and our wildest fantasies. Worlds in which climate change has brought humanity to the brink of extinction, biomedical technology has changed our bodies beyond recognition, and loss is a constant companion. As such, most of the stories in this anthology are speculative: they are visions of the future imagined in terms of changes in technology and culture. Worlds in which we colonise planets, live in enclosed cities, modify our bodies and live in mediated digital environments. There are, however, a small number of stories that are less concerned with technological change than with cultural and emotional responses to change.

John Fulton's 'Caretakers' is perhaps the most realist piece in the collection, exploring the shifting relationship between Jane, a teenage girl, and Mr McGuire, Jane's father's best friend, during her father's last few months of life. This tender story is told in a deft, seamless style that is perfect for this uncomfortable story of one young woman approaching the convergence of two 'worlds to come': one in which her father has died, and the other in which she moves from childhood to adulthood:

Recently, Jane has been uncomfortably aware of looking forward to these short trips in his car, to sitting next to this family friend, this man whom she practically grew up with, whose daughter, Lizzie, was her best friend for years, this man who glances now in the rearview mirror, his soft blue eyes falling on her and asks, 'Everyone buckled up?', before pulling out of the driveway. (81-2)

Two other stories that focus more on mood and metaphor to engage with the collection's theme are Leah Swann's 'Of Life Below', and Jeanette Zissell's 'The Whale God'. Zissell's 'The Whale God' is told from an unnamed child narrator's perspective and, like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, is set in a post-apocalyptic world where what has happened is less clear (and less important) than the character's responses to the death of their world. The writing is lucid and magical, infusing this dark tale of loss and grief with naïve beauty:

Most things died when the Whale God filled the sky. He came with a corona of light that illuminated his great shadow. The deep rumbling whale-cry of his voice filled the air and echoed out over the cow field. (111)

Leah Swann's 'Of Life Below' is a more explicit story, focusing on a young woman travelling alone in Europe whose memories of the past and premonitions of the future infuse her experiences of the present.

Many of the stories are more traditionally speculative, including Dirk Strasser's '2084', which explores a world in which our reliance on digital records has compromised our relationships with ourselves, and our past. Abir Hamdar's 'The Cure' is the story of a retired physician from Baghdad University Hospital who encounters a troubling 'deformity' that has rudely erupted in a young female patient centuries after it was eradicated. While Tabish Khair's 'Game' is the story of a future in which citizens of a post-apocalyptic earth go hunting in the wastelands.

Many of the stories are concerned with conversations between the present and the past, and with the ways in which they continue to influence each other. Marcus Waters's 'No Going Home' speaks explicitly of this dynamic, in a story in which Australia's colonial past, present and future are entwined. In this story, the barriers between different times are understood in complex ways: they are rigid and

persistent, but permeable. The past, present and future ‘become one’ (230), but there is also a strong sense of the responsibility that we – the inhabitants of the present – have to the citizens of the past and the future. As one of the characters, Dundalli, says to Make-A-Light:

You show only concern for this physical world. You forget our
Burruguu-ngayi-li: our Dreaming goes beyond this world. You will
have to answer for what you have done. (225)

This sense of having to answer for what we have done (and continue to do) pervades many of the stories, with characters, and cultures, living in the ruined shadows of our own time. This is true in the stories that feature landscapes ravaged by environmental change (such as ‘Into the Stillness Came the Rain’ by Crisetta MacLeod), as well as cultures – whole civilisations – destroyed by an over-reliance on technology, by cruelty, by violence and inhumane politics. In one story about a world in which falling asleep is fatal (‘Awake’ by Ben Brooker), a character thinks that his is ‘not the apocalypse we were supposed to have’ (45), but in a sense most of the stories align in interesting ways with the focus of Watts’s *The World to Come*: they *are* stories of apocalypse we are supposed to have, if we continue to live as we do now. Each story imagines the consequences of the choices we make now, in this world: the joys and sorrows of the resurrection. They are pleas for forgiveness. Urges to hope. Warnings. Stories as imagined, half-heard answers to the questions posed by those living now to the citizens of the future. Perhaps most poignant are the questions posed in Jeannette Delamoir’s ‘The World to Come is Made of Love’:

Are you there?
Has your pain gone?
Do you love me?
Can you forgive me?
...

Can you give me a sign that you are there? Any sign, the smallest
sign, the slightest, tiniest, most subtle sign, just one sign? (60)

Nike Sulway is a writer and academic. She is the author of several novels, including Rupetta, which – in 2014 – was the first work by an Australian writer to win the James Tiptree, Jr Award. The award, founded in 1991 by Pat Murphy and Karen Joy Fowler, is an annual award for a work of ‘science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender’. She teaches creative writing at the University of Southern Queensland.

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