

## THE CARRIER BAG THEORY OF FICTION (1986) URSULA LE GUIN (extract)

'The novel is a fundamentally unheroic kind of story. Of course, the Hero has frequently taken it over, that being his imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse, to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it. So the Hero has decreed through his mouthpieces the Lawgivers, first, that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead); second, that the central concern of narrative, including the novel, is conflict; and third, that the story isn't any good if he isn't in it.

I differ with all of this. I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.

One relationship among elements in the novel may well be that of conflict, but the reduction of narrative to conflict is absurd. (I have read a how-to-write manual that said, "A story should be seen as a battle," and went on about strategies, attacks, victory, etc.) Conflict, competition, stress, struggle, etc., within the narrative conceived as carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle, may be seen as necessary elements of a whole which itself cannot be characterized either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process.

Finally, it's clear that the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato.

That is why I like novels: instead of heroes they have people in them.'

'The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.' - Donna Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*

'In a modern Utopia there will, indeed, be no perfection; in Utopia there must also be friction, conflicts and waste, but the waste will be enormously less than in our world.' - H.G Wells (1905) *A Modern Utopia*

'Utopia is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia -- the imagined perfect society and its opposite -- because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other.' - Margaret Atwood (2012) *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*

'Solarpunk is about finding ways to make life more wonderful for us right now, and more importantly for the generations that follow us - i.e., extending human life at the species level, rather than individually. Our future must involve repurposing and creating new things from what we already have (instead of 20th century "destroy it all and build something completely different" modernism). Our futurism is not nihilistic like cyberpunk and it avoids steampunk's potentially quasi-reactionary tendencies: it is about ingenuity, generativity, independence, and community.' - Adam Flynn (2014) *Solarpunk: Notes toward a manifesto*

'Above all, we need to understand utopia as a method rather than a goal ... always suspended between the present and the future, always under revision, at the meeting point of the darkness of the lived moment and the flickering light of a better world, for the moment accessible only through an act of imagination' - Ruth Levitas (2013) *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*

## Cradle Community (2022) *Brick by Brick: How We Build a World Without Prisons*

### Abolitionist Steps (in collaboration with Abolitionists across the UK)

- Stop the construction of new prisons and of prisons under new names.
- Divest from and target international corporations profiting from securitisation and settler colonialism.
- Demand that our institutions divest from these violently parasitic corporations.
- End the police's use of lethal weapons and other cruel tools, such as firearms, tasers and spit hoods. Redirect funds from police equipment, vehicles and weapons into community-empowering resources.
- Abolish stop and search - one of the key tactics used to harass and criminalise young people of colour. Organisations such as Y-Stop provide tools and apps to help log stop-and-search incidents.
- Abolish PREVENT and the Gangs Matrix. Resist conspiring with these kinds of racist frameworks in whatever space they show up.
- Decriminalise sex work.
- Repeal laws that criminalise survival, e.g. drug laws and vagrancy laws, and release everyone imprisoned for these offences.
- Establish confidentiality between services and the people they support. Abolish mandatory reporting.
- Resist new bills to expand policing and probation powers. The Kill the Bill coalition of feminist groups and groups fighting against police brutality, for protest rights, for migrants' rights, against the criminalisation of GRT communities and against child imprisonment have all joined together in resistance to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, bringing hundreds of thousands out onto the streets on 1st May 2021.
- Establish community defence against state intervention.
- Spread information about your rights and resources to support people experiencing criminalisation in your local area. Local police monitoring projects are already set up in London, Manchester and other cities across the UK and are an important tool for keeping track of police actions in our communities.

'...our demands get called "impossible" or "idealistic" or even "divisive." As trans people, we've been hearing this for ages. [...] And yet we exist, continuing to build and sustain new ways of looking at gender, bodies, family, desire, resistance, and happiness that nourish us and challenge expectations. [...] being impossible may just be the best thing we've got going for ourselves: Impossibility may very well be our only possibility. What would it mean to embrace, rather than shy away from, the impossibility of our ways of living as well as our political visions? What would it mean to desire a future that we can't even imagine but that we are told couldn't ever exist?' - Morgan Bassichis et al (2011) *Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got*

'Abolition is by necessity speculative, and we ardently embrace its utopian dimension. Yet if a movement is framed as a progression towards utopia, its conceptual and organizing moves can also reinforce a central myth about abolition: that it is impractical, unattainable, a dream. (The framing of the US as the dystopic and exceptional outlier on an international carceral state spectrum does not help to erode feelings of the impossibility of abolition in the US with a concurrent minimization of the necessity for abolition in other nation-states.) Utopian approaches can be cast as limited, and it is a refrain too often levelled against abolitionists, along with our "evangelical zeal," our naivete, our failure to be pragmatic, and our extremism.' Angela Davis et al (2022) *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*



84K (2018) Claire North (below: p18-19)

Theo Miller lives in London under an assumed name in a near future where The Company control everything. Working in the Criminal Audit Office, he assesses each crime that crosses his desk and makes sure the correct debt to society is paid in full. His ex-lover Dani Cumali has threatened to expose him if he doesn't help her find her daughter who has been sent to labour in one of the Commercial Reform Institutes which have replaced prisons.

The fact they let him through security was strange. He sat at his desk in the Criminal Audit Office, patiently expecting handcuffs. For nearly twenty minutes he slouched there, fingers hooked on the edge of the desk, staring straight ahead without seeing, and waited.

No one came.

After twenty-five minutes an automatic alert appeared warning him that his productivity levels appeared to be slipping and that he was ten minutes away from being put on notice.

He stared at the pop-up message in amazement. In nearly nine years of working at the Criminal Audit Office, he'd never seen such a thing. He took a paracetamol, obvious and slow for the benefit of the camera on top of his screen, and set to work.

The cops didn't come.

Men in black didn't burst through his window.

Dani Cumali didn't laugh like a banshee as they dragged him down, pointing and howling with mirth at the lie that only she could have broken.

Nothing changed, so Theo did his job.

This is the daily diet on which Theo Miller is fed:

murder  
theft  
fraud  
burglary  
rape

*Guidelines on rape vary depending on whether it is felt that the woman may have dressed in a provocative manner or appeared to be sexually enthusiastic prior to the act of penetration. A woman who does not dress modestly is more likely to be a victim of crime and as a consequence we recommend indemnity in the low-to-mid £30,000 as a starting point for assessing the ...*

corporate espionage  
libel  
slander  
assault on a corporation

anti-corporate profit activity

*By acting against corporate interests, individuals show a complete disregard for society and are harming all, not merely a few. Starting indemnities of £400,000 are a viable place to commence negotiation ...*

riot  
trespass  
protest

Once he heard the minister for social responsibility explain: "Crime has huge financial cost on our communities. It is only right that we acknowledge its economic impact in a blue-skies thought-dynamic way that puts society back in the driving seat."

Theo remembered that phrase clearly – "put society back in the driving seat" – because he found it inherently confusing.

"It is time to hero the narrative of personal responsibility!"

The Criminal Audit Office had emerged some seven or so years before human rights were judged passé, from the outdated monolith of the Crown Prosecution Service. This was when the Company was still trading under many different names, a mess of loans and investments, debts and boards, but after they'd started investing in security. Prison was a deeply inefficient way of rehabilitating criminals, especially given how many were clearly irredeemable, and despite privatisation efficiencies overcrowding and reoffending were a perennial problem. Rehabilitation through work was an excellent and scientifically provable way of instilling good societal values. The first Commercial Reform Institute was opened when Theo was seven years old, and made meat patties for hamburgers.

*Shall we go, shall we go to the patty line?  
I kissed my love, she swore she was mine,  
But they took me to the patty line.*

Theo hums a half-remembered tune from his childhood under his breath, doesn't notice, reads a report.

WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME (1976) Marge Piercy (p209-10)

Connie, incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital in 1970s New York visits (time travels?/envisions?) the community of Mattapoisett in 2137. Notes on characters and jargon: Parra: a member of the community. 'Per': person, non-gendered pronouns used. Geraldo: her niece's violent partner/pimp. 'Crosser': someone who has caused harm. Mem: chosen family.

[Connie] "The community is precious. That's what you're saying."

"Just so." Parra nodded, grinning.

"You're a judge? Can you hang a sentence on them?" "Tonight I'm referee. Here to make sure the group crits each justly. I can point out injustice. Watch for other tensions that may surface, clouding the issues, weighting the reaction. Someone not from this village must play referee."

She frowned at this short, plump woman who called herself a judge. Younger than her and no more imposing, surely. "Is that what you mean by a judge? A referee?"

"No. We act in case of injury."

"Suppose I stole something?"

"We don't have much private property. Likely, I'd give you what you asked. But if you did take something, everyone would give you presents. We'd think you were speaking to us of neglect and feelings of poverty. We'd try and make you feel good - wanted."

"Suppose I hurt someone? What about rape and murder and beating someone up?"

"We're trained in self-defence. We're trained to respect each other. I've never actually known of a case of rape, although I've read about it. It seems... particularly horrible to us. Disgusting. Like cannibalism. I know it occurs and has occurred in the past, but it seems unbelievable."

She imagined herself taking a walk at night under the stars. She imagined herself ambling down a country road and feeling only mild curiosity when she saw three men coming toward her. She imagined hitchhiking a ride with anyone willing to give her a ride. She imagined answering the door without fear, to see if anyone needed help. "Nobody ever takes a knife to anybody? No lovers' quarrels? No jealousy? Don't hand me that." Her voice is "brassy with scepticism."

"Assault, murder, we still have. Not as common as they say it was in your time. But it happens. People still get angry and strike out."

"So what do you do? Do you put them in jail?"

"First off, we ask if person acted intentionally or not - if person wants to take responsibility for the act."

"Suppose I say, 'No, I didn't know what I was doing, judge?'"

"Then we work on healing. We try to help so that never again will person do a thing person doesn't mean to do."

"Suppose I say I'm not sick. I punched him in the face because he had it coming, and I'm glad."

"Then you work out a sentence. Maybe exile, remote labour. Sheepherding. Life on shipboard. Space service. Sometimes crossers cook good ideas about how to atone. You could put in for an experiment or something dangerous."

She stared. "You're telling me that when I smashed Geraldo's face, I'd tell you what I should do to... atone?"

"How not?" Parra stared back. "You, your victim, and your judge work it out. If you killed, a then the family of your victim would choose a mem to negotiate."

"If I killed a bunch of people, then I'd just sign on as a sailor or herd sheep?"

"You mean a second time? No. Second time someone uses violence, we give up. We don't want to watch each other or to imprison each other. We aren't willing to live with people who choose to use violence. We execute them."

"Suppose I say I didn't do it."

"That happens." Parra waved her hand. "By lot someone is picked to investigate. When that investigator thinks the crosser has been found, we have a trial. Our laws are simple and we don't need lawyers. The jury decides. A sentence is negotiated by all parties."