

# A Review of Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction

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Judie Newman, *Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2013, £80.00). Pp. xii + 181. ISBN 978 04158 9912 3.

Utopia and terror may not seem like obvious companions. Yet, as Judie Newman shows, studying the relationship between them is rewarding and sheds light not only on the texts discussed in this book, but also more generally on the directions American fiction has been taking since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The blurb notes that, in fiction, terror and utopia are linked “through the exploration of the commodification of affect,” but that does little justice to the book’s wider critical reach (i). *Utopia and Terror* opens with the analysis of a short story by Amy Waldman and concludes with a brief consideration of a novel by Margaret Atwood. The former is used as a springboard to launch the project, while the latter allows Newman to bring the focus out on the wider questions her project has sought to address. The decision to start and finish with textual analysis is an important one. It demonstrates Newman’s commitment to the kind of scholarship that does not eclipse the literary text in the pursuit of some higher abstraction. This is indeed a book about the various meanings of utopia, and the various ways in which terrorism interacts with literature, but above all it is a book that provides a thoughtful, erudite and wide-ranging discussion of literary fiction. The rationale for choosing those particular texts over other candidates may not always be clear, and this is a slight weakness in the project, but the actual discussion of each provides critical insights that will be useful and inspirational to any researcher of contemporary American literature.

As the acknowledgements make clear, most of the chapters have already been published as journal articles. It would be unfair, though, to conclude that the book has not been designed as a stand-alone entity. The “utopia and terror” themes do not appear as terms retrospectively applied to a body of published work. Rather, they provide an insightful means of analysing and assessing a range of texts by established and emerging American authors whose work engages in very different ways with the topics Newman has identified. The study kicks off with Kim Edwards’s *The Secrets of a Fire King* (2007). Following a brief plot summary of Edwards’s earlier novel, the author notes that “the narrow focus [of the story] masks a broad concern in Edwards’ writing” with social injustice, and this observation is illustrative of Newman’s greatest strength in this book: the ability to see, and make visible to her readers, the bigger picture that emerges from the often smaller-scale texts she discusses (21). The chapter on Susan Choi’s *Person of Interest* (2009) illustrates the book’s strengths in another way: it combines extensive research into the world and the warped mind of the Unabomber with a fine discussion of Choi’s use of textual strategies, such as narrative focalization or use of symbol and imagery. As in the rest of the book, the balance between textual and contextual analysis is expertly handled and provides a model of good literary scholarship. Newman is confident handling the work of established authors such as John Updike, who is represented here with *Toward the End of Time* (1998) rather than *Terrorist* (1998), but she is also a great champion of new and emerging voices, as well as of the critically underrated. There are two chapters on Andre Dubus III,

and discussions of the less well known Dalia Sofer and Chitra Divakaruni. A look at the notes on the Sofer chapter is sufficient to illustrate the challenge Newman must have faced: not a single article on Sofer's work is cited, presumably because none exists. Instead, her research has taken her from familiar studies of utopia to other less obvious places such as journals of Middle Eastern studies, works on Jewish feminism, and the meanings of Tarot cards.

The inclusion of Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2010) left me wondering whether the definition of "American fiction" has been stretched a little too far. True, as Newman points out, "Evaristo herself encapsulates the diasporic reach of the black Atlantic," but she is an author born and raised in London, and *Blonde Roots* is a novel about European and African transactions, so it is hard to see quite how author and novel fit into this study (119). To be fair, though, this fact, and the repeated misspelling of Fredric Jameson's first name, were the only instances where this reviewer raised an eyebrow, and that's much less eyebrow raising than most of us are likely to engage in, especially when reading specifically for reviewing purposes. I will be returning to this book, using it in my own teaching and research, and encouraging others to do so as well.

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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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