

LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAS

Journal of Literary History

2017



ЛИТЕРАТУРА ДВУХ АМЕРИК

Историко-литературный журнал

2017

ISSN 2542-243X

УДК 82(091)

Дэвид Кинг ДАНАУЭЙ

ЛИТЕРАТУРА ОБ АМЕРИКАНСКОМ ФАШИЗМЕ

Аннотация: Более столетия американские писатели рисовали образ демагога, который оказывается избран на пост Президента Соединенных Штатов, и размышляли о том, какой ущерб это могло бы нанести всемирной демократии; В статье дается обзор произведений как крупных, так и менее известных авторов (Дж. Лондона, С. Льюиса, Ф. Рота и др.), посвященных этой теме; их литературные пророчества в современной ситуации звучат особенно актуально.

Ключевые слова: Джек Лондон «Железная пята», Синклер Льюис «Это не может случиться здесь», Филип Рот «Заговор против Америки», Натаниэль Уэст, Октавия Батлер.

© 2017 Дэвид Кинг Данауэй (PhD, профессор, кафедра английского языка и литературы Университета Нью-Мексико, Альбукерке, шт. Нью-Мексико, США) dunaway@unm.edu

LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAS

Journal of Literary History

2017



ЛИТЕРАТУРА ДВУХ АМЕРИК

Историко-литературный журнал

2017

ISSN 2542-243X

UDC 82(091)

David King DUNAWAY

LITERATURE OF AMERICAN FASCISM

Abstract: American authors have for more than a century imagined a demagogue being elected President of the United States and the damage that could do to democracy world wide. Now that someone with this tendency has actually taken office, this article summarises the predictions of how famous and lesser-known authors have anticipated this dire situation, including Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, and Philip Roth. Forewarned is forearmed.

Keywords: Jack London *The Iron Heel*, Sinclair Lewis *It Can't Happen Here*, Philip Roth *The Plot Against America*, Nathaniel West, Octavia Butler.

© 2017 David K. Dunaway (PhD, Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA) dunaway@unm.edu

History knows many periods of dark times, in which the public realm has been obscured, and the world becomes so dubious that people have ceased to ask anymore of politics than it show due consideration for their vital interests and personal liberty.”

Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*

After the election of 2016, and re-reading *It Can't Happen Here*, I wondered if there was anything we could learn from in the classic novels of how fascism could arise in the United States? After reviewing a half-dozen novels imagining a demagogue as president, the principle suggestion is that the President needs a war, and the martial law and militia that often accompany it. What else could we learn from these authors' predictions? How could it happen here?

America's presidential election has created a great deal of heat in its academic circles. The debate is not a schism; building support for the current administration among the faculty is a tough sell. General opinion is that the boorishness of the President and his indiscriminate and contradictory statements are hard to follow.

Rather the issue becomes how academics will respond: as researchers, bystanders, or activists. All have their advocates. The recent (2017) meeting of the Oral History Association exemplifies these trends. Plenary sessions all addressed the election's consequences for historians—not surprisingly, as the current budget calls for elimination of the National Endowments for the Humanities and Arts—the largest funders of those attending—and zeroes out public broadcasting—which academics listen to and watch more than any other source of information.

Much discussed was the development of new research agendas, on how new policies affect the daily lives of the 99%, after cuts to medical and social welfare. Those collecting the history of Indians, Hispanics and African Americans advocated outspokenly for new research on the effects of reducing social benefits. Applying academic training to these topics was presented as a defensive posture for researchers.

Some argued for mutual understanding among opposing viewpoints. Instead of disregarding the views of the President's supporters, the goal should be to interview and analyze them. This calls into question the historians' own biases and how to negotiate them: should they interject their individual political leanings into their research. Should they offer reflexivity of their beliefs in statements. Inevitably orientation and prejudices find their way into research. But

how much should one take a stand, while interviewing those with whom we disagree? A minority asked for researchers to be bystanders, asking but not presupposing.

The majority, however, clearly favored confrontation as activists. Scholars called for active resistance, at least intellectually, and for collecting historical narratives to create new “origin stories” of how we got to now. Cuts in budgets were to be resisted; “Resistance” is the new byword of the American academy.

This attitude is summarized by the keynote speaker, Harvard professor Jill Lepore: “People are so grumpy, what with petty tyrants and such.” Alternate histories, particularly dystopias, reflect their societies’ radical pessimism. According to Lepore, this is ours: “The Internet did not stitch us together. Economic growth has led to a widening economic inequality and a looming environmental crisis. Democracy appears to be yielding to authoritarianism.”

Dystopia used to be a fiction of resistance,” she concluded; it’s become a fiction of submission, the fiction of an untrusting, lonely, and sullen twenty-first century, the fiction of fake news and Infowars, the fiction of helplessness and hopelessness. . . .A story about ruin can be beautiful. Wreckage is romantic. But a politics of ruin is doomed.¹

This essay, then, concerns American’s shared future in the face of such doubts, narratives of what American authors thought would happen if a totalitarian government is elected. If these pages are chilling, remember there’s always resistance to fascism. This takes many forms, from sabotage to secret agents. All these authors agree in finding something basic in humanity’s revulsion and resistance to losing our ethics.

History, George Santayana famously reminded us, is repeated by those who haven’t taken the trouble to understand it. But rather than go back to the history of slave revolts in Rome and Spartacus, why not start right here at home? What do we Americans need to know of the fictional literature of American fascism to defend ourselves in the future?

Books like Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* track the current presidency so far. That’s because the same forces at work in the 1930s persist today: a growing plutocracy which dominated and dominates political and economic power. Whether we call it Phillip Morris

¹ Lepore, Jill. “No we cannot.” *New Yorker* (June 5, 2017): 104.

Tobacco or Altria makes no difference. The year changes, but the actors and their roles remain the same.

To understand what fascism would look like in a uniquely American context, I set parameters. Works had to be by Americans and concern the US Presidency; They needed to be book-length and widely published; they must concern a regime which is by various names totalitarian, authoritarian, oligarchic, and fascist, not necessarily capital “F” (though on the cover of *It Can't Happen Here* a Fasces is displayed.)

There are enough of these works to constitute a literary genre, “alternative histories,” works which imagine a different future and its ramifications, usually from a momentous turning point. Science fiction is particularly rich with classic works like Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* (1932) and H.G. Wells’s *The Shape of Things to Come* (1935) as British examples. The alternative history reality show is an old one in American fiction; perhaps its ancestry starts with Edward Bellamy’s utopian *Looking Backwards* (1887).

The past might be debated, but the future is limited only by our imagination. 20th century science fiction largely concerns how the future will unskien, particularly in what might be called “social science fiction,” such as the multi-volume *Foundation* series of Isaac Asimov. (Fortunately, alternative histories of our country are not necessarily authoritarian.)

This is a narrative account of what American authors thought would happen if a totalitarian government is elected. The point of this essay is to raise issues to consider. None of these dark tales happened; that doesn’t mean they won’t. Forewarned is forearmed.

What do we benefit from reviewing how American authors foresaw homegrown totalitarianism?

First, it’s a way of coping with a distasteful predicament, as Jack London anticipated in *The Iron Heel* in 1908:

We’ll become so roused up that – either we’ll be desperate and really cling to each other and anybody in else in the world can go to the devil or, what I’m afraid is more likely, we’ll get so deep in rebellion against [insert name of favorite demagogue], we’ll feel so terribly that we’re standing for something that we’ll want to give everything else for it, even give up you and me. (179)

***The Iron Heel*, Jack London (1908)**

Jack London, the same guy who wrote *Alaskan Tales of Adventure*, named his principal character Earnest Everhard. Here he exceeds Dickens in eponymy, the attribution of character by a name. *The Iron Heel* is reportedly the biography of scholar-revolutionist Everhard by his wife Avis. It's the story of the poor, how they rose and fell: It's also the story of how Plutocracy evolves into Oligarchy.

The Iron Heel is among the scariest of alternative histories and the most overtly ideological. There's drama throughout: a firebomb in Congress; government attacks on newspapers; militias hunting down the disloyal. Tellingly, London foresaw such actions twenty-five years before the rise of fascism in the 1930s.

The novel begins at a dinner party in Berkeley, as a university professor and his daughter host a debate on current affairs. Everhard challenges a businessman and a bishop to rethink their true functions in society. He accuses them, and the world, of being shielded from the true source of their incomes and its effects. He challenges the bishop to leave his mansion and serve the poor, sounding like a Marxist graduate student. He sends the professor's daughter (Avis) shuddering to her room, after insisting her dresses are stained in blood from an accident at a factory where her father holds stock. Her consciousness is raised, as they say in Berkeley. Everhard sometimes seems Everbully.

Students of Jack London will notice the similarity in setting to *Martin Eden*, London's most autobiographical novel. Martin similarly falls in love with a naïve Berkeley professor's daughter. The difference is that this woman never evolves; whereas Avis Everhard learns to plot with the other revolutionists. Between the working-class-heroes London worshipped, and the university environment he both envied and scorned, lies the question of where knowledge truly lives: in the streets or in the libraries. Everhard lives in both places, but his preference is clear:

We intend to take, not the mere wealth in the houses, but all the sources of that wealth, all the mines, and railroads, and factories, and banks and stores. That is the revolution. It is truly perilous. (39)

The Oligarchy is equally clear. “We will grind you revolutionists down under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces. The world is ours, we are its lords, and ours it shall remain.” (63) As in *It Can't Happen Here*, private militias quickly emerge to keep dissent in line. Here, they're called the Mercenaries, and they do not pause for liberal tolerance.

Deeply in thrall to the deterministic social philosopher Herbert Spencer, London is more of an academic Marxist than he'd have admitted. Sometimes this leads to far-fetched statements, such as the book's only mention of ecology: “Socialism has no more to do with the state of capital in nature than has differential calculus with a Bible class.” (59)

The novel of ideas is a term applied to authors like Aldous Huxley, whose characters talk a great deal and do very little. In London's book, there are men of principle. The question is, how bad does it have get, how widespread the oppression, before they fall in line?

The professor is soon told his dinner-table discussions are “not in harmony with university traditions and policy.” He's offered a two-year sabbatical, which (improbably) he refuses. He's asked to resign. Then a phony mortgage appears on his paid-up house. He's evicted, and he's not alone.

According to London, fascism arises out of a vast, imminent conflict of Capital and Labor. At times, he sounds like Democrats after Trump's election:

There is a shadow of something colossal and menacing that even now is beginning to fall across the land. Call it the shadow of an oligarchy, if you will. (67)

London quotes a speech of Abraham Lincoln, just before his assassination:

I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country....Corporations have been enthroned, an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign. (68)

First, the professor's magnum opus is withdrawn by his publisher. When republished by that extraordinary 19th century Socialist newspaper *Appeal to Reason*, their warehouse is burned down. Then his stock disappears. The bishop's luck isn't any better. Following Christ, he gives

up all his possessions and brings food to the poor. The elite Black Hundreds militia captures him and dumps him in an insane asylum, for his sins.

After worker uprisings, for which one hundred thousand Army soldiers are called in to break up the strikes, cities and towns become armed camps.

Out of all the rack and ruin rose the form of the nascent Oligarchy, imperturbable, indifferent, and sure...it used all the power of the United States treasury to carry out its plans.” (111)

The railroad and the banks and the stock exchange hold vast numbers of farmers' debt. Most surrender their land and become farm hands. After people finish paying off their mortgages, they're not given back their deeds. Soon, they become landless slaves. Lawlessness becomes official policy.

But a Resistance starts. A general strike shuts down everything for a week. At the ballot box, fifty Socialist congressmen are elected; but when they try to take their seats, they're denied entry and later sent to camps.

The next step is to divide Labor. The Oligarchy favors unions of engineers and mechanics by giving them shorter hours, more pay, and their own compounds with taxes on the working class the rich build great new cities from. The oligarchs become worshippers of beauty, art-lovers just like high Nazi officials. Their cities resemble the palaces of Rome, the pyramids of Egypt—each built on slave labor. Public schools dissolve as education ceases to be compulsory.

In *Iron Heel*, all of North America from the Panama Canal to the Arctic belongs to the Oligarchy. But they cannot quiet what they own. From Florida to Alaska, Native Americans are dancing the Ghost Dance and anticipating their own messiah. In dozens of states, expropriated farmers march on their the legislatures. In the Sacramento Massacre, with plenty of liquor passed around to the National Guard, 11,000 men, women, and children are shot down on the streets, and the national government takes possession of California's government.

Pretty soon, members of the National Guard are compelled, under pain of death, to attack their number from another state. Those that flee conscription become outlaws. Again, there's was resistance. In the Kansas Mutiny, six thousand are killed in machine-gun fire. The country's

divided in three: those in the Oligarchy, the 1%; their vassals; and on the other side, “the people of the abyss” and revolutionists like Everhard, for whom the Resistance takes on the character of religion. An elaborate underground network of refugees and sanctuary cities emerges. The Resistance infiltrates all forms of government to mount a popular uprising to once and for all eject their tyrants.

On democracy and Congress London wastes no affection: “There is no Republican Party. There is no Democratic Party. There are no Republicans no Democrats in this house. You are lick-spittlers and panderers, the creatures of the Plutocracy,” (160) On the floor of Congress, a bomb is thrown at Everhard. Though unharmed, he goes underground to Sonoma County, to Jack London’s own estate.

By 1917, schools are shuttered. Children live like beasts “festering in misery and degradation. All the old liberties were gone.” Years of organizing lead to the First Revolt, but the Iron Heel anticipates this through its own spies. The angry masses thundering through the streets of Chicago are met with every armament, until their bodies are stacked high enough to stop traffic. And so it goes with the Second Revolt, the Third Revolt, and in fact for three hundred years afterwards.

Neither London nor, later, Sinclair Lewis expected mass resistance to be successful. The best London could manage was that after centuries the Oligarchy became so corrupt and weak it collapses, and the era of the Brotherhood of Man finally prevails.

1934 is the year of American dystopias, when the next three authors developed novels. This was also a year after the Reichstag fire in Germany led to Hitler’s taking power. Such events informed the imagination of Edward Dahlberg, Nathaniel West, and Sinclair Lewis.

Those Who Perish, Edward Dahlberg (1934)

It’s late spring in New Republic with a blustery wind bringing bad news. Banks are failing. “WIDE REVOLT!” says the newspaper headline. We see this Depression turmoil through the eyes of Regina Gordon, a self-described “Jew by accident and by defense.” (480) She takes the bus while her superintendent at the Jewish Community Center Henry Rosenzweig rides in his Cadillac, considering which mortgages to foreclose next.

He's one of the well-heeled German Jews who left early and looked down upon their ghetto brethren. Their response to anti-Semitism and Nazism is tame: *We Appeal to German Culture and Conscience* read the ribbons passed out by young Jewish women of German birth. One daydreams: "When Hitler comes to his senses he will know the German Jews will be his strongest allies and most loyal adherents . . . the Nazis are the last dyke against communism" (494). (Other than in this alternate reality, Russian Communists were the bulwarks against Nazism.)

"If you are a Communist and a Jew," she continues, "you'll very likely be murdered on the spot, and if you are a Jew without any political opinions they will no doubt be merciful and only starve you to death. As for myself, I propose to fight this gravedigger's menace to the finish." (570) Her boss and lover falls on the floor dead of a heart attack.

The president can barely slow the pace of fascism; it's unclear if he's trying. Headlines tell the story, in the fashion of Dos Passos's *USA*: "NATIONAL GUARDSMEN FIRE ON LONGSHORE MEN IN SAN FRANCISCO," or "FOOD FAMINE LOOMS UP IN MIDWEST." (573).

Dahlberg's times seem much like ours.

Each day she read the papers with her hair standing on end. The fragments of headlines had terrorized her and torn through her whole being like great bursting shells . . . 'I do not want this! I'm living in the most harrowing of times, and I cannot go on!' (568).

Regina's last act, after taking poison, is to call downstairs for a newsboy to bring her a paper.

A Cool Million, Nathaniel West (1934)

Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* is the story of a Vermonter, Lemuel Pitkin, whose house is foreclosed. In desperation, he turns to Nathaniel Whipple, ex-President and bank owner. In Dickensian fashion, Pitkin is told to "go out into the world and find your way" for "America is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and the industrious." (74) Whipple then swindles the family out of their remaining asset, a cow.

From this point on, the book follows the bizarre, episodic structure of Voltaire's *Candide* crossed with Franz Kafka's *Amerika*. Pitkin is swindled and beaten by an America impatient with the poor and immigrants. Ex-President Whipple embraces anti-Semitic speeches:

This is our country and we must fight to keep it so....we must drive the Jewish international bankers out of Wall Street! We must destroy the Bolshevik labor unions!
(112)

The ex-President founds a National Revolutionary Party, whose followers march on New York City.

As in *The Iron Heel*, Native Americans provide a significant cultural resistance. Chief Satinpenney addresses his warriors:

In what way is the white man wiser than the red? We lived here from time immemorial and everything was sweet and fresh. The pale face came and in its wisdom filled the sky with refuse... I know you can't put the clock back. But there is one thing you can do. You can stop that clock. You can smash that clock." (157)
(The braves attack a nearby village.)

Pitkin joins a traveling circus, (again like Kafka's *Amerika*): the Chamber of American Horrors. Pitkin's loss of appendages parallels the dismemberment of America's body politic. Banks are nationalized (rather, privatized) by the restored President Whipple, who's returned to power by "Leather Shirts," inspired by the Black Shirts of Italian Fascism.

After the circus, Pitkin, permanently unemployed, makes a job out of being abused as a clown. He has already lost his teeth, an eye, and a leg (similar to *Candide*'s loss of appendages). Then his old friend ex-President Whipple asks him to limp to an event and give a speech. He's warned but does not recognize he's on a fast track to martyrdom. For in the balcony is an assassin who shoots him as Pitkin begins to speak. So instead of cultivating his garden, he ends up proclaimed a hero by the President who had him shot. Pitkin has a national holiday. Through Pitkin's martyrdom the country is delivered from Marxism, the all-powerful President proclaims, and "America became America again." (179) Americans cheer Whipple. Or else.

It Can't Happen Here, Sinclair Lewis (1935)

Of all the dystopian novels of American politics, none so closely match the rise of our current President as this one, from America's first Nobelist in literature.

The origins of *It Can't Happen Here* go back to the summer of 1934. That August, Lewis's wife, Dorothy Thompson, became the first American journalist ejected from Nazi Germany. Between her and Vermont neighbor Gilbert Seldes, investigative reporter and editor, Lewis learned the step-by-step progress of Nazism. Though most assume Lewis modeled his dictator-president on Louisiana Governor Huey Long – 27 million people belonged to Long's Share the Wealth clubs – the novel hybridizes Nazism and Long's conservative populism. (Granted, there are parallels aplenty to Long: new roads, country schools, patriotic clubs which sometimes fall on anti-Long protestors.)

It's 1936. Roosevelt loses the Democratic primary to Senator Buzz Windrip on a campaign of cracker-barrel folksiness, racial supremacy, and a pledge to give every American five thousand dollars (enough to buy a house in 1936). His supporters include the League of Forgotten Men (a name with contemporary resonance!) and a militia, the Minute Men, who grow in power until, after the election, they rival the U.S. Army.

Candidate Windrip reviles Jewish bankers who “must be driven with whips and scorpions from off the face of the Earth.” (41) Windrip, the Professional Common Man, threatens to shake things up. He convinces the wealthy that the more he denounces them and promises to distribute their millions to the poor, the more they could trust his “common sense.”

Opposition is locally led by a crusty Vermont newspaper editor Doremus Jessup, who is puzzled by Windrip's appeal:

The senator was vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his ‘ideas’ almost idiotic....His political platforms were only wings of a windmill. Buzz was in favor of better beef stew in the county poor-farms, and plenty of graft for local machine politicians, with jobs for their brothers-in-law, nephews, law partners, and creditors.” (71)

Windrip's first steps make a fascinating comparison with those of the Trump administration. Windrip attacks the media (which Trump has called “the opposition party”): “I know the press only too well [they plot] how they can put over their lies, and advance their own

positions and feed their greedy pocket books” (34). Then the President threatens Mexico. They’re not fair traders. They’re sending us criminals. (Sound familiar?)

And who were the Windrip voters?

Farmers, the white collared unemployed, people on relief... Most of the suburbanites who could not meet the installment payments on the electric washing machine. . . the American Legion. . . the remnants of the Ku Klux Klan.” (78)

I don’t pretend to be anything but a poor working-stiff but there’s 40 million workers like me and we know that Windrip is the first statesman in years that thinks of what guys like us need.” says Jessup’s handyman, Shad. (89)

President Windrip sets up his cabinet. The Secretary of the Treasury is a bank manager; the Attorney General’s a notorious racist. Windrip’s appoints his Minute Men co-equal to the U.S. Army and demand Congress forfeit its (and the Supreme Court’s) authority. Congress refuses. Three hours later, a state of martial law is declared and 100 congressmen arrested. In days, Congress gives up, and the Supremes are under house arrest.

A month after inauguration his supporters are saying:

Yes, things do look kind of hectic down there in Washington, but that’s just because there’s so many of those bullheaded politicians who still think they can buck Windrip.” (142)

The country’s in a “crisis,” fighting Soviet Russia and Wall Street (which wink at each other and at this speech). A few weeks later, strikes across the U.S. are violently put down by Minute Men.

But the majority who voted for Windrip are pleased:

Never in American history had the adherence of a President been so well satisfied . . . with such annoyances as Congressional Investigations hushed, the official warders of contracts were on the merriest of terms with all contractors.” And with this chumminess

comes the next big move: States are eliminated and condensed into 8 provinces, for “economizing. (146)

But for others, everything goes downhill fast. More and more people are dispossessed of their property and land when they protest. States are dissolved into more easily-ruled provinces. The Southwestern Province of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma is permitted “to claim all portions of Mexico which the United States may from time to time find it necessary to take over, as a protection against the notorious treachery of Mexico and the Jewish plots there hatched” (146).

Six months in, Windrip dissolves all political parties except for his new American Corporate State and Political Party, known as the Corpus. The government’s great idea for eliminating unemployment: labor camps for everybody who doesn’t have a job. When not working on government projects, they’re hired out at a dollar a day. Huey Long understood the principle: Every Man a King, so long as he has someone to look down on. Hardly imaginable planks of Windrip’s platform are carried out; except they never did find a way to pass out that 5,000 dollars to voters.

Jews are targeted, but Blacks don’t have it much better. There are massacres in the South; private jails open for African-Americans who mouth off. Troops are posted at airports, and border guards quadruple. Military courts dispense dark justice.

Slowly, evidence of Windrip’s corruption seeps out. One newspaper bravely writes that the president received a million dollars in gifts from financiers. The top 3% now own 90% of the wealth.

Then it’s the turn of colleges and universities. Columbia kicks out faculty who voted against Windrip. A New American Education Plan is announced. Liberal schools like Swarthmore, Georgetown, Oberlin are shuttered in favor of two mega-universities whose entrance requirements are two years in high school and a letter from a Corpo official. The new universities are designed to be free of intellectualism: no languages, history before 1500, archeology; but lots of courses in advertising, business correspondence, and above all, sports, (though undergraduates are cautioned not to take sports for more than a third of their credits).

Still, not enough dissent is quashed. The next step’s the Iron Heel. One day 70,000 Minute Men and local police execute America’s Final Solution on crime. Criminals (and those

thought to be criminals) are arrested and court-martialed on the same day, with one of ten shot and two of ten joining their captors. Any person who by word or action works against the state is to be shot on the spot or sent to newly opened concentration camps. And the world dared not complain.

From correspondent's BBC radio report:

Far from there being any discontent with the Corpo administration among the people, they have never been so happy and so resolutely set on making a Brave New World. I asked a very prominent Hebrew banker about the assertions that his people were being oppressed and he assured me, "When we hear about such silly rumors, we are highly amused"(224).

After a couple of years, Windrip's popularity fades. Mexico, Canada, and South America don't relish a part in his empire. Egotism swallows his character completely; everybody's either fawning or an enemy. Sarason was the cunning one, establishing prizes for Negroes with the largest families, the fastest time in floor scrubbing, and the longest periods of work without taking a vacation.

Windrip babbles how he is loved everywhere: "The middle-westerners are absolutely loyal to me. They appreciate what I've been trying to do!" (346) But Sarason engineers Windrip's exile to Europe and becomes the new president. A month later, a general takes over from Sarason, marching into the White House with troopers and shooting Sarason dead. The new general-president "treated the entire nation like a well-run plantation, on which the slaves were better fed than formerly, less often cheated by their overseers and kept so busy they had time only for work and for sleep." (354)

Eventually the country rises. At the heart of the resistance is a realization of the changes fascism brings to daily life. More people, Doremus Jessup included, find their way to Canada and the New Underground. The government postpones invading Mexico till it's cooler weather.

The new underground fights back. Rebels take over the Pacific Northwest, a region bounded by the Canadian border, Detroit, Cincinnati, Wichita, San Francisco, and Seattle, calling it the American Cooperative Commonwealth. Now Windrip's supporters slowly awaken.

As month by month they saw they had been cheated by marked cards again they were indignant; they'd been kidnapped by a small gang of criminals armed with high ideals, well-battered words, and a lot of machine guns." (371).

In the end Jessup has a new life as a political organizer, "For a Doremus Jessup can never die" runs the last lines of the book. (381)

One scholarly essay on *It Can't Happen Here* concludes "the installation of a fascist government will not be a revolution or a coup-d'état; rather, the groundwork for fascism has already been constructed in the ideological worldviews of the majority of Americans. The riposte to the claim 'it can't happen here' is 'it already has.'"²

***The Man in the High Castle*, Phillip K. Dick (1962)**

It all starts with Roosevelt's assassination in 1933, just after inauguration. Without his New Deal, the Depression drags on. German-American groups and the anti-military Left promote isolationism. Unchecked by U.S. firepower, Hitler prevails at Stalingrad. Japan invades and conquers China, then India. Finally the United States falls, occupied by Nazi Germany in the East and Japan to the West, with a buffer zone across the Rocky Mountains. Slavery is legal again. The few surviving Jews hide under assumed names.

This is America in 1962: the Reich rules by technology. They build and use an H-bomb on Africa, they colonize the solar system via rockets. They even drain the Mediterranean Sea to produce cropland for their slaves to till. Japan exports Asian culture to its Pacific States of America. The I-Ching is everywhere, its predictions as widely used as today's cell phones. Japanese administrators ride out from the Home Islands to San Francisco via rockets.

Dick's characters appear and disappear in a murky plot by a Nazi defector to warn the Japanese of an impending attack. "How strange," Dick ends his fantasy ironically, "I never would have thought the truth would make you angry." (274) but in this parallel universe, truth is a quality never seen. Perhaps that's the novel's Existentialist point.

Like Hamlet's play-within-a-play to "catch the conscience of a king," Dick's novel turns around a fiction that's the mirror image of the book's alternative history. In the novel-within-the-

² McLaughlin, Robert. "Mark Shorer, Dialogic Discourse, and It Can't Happen Here," in *Sinclair Lewis: New Essays and Criticisms*, ed. James M. Hutchisson. Troy, NY: Wiston, 1997: 37.

novel (which the 2016 Amazon series conveniently turns into a missing film), an elusive author tells World War II and its aftermath largely as we know it, provoking horror in ruling Japanese and German authorities. In *The Grasshopper*, Japan and Germany actually *lost* the war. Heresy. But Dick's concept is not to show us what is happening inside the wall, but to take us through the looking glass. What was white is black. What's black is white. In doing this, Dick offers a river of hope coursing through an oppressive landscape. He lets the reader have his or her current reality, only now the present is firmly implanted in a nightmare.

Dick cited a 1953 title, *Bring the Jubilee* as inspiration. A more popular book circulating as he wrote was *If the South Had Won the Civil War* (1960). It imagines Southerners remaking Northern culture the way the Japanese do in this book. Filmmaker Spike Lee had a version of this in the "Confederate States of America." "The novelist knows humanity," Dick concludes darkly, "how worthless they are, ruled by their testicles, swayed by cowardice, selling out every cause because of their greed."(134)

Parable of the Sower, Octavia Butler (1993)

Butler's fascist dystopia, dated 2024, features a minister and his daughter living in a walled compound outside L.A. The community has a dozen families guarding themselves from the murder and chaos outside their gates. On TV they see L.A. and other cities burning, thanks to a new drug that makes watching fires better than sex, "PYRO."

President Charles Donner is elected November 6, 2024. Few expect change:

Most people have given up on politicians. After all, politicians have been promising a return to the glory, the wealth, and the order of the 20th century ever since I can remember. (20)

The new president will set the country back a hundred years, some say:

He's like a symbol of the past . . . he's nothing. No substance. But having him there, the latest in a two-a-half-century-long line of American Presidents make people feel that the country, the culture they grew up with is still here. (56)

So what does the new president promise? He wants to “suspend overly restrictive” minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection regulations. (27)

As soon as possible after his inauguration, he’ll begin to dismantle the ‘wasteful, pointless, unnecessary’ Moon and Mars programs.” And what about those suspended laws, the heroine grimly asks: “Will it be legal to poison, mutilate, or infect people—as long as you provide them with food, water, and a space to die? (27)

New laws allow indentured servitude; company towns open, with workers paid only in scrip, just enough so they’ll be always be in debt. Then it’s work for next to nothing or go to jail. Cholera spreads through Mississippi and Louisiana. Half-dead people succumb to measles. Illiteracy spreads too, and everywhere there are fires and corpses. Nobody’s safe; the police and fire department charge by the call and then loot.

The story’s told from an adolescent girl’s point of view, whose decreasing innocence and physical empathy makes her vulnerable. “You’ve just noticed the Abyss,” she’s told: “The adults in this community have been balancing on its edge for more years than you’ve been alive.” (66)

Eventually, their gated complex is burned. Around her the country crumbles, and the highways are filled with people heading North to Canada, where water is plentiful. She takes to the highway, picking up strays until she has the beginnings of a utopian community somewhere in Oregon. Police in gangs rob desperate, fleeing people. The Bay Area is over run by looters. On the sides of the roads, scavengers lurk. Some are cannibals. This is not the gentle, drug-dimmed dystopia of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

Her community forms a kind of Underground Railroad, and debt slaves join them as they walk. They’re shot at, stabbed, beaten, and still they move North.

Federal, state, and local government still exist but in name only, says the author later, describing the dark landscape she painted: “I imagine the United States becoming, slowly, through the combined effects of lack of foresight and short-term unenlightened self-interest, a Third World country.” In the end her community of misfits and survivors realizes that, as in the ending of *Candide*, they must cultivate their own garden.

The Plot Against America, Philip Roth (2004)

The Plot Against America is an unusual novel: it includes not just a note to the reader, but adds 25 pages of back matter, an actual chronology of major figures and events for its alternate history.

Nazism arrives in the U.S. over a two-year period after Roosevelt loses the 1940 election to Charles Lindbergh. “Lindy” was a famous aviator in the 1930s and a member of the German-American Bund, the American pro-Nazi organization before WWII. (In reality, Lindbergh did fly to meet with Hitler and commend him.)

Lindy barnstorms America on two wings, beaming out health and vitality.

Vote for Lindbergh or Vote for War” is his slogan. Nazism is Europe’s problem, not Americans’, he insists. Lindbergh admires Hitler’s 1935 racial laws which denied civil, social, and property rights to German Jews. The anti-immigrant president warns Americans against “the dilution by foreign races’ and the ‘infiltration of inferior blood.” (13)

At the 1940 Republican Convention, “Republican Party leaders are in despair over “their candidate’s stubborn refusal to allow anyone other than himself to determine the strategy of his campaign.” (36)

“On the morning after the election disbelief prevailed, especially among the pollsters.” In the weeks following the inauguration, the new American president flies to Iceland to meet with Hitler and sign a non-aggression pact. Then the president persuades Congress to institute 24 months of compulsory training for Jewish 18-year-olds. He sets up an “Office of American Absorption” to send them out as field hands and day-laborers.

In Roth’s alternate reality, as the Germans move across Europe, the Japanese march across Asia, taking Burma, Malaya, New Guinea, Singapore. In Russia, millions of Jews fall to Hitler’s extermination.

The next few steps to Nazism in America come quickly. The German-American Bund fills Madison Square Garden with 25,000 supporters. Roosevelt responds that the entire globe is now divided between human slavery and human freedom, “We—choose—freedom!” Roosevelt chants with crowds.

Battles over voting break out in living rooms and kitchens. “And what will they vote for?” Roth’s mother asks one night and immediately answers herself: “The American people will vote, and the Republicans will be even *stronger*.” (197-198) 225 Jewish families are told to vacate the cities in America’s northeast.

“And how long will the American people stand for this treachery perpetrated by their elected president?” Walter Winchell asks in the highest-rated news shows on the air.

How long will Americans remain asleep while their cherished Constitution is torn to shreds by the fascist fifth column of the Republican Right marching under the sign of the cross and the flag? (230)

The next week Winchell is fired by his network.

What’s terrifying about this tale is the way each step happens inevitably, inexorably. “Well, like it or not, Lindbergh is teaching us what it is to be Jews. We only think we’re Americans,” the narrator’s mother points out.

“Nonsense. No!” my father replied. “They think we only think we’re Americans. It is not up for discussion. It is not up for negotiation. Others? He dares call us *others*? *He’s* the other. The one who looks most American—and he’s the one who is the least American! The man is unfit. He shouldn’t be there. and it’s as simple as that.” (256)

In this imagined future, civil rights are shredded, culminating in the first American Pogrom in September, 1942. A bomb explodes in a Detroit temple and hundreds of Jews take refuge across the Detroit River in Ontario. Crowds attending Walter Winchell’s presidential campaign speeches began to chant “Kill him!” until someone finally does, outside of Louisville.

As in the film *Seven Days in May*, Lindbergh’s plane takes off but disappears; Burton K. Wheeler, Vice President, takes over. The next day martial law is declared. The acting President threatens war on Canada if they don’t hurry up and find the kidnapped aviator.

The Canadian-Mexican borders are sealed, and airports and seaports shut down. The U.S. government insists that both Winchell’s assassination and the Lindbergh kidnapping were “planned and executed by the same cabal of Roosevelt Jews.” National Guard units enforce a

nationwide curfew. The Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan calls for the President “to implement extreme measures to protect America from a coup d’état.”

The First Lady does not agree to these moves. Critics accuse her of being under the influence of a “Rabbi Rasputin.” Americans, still confused over who grabbed Lindbergh, begin anti-Semitic riots just after sundown in Alabama, Illinois, Iowa, and a dozen other states. 122 Americans die.

Still hunting Lindy, Americans wake up to an astonishing set of facts: the *Chicago Tribune* reports that the Lindbergh’s son (kidnapped and believed dead years ago) has been reunited with his father in Nazi Germany.

Law-enforcement agencies insist desperately those anti-Semitic riots are instigated by “local Jewish elements” working as part of “a far-reaching Jewish conspiracy intent on undermining the country’s moral.” (315) The next day mass arrests begin: Governor Lehman of New York, Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter, labor leaders, economists, leftist journalists. The Army’s infantry occupies New York City. Speaking at an emergency rally there, former President Roosevelt is arrested “for his own protection” by local police. Then the U.S. army shuts down all newspapers and radio stations in New York, and “tanks close off all bridges and tunnels into the city.” The First Lady is straight-jacketed and held prisoner for a day.

Instead, she moves back into the White House with her children saying, “I will not yield to or be intimidated by the illegal representatives of a seditious administration, and I ask no more of the American people, but that they follow my example and refuse to accept or support government conducted as indefensible.” (319)

From 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the “resolute widow of the vanished God” overturns the Wheeler presidency (in office only a week). In an election two and a half weeks later, Democrats sweep the House and Senate, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt has a third presidential term.

The Lindbergh child’s kidnapping turns out to have been engineered by the Nazis, to force Lindbergh to run for president and enact Hitler’s program in the U.S. Like the alleged Russian interference in the disputed presidential election of 2016, the Nazis plotted every maneuver of his election campaign:

It all became clear. The German army needed additional time to prepare for a war against the Soviet Union, without having to think of U.S. intervention simultaneously.

Lindbergh's presidency and refusal to fight Germany gave the German scientific establishment extra time to prepare an atomic bomb for use in America, after which Lindbergh was to turn over the country to Hitler. (3235)

This novel gave this writer nightmares of thugs and toughs out there on the streets. One might dream of people coming up the back stairs and breaking in the door, armed with pistols. In the extensive afterword, Roth points out Lindbergh was making anti-Semitic, pro-Hitler speeches until days before America was attacked at Pearl Harbor. Roth's conjectures seem probable.

There's a great deal more to this story than "what if the Germans won WWII?" In this passionate book, the dominant passion is fear. Fear of your own government, fear of your own city, where one ethnic group is pitted against another. Fear like a long dark hand reaching down from the sky to grab the Capitol and the White House and squeeze them dry. Until what's left of America is only the bad, the evil, and the tormentors. In the end as Roosevelt's reelected, Roth offers us what Sinclair Lewis could not bring himself to give: relief, that it truly can't happen here.

Or could it? In the disease of authoritarianism, the body politic stutters and falls. Sinclair Lewis imagines something like a taxonomy of dictatorships:

The universal apprehension, the timorous denials of faith, the same methods of arrest, sudden pounding on the door late at night, the squad of police rushing in, the blows, the search, the obscene oaths of the frightened women, the third degree by young snipe officials, the accompanying blows and then the formal beatings. All dictators followed the same routine of torture, as if they had all read the same manual of sadistic etiquette. (285)

So, suppose these authors are right? What's in the book of etiquette for American presidents turning dictator? First comes fascism's scent: "One can only dimly feel these things but they are in the air, now, today. One can feel the loom of them—things vast, vague, and

terrible,” writes Jack London. (67) Dahlberg begins his tale on an “erratic, blowing day.” Fascism, it turns out, is something Americans can smell in the wind.

Assembling these novels into a kind of playbook, listing the (imagined) next steps to fascism, here’s what we find: first, an attack on the Press, the bulwark against a president-demagogue when one party controls the Congress, the Presidency, and the Supreme Court. Racist and anti-Semitic statements follow, designed to distract the public from more insidious actions such as developing laws against protest and attacks on federal judges resisting the Big Picture. That way, when large protests occur and are bloodied and broken up by the National Guard, judges won’t interfere or speak out against martial law.

These novels agree that of all of the tricks pacify a population, there’s none so grand as war. It matters not which country is selected – Mexico, North Korea, Iran, Venezuela – war centralizes control and seizes priority over the national budget, communications, and infrastructure. If there’s one sure way of making America patriotic (but not great), it’s declaring war. As Ambrose Pierce wrote, “Patriotism is as fierce as a fever, pitiless and the grave, blind as a stone and irrational as a headless man.”

To Presidential demagogues, both Congress and the Supreme Court prove inconvenient and optional. Public education, particularly colleges and universities, is starved until private-sector versions take over. Campus rebellions rise and fall until the price of public protest is cooperation, death, or internment.

Always, in these alternative histories, presidents campaign for office by attacking Wall Street and, unlike current events, Russia. President Whipple in West’s *A Cool Million*, President Lindbergh in *The Plot Against America*, or President Donner in Octavia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower*—they all agree on (the usual) enemies: particularly Jews, immigrants, anyone poor or too “other.” American political dystopias are usually founded on anti-Semitism.

Catholics are libeled and pretty much any religion except mainstream Protestantism deeply suspect. No Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims show up in these works; but the demagogues would have trashed them as well. Fascism doesn’t enjoy competition.

Next come the militias, West’s Storm Troopers, London’s Mercenaries, or Lewis’s Minute Men. There’s variety in how quickly these groups are armed, whether they are volunteer hoods or ex-soldiers. A personal army is indispensable to a president-turned-dictator.

American tyrants also isolate and attack racial groups and mobilize mega-corporations and hard-right politicians inside and outside of the Republican Party. For every Lee Sarason, the grey eminence behind President Windrip, there's a Bannon or Kelly to a Trump.

Finally, it's worth counting the price of defiance: loss of your funding in Dahlberg; deportation to Japan or Germany in Dick; the step-by-step stripping of possessions and dignity in London and Lewis. In these books, Americans can fight back, but they usually cannot win. Authors conclude that the populace would be too distracted, too unprepared, and too deeply divided to act.

Unfortunately, there's nothing new in fearing the American electorate would vote in a tyrant.

"What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear" titles a closing chapter in Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America* (1806). Here, he predicts that in America, authoritarianism would "degrade men without tormenting them . . . The will of man is not shattered but softly softened, bent, and guided."

But, –

of all the forms democratic despotism could take, the worst would be to turn over all the powers of government to the hands of an irresponsible person...If such a government were once established," de Tocqueville prophesized, "it would not only oppress men, strip each of them of several of the highest qualities of humanity. Despotism, therefore, appears to me peculiarly to be dreaded in democratic times." (306)

Similarly, as Edward Bellamy wrote of his alternate history:

All thoughtful men agree that the present aspect of society is portentous of great changes. The only question is, whether they will be for the better or the worse. Those who believe in man's essential nobleness lean to the former view, those who believe in his essential baseness to the latter. (222)

De Tocqueville ends his essay with the hope that drives a Jessup to organize and an Everhard to speak truth to power. It's also a message for our times:

Let us, then, look forward to the future with that salutary fear which makes men keep watch and ward for freedom, not with that faint and idle terror which depresses and enervates the heart. (314)

It's hard to remember a time when so many Americans have been so mad. With President Windrip, resistance started slowly. Today, to read the press and magazines, fury abounds and neighbors are gathering to discuss next steps. Of the dire predictions of American authors, well, one can only hope they are wrong.

“The political duty of the writer is to describe the world we live in as not being inevitable,” art critic John Berger once commented in *In These Times*:

We live in a world in which we are surrounded by a very tall and gigantic wall, almost invisible, which cuts us off from any different future.... if we live within that wall the most profound political function of the writer is somehow to try and describe what is happening within, as if it was addressed to those who might be in the future be outside, on the other side of that wall.³

Building a wall was the signature issue for the current . So it becomes ever more urgent that Americans cherish those authors who addressed the future long ago, and that authors today imagine the future possibilities for a better world.

REFERENCES

- Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward*. 1888. New York: Signet, 1960.
 Berger, John. In *These Times*, May 21, 1980.
 Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1933.
 Dahlberg, Edward. *Those Who Perish*. New York: John Day Company, 1934.
 Dick, Philip K. *The Man in the High Castle*. New York: First Mariner Books, 1962.
 Kantor, MacKinlay. *If the South Had Won the Civil War*. Chicago: Bantam Books, 1960.
 Lepore, Jill. “No we cannot.” *New Yorker* (June 5, 2017): 104.
 Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here*. New York: Signet, 2014.
 Berger, John. “After Looking.” *These Times* (May 21, 1980): 14
 London, Jack. *The Iron Heel*. London: The Journeyman Press, 1980.

³ Berger, John. In *These Times*, May 21, 1980.

Roth, Philip. *The Plot Against America*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

Scharnhorst, Gary. "Afterward." Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. New York: NAL Penguin, 1956.

Sinclair Lewis: New Essays and Criticisms, ed. James M. Hutchisson. Troy, NY: Wiston, 1997.

West, Nathaneal. *A Cool Million*. New York: Moss and Kamin, 1931.