

Cycling Toward a Better Future

Biketopia: Feminist Bicycle Science Fiction Stories in Extreme Futures

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Biketopia can best be described as feminist science fiction themed around bicycling. It's an odd-sounding concept, but the book isn't alone in this genre: It is actually Volume 4 of the *Bikes in Space* series. Sci-fi has long been concerned with the possibility of social and ecological collapse, and eminent writers like Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing have injected socially aware sci-fi with a feminist sensibility. *Biketopia* combines these two threads, centering the bicycle as a means of achieving independence from both fossil fuels and gendered constraints on mobility.

That's a tall order for the humble bike. But the short stories that collectively make up *Biketopia* show how versatile a bicycle can be. In different scenarios, it's used to maintain health, pedal away from danger, provide an alternative to cars, evade restrictions on women's movements, and provide entertainment.

Obviously, in the real world, cycling probably can't accomplish all of these things, all of the time. But these stories are exaggerated versions of real-life situations, so it seems only fitting that the bike is bestowed with exaggerated powers. Indeed, the scenarios that play out in the book may have roots in present-day reality, but they take things to a distinctly fictional realm. For example, water shortages led to riots in India last year — but global conditions aren't yet so parched that reptiles have taken over the world. We've depleted Earth of valuable natural resources — but we haven't yet started mining asteroids for minerals. Food is produced on a mass industrial scale — but factories haven't yet completely displaced farms.

There are some commonalities in many of these stories' visions of the future. Earth will be hotter. Resources will be scarcer. More positively, women and non-binary folks will be at the forefront of attempts to make the planet more hospitable. And cycling will be a crucial means of transport and self-reliance.

It's refreshing that not all of *Biketopia*'s stories focus on doom and gloom. There's a short whimsical piece about a "center for bicycles raised by fishes," which imagines sea creatures rescuing bicycles discarded in Amsterdam's canals. Another story, *The Future of Flirtation*, manages to wring humor out of a mysterious encounter between a resourceful cyclist and a lusty diner owner in a water-starved landscape. A wordless comic strip also provides some hope and whimsy.

What also distinguishes *Biketopia* from some other sci-fi collections is its mix of professional authors and amateur writers. Yet some of the stories in the collection share a problem that is common in short science fiction more generally: It can take so much time to develop a believable world that there isn't space to devote to plot and characters. Several stories

overcompensate by rushing through exposition of the past crises that led to the present day. With more space, it would have been possible to create more artful and complex descriptions of environmental upheaval, while depicting how this affects characters and relationships.

Another issue is that certain kinds of people and environments are overrepresented in this collection. One of the most richly detailed stories is called "Portlandtown," for instance. And many of the stories are set in places that are still recognizably the United States, or the shell of what once was the US. The typical protagonist of a *Biketopia* story is a young-ish, hipster-ish woman living in

a wrecked city and rebelling against "mannist" systems of power that have contributed to civilizational decay. It's a strong narrative, but one with limits.

Going further, it would have been fascinating to read stories about the significance of cycling for people who can't afford another transport mode, or to include the perspective of those who wouldn't use bikes primarily for reasons of lifestyle or ethics.

Still, *Biketopia* is a fun, unusual book that provokes some interesting speculation about how the future will look. Will we be confined to cars and other devices that record data about us and limit what actions we can independently take? Will we be wearing solar panels on our clothes and learning to patch up bike punctures as an essential survival skill? Will we be cycling as fast as possible away from the cannibals, zombies, militias, corporate fat cats, and ex-boyfriends who would do us harm? ■

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