

# Trumpeter (1992)

ISSN: 0832-6193

## A Mundate Utopia

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For the past two years I have taught a graduate seminar entitled "Environmental Utopias." 1. this year one of the novels, *Mundane's World* by Judy Grahn, was so delightful and so universally praised by seminar participants that it deserves commentary..2.

The novel doesn't fit into the normal utopian genre at all. There is no unconvinced visitor asking questions, nor is the setting on some other planet, in some foreseeable future, or on some undiscovered island. In fact the jacket cover tells us that it's set in "a mythic and fabulous pre-historic world." Perhaps. Perhaps it's the old Europe studied by Marija Gimbutas and described recently by Eisler..3. Or maybe it really is a "not yet" place, a model for a distant future. I contend that this is so, that Grahn has given us the first ecofeminist utopian vision.

But novels, utopian or not, work only when their plots work, when there is a story to be told. Here we have the story of the unexplained death of Lillian of the Bee clan intertwined with the coming of age of Ernesta (Snake clan), Jessi-ma (Lillian's niece) and three other girls. The resolution of the mystery comes about only through the story ending ritual as the five girls become women. Seemingly lesser stories - an encounter with a lion and choosing a site for a new temple are woven into the larger stories. And there are many subplots involving other beings; a single example may give a hint of the novel's flavour. There is an oak tree and ants to protect it and as the story unfolds there is a drought, a single minded Bee clan person (Jessi-ma) who tries to punish the tree for using too much water, a rain dance, too much rain and major changes in the lives of both tree and ants.

There are ants and there are aunts in *Mundane* and though the latter get more words, the lives of the former are followed with equal care. Grahn gives us a chapter titled "Remembering is One Way of Writhing in the Clutches of Three Large Aunts" (in which Ernesta tries to remember the encounter with the lion while the safety of her aunts' yard) and about 30 pages later we begin to follow the progress of three ants as they contain in their clutch the larva of a large beetle. A beetle destined for temporary storage but, like Ernesta, also destined for an active life after coming of age.

### ***Why Ecofeminist?***

Why do I call this an ecofeminist utopia?.4. First there's what the city and its society are not. It's not patriarchal, nor hierarchical, nor are there obvious value dualisms, nor could it be labelled as a dominator society, nor could the attitude toward nature be called

arrogant. Oppression simply does not exist.

What the society is like takes a whole novel to reveal, but it's certainly diverse. When Gedda, the stranger from the north with pale, fully tattooed skin, decides to come to Mundane it's because "She had heard it was a warm city on a busy river where there were so many different kinds of people no one would really mind another..5. What she finds are four complementary clans (Tortoise, Lion, Bee, and Snake), numerous "societies" (we are told of the Spider, Howler, and Arrow Societies and obviously there are others) and she is free to join any of them. In fact her daughter (one of the girls who is about to become a woman) joins a different clan. At the individual level, Ernesta's three aunts and her mother are related in the obvious sense but are very different in habits and skills.

Such diversity must lead to conflicts and the novel has plenty of them, but the question is how resolving such conflicts would come about in an ecofeminist utopia. Again the negative answer is easiest: never with violence and never by resorting to a cumbersome legal system relying on laws and contracts. The usual feminist method is resolution by consensus and that occurs. But when the Tortoise clan has a major dispute with the Bee clan because a rain dance is too successful, consensus is impossible and the answer is to reduce tension by disengagement. Twenty-five percent of the Bee clan simply leave the city and they do not return until months later for a major ceremony.

Resolving conflict is but one of a series of ethical questions posed by ecofeminist theorists. Karen Warren has laid out the connection between feminist ethics and ecofeminism compellingly..6. She suggests, for example, that the core feminist values of care, love, appropriate trust, and friendship (virtues that Grahn's characters practice) are necessary for a viable anti-naturist ecofeminism. She also points out that the importance of relationships is a common theme in feminist thought but what sets ecofeminism apart is the insistence that relationships with the earth and all its beings are as important as those with other humans. This insistence on the significance of other beings permeates the novel. For Grahn the lives of ants and oak trees, owls and mice, and a strange plant in the hills are not just background or filler, they are at the heart of both place and story. The way the inhabitants think about other beings can be illustrated with a quotation from Mundane herself, talking to the Snake clan "Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue. Talk to them all the time, every day, maintain the friendship, don't take it for granted. Once they lose interest in speaking to us, they will no longer tell us their healing secrets," she said, "and we will fall down a pit of stupidity and loneliness, we will lose our powers, and our intelligence, and rightly so. We will become blind mechanical counters and educated guessers. All of our powers of knowing come from conversations with the earth, and for us especially from the snakes and the plants."..7.

However in ecofeminist theory too much identification with other beings can be a problem. Jim Cheney makes some sharp distinctions between a male view and ecofeminism in this regard. He claims that "It is interesting that there is a very strong tendency on the part of male theorists to understand networks of defining relationships on the model of the expansion of the self to the boundaries of the whole."..8. In the novel when Ernesta's mother identifies too much with a plant she dies because of it. As one of the aunts says "Too much desire for unity, and between such unlike beings. And who knows what is really in this plant's mind?"..9.

There are questions from ecofeminist theory that the story doesn't consider. For example, are women closer to nature than men? We don't know, partially because we learn little about men. In fact for some readers the lack of attention to men's lives might be considered a fault..10. Men are in the background, in the hills, in the roundhouse telling hunting stories, and we are told a bit about the Arrow Society, crafty men who make exotic polished metal knives. Men are necessary for sexual fun and procreation (which isn't so in either *The Wanderground* or *Herland*), but neither sex nor men's lives are crucial to the story line. Story line aside, the texture of the novel is enriched when we

hear about Ernesta's mother and her lovers: "She would take them into her room where they would paint each other rich colours and play mating games, imitating birds, butterflies, and small mammals from deep in the hills." .11.

### ***Why Utopian?***

There are many classical features in a utopian novel: for example we expect to read about government, justice, education, work, trade, religion, death rites, and health care. Grahn gives us all these but with more whimsy than we expect from the genre. A single example will suffice. When Ernesta and Jessi-ma set out to discover the "rulers of the city" Jessi-ma (of the calculative Bee clan) is sure that ruling has to do with measuring and points out the irrigation water of the city by telling it where to go an dhow much at a time," Jessi-ma explains, "and it rules and directs the runoff, so during over-abundant rains these tunnels keep the streets above us from flooding water into the houses." .12. Of course there's more to ruling than measuring - there is the importance of gossip and the women in the temple making decisions and when Jessi-ma asks Ernesta whether the Snake clan has rulers she replies "The Snake clan acknowledges the oak tree as our ancestor. I guess you could call her a ruler." .13. The idea of ruling appears again at the end of the story. The five girls have become women and we are told "Everyone knew the five of them together would now be lifelong peers, ruling together, exchanging and squabbling as Sonia and Lillian and her aunts and mother and Gedda had, trying to find answers to the riddles of human living on the earth, and in the pull of the moon, and in the midst of other creatures." .14.

In addition to ideas on ruling, utopian novels always contain critiques of the society of the author. As a single example, a character in Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, speaking from 2137, says of our time "Yet the force that destroyed so many races of beings, human and animal, was only in its source sexist. Its manifestation was profit-oriented greed." .15. There is a sense in which Grahn simply provides us with an alternative so deeply different that she doesn't need to offer a specific critique of what's gone wrong in modern society. However she provides one example of what she believes is wrong here and now by showing how the same mistake can be made in a mundane utopia. It's made by Lillian, the architect whose mysterious death is a major feature of the story - and by analogy we discover that if Mundane were to perish it would do so by following Lillian's path. She dies because she has been "...doing all her living in a straight line" .16. and she "...seems frantic to make an artificial connection to others' times by mechanically measuring angles...." .17. This franticness in the story becomes the literal fear of facing the lion, running instead of attempting "...to enter its time and decipher its motives...." .18. The problem then for Lillian and by analogy for us (living a straight line, depending too much on calculation) can be overcome only by connection with the earth, facing the lion..19.

### ***Why the Title?***

What about the title? Why Mundane? There are at least three reasons. At the most literal level Grahn explains that the city was founded by Grandmother Mundane and we discover that there is still a grandmother with that name who plays an important role in the story. So, we simply have a city named for its founder and with the original family still present.

Second there is the dictionary sense of the word "characterized by human affairs, concerns, and activities that are often practical, immediate, transitory and ordinary." .20. Mundane is indeed ordinary - there is a marvellous section in which Ernesta considers onions and how to peel them and Grahn titles four separate chapters "How Cooking Took A Long Time To Learn". Life in its immediacy is filled with gossip and concerns about when it might rain or whether it's too hot to do the tile murals. One might even say that

time goes by in a hum drum way - a point Grahn describes in a passage that shows her love of playing with words "Thus it was that many of the city's people spent much of their work day humming and drumming for the purpose of the keeping of different kinds of time and for the physical expression of rhythmic emotions, and they were known for having an extremely hum drum society." .21. A third reason for the title is inherent in its root. "Mundane" comes from the Latin word for world and the novel is literally about the "World's World". I believe that the novel does what Heidegger tried to do in his essay *The Thing*.22. In that piece he made the case for the deobjectification of the world, claiming that certain things could thing (he plays with language - the noun "thing" loses its object status in our mind as we think of things, thinging). Heidegger believed that the number of things that could thing was limited ("the jug and the bench, the footbridge and the plow. But tree and pond, too, brook and hill, are things, each in its own way".23.; a belief not shared by Grahn, whose whole world is alive. In the essay Heidegger also speaks of the world worlding and until Grahn's novel I had never imagined what that might mean.

But I fear this commentary does the book a disservice by making it sound like a philosophical tract and it isn't. It's a marvellous novel by a person in love with her characters, in love with words, and in love with the mundane world, worlding. The students in the seminar paid it the ultimate compliment - not only the favourite book, but the answer to the question "in which utopia would you like to live?" Mundane's World.

## Notes

1. The other novels (and number of times used) are more's *Utopia* (1), Woolridge's *Perfecting the Earth* (2), Gilman's *Herland* (2), Huxley's *Island* (1), Callenbach's *Ectopia* (1) and *Ectopia Emerging* (1), Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (2), Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (2), and Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1). In addition we read selections from the literature of deep ecology, ecofeminism, feminism, Brown's *State of the World*, and the critical literature in science fiction.

2. Judy Grahn, *Mundane's World*, Freedom, California, The Crossing Press, 1988.

3. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1988. Eisler writes persuasively about old Europe and Gimbutas's work, introducing the subject on pages 12-14.

4. There is now a rich literature concerning ecofeminism: my own understanding has been formed by authors such as Karen Warren, particularly "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections", *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 9, pp. 3-20, 1987, and "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism", *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 12, pp. 125-146, 1990, but has also benefited from attendance at a quarter long seminar taught by Deborah Slicer at the University of Montana.

5. J. Grahn, op. cit., p. 62.

6. K. Warren, op. cit.

7. J. Grahn, p. 179.

8. Jim Cheney, "Eco-Feminism and Deep Ecology", *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 9, 115-145, 1987. Karen Warren makes the same point, op. cit.

9. J. Grahn, op. cit. p. 148.

10. Helene Cixious in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (as reprinted in *Art and Its Significance, An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, edited by S.D. Ross State U. of New York Press, 1987, p. 575) advises women "I write women: Woman must write woman. And man, man." Grahn follows this advice as did Evan Williams, a seminar participant who responded to Grahn's lack of detail on mens' lives by writing a full chapter on the Arrow Society.
11. J. Grahn, op. cit, p. 128.
12. Ibid., p. 119.13. Ibid., p. 124.
14. Ibid., p. 190.
15. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York, Fawcett Crest, 1976, p. 210.
16. J. Grahn, op. cit., p. 180.
17. Ibid., p. 180.
18. Ibid., p. 185.
19. Metaphorically the meeting with the lion is reminiscent of another great encounter with a lion in Susan Griffin's "The Lion in the Den of the Prophets" (*Woman and Nature*, Harper and Row, New York, 1978, p. 187). In Griffin's one page story/poem a group of calculative scientists try to measure the lion on their own terms (instead of "entering her time") and she devours them.
20. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, Springfield, G. & C. Merriam Co., 1951.
21. J. Grahn, op. cit., p. 81.
22. Martin Heidegger, "The Thing", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter, trans., Harper and Row, New York, 1974, pp. 165-182.
23. Ibid., p. 182.

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