

Science fiction writers imagine the way out



(Image by gremlin / E+ / Getty)

I'm reading other worlds. In one story a city is planted from seeds—buildings, people, and animals sprout like daffodils. In another, a mother and daughter clash over the fate of their planet. In another, a people, bound together by their common fate, create a new life in a decimated land.

“All organizing is science fiction,” writes Walidah Imarisha. I suppose the inverse is true—our disorganizing, our entrenchment, and the intractability of our brokenness are a failure of imagination, a failure to believe in the possibility of new worlds.

“Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction.” I keep Imarisha's words close when organizing demands are dictated by the red blaze of tragedy. A Black man dead by the Taser of a police officer or a crooked landlord blackmailing undocumented tenants. Meanwhile, the city council is entrenched in developer interests. Another fire is sparking somewhere behind our backs.

There are solutions and marches, power analysis and strategy. But science fiction offers a vision of worlds beyond tragedy. It does so through dislocation and disruption. Ursula Le Guin, N. K. Jemisin, and Octavia Butler build worlds that are strange to me. It will often take a week of reading before the distinctive language, unknown place names, and intricate histories pattern themselves in my brain. Their work is an invitation to let go of architecture and customs, economics and technology. They shake loose my expectations and assumptions.

I'm familiar with this loosing as invitation, how it curves within me toward curiosity. In the New Testament Jesus turns my attention from endless cycles of harm toward seeds, pearls, and returning children. Jesus stretches me past the scraps of good life I've come to believe we can scratch out from the ruins. The reign of God is like yeast and weeds. It is fisherfolk with nets in flight.

In the real world, the tethers of oppression are wrapped so tight. Corporate interests and monied developers curl their tentacles around hope. There isn't enough air. Jesus loosens the grip as we are given space to see that something else is possible here. He refuses reforms that polish up our entrenched systems or policies that quibble over the structure of power. The reign of God sprouts and grows, wild and unruly.

Writers of new worlds put flesh on these bones. They have imagined their way into the cracks and stretched out, freeing space for my creative hope. Over paper and keyboards they have the same tools as all of us—rock, flesh, and dirt. And they have made a new way where there was no way. I believed and now I see.

We are afforded no utopias. In Salman Rushdie's latest novel, a city is born from the ashes of a mother's self-immolation. A woman with magical powers creates this world and decides that there will be no more cities where women burn themselves on the lives of men. She will whisper new stories into the ears of her creation—and she will come to find that she cannot control it. There are wars and battles. Children lose their fathers' gods. Empires rise and sisters wail. The world we carve with our blood remains a world of people.

It is in the face of these realities, not in spite of them, that I discover the gift of world builders and science fiction. Writers imagine ways out. The paths they map echo Toni Cade Bambara: they "make the revolution irresistible." Futures without war or poverty, void of prisons and empty of scarcity are within the grasp of our collective

action. They are good, they are whole, and they are beautiful.

I saw this spring to life in science fiction stories written by activists and organizers in the anthology *Octavia's Brood*. Few of them had written science fiction before. But they were encouraged by editors Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, who reminded them that they each had "a new world living inside them."

Many of the writers come from marginalized communities. Each, explains Imarisha, is "already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us." *Octavia's Brood* is an extension of their creative act, "moving forward with their visionary legacy."

I hold fast to images of yeast and promises of ancestors on nights like the one where I returned angry and frustrated from a required training for prison volunteers. I'd spent hours being told how the women of our prison are manipulators and con artists. These women, we were warned, are rotten at their core, penned into this concrete cage to keep me safe. I was entering at my own risk, and my hopeful naïveté would only get me into trouble. The shadow of dehumanization hung heavy on my shoulder as I drove home to my children.

But that night I pulled Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* off my shelf and thumbed to the second chapter. On the ambiguous utopian planet of Anarres, children learn about a form of punishment from the past called prisons. They are so entranced that several of them decide to play out the idea in a room beneath the school. One boy volunteers to be the prisoner and is locked into an alcove with a large rock. The guards begin to sense their power. Thirty hours later, they return to find their child prisoner curled in a fetal position on the floor, covered in his own waste, and they are horrified.

But for Le Guin the absence of prison walls isn't enough freedom. She pushes her reader to interrogate the other walls that are built on Anarres—walls of duty, education, and privilege. There are walls all around us if we pay attention.

World builders offer no easy answers and no false hope. Instead, they offer us imagination, planets and galaxies to roam, where we test our possibilities and meet friends to share our sorrows. In these moments, with my eye on the page but my heart in the world, I can sense Jesus' words coming to life: "The reign of God is within you."