



The Search for the Perfect Era: Speculative Fiction and Eutopian Imagination

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1. Introduction

The end and beginning of each year tend to inspire a kind of seasonal optimism, despite all the anxieties trailing behind from the year just closed. It is precisely this cultural trait of renewed anticipation that makes this moment particularly apt for reflecting upon a perspective that contemporary speculative fiction does not seem to deploy very often anymore: the eutopian framework (*eu-*, “beautiful”, plus *-topos*, “place” in Greek), or a narrative mode that depicts an intentionally good or improved society. Over the past two decades, most science fiction and fantasy, especially those oriented around the Anthropocene, have leaned towards gloomy palettes. In effect, ecological collapse, techno-dystopia, exhaustion of planetary resources, or dark fantastical settings such as grimdark fantasy have dominated the imaginative horizon. Yet this pessimistic swing is not the full story of these genres. There was a time, not too distant yet now feeling strangely remote, when both fantasy and science fiction invested their creative energies in composing worlds suffused with optimism, where courage, ethical determination, and curiosity were not uncritical hopes but workable assumptions about human exceptionalism.

It is in part towards these moments, commonly labelled “the Golden Age” in science fiction and the “foundational era” in fantasy, that this prefatory section turns. In so doing, I do not defend a nostalgic return to earlier modes or claim the superiority of mid-century imaginaries over contemporary ones. Rather, I aim to examine how the optimistic ethos of certain fantasy and science fiction traditions once shaped human possibility at moments when technological acceleration, geopolitical disruption, and cultural turbulence tempted writers towards despair. More to the point, I wish to draw attention to

more recent narrative movements, such as solarpunk and hopepunk, which revive this optimistic impulse in new forms. These movements, as their -punk suffix suggests, inherit a countercultural spirit – not one of nihilism or violent rebellion, but of defiance against pessimism and social degradation. In this way, they demonstrate speculative fiction’s ongoing capacity to frame the futures we desire and the pasts from which we draw strength.

2. A Golden Age in the Far Future

In the introduction to his essay on greenpunk, Pacheco (2010) poses two questions: What if technology is no longer a form of contamination? What if technology is precisely the key to saving the world? Despite addressing a recent literary phenomenon, these questions also represent the creative impulse of several stories from the Golden Age science fiction era (1926-1960), often remembered for its techno-optimism, a brisk confidence in what science and engineering could deliver. Under John W. Campbell Jr.’s direction, *Astounding Science Fiction* cultivated narratives in which technological ingenuity and rational problem-solving were not only expected but routinely rewarded, shaping a readerly sense that the future was open to improvement through unwavering human effort (Page 2019). Contemporary reference works likewise emphasize this prevailing mood, characterizing the era by its assumption that scientific progress, most emphatically via impossible gadgets, was both inevitable and beneficial, a framework that helped define the period’s larger imaginative impetus (Attebery 2003). Taken together, these accounts show that Golden Age stories habitually aligned technological advancement with social possibility, producing the clear, forward-tilted optimism that became a recognizable trait of this kind of science fiction.

A shared sense of optimism towards the future persisted for long sweeps of time. Major film and television franchises that followed continued to reaffirm this forward-looking sensibility, attracting global audiences over several decades. *Star Trek* – both the original series (1966-1969) and *The Next Generation* (1987-1994) – offers the clearest expression of this paradigm, imagining a post-capitalist society grounded in diversity (human and alien), cooperation, and a pursuit of understanding of the universe rather than material accumulation. Within these imagined worlds, technological advancement has reached a point where pervasive human problems have been eliminated, creating an optimistic vision of social possibilities. For instance, space exploration has allowed humanity to reach deep space and unfathomable knowledge. Gadgets like the universal translator made linguistic barriers obsolete, though invented to avoid the need for fictional languages, while the replicator (a kind of matter synthesizer) eradicated hunger and scarcity. *Doctor Who* (1963-present) tempers this technological confidence with a stronger emphasis on moral resilience, but it similarly foregrounds humanity’s capacity for doing good; its tenth modern-series season repeatedly invokes this belief in human worth, most notably in moments of profound crisis.

Today, stories exploring a similar formula, extolling a hopeful vision on humanity’s future, have recently begun to gain traction again. These have developed into an aesthetic movement termed solarpunk, a twenty-first-century science fiction mode that envisions equitable, ecologically restored

futures powered by renewable energy and collective care. Emerging in the early 2010s through online manifestos and visual art, it developed into a recognizable literary tendency with works such as *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (2017) edited by Phoebe Wagner et al. and the *Glass and Gardens* anthologies (2018; 2020) edited by Sarena Ulibarri. These texts imagine communities who forge sustainable futures not through grand technological leaps but through communal cooperation, and localized innovation. In this sense, solarpunk fiction does not ignore current societal problems but rather operates as a cultural response to contemporary concerns like climate change, environmental degradation, and the perceived precarity of general conditions of the present.

In its narrative practice, solarpunk gives these commitments tangible shape through futures that are local, intimate, and materially attentive. Its prose mostly avoids the dense figurative language common to fantasy or the technological slang of cyberpunk. Instead, it generates a bright, unhurried clarity, favoring images of maintenance, shared labor, and small acts of care, highlighting simple everyday tasks rather than spectacle. *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures* (2021) edited by Chaudhuri et al., for instance, offers such an orientation, with stories that imagine urban spaces in which renewable infrastructures and ecological reciprocity are folded into ordinary life, not as background detail but as the conditions through which communities negotiate responsibility and belonging (Schuller 2023). Becky Chambers's *A Psalm for the Wild Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown Shy* (2022) develop this sensibility in a quieter key: their solar-powered settlements, slow travel, and rituals of care sketch a world where technological sufficiency supports ethical curiosity rather than accumulation. In terms of themes and tropes, these texts seem to draw considerably on works like Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), a narrative about Earth's hypothesized surviving inhabitants that "might be going to have lived", whose culture and language reflect their commitment towards perfect environmental harmony – a story that could be rightly viewed as a sort of proto-solarpunk. Across all these works, solarpunk's thematic core becomes clear: climate change is neither denied nor catastrophized, but refigured as a collective design challenge, approached through concerted effort rather than heroics. Now at its early stages, solarpunk still looks exceedingly zealous, but it might, in time, settle into a more tempered vocabulary of hope, one that balances its fervor with a clearer sense of the material and political labor required to sustain the futures it imagines.

3. A Golden Age in a Remote Past

Commonly located in a remote fictional past, fantasy from the end of the foundational era, in what might be considered its own parallel Golden Age, expresses optimism not through technological possibility but through ethical possibility, although these works are often read today through ecological or melancholic lenses. Fantasy is fundamentally a narrative mode that believes in the potential for wisdom and the moral capacities of ordinary beings, frequently using anthropomorphized non-human creatures as symbolic figures. To illustrate, early twentieth-century works such as L. Frank Baum's *The Magic of Oz* (1919) already exemplify this trust in the individual's capacity to acquire and

embody moral attributes. Likewise, in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), Bilbo and Frodo are not heroes by predisposition but become heroic through circumstance, loyalty, and a willingness to act in defiance of evil and their own fears. The narrative's belief that courage can be found in unlikely individuals, and that honor has pragmatic force, is not merely thematic: it is the ethical engine of the entire trilogy, something that has been referred to as a sort of "affective novum" (Boucher 2024; Suvin 1979). Other contemporaneous fantasy texts of the twentieth century similarly express confidence in human potential for doing good (and non-human potential as a symbol for certain moral qualities). C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) are structured around the assumption that ordinary children are capable of extraordinary righteousness and leadership. In a similar vein, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy (1968-1972), while more psychologically complex, still frames the attainment of wisdom as a reachable horizon.

This confidence in the moral capacities of ordinary figures continues in later fantasy, though it begins to take on a different inflection as the genre turns its attention from heroic deeds to quieter labor and personal virtue. In the realm of cartoons and anime, stories such as *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and *Spirited Away* (2001) foreground characters whose courage, or acts of courage, is measured less by battle prowess or displays of strength than by attentiveness, curiosity, and compassion. In these narratives, a kind of moral optimism emerges in that they imagine human beings as generally capable of incremental, thoughtful acts that culminate in transformative change, reaffirming a view of humankind in which hope is enacted through daily choices rather than epic deeds. In connection with such thematic streams, hopepunk's prose typically uses a plain, relational style of language, marked by openness and emotional clarity. It avoids grand metaphors and elevated diction in sharp contrast with more traditional fantasy.

In recent years, this shift has often been discussed under the deliberately loose label "hopepunk," a term coined by Rowland (2017) as a counterpoint to the cynicism of grimdark, later taken up in wider critical discourses, especially among enthusiasts and, perhaps more prominently, in German-language fantasy. As Bauer and Sinning (2025) point out, hopepunk does not constitute a genre or a subgenre in any formal sense but an ethos, that is, a mode of expression that values persistence, mutual care, and a refusal to resign in the face of the bleakest of circumstances. Interestingly, it also seems to draw both on science fiction's commitment to collective problem-solving in precarious worlds and on fantasy's conviction that ordinary people can enact meaningful moral change. Crucially, hopepunk often treats cataclysmic events not as fixed settings but as starting points for an ethos of persistent, communal care in the face of uncertainty. Because this stance is not anchored to a specific scenario, historical moment, or fixed megatext, it moves freely across speculative forms. It can appear in climate-inflected science fiction, but it finds an equally natural home in fantasy, where the work of tending relationships, communities, and fragile places becomes the ground on which hope is enacted.

4. Conclusion

Speculative fiction, at its most hopeful, carries out a kind of double vision. It looks attentively at the pressures of its moment of writing, its social unease, its technological dilemmas, its ecological crisis, and holds them up for scrutiny, as with other forms of non-mimetic writing. Yet it also presses beyond mere criticism, it envisions drastically different alternatives, opening “what if” spaces where solutions can be discussed, futures can be tested, and better worlds can tentatively be shaped. Seen in this way, optimism in speculative fiction is not a naïve gloss laid over difficulty but a narrative stance: a way of arranging attention towards potential rather than inevitability. Much like the turning of the year, with its blend of reckoning and expectation, these stories invite readers to consider what might be changed and how human effort, moral courage, and communal care might set such change in motion on an individual basis.

Such narratives, therefore, offer more than an aesthetic effect. They perform a social function, reminding the reader that imagination is itself an act of participation in the world; to picture alternatives is to create the conceptual room in which actions, however small, can take form. Even amid ambiguity, these stories insist that human agency and ethical attention continue to matter. Consequently, speculative fiction reasserts the power of storytelling as a cultural force, one capable of guiding thought, prompting action, and sustaining aspiration. By modelling futures grounded in eutopian imagination in addition to dystopian predictions that also have their relevant locus, such narratives provide fertile ground for the next waves of creative work, encouraging writers and readers alike to imagine more boldly.

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