

Are We There Yet?

En Route to Dystopia with the Angry Optimist

I'm quite a cheerful guy in person. Apparently people are surprised by this.

I don't know what they were expecting; Some aging goth in eyeliner and black leather, maybe. A wannabe hipster born a generation out of synch. But insofar as I'm known at all, I seem to be known as The Guy Who Writes The Depressing Stories. My favorite thumbnail of that sentiment comes from James Nicoll — "Whenever I find my will to live becoming too strong, I read Peter Watts" — but the dude's hardly alone in his opinion. While mulling over what to put in this essay I did a quick Google search for the descriptors commonly applied to my writing. I list a few for illustrative purposes:

Brutal
Dark (frequently "unrelentingly" so)
Paranoid
Nightmarish
Relentless
The blackest depths of the human psyche
Ugly
Savage
Misanthropic
Dystopian

Those last two get used a *lot*. Googling my name in conjunction with misanthropy and its variants nets around ten thousand hits; "Peter Watts AND dystopian OR dystopic" returns almost 150,000 (although granted, not all of them can be about me).

I submit that this is a serious mischaracterization.

Harlan Ellison opened one of his collections¹ with a hyperbolic Author's Warning about the emotional distress you risked if you read the whole book in a single sitting. That is not me. I would not pull that shit on you —because quite honestly, I don't think my stuff *is* especially depressing.

Look at the stories in this volume. "The Things" is fan fiction, an homage to one of my favorite movies and also — to my own surprise — a rumination on the missionary impulse. "Nimbus" is pure unresearched brain fart: an off-the-cuff fantasy seeded by a former girlfriend who looked out the window one day and said *Wow, those thunderclouds almost look alive*. "The Eyes of God" asks whether we should define a monster by its impulses, or its actions. And "The Island" started out as a raspberry blown at the all those lazy-ass writers who fall back on stargates to deal with the distance issue. None of these stories focuses on dystopia in the sense that, say, John Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* does.

¹ *Deathbird Stories*, if you must know.

There's wonder here, too. A diaphanous life-form big enough to envelop a star; mermaids soaring through luminous nightscapes on the ocean floor; a misguided Thing whose evolutionary biology redeems Lamarck. Even the idea of a vast, slow intelligence in the clouds has a certain Old-Testament beauty to it. Whether the stories themselves succeed is for you to judge — but the things they attempt to describe verge, to my mind at least, on the sublime.

The worldview that supports these stories may not be to everyone's taste. People aren't used to seeing their noblest dreams and aspirations reduced to the deterministic sparking of chemicals in a bone bowl, for example. Some might resist the thought that our brain stems continue to call the shots, no matter what that spoiled petulant neocortex keeps insisting. The most fundamental underpinnings of human biology — that evolution tinkered us into existence using the same hit-and-miss processes that shaped every other life-form on the planet — are downright offensive to some. But these are not especially dark thoughts where I come from. It's just biology: neutral, empirical, *useful*. I've grown up with these ideas; I think they're *neat*. I've never felt like opening my wrists when I write the stuff. If you feel that way when reading it, well, that's your problem.

I'll grant that you may not want to live in some of these worlds. I wouldn't want to bunk up with Walter White, either; that doesn't make *Breaking Bad* a piece of dystopian story-telling. Backdrop isn't story; it's not even theme. I'm a dystopian writer? Might as well insist that CSI is a show about automotive engineering because cars figure so prominently in every episode.

And it's just as well, because truth be told, I'm not very *good* at writing dystopias. For one thing, my worlds embody an almost Pollyannaesque view of human nature.

Consider: We live in a world where planet-spanning financial institutions screen job applicants for symptoms of sociopathy — not to weed out the sociopaths, but to *recruit* them. Even after those institutions ran the global economy off a cliff — knowingly, as it turns out — the bodies ostensibly set up to regulate them have stated explicitly that no matter what laws they break, nobody's going to jail. In terms of despots running the asylum, you can't get much more explicit than that — and these are the *good* guys, the leaders of the so-called "free world".

But you won't find any Goldman-Sachs in my work. No Dick Cheneys or Osama bin Ladens either. Nobody starts wars under false pretences to enrich their buddies in the oil industry; nobody justifies mass murder by invoking the divine. The pope rates a brief mention near the end of the Rifiers trilogy, but only to establish that he's fled into exile, reviled and hunted for his corporation's traditional abuse of the helpless; another instance of sunny naivety in my world-building, perhaps.

Bad things do happen in Wattsworld, of course, but generally to avert worse ones. Jasmine Fitzgerald guts her husband like a fish, but only to save his life. The nameless narrator of "Repeating the Past" deliberately induces PTSD in his grandson, but only to save his soul. Patricia Rowan (from the Rifiers books again) may authorize the destruction of the Pacific northwest and enough human collateral to put the Iraq war to shame, but she's not doing it to pad her bank account; she's trying to save the goddamn *world*. Any of the half-dozen people who read *Behemoth* — alert for classic cardboard villainy — might point to the unleashed sexual

sadism of Achilles Desjardins, but even he wasn't to blame for what he did. He was a profoundly moral individual whose conscience was neurochemically excised by someone who (again, with the best of intentions) only wanted to set him free.

I can't write real villains. I tried, once. I based one of *Starfish's* characters on someone I knew in real life. No one too extreme of course, no rapist or murderer: just a slimy little opportunist who made a career out of taking credit for other people's work and customizing his scientific opinions to suit the highest bidder. But I wasn't up to capturing even that penny-ante level of perfidy; writing the character as I saw him, he came across as a mustache-twirling cutout. The only way I could sell him to myself was to give the character more depth, make him more sympathetic, than his inspiration was in real life.

I can't do fundamentalists very well either. I try to describe a biblical creationist and end up with a condescending cartoon scribbled by a smug elitist. So characters who *do* survive to publication all come across as products of some parallel timeline where even the garbage collectors have BScs. Lenie Clarke may be a glorified pipe-fitter, but she'd never deny the existence of climate change. Kim and Andrew Goravec are pretty crappy parents, but not so crappy that you'd ever catch them at an anti-vaccine rally. Even Jess's nameless widowed dad — hunkered down against vast forces he can only dimly comprehend — regards sex in curiously erudite terms: "just another pair of mammals, trying to maximize our fitness before the other shoe dropped".

And yet, the world is in the mess it's in largely because real people *do* deny climate change and evolution, because 85% of the North American population believes in an invisible sky fairy who sends you to Space Disneyland after you die so who gives a shit about the eastern beach tiger beetle? Here in reality those folks make up the majority; they're nowhere to be found in Wattsworld². You could argue that I don't write about real people at all. For all their personal demons, for all the squalor of their surroundings, my characters are more like some kind of human Platonic ideals.

You could also argue that, having spent most of my adult life hanging out with scientists and academics, my range is just too limited to craft any other kind of character. Fair enough.

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I'm not claiming that I don't tell my stories against a dystopian backdrop. Take the *Rifters* trilogy, for example. The desperate rearguard against ongoing environmental collapse, the neurochemically-enclaved bureaucrats deciding which part of the world they'll incinerate today to hold back the latest plague, the exploitation of abuse victims to run power plants on the deep-ocean floor — none of this is the stuff of Hallmark Theatre. But in a very real sense, these are not *my* inventions; they are essential features of any plausible vision of the future. The thing that distinguishes science fiction, after all — what sets it apart from magic realism and horror and the rest of speculative horde — is that it is *fiction* based on *science*. It has to be at least semiplausible in its extrapolations from *here* to *there*.

² Actually, that's not quite true; my next novel centers around the existence of an omnipotent, miracle-performing god, and the very smart folks who study it. But I can assure you that the god of *Echopraxia* is far removed from your run-of-the-mill scripture-based deity.

Where can we go, from *here*? Where can we go, starting with seven billion hominins who can't control their appetites, who wipe out thirty species a day with the weight of their bootprints, who are too busy rejecting evolution and building killer drones to notice that the icecaps are melting? How do you write a plausible near-future in which we somehow stopped the flooding and the water wars, in which we *didn't* wipe out entire ecosystems and turn millions into environmental refugees?

You can't. That ship — that massive, lumbering, world-sized ship — has already sailed, and it turns so very slowly. The only way you can head off those consequences by 2050 is by telling a tale in which we got serious about climate change back in the nineteen-seventies — and then you're not talking science fiction any more, you're talking fantasy.

So if my writing tends toward the dystopic it's not because I'm in love with dystopias; it's because reality has forced dystopia upon me. A ravaged environment is no longer optional when writing about the near future. All I can do now is imagine how my characters might react to the hand they've been dealt. The fact that they resort to implanting false memories and neurological shackles in their employees, that they may order the immolation of ten thousand innocent refugees — that's not what makes dystopia. What makes dystopia is an inheritance in which these awful actions are the *best ones available*, where every other alternative is even worse; a world where people commit mass murder not because they are sadists or sociopaths, but because they are trying to do the least harm. It is not a world my characters built. It is only the world we left them.

There are no real villains in Wattsworld. If you want villains, you know where to look.

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Dystopia is not always an unhappy place. There are, as it happens, certain dystopias in which it's perfectly possible to be happy as a clam. Vast numbers of people go through life never even realizing that they're in one, might live through the real-time decay from freedom to tyranny and never notice the change.

It basically comes down to wanderlust.

Imagine your life as a path extending through time and society. To either side are fences festooned with signs: *No Trespassing, Keep off the Grass, Thou Shalt Not Kill*. These are the constraints on your behavior, the legal limits of acceptable conduct. You are free to wander anywhere between these barriers — but cross one and you risk the weight of the law.

Now imagine that someone starts moving those fences closer together.

How you react — whether you even notice — depends entirely on how much you wandered beforehand. A lot of people never deviate from the center of the path their whole lives, wouldn't deviate even if there *were* no fences. They're the ones who can never understand what all those fringe radicals are whining about; after all, *their* lives haven't changed any. It makes no

difference to them whether the fences are right on the shoulder or out past the horizon.

For the rest of us, though, it's only a matter of time before you wander back to a point you've always been free to visit in the past, only to find a fence suddenly blocking your way.

When that happens, you might be surprised at how close those things have crept when you weren't looking. I know I was. I'm not what you'd call a hardened criminal. I've found myself in the little white room at US Customs somewhat more often than might be expected from a "random" selection process, but I suspect that's just because your average customs agent doesn't quite know what to make of the self-employed ("Biostatistical consultant and writer? What the hell is that supposed to be?")³ I may have once been guilty of associating with tewwowists, back when my dad was still alive — a retired preacher and the General Secretary of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, I'm told he earned a CSIS⁴ file for his efforts on behalf of unpatriotic groups like Amnesty International — but none of Obama's flying terminators were likely to get all twinkly-eyed when they ran me through facial recognition.

Which is not to say that I was *intellectually* unaware of the ongoing erosion of civil rights on this continent. Only that, as a well-educated white dude with a relatively sheltered life, my awareness was more academic than visceral, more second- than first-hand. So while returning to Toronto with a friend after a trip to Nebraska, I expected to be stopped at the Canadian border, by Canadian Customs. I expected that if they decided to search the vehicle, they'd inform me first, and ask me to pop the trunk⁵.

And when none of this happened — when I was pulled over by US border guards two kilometers from the Canadian border, and looked over my shoulder to find eager guards already going through our luggage like a swarm of army ants — I expected no real trouble when I got out of the car to ask what was going on.

I imagine a number of readers rolling their eyes at this point. *Well, of course. You never get out of a vehicle unless ordered. You never make eye contact. You never ask questions; if you do, you deserve what you get.* I have nothing to say to these people. To the rest of you I say: see what we've come to. We have criminalized the expectation of reasonable communication with those who are supposed to protect us. *And people approve.*

(One of the things we tend forget about Ray Bradbury's classic *Fahrenheit 451* is that the banning of books was not imposed against the will of the people by some tyrannical authority. The grass roots in that dystopian novel didn't *want* to read.)

I learned more than I wanted to about Michigan's legal system in the months that followed. I

³ In more recent years — back before I was banned outright from entering your fine country — I just decided to have fun with it and list "masturbation" as one of my Professional Activities. In such cases it's generally a good idea to show up at least four hours before departure.

⁴ Canada's equivalent of the CIA, albeit with an annual budget of about \$43.26. Known primarily for pulling into traffic after forgetting the briefcase full of national secrets they'd just parked on the roof of their shiny black sedan while unlocking the driver's door.

⁵ Yes, this is the official protocol. It was confirmed on the record by a spokesperson for US Customs who was being interviewed about this very case.

learned of a miraculous little statute — 750.81(d) by name — which bundles everything from murder down to "failure to comply with a lawful command" into one felonious little package. It spends almost half a page defining what constitutes a "person"; nowhere does it define what makes a command "lawful". If you happen to be crossing the border and a "person" tells you to get down on all fours and bark like a dog, you might want to keep that in mind. (Fun fact: according to US law, "the border" is actually a *zone* extending a hundred miles from the actual line on the map. The rights-free atmosphere one encounters at Customs — warrantless searches, detention without cause, the whole shebang — extends throughout that band. If the Border Patrol decides on a whim to kick in the door of some poor sap living in Potsdam, there's not a lot anyone can do about it; it's a "border search", exempt from the usual checks and balances.)

In the end, of course, I was convicted. Not of assault, despite what you may have heard. The trial established that there was no aggression on my part, not so much as an expletive or a raised voice, despite prosecutorial allegations that I "resisted", that I "choked an officer"⁶. What the prosecution fell back on, ultimately, was that just after I'd been repeatedly punched the face and just before I got maced, I'd been ordered to get on the ground — and instead of immediately complying, I'd said "What is the *problem*?" It didn't matter that I *had* been punched in the face, or that the guards themselves had lied under oath. (The jury threw out their testimony wholesale because — as one of them stated on the record — "they couldn't keep their stories straight".) It didn't matter that DHS itself, called up from Detroit in hopes of boosting the charges (my arrest sheet originally accused me of "Assaulting a Federal Officer") refused to participate in the case once they'd interviewed those involved. It didn't even matter that jury members publicly opined that the *guards* should have been the ones on trial. 750.81(d) forced them to convict regardless.

It's important to note that what happened to me was *not* an abuse of the law. The law functioned exactly as it was supposed to; it gave carte blanche to authority, while criminalizing any act — even asking a question — short of immediate and unthinking compliance. We live in a society where laws are designed to protect not the populace, but the right to *abuse* the populace under almost any circumstance.

I'm focusing on the US here because that's where I encountered my own personal fence; it's also where most of you happen to live. But lest you think I'm just another smug Canuck taking a fashionable dump on the Ugly American, let me emphasize that I hold my own country in no greater esteem. The Canadian government routinely muzzles its own scientists and is currently busy dismantling even the rudimentary environmental protections with which we once made do. My home town of Toronto was the site of Canada's largest violations of civil rights, during the G20 protests in 2010: over a thousand people arrested and detained, the vast majority of them without charge⁷. Hundreds kettled for hours in a freezing downpour: ordered to leave, prevented from leaving, arrested for noncompliance. Preemptive gunpoint roustings in private bedrooms, 4a.m. arrests on the chance that some activist might otherwise commit a crime later in the day. And what kind of party would it have been without the traditional beating of unarmed, unresisting protestors by officers with obscured badge numbers, who then leveled charges of "assaulting police" on their victims? Thank the gods for cell-phone cameras. Thank the gods for

⁶ To this day I remain puzzled as to why they'd even make those allegations in the first place; they must have known that my passenger saw the whole thing, and would call bullshit. Which is exactly what happened.

⁷ 1,118 arrested; 231 charged; 24 guilty pleas; 0 convictions after trial.

Youtube.

Should you be tempted to suggest that North America — with all its authoritarian abuses — is still a paragon of liberty next to the likes of Iran or communist China or North Korea, I will not argue the point. In fact, I will emphasize it. From the saturation surveillance of central London to the Toronto PD arresting people for failure to obey search-and-seizure laws that don't actually exist, the systemic abuse of civil rights seems to be a feature of freedom-loving democracies everywhere. This, apparently, is the best we can do.

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I'm still quite a cheerful guy in person. Apparently people are surprised by this.

Especially now.

I've been asked if recent experience has altered my worldview, if my tango with the US justice system might birth even darker visions to come. I don't think so. After all, it's not as if I was unaware of this stuff before it happened to me; one or two journalists have even highlighted parallels between my real-life experiences and the things I've inflicted on fictional protagonists, as though my imaginings of police brutality were somehow prescient because they happened to occur in the future.

If anything, though, my perspective has *brightened*. I came out of it relatively unscathed, after all; I was convicted, but despite the prosecution's best efforts I didn't go to jail. I'm not welcome back in the US any time soon — maybe not ever — but at this point that's more of a badge of honor than a professional impediment.

In a very real way, I *won*.

Most would not have. Most people, up against an enemy bureaucracy with deep pockets and only the most token accountability, would have been swallowed whole. There would have been surrender regardless of guilt; desperate plea-bargains to avoid crippling court costs. If the accused did somehow summon the audacity to fight back there would have been a lopsided battle and captivity and years of debt. Michigan bills you for your time behind bars: thirty bucks a day, as if you were staying at a fucking Motel 6, as though you'd chosen to bunk up for the room service and free cable. The longer you're incarcerated, the higher the bill they shove in your face when you get out.

I've stopped getting those little yellow cards in the mail. Maybe they gave up, maybe they lost track of me when I moved, maybe the fact that I'm on the far side of an international boundary makes me not worth going after for the price of one measly night in the clink⁸. Those poor bastards I shared beans and Kool-Aid with, though: no protective borders, no sanctuary, no

⁸ From the Dept. of Small Worlds: there were books in my cell. Most had been picked over for use as pillows (which aren't allowed in the St. Clair County Jail), but amongst the remaining dregs — *Good News for Modern Man!* and *Mr. God, This Is Anna* — I did make one anomalous finding: an ARC from Tor. Some kind of Benchleyesque thriller about the Loch Ness Monster. If anyone can remember the title, drop me a line.

breaks for *them*. A year in jail and they walk out ten thousand dollars in debt. And even *they* have it pretty damn easy next to a family friend whose activist husband was disappeared in Latin America, who was gang raped and gave birth in jail; conversations with such folk leave you a bit less inclined to whinge about the injustice of Michigan's legal leg-hold traps.

I had so much help. Half the internet woke up on my behalf. Thanks to Dave Nickle and Cory Doctorow and Patrick Neilson Hayden and John Scalzi — thanks to all the myriad folk who boosted the signal and chipped in to my defense fund⁹ — I walked away no poorer than when it all began. I walked away *heartened*: look at all those friends I didn't know I had. See how obviously corrupt the authorities were shown to be in the court of public opinion. See what outrage and anger can accomplish, when the rocks are kicked over and their undersides exposed to the light (Port Huron now posts signs warning travelers of upcoming exit searches; that's something, at least). So many reasons for a white middle-class guy with influential friends to have hope.

And a lot of folks in this privileged demographic *do* seem to have hope. I once attended an event in which Cory Doctorow and China Miéville chatted about the inherent goodness of humanity, about their shared belief that the vast majority of people are decent and honorable. Another time I was the one on stage, debating Minister Faust on the subject of whether science fiction could be "a happy place", and the same sentiment resurfaced: Minister attested that the vast majority of people *he'd* encountered were *good* folks. The problems we face as a species, he said — the intolerance, the short-sighted greed, the accelerating threats of climate change and strip-mined ecosystems and floating islands of immortal plastic garbage the size of the fucking Sargasso — these were thanks to those few despots and sociopaths who sat atop the world's power structures, shitting on the world for their own profit.

I concede the point, to some extent at least; even in the depths of the system arrayed against me, bright spots ignited where I least expected them. That one border guard who refused to fall in line with her fellows, who testified that she didn't see me committing the acts of which I stood accused. The jurors who, having voted to convict, spoke out publicly on my behalf (one of them stood at my side during sentencing, in a show of support that netted her an extended ordeal of police harassment and home invasion). A judge who set me free with a small fine, admitting that I was the kind of guy he'd like to sit down and have a beer with.

Reasons to hope. The anger remains, though, even if all those other folks are right about the goodness of grassroots humanity. *Especially* if they're right; because what do you call a world of decent folks ground beneath the boot-heels of despots and sociopaths if *not* dystopia? You can trot out your folksy tales of good hearts and personal redemption, your small hopeful candles flickering down at street level; I can't help noticing the darkness pressing down from overhead, the global dysfunction that throws the world on its side despite the angels of our better natures. I don't even entirely believe in those angels, not really, not even down here in the happy realm of the little people. Zimbardo and Milgram didn't create thugs and torturers with their infamous experiments; they merely *uncovered* them. And it's not just psychos and sickos who level the forests and flush their shit into the ocean and fire up their dinosaur-burning SUVs for a two-block drive to the local Target. Those plastic islands in the Pacific have grass roots all over them.

⁹ Some of whom are *still* owed thank you e-mails, three years later.

Down in the basement, my anger never goes away; and that's informative in a way you might not expect, because I don't believe true misanthropes generally feel that way. Bitter, sure. Cynical, deeply. But angry?

You may not think much of tapeworms, but you don't generally get mad at them. You might wipe cancer off the face of the earth if you could, but not because the thought of cancer leaves you spluttering with rage. You don't blame something for doing what it does, what it's always done, what you *expect* it to do.

You only get mad if you expected better.

Apparently my writing spells *misanthrope* to a fair number of readers. It's my anger, I think, that puts the lie to that label. It winds through so much of my fiction: in the collapsing civilization of the Rifters trilogy, in the Island's betrayal of Sunday's faith, in an anonymous Ambassador's paradigm-shifting realization that back-stabbing is just the way we do things out here. You wouldn't find it in the work of a true misanthrope; such a person would just wrinkle his nose, shrug, turn away with contemptuous indifference. *Well, of course. What did you expect?*

It's why I can't pull off convincing villains. It's why I got out of that car back in 2009 even though everyone knows the rules, even though we've all heard the stories: *don't fuck with those assholes at the border, don't even make eye contact with them. You should hear what happened to me last year...*

It's because down in my gut, I still can't quite believe that villains do exist. No matter what I've read and heard, I just can't believe that you could get shit-kicked for asking a simple, reasonable question.

Most of the time, of course, I'm dead wrong. And so I get angry, because I expected better. I *still* expect better, even now. And in what might be charitably characterized as an ongoing act of noblest stupidity, I continue to act as if people *were* better, in worlds both fictional and real.

You know what that makes me, by definition?

An optimist.