



Pacific Edge

Kim Stanley Robinson

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2065: In a world that has rediscovered harmony with nature, the village of El Modena, California, is an ecotopia in the making. Kevin Claiborne, a young builder who has grown up in this "green" world, now finds himself caught up in the struggle to preserve his community's idyllic way of life from the resurgent forces of greed and exploitation.

Pacific Edge Details

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Author : Kim Stanley Robinson

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From Reader Review Pacific Edge for online ebook

Athena says

3.5 stars

Utopia means 'no place' or 'nowhere'. You can't ignore this irony reading K.S.Robinson's concluding book of Three Californias series about alternate futures seen from the perspective of Orange County, California. Pacific Edge (first published in 1990) is an ecofiction, it portrays a near-future utopian dreaming scenario that it is only slightly shifted from our own reality.

Most of the region has undergone hyper-development but citizen action has limited growth and the expansion of big corporations. The multi-nationals are disbanded and everything from businesses to homes to transportation, is small scale, sustainable and green. Social arrangements are in place, and citizens' group manage the healed natural systems with democratic governance. Daily life is quite mundane and it is based in close face-to-face relationships.

In Pacific Edge, KSR underlies a few of his concrete ideas for creating a utopia. The year is 2065 and it involves advanced technologies but the economic systems go beyond capitalism. People are part of the biosphere, but not antitechnological. In the Pacific Edge the story is, perhaps, less exciting than the post-apocalyptic society of The Wild Shore, but it is more real and believable. What KSR give us, in a sense, is how it might feel if we decide to take the first steps of reconfiguring the landscape, the infrastructure, and the social and economic systems of our societies.

Ben says

I liked a lot about this book. How many novels do you read where the local Green Party stops developers and engages with local residents in heated political arguments that are fairly sane?

But, as sometimes happens with KSR, the characters are not as sharply defined as they could be and it's easy to lose track of who is doing what. Hence I didn't like it as much as the great left activist/teacher/writer Mike Davis did.

Of the three books in the "Wild Shore Triptych" I liked The Gold Coast best, I found the crazed lives of the drug-abusing central characters to be especially convincing. Er, based on other reading of course.

Robert says

This is the second of the "Three Californias" series that I've read and it represents a huge improvement over the dull The Gold Coast, which probably would have put me off KSR forever if it had been the first book I'd read by him.

The Three Californias are really Three Orange Counties - three near future visions of what a place beloved to the author could turn out like. Gold Coast is an extrapolation of current trends toward money over everything, particularly environment. This is a "Utopia"; the one I haven't read is post-nuclear holocaust. But "Three Orange Counties" is probably not as internationally marketable a title as "Three Californias"... This was back in the days of KSR's optimism, when he thought presenting a choice of futures to people might help. Look at how strident he became when he realised that wasn't going to work: *Forty Signs of Rain* etc. And how depressed he became when *that* didn't work, either: *Galileo's Dream*. Gold Coast, here we come.

"Utopia" is in quotes because the point is that whilst this is KSR's optimistic view of how things could turn out, where corporate power is severely limited, the environment is a paramount concern and nobody owns a car as an individual, KSR recognises the will to power within humanity and that the fight against it would have to never stop. That struggle, in microcosm, is the plot of the story - to save an undeveloped hill from organised powers intent on re-asserting control illegally.

It's also a love-story. This aspect of the novel was particularly well done; I don't off-hand remember relating so directly to the descriptions of the emotional state of the protagonist during his love-pangs in any other novel.

There is one flaw, though; KSR's obsession with baseball (strictly soft-ball, in this case) is over-indulged. Indulging it at all being an over-indulgement in my view because the only thing I find more boring in sport than watching baseball is reading about it.

Chris Radcliff says

I started re-reading *Pacific Edge* with some trepidation; I worried it wouldn't stand up to my memory, that its utopian ideas would seem naive compared to my experience of the world. Luckily, the world Robinson builds is complex and nuanced, and the characters are so engaging I wouldn't have minded if it wasn't.

The main story is set in 2065, a time when many of our big problems – war, income inequality, fossil fuel dependence, corporatism – have been solved, not by technological breakthroughs, but by hard work on social and legal progress. The setting is Southern California, just like the other Three Californias novels, this time in a bucolic town where the residents split their time between work, softball, civic improvements, and communal family life.

The book also weaves in excerpts of a character's journals from 2012, which was the future when the book was written (and when I first read it). That future-present is different from ours in the details, but all too familiar in tone. The journal entries provide balance to the narrative, not just by contrasting Robinson's utopian vision with present reality, but by challenging the idea of a utopian novel itself. This impressed me most, a layer I hadn't remembered from the first reading that gave the book even more depth as a philosophical piece.

Overall: still wonderful, a worthwhile read. I'm inspired to find the other two novels and reread them as well.

Adam McPhee says

Must redefine utopia. It isn't the perfect end-product of our wishes, define it so and it deserves the scorn of those who sneer when they hear the word. No. Utopia is the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever.

Compare it to the present course of history. If you can.

Some brilliant moments that rise above, but still a lot of prosaic parts that characterize his early work (my fault for saving this to near the end). There's a fantastic bit set on a futuristic cargo ship, and you think about a similar one in *Aurora* and about how he could write a whole book set on one, but it's one chapter that's just disconnected from the rest.

There's too much baseball. The water management stuff and Californian history is boring, and while I think we need to protect wilderness and biodiversity, etc, I can't really get in to this level of deep ecology. I just don't care about them saving the hill from a development. If they'd been fighting it to fight money laundering, sure, I guess. But I suppose that's part of the point: he's setting out to prove there are still underdogs and uphill struggles and chaos in utopia. As a prototype for his future work, it's a fine book.

My only other complaint is how he uses a lot of plain jane names that all run together (Kevin, Tom, Hank, etc). I get that it's a motif in his triptych, but it's a problem in a lot of his novels. Eventually the names just start running together.

I liked the near future elements, of course. And the predictions he gets wrong (the Soviet Union still being a concern, mostly consumer technology stuff like still using VHS tapes) are as interesting as the things he gets right (submarine lifeboats, sort of predicts Skype, solar panel ubiquity, etc). Really weird to think that the first book in the series was written only three years before I was born, and we've already surpassed much of his future stuff in some ways.

In his utopian elements he has an interesting maximum wage law. People top out at a certain point (they're referred to as hundreds, because they're making one hundred percent of what they're allowed, but it's unclear how much wealth they have, and I think the amount a hundred can receive varies regionally). The money they would have been making is (I think) paid to the government as tax, and they can decide how up to 20% of it is spent (one character thinks cynically that a hundred is directing his tax money into the military and biomedical industry, so his related businesses can continue to profit through government contracts). I prefer Jeremy Corbyn's simpler maximum wage proposal: legislate that companies can only pay their highest earning employee X times more than the amount their lowest worker is paid.

Good lines:

Really liked this paragraph on teachers, brought a new perspective: (view spoiler)

Living life versus telling your story: (view spoiler)

On diplomacy: (view spoiler)

On first loves: (view spoiler)

On near-term AI: (view spoiler)

Brian says

Recommended by dear friend Lee as one of his top-10 fave novels of all time, I was a bit disappointed with it. Certainly unique to imagine a (literal, not negative) utopia with intrusive government, heavy taxation, lots of lawyers and byzantine land-use zoning regulations. And also somewhat rewarding to find repeated characters/themes in the trilogy -- but not overwhelming in the end.

A lot more romance/sex/relationships than the first two, which caught me off-guard and seemed to distract from his broader points, whatever they might be. And while nice to imagine, it seems pretty naive to suggest a USA in which -- through representative democracy -- multinational corporations have been disintegrated, earnings over \$100,000 are taxed at 100% and redirected to community dividends, and everyone grows their own vegetables and rides a bike.

Also, an unexpectedly heavy (nigh brutal) dose of action sequences from adult co-ed softball community-rec league play. Out of left field, as it were.

Lee adores this author, and is advising me to tackle yet another trilogy, but I'd only reluctantly, with caveats, recommend this series to anyone without a reasonable amount of free time to read middlebrow fluff.

Maynard Handley says

I'm not sure quite how to read this novel (and the entire triptych project) so I'll give an initial review (with spoilers), then some comments on an alternative reading.

So: the straight reading.

This is a deeply unsatisfying novel, clearly a very early effort. I'm not going to dwell on how it's unsatisfying as "literature", plenty of others have done that, but on how it's unsatisfying as a utopian novel. The basic problem is that such a novel has to explain how and why its society works, something of a theory of human relations that allows the setup to work; even the most (literally) juvenile utopias, something like *The Twenty-One Balloons*, understand that this is an essential convention of the genre.

But KSR omits these details, making the story, what, an uninteresting soap opera? The mental model he seems to be working with is that "evil developers destroyed Orange County in the early 21st C because of the evil evilness of their hearts and the greedy greediness of their desires". There's no discussion, for example, of the issue of population pressures. In the real world, as opposed to his fantasy, if every couple wants four kids, then where are those kids going to live? It is THAT growth in population that leads to things like massive development of OC, and yet in his utopia he says nothing about what happened to the excess population, and what restrains it from again growing out of bounds.

There's a similar lack of interest in thinking about issues that actually matter vs issues of minor importance. The central focus of the book is some minor hill in an area that already has plenty of undeveloped land. What does it matter if it gets developed? OK, it's supposed to be a symbol of a slippery slope or whatever, but it's only a slippery slope if that development is not replaced by another empty hill. If the population is stable and small (as it has to be if the whole system is going to work) then there is no slippery slope; there's simply not going to be any indefinitely increasing demand for ever-more development. Once again we see a refusal to actually confront root issues.

The impression I got, I'm sorry to say, is not of someone who wants to take ecology seriously, but of, in fact, the worst sort of obsession with property right --- "I got mine, and tough for everyone else". There seems to be an expectation that if Kevin is enjoying "his" hill, it's thereby his and no-one else deserves to consider alternative ways to use it. We see a more striking version of this in the constant re-iteration of the Owens Valley/LA water business, with the implication that it is reasonable for a tiny number of people in the Owens Valley to use (or not use) as they wish, a resource that could otherwise benefit millions of people in Los Angeles. My point is not to choose sides, it is to point out the utterly muddled thinking throughout the book. Half the time KSR is complaining that property rights are too strong, that we should all be communal, should share, should look at the big picture; the other half of the time he is complaining that "the system" is taking stuff away from its "natural owners" to benefit other people who "don't deserve it".

(By the way, an obsession with Owens Valley, IMHO, shows too much time spent watching Chinatown and not enough time spent studying actual California water. The flows from the Colorado [to LA and the Imperial Valley irrigation], and from the Sacramento area to the Central Valley are just as interesting, and far larger and more important --- but they can't as easily be cast into some sort of moralizing mold.)

We see this same sort of muddled thinking throughout the triptych. The Gold Coast is supposed to show out of control development, but, what's actually so bad about it? Look at the whole LA/OC area in Apple Maps. You'll see plenty of mountain land that is not developed today, and seems unlikely to be developed in the next twenty years for very practical reasons. Even in the novel, the Sierra Nevada is still there, undeveloped. So what exactly is the complaint? There are real ecological complaints about development, to do with carrying capacity, with destroying species, with using up resources. But those are not the arguments of the book. The arguments of the book appear to be "I personally find a certain type of development ugly and I wish it would go away". OK, but other people disagree with you, they like living in this type of built environment -- and by the way, it's a big country. If you want to live a rural life, what's stopping you? Go move to the very north of CA, or central Oregon, or into the desert, or to Iowa? Once again, a muddled argument that seems to boil down to the worst sort of "Everyone must want what I want, and those who don't are evil".

OK, so that's reading it straight. There is an alternative reading, which is to say that the whole thing is a kind of elaborate, not joke exactly, but mockery of the idea of utopia, and in particular the sort of eco-utopia portrayed in *Pacific Edge*. Arguments you could make for this reading include the way in which there is (really!) not much difference between the first and third novels. One is supposed to be post-nuclear apocalypse, the other eco-utopia, but what the hell is the difference? They are both based on small farming communities, local is beautiful and all that. They both show that hell is other people, that we are most hurt by irreconcilable human differences (boy wants A, girl wants B) regardless of our environment.

Likewise the small arguments between engineer-father and impractical (and ignorant) author-son in *The Gold Coast* suggest that there's **some** sort of considering of the big picture by KSR; and these sorts of nods to the knowledgeable reader become more striking in *Pacific Edge* in the form of the weird short "diary entries" from 2012 that talk about things like the futility of writing about utopia, or showing how Oscar, the large lumbering lawyer, wants to achieve flourishing via means and in a direction very different from the priorities of the (let's face it) eternal teenagers of El Modena.

And of course there are the obvious literary flourishes like the openings of all three novels that are variations on a theme, or the old-timer named Tom in each novel.

So which of these is the correct reading? I honestly don't know. I lean towards the second because KSR (in his later work) seems to be a fairly self- and other-aware guy, and because it's the sort of thing you could imagine someone wanting to write SF (but with a degree in literature) might want to do: "I'm going to write what looks like a standard, somewhat cliched, set of SF novels; but there's going to be a second level to them that the rubes will miss but which I and my colleagues will know are there". But this sort of thing is a

dangerous game to play --- I've read a number of reviews of the triptych, and they all seem to read them straight, to rave about how, for example, "Pacific Edge shows us such an idyllic world that could be, blah blah". You can't really change the world (and get it to think more sensibly about the big picture) if the message encoded in your writing is so deep that no-one can see it!

And i can't deny the fact that in the (few) interviews I've seen with KSR on these three novels, I have to admit he hews to the straight reading all the way, without so much as a hint that there's anything deeper there.

Phillip says

This short, unassuming book wormed its way into my imagination and has become one of my favorite books. I can't tell you how many people I've recommended it to and told about its semi-utopian ideal of California. Of what the world could look like if environmental movements "won" and we redefined what efficiency meant, to mirror sustainability. And the fact that regardless of how just and environmental our system is, people are still people and life will still be a tricky maze of broken individuals trying to do their best.

I went to hear KSR speak and asked a question to him (and Paolo Bacigalupi) about this book which merited a great discussion. I asked KSR to write a sequel (half jokingly) and he said no. Honestly. That ending. You bastard.

(I still love you though).

Candace says

I liked what KSR was doing with this, but was a bit mixed on a lot of the particulars. I'll be making a video review very soon!

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Never reviewed this one but you can hear me discuss it on the SFF Audio Podcast. This one is a utopia. What happens when life is good? Well, not a lot. I do like the parallel future idea that KSR had for this triptych, but I haven't read the other two.

Steev Hise says

Of this book my judgment is mixed: the author is exploring something I think we need more of: visualizing a near-future where humanity actually gets its shit together and starts fixing some seriously broken stuff, like our abuse of nature and the out-of-control power of corporate capitalism.

But sadly, as with many science-fiction writers, the prose is sort of low-quality. Well, I'll say medium-quality. I started out reading SF exclusively as a kid, but I guess when you get used to reading top-notch contemporary literature like Lehem, Bolaño, Eggers, Vonnegut, etc, and then come back to SF, it can be

disappointing. SF addresses some important subject matter but really skilled authors in the genre are few and far between... and the thing about that is that Robinson is considered one of the better ones!

I actually found myself skimming and flipping through big stretches of this novel because they were so bad and uninteresting to me. A lot of the story revolves around a love triangle between the main character, Kevin, Ramona, and the man Ramona's been partners with for many years, Alfredo. Alfredo and Ramona break up and then Kevin moves in, and the author blows many many words describing the bliss Kevin feels when he's successful at getting it on with Ramona, and how it's his first real love ever, etc etc. It's so bad that it reads like a Harlequin Romance! I don't mind a little character driven storyline, but I'm mostly interested in the future vision here, Kim, please spare us!

Sadly, I also find his sort of overexplanatory omniscient style to be a little annoying. The viewpoint switches from one character (always one of the "good" ones) to another fluidly, which is good, but you have to sit and watch each person think through all the back story and personal history that they know in order to get up to speed. I guess the other thing is that maybe as a filmmaker and someone who's been reading a lot of scripts and thinking about "show don't tell" I am less and less interested in that kind of story. And if you're going to stick us inside somebody's head, make that head unique and interesting, maybe a little unreliable, maybe profoundly different from the last head we were just in! ok? Also, most of Robinson's male characters are thinly-veiled horndogs who spend a lot of time noticing the shiny skin and muscled legs of the women they're crushing out on in this way that the author thinks is subtle but isn't really. "Insert gradually rising romantic tension here"... sigh.

Finally, even the future vision that drew me to this book was ultimately disappointing. Part of this can be forgiven by the fact that the book was published way back in 1988, before the dire situation with climate change and peak oil was really understood. Robinson actually alludes to these issues but for the most part the change he posits has mostly to do with limiting the size of corporations and limiting the incomes of individuals. These legal changes were made sometime about a generation before the events of the book take place, but there are still some rogue companies that are trying to grow bigger than they're supposed to, and some people trying to get richer than is legal.

The environment is nodded to, and there's plenty of bike riding. But there are still cars, mostly used via car-share type arrangements, and there are still genetic engineering companies, and high-tech materials companies, and they're getting ready to divert water down a huge aquaduct from the Columbia River in order to provide for the entire West now that the Colorado River isn't enough. It's typical sci-fi crap where horrid technological solutions are posited to solve the horrid problems created by the last round of technology, and people's lifestyles are somewhat more "green" but everyone still talks comfortably over video phones and travels the world in computerized super sailing ships and re-roofs their hip homes with wacky wonder-substances like "cloud gel"...

I just don't buy it anymore. The future won't look like that, not in 2065 as this book says, and not even in 2025. If we're to save the planet and humanity, the change must be much more profound. Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll still have books and bikes, but we won't be diverting the Columbia or designing heart valves. Hopefully.

Kim Clarke says

Having finally finished the third book I can give a more complete review.

It is hard to say that these books are 'about' anything specific. We are shown three alternate futures for one particular area of California. One after a nuclear war, one a future which looks more like what we could actually get and a third with something of a utopian town.

There is one character in each story, an Elder man by the name of 'Uncle' Tom, who may or may not be supposed to be the same person. What you do have is humans facing human struggles in all three stories, despite the wildly differing circumstances.

PS. I'll take number three please.

Tomislav says

second read - 2009 October 15 - **** I first read all three of Kim Stanley Robinson's Orange County novels as they came out, which was spread out over a few years in the 1980s. In the past two months, I re-read all three of them, and still like them quite a bit. They are related to each other, not sequentially, but as three alternate futures for the same Orange County (extensive suburban area of Los Angeles). The first time I read them, I was not aware of the extent to which subtle geographic references, a few plot events, and one character, were re-used in different ways in each. But watching for that now just added to my interest. They can be read stand-alone, or in any order. They are -

The Wild Shore - a post-apocalypse novel set in a world where the US was nuclear bombed, and then quarantined by the rest of the world for 100 years. A first-person narrative, and coming of age story.

The Gold Coast - a future of overdevelopment and overpopulation where some individuals try to find meaning in their lives. A dystopia.

Pacific Edge - a future where deliberate population reduction and choice of sustainable lifestyles has led to a technological but low key network of villages in Orange County. A utopia, but still with human drama.

first read - 1991 September 2

Enso says

Despite being a huge Robinson fan, I've never read two out of three books in his "California" trilogy, written back in the 1980s.

This book is full of what clearly became themes in his later works. Lots of detailed descriptions of landscape, hiking, and being out in the open, along with the strange (yet actually normal) interrelationships between normal people. There isn't a lot of overall plot in that it is an utopian novel set in a small town struggling with a legal zoning fight in the city council. Our craftsman carpenter protagonist loves the last hill that is going to be developed if he doesn't win but he's also known most of the other characters, including his antagonist, since childhood. There is a love triangle between the woman that they both love and a bit about his grandfather, a depressed hermit, who is one of the architects of the legal framework of their society. In the sense of plot, there is not a lot of "there" there. It is a book about the people and a kind of dream of southern California life. As a resident of California for almost a decade now, I can kind of dig that and, as a utopia, it sounds like a great place to live, really. It isn't tense except on the interpersonal level though.

The book is not too badly dated. The parts from his grandfather's journal, many years in the past in 2012 (!) don't sound too out of place for our world except for the focus on the AIDS epidemic as a plot point (not surprising for writing in 1988). The 2065 "present" is quaint in ways without networking, outside of people using their TVs to videoconference, and no mobile computing or cell phones. All phones are wired and I feel like a relic just reading that.

I enjoyed it and I think Robinson fans would enjoy it. I'm not sure if this is a book, versus just going to the Mars trilogy, that I'd recommend to people that don't know Robinson. It definitely gives you the early stages of things that are very present in the Mars trilogy, his global warming trilogy, and various other later novels.

Katherine says

And the last of the Three Californias. Three variations of a future Orange County. Three different fates. This book describes the best possible fate -- a world that's brought unchecked capitalism under control, a world where we are able to live in harmony with the surroundings, a possible utopia.

And yet there's still conflict, there are still people doing bad things and being evil. It's funny that KSR's most recent book dealt with real estate drama, as this one does as well, and it's the main underpinning of the story. Bad people want to build a mall, and the good guys try to figure out how to stop them.

Overall it's quite good, it really shows KSR finally starting to slip into his form as a writer, more poetic, more writing about the outdoors and about some of his alternate economy ideas. It's a vision of the country and world that I really wish I could live in.
