

A People's Future of the United States: Speculative Fiction from 25 Extraordinary Writers

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A glittering landscape of twenty-five speculative stories that challenge oppression and envision new futures for America—from N. K. Jemisin, Charles Yu, Jamie Ford, G. Willow Wilson, Charlie Jane Anders, Hugh Howey, and more.

NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

In these tumultuous times, in our deeply divided country, many people are angry, frightened, and hurting. Knowing that imagining a brighter tomorrow has always been an act of resistance, editors Victor LaValle and John Joseph Adams invited an extraordinarily talented group of writers to share stories that explore new forms of freedom, love, and justice. They asked for narratives that would challenge oppressive American myths, release us from the chokehold of our history, and give us new futures to believe in.

They also asked that the stories be badass.

The result is this spectacular collection of twenty-five tales that blend the dark and the light, the dystopian and the utopian. These tales are vivid with struggle and hardship—whether it's the othered and the terrorized, or dragonriders and covert commandos—but these characters don't flee, they fight.

Thrilling, inspiring, and a sheer joy to read, *A People's Future of the United States* is a gift for anyone who believes in our power to dream a just world.

Featuring stories by Violet Allen, Charlie Jane Anders, Lesley Nneka Arimah, Ashok K. Banker, Tobias S. Buckell, Tananarive Due, Omar El Akkad, Jamie Ford, Maria Dahvana Headley, Hugh Howey, Lizz Huerta, Justina Ireland, N. K. Jemisin, Alice Sola Kim, Seanan McGuire, Sam J. Miller, Daniel Jos Older, Malka Older, Gabby Rivera, A. Merc Rustad, Kai Cheng Thom, Catherynne M. Valente, Daniel H. Wilson, G. Willow Wilson, Charles Yu

Victor LaValle is the author of seven works of fiction: four novels, two novellas, and a collection of short stories. His novels have been included in best-of-the-year lists by *The New York Times Book Review*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *Publishers Weekly*, among others. He has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Book Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, and the Key to Southeast Queens. He lives in New York City with his wife and kids and teaches at Columbia University.

John Joseph Adams is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a science fiction and fantasy imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, as well as the bestselling editor of more than thirty anthologies, including *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych*. Adams is also the editor and publisher of the magazines *Nightmare* and the Hugo Award-winning *Lightspeed*, and is a producer for *Wired's The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. *The Bookstore at the End of America*

Charlie Jane Anders

A bookshop on a hill. Two front doors, two walkways lined with blank slates and grass, two identical signs welcoming customers to the First and Last Page, and a great blue building in the middle, shaped like an old-fashioned barn with a slanted tiled roof and generous rain gutters. Nobody knew how many books were inside that building, not even Molly, the owner. But if you couldn't find it there, they probably hadn't written it down yet.

The two walkways led to two identical front doors, with straw welcome mats, blue plank floors, and the scent of lilacs and old bindings-but then you'd see a completely different store, depending which side you entered. With two cash registers, for two separate kinds of money.

If you entered from the California side, you'd see a wall-hanging: women of all ages, shapes, and origins, holding hands and dancing. You'd notice the display of the latest books from a variety of small presses that clung to life in Colorado Springs and Santa Fe, from literature and poetry to cultural studies. The shelves closest to the door on the California side included a decent amount of women's and queer studies but also a strong selection of classic literature, going back to Virginia Woolf and Zora Neale Hurston. Plus some brand-new paperbacks.

If you came in through the American front door, the basic layout would be pretty similar, except for the big painting of the nearby Rocky Mountains. But you might notice more books on religion and some history books with a somewhat more conservative approach. The literary books skewed a bit more toward Faulkner, Thoreau, and Hemingway, not to mention Ayn Rand, and you might find more books of essays about self-reliance and strong families, along with another selection of low-cost paperbacks: thrillers and war novels, including brand-new releases from the big printing plant in Gatlinburg. Romance novels, too.

Go through either front door and keep walking, and you'd find yourself in a maze of shelves, with a plethora of nooks and a bevy of side rooms. Here a cavern of science fiction and fantasy, there a deep alcove of theater books-and a huge annex of history and sociology, including a whole wall devoted to explaining the origins of the Great Sundering. Of course, some people did make it all the way from one front door to the other, past the overfed-snake shape of the hallways and the giant central reading room, with a plain red carpet and two beat-down couches in it. But the design of the store encouraged you to stay inside your own reality.

The exact border between America and California, which elsewhere featured watchtowers and roadblocks, you are now leaving/you are now entering signs, and terrible overpriced souvenir stands, was denoted in the First and Last Page by a tall bookcase of self-help titles about coping with divorce.

People came from hundreds of miles in either direction, via hydroelectric cars, solarcycles, mecha-horses, and tour buses, to get some book they couldn't live without. You could get electronic books via the Share, of course, but they might be plagued with crowdsourced

editing, user-targeted content, random annotations, and sometimes just plain garbage. You might be reading The Federalist Papers on your Gadget and come across a paragraph about rights vs. duties that wasn't there before-or, for that matter, a few pages relating to hair cream, because you'd been searching on hair cream yesterday. Not to mention, the same book might read completely differently in California than in America. You could only rely on ink and paper (or, for newer books, PeipOr) for consistency, not to mention the whole sensory experience of smelling and touching volumes, turning their pages, bowing their spines.

Everybody needs books, Molly figured. No matter where they live, how they love, what they believe, whom they want to kill. We all want books. The moment you start thinking of books as some exclusive club, or the loving of books as a high distinction, then you're a bad bookseller.

Books are the best way to discover what people thought before you were born. And an author is just someone who tried their utmost to make sense of their own mess, and maybe their failure contains a few seeds to help you with yours.

Sometimes people asked Molly why she didn't simplify it down to one entrance. Force the people from America to talk to the Californians, and vice versa-maybe expose one side or the other to some books that might challenge their worldview just a little. And Molly always replied that she had a business to run, and if she managed to keep everyone reading, then that was enough. At the very least, Molly's arrangement kept this the most peaceful outpost on the border, without people gathering on one side to scream at the people on the other.

Some of those screaming people were old enough to have grown up in the United States of America, but they acted as though these two lands had always been enemies.

Whichever entrance of the bookstore you went through, the first thing you'd notice was probably Phoebe. Rake-thin, coltish, rambunctious, right on the edge of becoming, she ran light enough on her bare feet to avoid ever rattling a single bookcase or dislodging a single volume. You heard Phoebe's laughter before her footsteps. Molly's daughter wore denim overalls and cheap linen blouses most days, or sometimes a floor-length skirt or lacy-hemmed dress, plus plastic bangles and necklaces. She hadn't gotten her ears pierced yet.

People from both sides of the line loved Phoebe, who was a joyful shriek that you only heard from a long way away, a breath of gladness running through the flowerbeds.

Molly used to pester Phoebe about getting outdoors to breathe some fresh air-because that seemed like something moms were supposed to say, and Molly was paranoid about being a Bad Mother, since she was basically married to a bookstore, albeit one containing a large section of parenting books. But Molly was secretly glad when Phoebe disobeyed her and stayed inside, endlessly reading. Molly hoped Phoebe would always stay shy, that mother and daughter would hunker inside the First and Last Page, side-eyeing the world

through thin linen curtains when they weren't reading together.

Then Phoebe had turned fourteen, and suddenly she was out all the time, and Molly didn't see her for hours. Around that time, Phoebe had unexpectedly grown pretty and lanky, her neck long enough to let her auburn ponytail swing as she ran around with the other kids who lived in the tangle of tree-lined streets on the America side of the line, plus a few kids who snuck across from California. Nobody seriously patrolled this part of the border, and there was one craggy rock pile, like an echo of the looming Rocky Mountains, that you could just scramble over and cross from one country to the other, if you knew the right path.

Phoebe and her gang of kids, ranging from twelve to fifteen, would go trampling the tall grass near the border on a "treasure hunt" or setting up an "ambush fort" in the rocks. Phoebe occasionally caught sight of Molly and turned to wave, before running up the dusty hillside toward Zadie and Mark, who had snuck over from California with canvas backpacks full of random games and junk. Sometimes Phoebe led an entire brigade of kids into the store, pouring cups of water or Molly's homebrewed ginger beer for everyone, and they would all pause and say, "Hello, Ms. Carlton," before running outside again.

Mostly, the kids were just a raucous chorus, as they chased each other with pea guns. There were times when they stayed in the most overgrown area of trees and bracken until way after sundown, until Molly was about to message the other local parents via her Gidget, and then she'd glimpse a few specks of light emerging from the claws and twisted limbs. Molly always asked Phoebe what they did in that tiny stand of vegetation, which barely qualified as "the woods," and Phoebe always said: Nothing. They just hung out. But Molly imagined those kids under the moonlight, blotted by heavy leaves, and they could be doing anything: drinking, taking drugs, playing kiss-and-tell games.

Even if Molly had wanted to keep tabs on her daughter, she couldn't leave the bookstore unattended. The bi-national design of the store required at least two people working at all times, one per register, and most of the people Molly hired only lasted a month or two and then had to run home because their families were worried about all the latest hints of another war on the horizon. Every day, another batch of propaganda bubbled up on Molly's Gidget, from both sides, claiming that one country was a crushing theocracy or the other was a godless meat grinder. And meanwhile, you heard rumblings about both countries searching for the last precious dregs of water-sometimes actual rumblings, as California sent swarms of robots deep underground. Everybody was holding their breath.

Molly was working the front counter on the California side, trying as usual not to show any reaction to the people with weird tattoos or with glowing silver threads flowing into their skulls. Everyone knew how eager Californians were to hack their own bodies and brains, from programmable birth control to brain implants that connected them to the Anoth Complex. Molly smiled, made small talk, recommended books based on her uncanny memory for what everybody had been buying-in short, she treated everyone like a customer, even the folks who noticed Molly's crucifix and clicked their tongues, because obviously she'd been brainwashed into her faith.

A regular customer named Sander came in, looking for a rare book from the last days of the United States about sustainable farming and animal consciousness, by a woman named Hope Dorrance. For some reason, nobody had ever uploaded this book of essays to the Share. Molly looked in the fancy computer and saw that they had one copy, but when Molly led Sander back to the shelf where it was supposed to be, the book was missing.

Sander stared at the space where *Souls on the Land* ought to be, and their pale, round face was full of lines. They had a single tattoo of a butterfly clad in gleaming armor, and the wires rained from the shaved back of their skull. They were some kind of engineer for the Anoth Complex.

"Huh," Molly said. "So this is where it ought to be. But I better check if maybe we sold it over on the, uh, other side and somehow didn't log the sale." Sander nodded, and followed Molly until they arrived in America. There, Molly squeezed past Mitch, who was working the register, and dug through a dozen scraps of paper until she found one. "Oh. Yeah. Well, darn."

They had sold their only copy of *Souls on the Land* to one of their most faithful customers on the America side: a gray-haired woman named Teri Wallace, who went to Molly's church. And Teri was in the store right now, searching for a cookbook. Mitch had just seen her go past. Unfortunately, Teri hated Californians even more than most Americans did. And Sander was the sort of Californian that Teri especially did not appreciate.

"So it looks like we sold it a while back, and we didn't update our inventory, which, uh, does happen," Molly said.

"In essence, this was false advertising." Sander drew upward, with the usual Californian sense of affront the moment anything wasn't perfectly efficient. "You told me that the book was available, when in fact you should have known it wasn't."

Molly had already decided not to tell Sander who had bought the Hope Dorrance, but Teri came back clutching a book of killer salads just as Sander was in mid-rant about the ethics of retail communication. Sander happened to mention *Souls on the Land*, and Teri's ears pricked up.

"Oh, I just bought that book," Teri said.

Sander spun around, smiling, and said, "Oh. Pleased to meet you. I'm afraid that book you bought is one that had been promised to me. I don't suppose we could work out some kind of arrangement? Perhaps some system of needs-based allocation, because my need for this book is extremely great." Sander was already falling into the hyper-rational, insistent language of a Californian faced with a problem.

"Sorry," Teri said. "I bought it. I own it now. It's mine."

"But," Sander said, "there are many ways we could . . . I mean, you could loan it to me, and I could digitize it and return it to you in good condition."

"I don't want it in good condition. I want it in the condition it's in now."

"But—"

Molly could see this conversation was about three exchanges away from full-blown unpleasantries. Teri was going to insult Sander, either directly or by getting their pronoun wrong. Sander was going to call Teri stupid, either by implication or outright. Molly could see an easy solution: She could give Teri a bribe—a free book or blanket discount—in exchange for letting Sander borrow the Hope Dorrance so they could digitize it using special page-turning robots. But this wasn't going to be solved with reason. Not right now, anyway, with the two of them snarling at each other.

So Molly put on her biggest smile and said, "Sander, I just remembered, I had something extra special set aside for you, back in the psychology/philosophy annex. I've been meaning to give it to you, and it slipped my mind until now. Come on, I'll show you." She tugged gently at Sander's arm and hustled them back into the warren of bookshelves. Sander kept grumbling about Teri's irrational selfishness, until they had left America.

Molly had no idea what the special book she'd been saving for Sander actually was—but she figured by the time they got through the Straits of Romance and all the switchbacks of biography, she'd think of something.

Phoebe was having a love triangle. Molly became aware of this in stages, by noticing how all the other kids were together and by overhearing snippets of conversation (despite her best efforts not to eavesdrop).

Jonathan Brinkfort, the son of the minister at Molly's church, had started following Phoebe around with a hangdog expression, like he'd lost one of those kiss-and-dare games and it had left him with gambling debts. Jon was a tall, quiet boy with a handsome square face, who mediated every tiny dispute among the neighborhood kids with a slow gravitas, but Molly had never before seen him lost for words. She had been hand-selling airship adventure books to Jon since he was little.

And then there was Zadie Kagwa, whose dad was a second-generation immigrant from Uganda with a taste for very old science fiction. Zadie had a fresh tattoo on one shoulder, of a dandelion with seedlings fanning out into the wind, and one string of fiber-optic pearls coming out of her locs. Zadie's own taste in books roamed from science and math, to radical politics, to girls-at-horse-camp novels. Zadie whispered to Phoebe and brought tiny presents from California, like these weird candies with chili peppers in them.

Other Books

Letters from the Silk Roads, Even today there are echoes, memories, and impacts from the silk roads that affect whole cultures and civilizations and sometimes spell the difference

between war and peace, or preservation of the earth and its continual ruin. The Silk Road is a metaphor for worldwide intercultural cooperation in the new millennium. Hattori does a comparative East-West analysis of various political, philosophical, and ecological issues, particularly in Eurasia.

???. To say, "Economic development is nothing but the result of the effort of a people; any lag in growth is that people's responsibility," is an absurd remark. Not only does it reflect ignorance of the structure of the present world economy ..."