

Web Exclusive Interview: Allegra Hyde



May's flash fiction exclusive, "[Endangered](#)," imagines a world in which artists are kept in cages for their own safety. But author Allegra Hyde is more about the utopia than the dystopia—and what with the sorry state of the world right now, it's completely understandable. We talked recently about utopias, how to get closer to your own (hint: it involves going off social media), and how there are little slivers of real utopias worth paying attention to.

Erin McReynolds: In "Endangered," an unspecified future sees artists kept in enclosures "for their own good." There's a lot of not-so-inside jokes for artists here, like how they're kept complicit with occasional awards and recognition. What do you see as the most confining element of our world, from an artist's perspective?

Allegra Hyde: Well, existing within the armature of late-capitalism isn't easy for artists—or anyone really. Beyond that, though, much of the art world is built on legacies—how *this* speaks to *that*—which means that legacies of sexism and racism, for instance, are carried through along with traditions of aesthetics. For women artists, artists of color, or anyone who doesn't fit the stock image of white male genius, there are extra barriers to art-making. This is frustrating when you want to believe that the art world is inherently progressive—that the nature of art is to be ahead of its time—but, in fact, so much of that world is tied to traditions of wealth and power, which can be maddening. The challenge as an artist, in this sense, is not to go mad. Maybe that's why I direct much of my writing toward explorations of utopia: it keeps me from staring too long into the proverbial abyss.

EM: *Well said.* I almost asked "so are utopias the puppy videos of a writer's inner Facebook wall of angst?" but it trivializes how complex utopias are.

AH: Right. I think utopias are much more than cute fluffy distractions.

EM: We're surrounded by dystopias in literature, but you've done something different

here, and in the stories in your collection *Of This New World*: you imagine utopias that are, often, sweetly blundered. Can you describe the distinction between the two, as you see it?

AH: I love “sweetly blundered” as a description of the utopias in *Of This New World*. I’m drawn to the subject of utopia—or more specifically, utopian aspirations—because I believe in nurturing our sense of possibility, even in the face of difficult circumstances and the presence of human fallibility. [I also believe in the necessity of imagining better realities](#), not only worst case scenarios. The difference between dystopia and these bungled bids for utopia is, for me, the difference between cynicism and a persistent, though often illogical, hope. I see the success of a utopian endeavor—if we define “success” in terms of longevity or functionality—as less important than the inventor’s will to continue trying and experimenting.

EM: Oh man, "less important than the inventor's will to continue trying and experimenting." I feel like we need to reinforce this constantly, to create safe spaces to allow it. Those could be anything from a critic-free environment in which to ponder and create (self, I'm looking at you; social media, I'm definitely looking at you), to publishers that are interested in taking chances on books that may not do huge numbers. What safe spaces do you see the need for?

AH: I think stepping away from social media is hugely important in terms of protecting one’s creative spirit. Though Facebook and Twitter do have positive impacts on people and communities, it’s important to remember that these sites don’t exist simply to serve the public good. They exist to capture our attention for as long as possible and sell us more things. Hundreds of engineers spend their days perfecting algorithms to keep us on the sites as long as possible.

I recently learned that many social media sites actually borrow design elements from casino slot machines. We are literally gambling our attention for more attention! This should be disturbing for everyone, but especially for artists. Why are we writing so much free content for these corporations? Why are we draining our intellectual resources? Even if we aren’t on Twitter all the time, for instance, we still might always be half-thinking about our next clever tweet. But the difficulty of extracting oneself from social media—beyond the sites’ addictiveness—is that we live in a world that so often demands digital engagement. I don’t have a clear solution for creating a “safe space,” in this sense. I’ve deactivated my Facebook account. I’m trying to curb my Twitter usage. Those efforts, though, may be temporary. If anything, I’m just trying to be aware of the mechanisms in motion. If I’m playing a slot machine, I at least want to recognize that I’m playing and set up some limits.

EM: Are we capable of utopias? What's the closest thing you have experienced to one?

AH: I do think we are capable of achieving utopia—at least in an ephemeral sense. Historically, utopian experiments do not last. The Shakers, for instance, have all but died out. Most back-to-the-landers of the sixties eventually went back to the suburbs. My understanding, though, is that the members of these communities may have experienced, ever so briefly, the fruits of their ideals—before, of course, the burden of those ideals became crushing or incompatible with the

pressures of an evolving mainstream society. Still, there may have been that shining moment of perfection. That's not insignificant. Even if the Shakers are gone, their aesthetics and culture had a profound effect on the aesthetics and culture of the Northeast. And while those sixties hippie communes mostly crumbled (though not all), ideas about organic gardening, for instance, have persisted and spread.

The closest thing to utopia that I've experienced was likewise ephemeral. Back in 2011, I was backpacking around New Zealand—a nation home to more intentional communities per capita than anywhere else—and ended up at a hippie commune called Wilderland. The place wasn't perfect, there were the usual conflicts regarding labor distribution and rule following, but at least for a stretch of several days, the community seemed to overflow with goodwill and harmony and ribbon-dancing. This was right on the cusp of summer and fall, when the commune's orchards were bursting with apples and guavas and avocados and walnuts. Then, as tends to happen, the spell broke. There were arguments over onions, I remember: whether to eat them with our lentil soup or save them for winter. The weather turned chilly. People got kicked out. I left as well. It all felt sad, but I was, and remain, glad to have experienced that glimmer of hippie paradise.

EM: I admire your ability to let go of a beautiful moment and not cling to it. Is this that "gratitude" Oprah keeps talking about?

AH: I kind of cling to that moment, to be honest.

EM: What does your personal utopia look like?

AH: This is a tough question because my personal understanding of utopia continually changes. For instance, had I been an age other than twenty-three at Wilderland, I might have found the commune less utopian. Right now, though, my idea of utopia is a situation that offers solitude and camaraderie simultaneously. For all my fascination with groups of people trying to reinvent society, I'm kind of a loner. I like space and quiet. I need those things to write well. But I also like to laugh and talk and share large bowls of soup with people. My current utopia is a place where writerly solitude and big-hearted friendships coexist easily.

[clear-line]

Allegra Hyde is the author of the story collection, *Of This New World*, which won the John Simmons Short Fiction Award. She has is the recipient of two Pushcart Prizes, as well as fellowships and grants from The Elizabeth George Foundation, Jentel Arts, The Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, and the U.S. Fulbright Commission. She is currently in residence as a Lucas Literary Arts Fellow at the Montalvo Arts Center. For more about Allegra visit: www.allegrahyde.com.