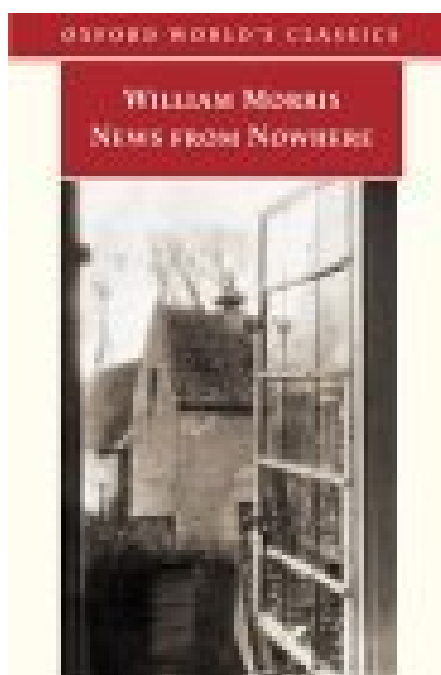




News from Nowhere

William Morris , David Leopold (Editor)

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News from Nowhere(1890) is the best-known prose work of William Morris and the only significant English utopia to be written since Thomas More's. The novel describes the encounter between a visitor from the nineteenth century, William Guest, and a decentralized and humane socialist future. Set over a century after a revolutionary upheaval in 1952, these "Chapters from a Utopian Romance" recount his journey across London and up the Thames to Kelmscott Manor, Morris's own country house in Oxfordshire. Drawing on the work of John Ruskin and Karl Marx, Morris's book is not only an evocative statement of his egalitarian convictions but also a distinctive contribution to the utopian tradition. Morris's rejection of state socialism and his ambition to transform the relationship between humankind and the natural world, give News from Nowhere a particular resonance for modern readers. This text is based on the 1891 version, incorporating the extensive revisions made by Morris to the first edition.

News from Nowhere Details

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From Reader Review News from Nowhere for online ebook

Andrea says

(1890) William Morris

A utopian novel, set in the 2000s -- It feels so strange to have lived through the futures named by so many utopian and dystopian writers, even if only by year and not imagining. A socialist returns home to Hammersmith frustrated with another meeting of argument and lost tempers (nothing has changed there) and wakes up in a world transformed by revolution. This is actually one of the nicer utopias I've read, here is the new Hammersmith and his dream of the Thames river banks, with his ideal residential architecture:

Both shores had a line of very pretty houses, low and not large, standing back a little way from the river; they were mostly built of red brick and roofed with tiles, and looked, above all, comfortable, and as if they were, so to say, alive, and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them. There was a continuous garden in front of them, going down to the water's edge, in which the flowers were now blooming luxuriantly, and sending delicious waves of summer scent over the eddying stream. Behind the houses, I could see great trees rising, mostly planes, and looking down the water there were the reaches towards Putney almost as if they were a lake with a forest shore, so thick were the big trees... (loc 108)

More on the new face of Hammersmith, the modern return to ancient ways and the fate of the city to return to village and countryside:

We turned away from the river at once, and were soon in the main road that runs through Hammersmith. But I should have had no guess as to where I was, if I had not started from the waterside; for King Street was gone, and the highway ran through wide sunny meadows and garden-like tillage. The Creek, which we crossed at once, had been rescued from its culvert, and as we went over its pretty bridge we saw its waters, yet swollen by the tide, covered with gay boats of different sizes. There were houses about, some on the road, some amongst the fields with pleasant lanes leading down to them, and each surrounded by a teeming garden. They were all pretty in design, and as solid as might be, but countryfied in appearance, like yeomen's dwellings; some of them of red brick like those by the river, but more of timber and plaster, which were by the necessity of their construction so like mediaeval houses of the same materials that I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century; a sensation helped out by the costume of the people that we met or passed, in whose dress there was nothing "modern." Almost everybody was gaily dressed, but especially the women, who were so well-looking, or even so handsome, that I could scarcely refrain my tongue from calling my companion's attention to the fact. Some faces I saw that were thoughtful, and in these I noticed great nobility of expression, but none that had a glimmer of unhappiness, and the greater part (we came upon a good many people) were frankly and openly joyous (loc 328).

This is a future in which no one knows want, work is shared out equally in small portions -- though I was a bit disappointed that women still reveled in domestic duties. Still, they also worked with stone and in building great buildings and other more unconventional places. I laughed out loud when we came to the 'golden dustman of Hammersmith'! Because everyone can wear what clothes they like, woven for pleasure and beauty. Who will collect the garbage? Mostly this guy, but everyone, and they will do it happily. Their great fear is running out of work because everything is already so beautiful after they have built and rebuilt and rebuilt again. Needless to say the slums are no more:

"Tell me, then," said I, "how is it towards the east?"

Said he: "Time was when if you mounted a good horse and rode straight away from my door here at a round trot for an hour and a half; you would still be in the thick of London, and the greater part of that would be 'slums,' as they were called; that is to say, places of torture for innocent men and women; or worse, stews for rearing and breeding men and women in such degradation that that torture should seem to them mere ordinary and natural life."

"I know, I know," I said, rather impatiently. "That was what was; tell me something of what is. Is any of that left?"

"Not an inch," said he; "but some memory of it abides with us, and I am glad of it. Once a year, on May-day, we hold a solemn feast in those easterly communes of London to commemorate The Clearing of Misery, as it is called. On that day we have music and dancing, and merry games and happy feasting on the site of some of the worst of the old slums, the traditional memory of which we have kept. On that occasion the custom is for the prettiest girls to sing some of the old revolutionary songs, and those which were the groans of the discontent, once so hopeless, on the very spots where those terrible crimes of class-murder were committed day by day for so many years. To a man like me, who have studied the past so diligently, it is a curious and touching sight to see some beautiful girl, daintily clad, and crowned with flowers from the neighbouring meadows, standing amongst the happy people, on some mound where of old time stood the wretched apology for a house, a den in which men and women lived packed amongst the filth like pilchards in a cask; lived in such a way that they could only have endured it, as I said just now, by being degraded out of humanity--to hear the terrible words of threatening and lamentation coming from her sweet and beautiful lips, and she unconscious of their real meaning: to hear her, for instance, singing Hood's Song of the Shirt, and to think that all the time she does not understand what it is all about--a tragedy grown inconceivable to her and her listeners. Think of that, if you can, and of how glorious life is grown!" (loc 900)

It is fascinating, this new topography of London which makes it no longer London, no longer a city. This is a vision of socialism in which cities are inimical, so different from those visions based on technology and scientific improvement. I did love titling banks as 'swindling kens', and that they were occupied in the transition to a new way of structuring society socially and materially:

"Tell me in detail," said I, "what lies east of Bloomsbury now?"

Said he: "There are but few houses between this and the outer part of the old city; but in the city we have a thickly-dwelling population. Our forefathers, in the first clearing of the slums, were not in a hurry to pull down the houses in what was called at the end of the nineteenth century the business quarter of the town, and what later got to be known as the Swindling Kens. You see, these houses, though they stood hideously thick on the ground, were roomy and fairly solid in building, and clean, because they were not used for living in, but as mere gambling booths; so the poor people from the cleared slums took them for lodgings and dwelt there, till the folk of those days had time to think of something better for them; so the buildings were pulled down so gradually that people got used to living thicker on the ground there than in most places; therefore it remains the most populous part of London, or perhaps of all these islands. But it is very pleasant there, partly because of the splendour of the architecture, which goes further than what you will see elsewhere. However, this crowding, if it may be called so, does not go further than a street called Aldgate, a name which perhaps you may have heard of. Beyond that the houses are scattered wide about the meadows there, which are very beautiful, especially when you get on to the lovely river Lea (where old Isaak Walton used to fish, you

know) about the places called Stratford and Old Ford, names which of course you will not have heard of, though the Romans were busy there once upon a time." (loc 992)

Morris is quite specific in this remapping and remaking of London. Here is the new topography south of the Thames:

About these Docks are a good few houses, which, however, are not inhabited by many people permanently; I mean, those who use them come and go a good deal, the place being too low and marshy for pleasant dwelling. Past the Docks eastward and landward it is all flat pasture, once marsh, except for a few gardens, and there are very few permanent dwellings there: scarcely anything but a few sheds, and cots for the men who come to look after the great herds of cattle pasturing there. But however, what with the beasts and the men, and the scattered red-tiled roofs and the big hayricks, it does not make a bad holiday to get a quiet pony and ride about there on a sunny afternoon of autumn, and look over the river and the craft passing up and down, and on to Shooters' Hill and the Kentish uplands, and then turn round to the wide green sea of the Essex marsh-land, with the great domed line of the sky, and the sun shining down in one flood of peaceful light over the long distance. There is a place called Canning's Town, and further out, Silvertown, where the pleasant meadows are at their pleasantest: doubtless they were once slums, and wretched enough." (loc 1007)

As the protagonist travels through this new civilisation, asking questions that younger people don't understand, the answers he receives from older 'scholars' make this a bit like a book of FAQs. Morris has clearly been asked about what happens to the population, how a dense city can be transformed into a series of villages and country houses. I couldn't buy it, but spreading out across England and the world is the answer:

"I am rather surprised," said I, "by all this, for it seems to me that after all the country must be tolerably populous."

"Certainly," said he; "the population is pretty much the same as it was at the end of the nineteenth century; we have spread it, that is all. Of course, also, we have helped to populate other countries--where we were wanted and were called for." (loc 1096)

But I liked that he grappled with imperialism, re-envisioned work to end exploitation both of the English working classes and the oppressed workers of other nations. Here is more on labour, machines, exploitation and imperialism:

"What's that you are saying? the labour-saving machines? Yes, they were made to 'save labour' (or, to speak more plainly, the lives of men) on one piece of work in order that it might be expended--I will say wasted--on another, probably useless, piece of work. Friend, all their devices for cheapening labour simply resulted in increasing the burden of labour. The appetite of the World-Market grew with what it fed on: the countries within the ring of 'civilisation' (that is, organised misery) were glutted with the abortions of the market, and force and fraud were used unsparingly to 'open up' countries *outside* that pale. This process of 'opening up' is a strange one to those who have read the professions of the men of that period and do not understand their practice; and perhaps shows us at its worst the great vice of the nineteenth century, the use of hypocrisy and cant to evade the responsibility of vicarious ferocity. When the civilised World-Market coveted a country not yet in its clutches, some transparent pretext was found--the suppression of a slavery different from and not so cruel as that of commerce;

the pushing of a religion no longer believed in by its promoters; the 'rescue' of some desperado or homicidal madman whose misdeeds had got him into trouble amongst the natives of the 'barbarous' country--any stick, in short, which would beat the dog at all. Then some bold, unprincipled, ignorant adventurer was found (no difficult task in the days of competition), and he was bribed to 'create a market' by breaking up whatever traditional society there might be in the doomed country, and by destroying whatever leisure or pleasure he found there. He forced wares on the natives which they did not want, and took their natural products in 'exchange,' as this form of robbery was called, and thereby he 'created new wants,' to supply which (that is, to be allowed to live by their new masters) the hapless, helpless people had to sell themselves into the slavery of hopeless toil so that they might have something wherewith to purchase the nullities of 'civilisation.' (loc 1411)

Such a simple breakdown of how imperialism worked and still works. I also like that he gives details of how utopia was all actually achieved -- through mass movement. The reason the revolution could not be repressed and destroyed:

"The members of the Committee went off quietly to prison; but they had left their soul and their organisation behind them. For they depended not on a carefully arranged centre with all kinds of checks and counter-checks about it, but on a huge mass of people in thorough sympathy with the movement, bound together by a great number of links of small centres with very simple instructions. These instructions were now carried out (loc 1803).

And of course, you then have the GENERAL STRIKE. Never in America did I hear people go on at such length about the general strike the way they do in the UK, a venerable tradition I can see. Just as the newspapers continue on:

The ordinary newspapers gave up the struggle that morning, and only one very violent reactionary paper (called the *Daily Telegraph*) attempted an appearance, and rated 'the rebels' in good set terms for their folly and ingratitude in tearing out the bowels of their 'common mother,' the English Nation, for the benefit of a few greedy paid agitators, and the fools whom they were deluding.

That made me laugh. The revolution had no manifesto though people kept waiting for it, clearly a bone of contention for the socialists of the day, just as it was recently for the occupy movement. What will happen to all of our stuff -- another FAQ. Morris is, of course, focused on work and art and the ideal relationship between them, the end of capitalist production means the creation of objects for use not profit, and frees time to make them well and beautifully:

The loss of the competitive spur to exertion had not, indeed, done anything to interfere with the necessary production of the community, but how if it should make men dull by giving them too much time for thought or idle musing? But, after all, this dull thunder-cloud only threatened us, and then passed over. Probably, from what I have told you before, you will have a guess at the remedy for such a disaster; remembering always that many of the things which used to be produced--slave-wares for the poor and mere wealth-wasting wares for the rich--ceased to be made. That remedy was, in short, the production of what used to be called art, but which has no name amongst us now, because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces (loc 1996)."

Thus the good life can be lived without a trace of the guilt that we always carry with us in a capitalist society, because anything created by the work of others is created through their oppression.

The evening passed all too quickly for me; since that day, for the first time in my life, I was having my fill of the pleasure of the eyes without any of that sense of incongruity, that dread of approaching ruin, which had always beset me hitherto when I had been amongst the beautiful works of art of the past, mingled with the lovely nature of the present; both of them, in fact, the result of the long centuries of tradition, which had compelled men to produce the art, and compelled nature to run into the mould of the ages. Here I could enjoy everything without an afterthought of the injustice and miserable toil which made my leisure; the ignorance and dulness of life which went to make my keen appreciation of history; the tyranny and the struggle full of fear and mishap which went to make my romance. The only weight I had upon my heart was a vague fear as it drew toward bed-time concerning the place wherein I should wake on the morrow: but I choked that down, and went to bed happy, and in a very few moments was in a dreamless sleep (loc 2104).

There is a great deal in here about the openness of relations both between the sexes and between friends, who can choose to live with each other in different configurations of large home or village. There are no prohibitions, rules against divorce, class distinctions, roles for men and women, requirements for nuclear families and children come and go. While sadly queer happiness is not cared for here, for its time (and in many ways ours as well), this is quite advanced in ways I like. The ideas around education -- that it just sort of happens by itself -- I found the strangest, but from what I have heard of Victorian rote and miserable schooling, also served as an advancement. All in all I quite enjoyed this, in all its sincerity and simplicity.

Just one last thing, because I've run into older uses of the word 'cockney' in a couple of other places and found it quite interesting, is this description of 'cockney villas', also a description of the further suburbs of London in Morris's own time:

As we went higher up the river, there was less difference between the Thames of that day and Thames as I remembered it; for setting aside the hideous vulgarity of the cockney villas of the well-to-do, stockbrokers and other such, which in older time marred the beauty of the bough-hung banks, even this beginning of the country Thames was always beautiful... (loc 2154).

Miriam says

A Victorian gentleman named Guest is mysteriously transported forward in time to a society less futuristic than one might expect. A utopia of environmental purity, personal freedom, and peace, it is characterized by small communities of rural artisans modeled after Morris' idealized conception of medieval (communal, not feudal) society. There are no nations and no money. Each individual does the work that he or she finds fulfilling, and the products of labor are shared freely. Rather than perfecting labor-saving technology, people have learned to value work and to prize the quality of objects over mass-consumerism. Possessions are few, but beautifully crafted and food is wholesome and plentiful. Sexual relationships are at the discretion of those involved and there are no social mores other than a general concern for the happiness of others.

Morris' radical beliefs were grounded in aesthetic rather than political or economic ideas. He himself explained his socialist convictions, perhaps flippantly, but not insincerely, *I am a socialist partly because I found out that in these days only rich men can have pretty things about them—which doesn't seem fair to me.*

In the utopia dreamt of by Morris, the populace will create and enjoy art as part of the *aspirations of the people towards the beauty and true pleasure of life*.

Morris had become interested in social amelioration soon after entering the university, when he and his close friend Burne-Jones discussed entering monastic life but instead resolved to dedicate themselves to art and make that art a *crusade and Holy Warfare against the age*. Morris' early publications, particularly his long poem-story "Defense of Guenevere", were notable for their rejection of contemporary sexual mores and interest in social justice. At this early point Morris was not yet involved in the socialist movement and his radicalism was by and large camouflaged by the romantic imagery and ornate decorative motifs that characterized his writing and visual arts. During middle age, when he became openly affiliated with the Social-Democratic Federation, he came to focus more and more on the need to create an egalitarian society, which he imagined as resembling the small communities of the Middle Ages, minus the feudalism, violence and poverty.

Morris imagined a future utopian society in which hard work, creative fulfillment, generosity, and personal freedom would be united in an environment of liberation and creativity. For Morris, socialism meant the freedom for individual pleasure, but time and again his examples of the pleasures of the future society return to art. Pleasure, essentially, was the creation of beauty. Morris stated that he did *not want art for a few any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few*. By this Morris meant not only the possession of art but also its production. Morris believed that the best and most vibrant art was made by cooperative rather than individual effort. He wrote that *popular art...is...the art which is made by the co-operation of many minds and hands varying in kind and degree of talent, but all doing their part in due subordination to a great whole, without anyone losing his individuality...* This is Morris' ideal of the fulfilling communal life, in which no one is excluded from artistic production. This point is especially clear in contrast with some of his other fiction writing, such as his last novel, *Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897). One of the locales Morris invents in this story is the Isle of Increase Unsaught, alternately named the Isle of Earthly Pleasure; here limitless production occurs without the intervention of the inhabitants, who gain no happiness from their physical resources because they are all prisoners who no longer have the knowledge or ability to create on their own or to even survive without their magical environment.

Morris was, for his era, extraordinarily optimistic about human nature. Many who shared his utopian ideals did so with a more typically Victorian pessimism, in which community, and the peer pressure that accompanied it, was a necessary restraint to man's negative tendencies. Morris believed that people really enjoyed work as much as he did himself (he typically worked 14 hours a day and eventually died of overwork) and did not see a need for a mechanism to prevent idleness. He championed sexual freedom but thought most people, left to their own devices, would settle down into nuclear families. Women would probably want to be more involved in the domestic sphere, but if some didn't care to that was also fine. Morris does not delve very deeply into economics, which he admitted to having little interest in or understanding of, and this is the main weakness of his socialist theory. Without a concrete mechanism, it is just a beautiful dream.

Jose Moa says

There are many distopic novels but few utopic,between them is this: News from Nowhere.

It is a utopic socialist novel on the edge of anarchism;taking account that it was written in 1890 in a pre high technological society and by that a no to day utopic novel,it describes a a semirural society where part of people returned from cities to the fields,a society without classes,with a comunal property of the means of production,with few useless things produced,where the people works in that it wish and by the plasure of work and produce useful and beautiful things,with direct democracy,without goverment,courts,policy,jails

,army,war,the children educated in whole freedom with plenty of books to search the knowledge and truth.

As all utopies that show a perfect society its fault is that it is build on perfect humans without greed,envy,asocial,psychopaths,natural born violent individuals and by that this utopies are beautiful dreams-the novel itself is a dream of the nameless main character-but is good to dream and try to aproximate real society to this dream.

The novel has many positive faces, being vanguardist for its time:the search of the beauty in all,the free love without social conventions,the women freedom and equality and a intense love and respect by the nature along the whole novel-to day it could be classified in the deep ecology movement.

As a example this quote said by Susan "The earth,its forests,its life! Oh if i could say,if i could show how i love it ".

The book is also profetic in his critic of globalization and the massive production of cheap low quality useless things.

A beautiful,full of humanity,beauty and poetry dream

J.G. Keely says

I first knew of Morris as the greatest bookbinder of the modern age, a master of textile design who single-handedly rediscovered half a dozen dead arts. But he was also a fantasist, contemporary with Dunsany, and a political thinker.

My search among the many branching roots of Fantasy lead me to pick up this collection, but I must admit this is not what I had in mind by 'fantasy'. Here, Morris gives us a rather bland and didactic rundown of his perfect world, loosely structured around something less engaging than a story.

Morris' pessimism about the state of man lends him a desperation, a need for things to be different, to be better. He indulges this need, but he does not build upon it. We never learn how his world came about, how it overcame the pitfalls of human conflict, of ignorance, or fear.

There was a bloody revolution, this we know, brought on by the great inequality suffered by the squalid poor. This is not remarkable, as history will attest, but in every case, such revolutions have not resulted in a sudden utopia, but in a new power structure.

In Morris' world, a pleasant socialist anarchy arises from the revolution, and the only explanation for why is that 'human beings desire to be happy'. Certainly, they seem to, but that doesn't mean they know how to achieve happiness, or that they won't be sidelined by fear, ignorance, and internal conflicts.

Morris seems to sense the ephemeral state he has painted, where the problems of the world are solved by pure coincidence, and he often foreshadows that this ideal world is poised to fall at any moment, as well it might, since there is nothing to bolster or protect it.

Like the other Utopian Socialists of Victorian England, Morris wants to see a new world born, but doesn't seem to know how to bring it about. Like them, he is content to rely on the 'pure goodness of man' to do the work for him, and like them, his pleasant thoughts prove ineffective in the end.

After reading about Morris' many laudable achievements in various arts, I felt a need to study him, hoping I might find the personal philosophy which allows a man to explore so freely, and to remain undaunted by the vastness of his studies. I quickly found his secret: he was independently wealthy from a young age.

This allowed him to pursue with absolute freedom anything which interested him, including socialism and the 'plight of the poor', which was indeed a severe one in Victorian period. So he and his other well-off friends started a social club where they would hang about and talk about how to fix the world.

And this book sounds like what would come of the conversation of a bunch of wealthy people who were concerned about the poor and decided they wanted to fix things. There are a lot of noble sentiments, many platitudes, and a complete avoidance of man's darker side.

Morris assumes that if one destroyed all of the social structures (politics, justice, law, industry, business), then all people would naturally be nice to one another, which rather ignores the fact that we developed these systems to replace the violent, anarchic systems which preceded them.

Certainly, all of these structures are rife with corruption and inequality, but it is folly to scrap an entire plan just because it has drawbacks. Every plan has drawbacks, so the real challenge is to find the one that will be most effective despite its flaws, not reject anything that isn't perfect.

Also like other idealist thinkers of the Victorian, he seems to have a very rosy, idealized view of the Medieval Period. After all, it was the Victorians who invented the world of knights, princesses, chivalry, and honor that we not think of as the Middle Ages.

Now, Morris had slightly more knowledge of the period than some of his contemporaries, since he read Medieval manuscripts in order to recreate their craft techniques, but his social understanding seems to be more rudimentary, as he seems to think of it as a Golden Age when people were intelligent and pleasant, not as a period of violent, jostling warlords who were so childish and ignorant that they would buy matching silk shirts instead of armoring their troops.

Morris' Utopia is similar to the Medieval in that it seems to be a period following a Dark Age, where people are mostly simple and uneducated, where much of technology has fallen by the wayside, and people have enough to think about with feeding their families rather than casting their thoughts to higher things.

Overall, the pervasive happiness on which his world seems to run felt more to me like ignorant self-satisfaction rather than the enrichment of a lifetime of soul-searching. Perhaps Morris likes the idea of a world run by the motto 'ignorance is bliss', but I can hardly imagine that would turn out very well.

Another concept central to his world is the notion that work and art are the same thing, and that if people simply took pride in what they did, then they would be happy and all the work would always get done. I couldn't help but think that there would definitely still be some jobs that wouldn't get done, especially ones unpleasant enough that it would be hard to find the art in them, especially if they weren't recompensed.

Certainly, there have been some projects that operated because of a pride in work--namely the great cathedrals of Europe and the Egyptian pyramids, where people were given personal prestige and spiritual guarantees for working free or at a discounted rate, but Morris gives us no such social structure to elevate the status of truly unpleasant labors.

In the conclusion, Morris asks us to believe that this is a vision, not a dream, but that isn't true. This is not a revelation of a philosophy or worldview, not a glimpse of other possibilities, but a vague and ephemeral thing, built of elation and hope--and little else.

UPDATE:

The day after writing this review, I continued with my collection of Morris' writings, finding a lecture called *'The Hopes of Civilization'* which more-or-less outlines all the problems I had with *News From Nowhere*. In the lecture he explains how his utopia could come about, why he idealized the Medieval period, what economic philosophies underpin ideas, and he even mentions manufacturing a pseudo-religious motivation for work.

So here were all my answers, all the failings of this book explained succinctly, passionately, concretely, and instructively, in a lecture. A lecture written five years before *News From Nowhere*. It is hard to describe the combination of frustration, anger, and confusion I felt as I saw him skillfully lay out what this book should have been, proving that he had all of the tools necessary to write an engrossing, insightful, well-supported work, but instead, and for unfathomable reasons, wrote something vague, repetitive, unsupported, and preachy.

I think if you took all the descriptions of how pretty women are in *News From Nowhere* (usually every other paragraph if the narrator is talking to a woman) and set them aside, the result would be longer than the entire lecture. I'm not sure what this means, but it gives me the same itchy, perturbed sensation I get when I see a luxury SUV parked across two handicap spaces.

I know other of his works have a more overtly fantastical bent, and I hope to get more out of them than I did from this.

Broadsnark says

This book will not be for everyone. There are some very clumsy parts where he goes on about attractive young ladies that I could definitely do without. And Morris is much more interested in architecture than I will ever be. But if you are interested in utopian literature and can manage to get through the 1800s prose, than you may find this book worth a read. I'm always amazed at how we are always fighting the same battles in every generation. Our means of travel and communication might be very different, but the problems Morris was addressing in 1890 are fundamentally still here and the answers are still very much the same.

Bettie? says

HUZZAH - Gutenberg comes up trumps again: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3261>

Mitch says

My Interest in this book was mostly academic. I wanted to clearly grasp Morris' perspectives concerning agrarian socialism, gender equality and the like. As a designer, I see his contributions to my occupation are profound, and I wanted to see if his politics would be as well. While the language he uses definitely shows it's age, it still maintains its accessibility. The world he describes, and the characters therein, are lovely though perhaps a little too perfect for my taste. I prefer the imperfect utopian novels of the seventies, but there is no denying the importance of this work. It is a must-read if you're interested in lefty-politics, especially that which is concerned with decentralization. You might also find it interesting if you are

studying living systems theory and ecology in relation to economics.

Ashley Walker says

Published in 1890 in response to Edward Bellamy's utopian novel "Looking Backward" published 3 years earlier.

Both these books are remarkably similar which leads me to conclude that Morris agreed with much of Bellamy's vision of a socialist society and also thought that the story in Looking Backward was a good vehicle in which to present these ideas. Morris, however must have objected to Bellamy's world being completely reliant on machine technology to achieve its utopian state and felt sufficiently irritated by it to attempt to rewrite the book but this time with the emphasis on manual handicraft as an alternative to factory based mass manufacture.

News from Nowhere starts fairly abruptly with the central time travelling character awakening into a future of idyllic peace and tranquillity. Unlike Bellamy, Morris makes no attempt to explain how time travel is achieved because the whole story subsequently turns out to be a dream. This a poor device as it devalues the authenticity of the socialist message.

Of the utopian worlds described in the two books a natural question to ask is: Which is the most realistic? Morris had the advantage as his book is written second giving him the opportunity to correct Bellamy's weaknesses. The largest hole in Bellamy's narrative is a failure to adequately explain how a rampant capitalist Victorian society could have transformed into a worldwide socialist utopia. Bellamy simply states that the people decided socialism was an idea whose time had come and so the change was brought about without violent upheaval. Morris however, thought this view far too optimistic and one of the longest chapters in News from Nowhere is devoted to a blow by blow account of civil unrest leading to a three year civil war. The war in which supporters of the capitalist system are eventually defeated involves mass destruction (often perpetrated by the capitalist class as a sort of scorched earth tactic) and nearly all factories, towns and whole cities are laid to waste.

Morris's narrative of what happened next is a little vague, but joining all the hints and snippets together the new socialist society goes on to perfect many technologies and for a while at least mass manufacture provides for everyone's basic needs. Meanwhile the population moves out into the countryside and starts to live off the land and relearns the old skills of gardening, building new homes, making their own clothes and any number of other handicrafts. As these skills slowly improve and the people become adept at self-sufficiency the technology of mass manufacture is gradually phased out except where it provides a need not met by handicraft skills. Over many years the conversion from mass manufacture to handicraft dominates society so that the use of high technology becomes almost invisible. Only two brief mentions in the book indicate it has not been abandoned all together. These are:

- 1) When the main character inquires about the lack of smoke coming from workshops he is counter questioned as to why he should think there would be smoke!
- 2) In Chapter 24 "Up the Themes: The Second Day" the party encounters some large barges on the river which have no visible means of propulsion. These are described as "force" vehicles which have taken the place of old steam powered ones.

The nature of the force involved remains unexplained but it is probably the same as that used in the workshops which produce no smoke.

Morris has been described as a medievalist because his utopian society appears to be based on a rustic machine free culture, but this is not strictly the case as the existence of "force" vehicles and smoke free workshops demonstrates. Morris's utopian citizens work their handicrafts for enjoyment and wellbeing and if that work becomes onerous they employ a high tech machine to do it. Morris's practice of refusing to speculate about the nature of the new technology is in part because he does not want to draw attention away from his beloved handicrafts and maybe also to ensure that the story does not date as badly as Bellamy's. There are many other small differences between the two books for example Looking Backward has a

government (resembling the corporate management of today) and goods are exchanged for citizens credit. There is private ownership of sorts but the need to accumulate goods has been removed. Morris's utopia is truly moneyless and there is no central Government and no private ownership. Bellamy's world is run by State Capitalism and the process of mass manufacture is carefully accounted and regulated so that everyone's needs are met. Most of the population live in cities and are incapable of carrying out any degree of self-sufficiency. In Morris's world the population live in small communities in the countryside and a large part of their needs are met by their own labour. Goods are distributed free and everyone takes great delight in helping each other. Morris's world is essentially an anarchist vision, there is no mention of any attempt to plan ahead, no central stores of goods (except manure which is stored in the old houses of Parliament). Were it not for the mysterious "force" I would have to say that Morris's world is a very fragile one vulnerable to famine and natural disaster.

Is it possible that a large population could live at a low density in the countryside? In the past the countryside supported most of this country's population as is still the case now in many third world countries, so yes it is possible. More crops can be grown per unit of land if humans intensively tend them by hand. I personally would not want to live in such a world. Anyone who has tried to take on some level of self-sufficiency knows it is very hard work with very limited leisure time and as for making your own clothes building your own house and doing everything else to keep your material needs met, well it's not going to be a practical proposition even with modern technology to aid ones efforts.

Which utopia would I rather live in, Morris's or Bellamy's? On balance I think it would be Bellamy's as he has an organised social structure. If I were to fall ill or had some disability at least I could feel secure in the knowledge that I would be taken care of by a benevolent state. In Morris's world I would have to depend on the charity of individuals. Morris says that I would be taken care of but I would be beholden to certain individuals to sacrifice their time and individual desires to provide that care and I would end up feeling guilty and worthless.

I do find the handicraft focus of Morris's world attractive as I enjoy being creative and have a deep desire to express my individuality in what I chose to do and wear. I find that my desires are deeply frustrated by the modern world of mass manufacture where to wear clothes that have been designed and made by yourself is considered eccentric and weird. However, I think that not everyone is equally inclined to find self-expression through individual creativity. Morris's focus on handicraft is a result of bias towards his own interests. It may be a Utopia for him but probably not for all.

I also think that ultimately Morris's world is essentially a stagnant one. He mentions that there are still scientists who are presumably working on their own interests, slowly increasing the sum of human knowledge but there is no apparent mechanism by which technology can be improved any further and education is left to the whim of the individual. There is also a lack of any communal effort to improve the lot of humanity (no communal effort to stamp out disease, no communal effort to explore inner or outer space). In fact the inhabitants of Morris's world having replaced all the "ugly iron bridges with pleasing solid stone structures" and dismantled and replaced most of the "hideous" Victorian architecture express some fear that they will run out of work to keep them occupied.

Utopias are or should be all about how equality is achieved. Both stories tackle this difficult subject well. Bellamy advocates distribution of an equal share of the nation's wealth and it is impossible to accumulate additional wealth. Each citizen (apart from the infirm) are required to provide a certain equal amount of work to ensure all have a comfortable lifestyle. A great deal of effort is put into assessing work equality. Not just the amount of time spent at work but also the difficulty and desirability of the work is taken into account. The only unequal aspect of Bellamy's world is social status which is used as an incentive to work hard. Clever and able people are given better jobs with greater responsibility and power. Less able people are given mundane and dirty jobs but are at least given more leisure time as compensation. In Morris's world equality is less overt as it has not been built (artificially) into the system but arises naturally from the basic rule that no one is allowed to own wealth or property. It is possible to achieve higher status via the expression of one's creativity and prowess at the work you choose to do however, less able people still end up doing the drudge work without any apparent compensation.

One further note on equality. In both utopias the authors were obsessed with health and beauty (particularly of women!). They repeatedly refer to the glowing health and youthful good looks of their world's inhabitants

and compare this to the run down, worn out, and sick working class denizens of the real world capitalist economies of their time. This visible sign of inequality is perhaps the driving force of their desire to create a better world and probably seems a bit strange to the typical citizen of the 21st century where the standards of living have increased and a national health service provides medical care at little personal cost. Also much of the hard labour in manual work has been replaced by modern machinery. However, there are still plenty of people still alive in the UK with wrecked bodies resulting from overwork. As a young man in my native North East England I was always struck by the huge number of worn out, aged before their time, people (particularly women) walking around the streets of the big towns in Teeside. I can only imagine what it was like in Victorian England! Perhaps the increase in living standards is the chief reason why utopian fiction has gone out of fashion but now that inequality and comparative poverty is on the increase the time should be right for a modern work of utopian fiction.

Kerry says

I heard "News from Nowhere" described as a socialist utopian romance, and while it's definitely all of those things it's also super dull and patronising. The main action so far has been the main character, William Guest (DO YOU SEE) wandering around Future London, which has been transformed into a chilled-out libertarian socialist paradise after a mysterious revolution, and saying things like "But how can you simply give this beautifully worked tobacco pouch to me? Surely I should pay you for it!" while all the other characters look curiously at him and go "Pay? What is this pay? Oh, yes, now I remember hearing tales of such things as 'payment' and 'money' being common at the end of the nineteenth century, but their meaning has been fair lost to history!" (I started playing a drinking game in my head for whenever a future character randomly referenced the end of the nineteenth century, but stopped when it happened three times on one page.)

Currently Our Hero has been sitting with a Future London character and having a long and stilted conversation on the theme of But Explain How This Utopian Paradise Works for thirty-four pages, punctuated every so often by Our Hero going, "But wait, how can this be? Isn't commerce necessary for a society to progress?" and Future Londoner going, "Yes, this was indeed the folly of many people at the end of the nineteenth century! Fortunately we have moved past that, as I shall now explain!"

It's dull when Ayn Rand does it and it's still dull when a socialist does it, and the gender politics are terrrrrrrible. I'm quitting.

Layla (Between the Lines) says

This was another assigned reading for my English class. I won't be writing a full review for it because I have too many essays to write as is.

Stephen says

This is a fantastic book. It is a work that describes a visionary future, one which left me thinking that I wanted to live in that place. Of course, the place doesn't exist, but that doesn't prevent us from wanting to build elements of this utopia.

The book, first written in 1892, is set in 2003. The narrator - one William Guest - is transported from late Victorian London to the London of the imagined future of today. Much of what we see today is missing. There are no cars, there is no electricity, and, most galling to modernists, there is no ubiquitous internet. All of that simply hasn't happened. Instead, we have a rather idealistic vision of what England could be. One that is free from toil (but not from work), one from which want has been banished, and one in which respect for the individual has replaced respect for the corporation - both municipal and private.

One might ask how, in this world without money and compulsion, does anything ever get done? It is important at this point to note that toil has been banished rather than work. People produce the necessities of life for the simple joy of creation. To win the applause of their fellow. To gain the sense of fulfillment that comes from doing a good job that is of benefit of others. The motive in society is to provide a public benefit rather than to produce a private gain. It assumes that the accumulative spirit can be restrained, that people are happier with the stuff they have rather than wanting more stuff. It also helps that people are content to live far simpler lives than we currently do. The expectations of life, in this world, have shifted from wanting greater levels of material enjoyment to wanting greater levels of spiritual enjoyment.

The cynics might scoff at this. However, it does warrant further thought. Many human enterprises are based upon the principle of co-operation rather than competition. A loving and nurturing family is one in which the family members work for each other, where parents forego material possessions in order to foster and nurture their children. Equally, despite the claims of the neo-conservatives, one could argue that commercial life is dominated by co-operation. The customer co-operates with the supplier. Even that taxpayer co-operates with the tax collector. In many cases, co-operation is more evident than competition. This is why this vision ought not to be written off out of hand as idealistic and utopian.

Visions of this nature come around periodically. Normally they accompany periods of economic distress, when people in general are keen to think about alternative ways to organise their affairs. I found much in this book to resonate with Keynes' vision of the economic possibilities for the grandchildren of his generation. More recently, there has been much discussion along these lines by the Occupy Movement.

It is not likely that such periods of questioning will come to much in practice because the power of money and the desire to accumulate soon take over again. This does not mean that we should despair of ourselves. Just as the mainstream asserts itself, it is always possible to find those who live outside of the mainstream - whether they are Morris' Utopian Socialists or Keynes' Bloomsbury Set - and to adhere to these deviant principles. That is the comfort this book gives me. To know that I am not alone in seeking a different way, and to see the path which others have forged before me.

jjonas says

Tylsä, kaavamainen, yhteiskunnallisesti epäuskottava ja fiktiivisenä tarinana huono kertomus.

(Tämä arvio perustuu vuonna 1900 julkaistuun J.K.Karin suomennokseen *Ihannemaa*.)

Morrisin kirja on aika samankaltainen kuin monet sitä edeltävät vastaavat kertomukset (Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella jne.), joissa kertojaminä on vierailemassa toisenlaisessa yhteiskunnassa ja ihmettelee kokemuksiaan siellä.

Ihannemaassa kaikki saavat tehdä mitä haluavat, koneiden käyttö on vähennetty minimiin koska käsityö on paljon hausempaa, eikä erityistä hallitusta tai politiikkaa ole. Pahat teot ovat lähinnä vahinkoja ja väärinkäsityksiä. Kaikki työ on palkitsevaa ja mukavaa. Kaikki ihmiset ovat kauniita ja vuoroin punastelevat,

vuoroin nauravat. Kysymys naisten tekemistä kotitöistä ratkaistaan alkamalla arvostaa niitä siinä missä muitakin töitä.

Tarina on huono ja dialogi hyvin opettavaista. Ylipäättään kaikki on hyvin "opettavaista" ja niin yksinkertaisesti sommiteltu juuri tätä tarkoitusta varten, että mieleen tulee joku lastenkirja. Kertojan tehtävänä on hämmästellä kommunistista käsityöläis-anarkiaa, ja hämmästyihin vastaavien muutaman paikallisen tehtävänä on joko olla käsittämättä, mitä vieras oikein tarkoittaa kummallisilla kysymyksillään, tai sitten antaa joku perusteellinen vastaus, jonka vieraamme nielaisee aina kritiikittä.

Uuteen yhteiskuntaan on päästy väkivaltaisen vallankumouksen ja sisällissodan kautta. Köyhien kansannousun väkivaltainen tukahduttaminen johtaa yleislakkoon, joka muutamassa päivässä saa vanhan järjestelmän polvilleen. "Tärkein syy voittoon oli kuitenkin se, että työntekijät kaikkialla, missä he eivät olleet väkivaltaisen pakon alaisina, tekivät työtä 'kapinallisille', mutta ei vanhoillisille."

Seuraavassa kertojan kuulemat (ja vakuuttavina pitämät) keskeisimmät selitykset uudelle järjestykselle.

Kun yksityisomistus poistui, katosi myöskin kaikki ne lait ja lakien rankaisemat rikokset, jotka olivat yksityisomistuksen synnyttämiä. 'Ei sinun pidä varastaman', täytyi muuttua käskyksi: 'Sinun pitää tekemän työtä ollaksesi onnellinen'. Tarvitseeko tällaista käskyä tyrkyttää ihmisille väkivallalla? [...]

Mies lyö toista, ja tämä antaa takaisin, kunnes — otaksukaamme pahinta — lopuksi sattuu kuolinisku. Ja mitä sitte? Pitäisikö meidän, hänen naapuriensa ja lähimäistensä, tehdä paha vielä pahemmaksi? Pitäisitkö meidän ajatella toisistamme niin halpamaista, että vainaja huutaa meitä kostajiksi, kun kumminkin tiedämme, että hän, vaikkapa hän olisi joutunut raajarikoksikin, olisi antanut vastustajallensa anteeksi heti, kun hän olisi tyyntynyt ja tarkoin harkinnut asiaa? [...]

Mutta jos asia on yleistä laatua, joten sen tekeminen tai jättäminen vaikuttaa jokaiseen, niin täytyy enemmistön päättää siitä, vaikkapa vähemmistö tarttuisi aseisiin ja todistaisi väkivallalla olevansa todellinen enemmistö. Tätä ei kumminkaan voi tapahtua vapaiden ihmisten muodostamassa yhteiskunnassa, jossa toinen on toisensa arvoinen. Sillä tällaisessa yhteiskunnassa on näennäinen enemmistö myöskin todellinen enemmistö. Ja toiset tietävät tämän, kuten jo olen maininnut, liian hyvin ruvetakseen sitä itsepäisesti vastustamaan, varsinkin kun heillä on kyllin tilaisuutta tuoda julki mielipiteensä ja valaista asiaa omalta katsantokannaltaan. [...]

*kaikki työ on nykyään miellyttävää. Tämä johtuu ensiksikin siitä, että tekijä toivoo työstään kunniaa tai nautintoa sen suorittamisesta. Tämä herättää mieltymystä silloinkin, vaikkei hetken työ olisikaan vlehättävää. Toiseksi se voi perustua siihen, että työ on tullut mieluisaksi tottumukseksi, kuten on esim. n. k. koneellisten töitten laita. Ja lopuksi on **työ itsessään huvittavaa** (näin on meillä useimpain töiden laita) koska työemme on taidetta, itsetietoista, varsinaista taidetta ja sen tekijät taiteilijoita. [...]*

ihmiset olivat sivistyksen edellisellä aikakaudella joutuneet tavarantuotannon alalla umpisokkeloon, josta he eivät päässeet pois. He olivat kehittyneet ihmeteltävän käteviksi tavarain valmistuksessa, ja voidakseen käyttää tätä hyväkseen kehittäneet — tai oikeammin antaneet kehittyä — sangen laajaperäisen osto- ja myyntijärjestelmän, jota he kutsuivat maailmanmarkkinoiksi. Ja tämä järjestelmä kerran käyntiin päästyään pakotti heitä valmistamaan yhä enemmän tavaroita, huolimatta siitä, tarvittiinko niitä vai ei. Ihmiset eivät luonnollisesti voineet välttää todella tarpeellisten tavarain valmistamiseen vaadittavaa työtä, ja samalla heidän täytyi valmistaa suunnaton määrä tarpeettomia tuotteita, jotka niinkutsuttujen maailmanmarkkinain rautaisen hirmuvallan kautta tulivat yhtä tärkeiksi, kuin todella tarpeelliset tuotteet, jotka ovat välttämättömiä elämässä. [...] Valmistamamme esineet tehdään sentähden, että me tarvitsemme niitä. Ne tehdään lähimäiselle yhtä hyvin kuin itsellekin, eikä tavaroita enää valmisteta epävarmoja, tuutemattomia markkinoita varten, joista ei kukaan tiedä ja joissa ei ole mitään tarkastusta. Kun ei meillä osteta eikä myydä, olisi järjestöntä valmistaa tuotteita summakaupalla ainoastaan sen otaksumisen nojalla, että niitä

ehkä tarvitaan; sillä ei ole enää ketään, jota voisi pakottaa niitä ostamaan. Tästä johtuukin, että kaikki valmistamamme tuotteet ovat hyviä ja tarkoitustansa vastaavia. Kaikki tehdään todellista käytäntöä eikä kauppaa varten, ja siksi ei enää valmistetakaan ala-arvoisia tavaroita. Työt, joita on vaikea tehdä käsin, tehdään koneilla, ja kaikki se, mitä on käsin hauska tehdä, suoritetaan ilman koneitten apua. [...]

Ihmisethän olivat tottuneet teettämään kaikki koneilla. Siten he olivat itse muuttuneet koneiksi, eivätkä kenneet omavaraisesti suorittamaan yksinkertaisintakaan työtä. Jokaiseen pienimpäänkin tehtävään tarvittiin koneita, joten oltiin niistä aivan riippuvaisia. [...]

Kun ihmiset sodan jälkeen taas pääsivät lepoon ja kun heidän työnsä oli osaksi korjannut ne vahingot, mitä sodan hävitykset olivat matkaan saattaneet, näytti jonkunlainen pettymys valtaavan mielet. Entisaikojen vanhoillisten ennustukset näyttivät toteutuvan, kun he olivat väittäneet, että meidän pyrintömme ja voittomme synnyttävät lopuksi tylsän yksitoikkoisuuden ja yhdenkaltaisuuden, yksistään hyötyä ja mukavuutta tarkoittavan ylellisyyden. [...] Parannuskeinona oli lyhyesti se tuotanto, mitä ennen kutsuttiin **taiteeksi**. Sillä ei ole nyt enää mitään nimeä, koska se on erottamattomalta osalta jokaisen ihmisen työssä. [...] Se taide, josta äsken puhuin, tai työn hauskuus työnhalu, kuten sitä voisi nimittää, syntyi itsestään. Sen luojana oli jonkunlainen kansan vaisto, kun ei epätoivoisia ihmisiä enää tarvinnut pakottaa vaivaloiisiin ja tuhoaviin liiallisiin ponnistuksiin, vaan he saivat tehdä käsillä olevan työn niin kunnollisesti ja erinomaisesti, kuin suinkin mahdollista. Kun tätä oli jatkunut jonkun aikaa, heräsi ihmisten mielissä yleinen kauneuden kaipaus. [...]

»Olkoon niin», sanoin hänelle. »Mutta kuinka on **naisemansipatsioonin laita**? Huomasin vieraskodissa, että naiset palvelivat miehiä. Eikö se ole taantumista, vai kuinka?»

»Taantumistako», huudahti vanhus. »Luulettelo todellakin, että taloustoimet ovat niin vähäpätöistä työtä, etteivät ne ansaitse kunnioitusta! Sehän lienee ollut yhdeksännentoista vuosisadan 'edistyneitten' naisten ja heidän miespuolisten kätyriensä mielipide. Jos teikäläisetkin ajattelevat samoin, suosittelen teille norjalaista kansansatua 'ukko akan ja akka ukon töissä'. Siinähan kävi miehen taloustoimien siten, että lopuksi sekä hän että perheen lehmä roikkuivat toinen toisessa ja toinen toisessa päässä nuoraa, mies uuninpiipussa ja lehmä katon räystäällä. [...] Ettekö siis todellakaan tiedä, ystäväni», jatkoi hän, »että viisaalle naiselle on todellinen nautinto talouden hoitaminen niin taitavasti, että kaikki ovat tyytyväiset ja kiitolliset? Ja samoin toiselta puolelta miehille mukautuminen heidän tahtonsa mukaan ja heidän määräämänsä töiden suorittaminen.»

Genia Lukin says

Even knowing the background on which these books grew, I have something of a tolerant dislike towards old utopias. When I read them, it oftentimes seems to me that the authors, without intending and without really thinking about it, actually wrote a rather frightening dystopia, and thought well of it.

Of course, I am allergic to utopias in general, but I posit that this is not merely a completely subjective occurrence. I shall demonstrate:

Here, for instance, is the perfect communist small-village world, written by William Morris. Everyone is happy. Everyone does what he wants to do. Namely... uh, being a dustman, sculling people on the Thames, building houses and bridges, planting gardens and making "useful" stuff. Oops.

Being as I hail from what used to be a socialist (permanently on the road to communism, you know) country, I've some experience with this sort of habitual usefulness and manual labour happiness. 'Digging potatoes' is something of a running joke in my family, most of whom happen to be mathematicians, doctors and

engineers. It describes frustrating, annoying, pointless work which randomly tears you away from the things you're actually good at (like surgery) and sends you at random intervals to do precisely what Morris described as the state of ultimate happiness.

Then there is the blissful (in Morris's words) ignorance of world history and the past. 'Education' is unknown, book reading becomes rare, everyone is so happy working outside that they become smart by some miraculous osmosis, making book-learning appear pettish, unrewarding, somewhat peculiar. This streak of anti-intellectualism, fantastically common to all communist utopias (except, strangely enough, for the ones written by actual residents of communism, like Lem or the Strugatsky brothers) isn't as severe - the author chose to let Oxford and its 'less interesting sister, Cambridge' (Morris being an Oxford man, that made me literally spew drink out of my nose) remain standing - but very much present.

Sorry, Mr. Morris, I just don't see myself finding my ultimate happiness in raking hay by hand wearing Medieval clothing.

The book actually managed to make me think of Ayn Rand who, while coming from the completely opposite end of the political spectrum, shares some traits with this novel. Namely, that the culmination of political dogma in her works, and in this one, makes people smarter, happier, healthier and, yes, I kid you not, even prettier. Morris considers communism to be capable of transforming not only human society, but also the human individual. No more cosmetics and plastic surgery, ladies! Communism is your road to automatic 'comeliness', as he puts it. Perhaps he'd had a vision of the old, 20s and 30s Russian propaganda posters, in a dream.

I confess that rather grated.

It doesn't help that utopias by their very nature, beginning with Plato and culminating in Le Guin, are political diatribes. Dystopias are too, of course, but at least in dystopias there is an element of man vs. hostile world, a one-step-removed element of things actually happening. Whereas, what can one do in a utopia? Everything is great! The element of struggle is removed and.. bam! One is reading a Platonic dialogue poorly veiled under 'and then this happened and then this happened'. Morris is no different. His protagonist - and we never get an explanation of why the friend knows him so well, by the way - wakes up in the future, listens to a great deal of good things about the future society, drives through the uprooted and reforested London (my heart ached for the historically significant buildings), listens to more political diatribes, goes up the Thames, has political musings... et cetera ad nauseum.

And all this is written in a pseudo-quaint, didactic style, using the word 'quoth' a lot. Who the heck uses the word quoth in 1890! Wilde sure hadn't. Doyle sure hadn't. Hardy had't (much). Suddenly... 'quoth'.

'Well'. quoth I, 'I'd much rather my unutopic world, and not have to dig potatoes'.

James says

An excellent book, originally written in response to Looking Backward by Edward Bellamy, whom William Morris considered to take too much of a statist approach.

Whilst Morris' book is utopian (assuming people will find work pleasurable), it is interesting to note that he ruled out the prospect of non-violent revolution, and so is perhaps less idealistic than Bellamy in this regard (Bellamy believed a peaceful transition of power was possible).

Overall, I think Bellamy's books stand up stronger, having more economic arguments within them (which are still very relevant today) and very accurate predictions with regards to the expansion of automation and technology (Equality covers this very well, especially how vested interests will resist such changes). But Morris' book should not be overlooked by any means, and is an enjoyable and inspiring read.

Karen says

After a meeting with fellow socialists a man returns to his home in Hammersmith, wakes up in the morning in a future Hammersmith (2001 is mentioned). This future is an idyllic world of everyone working at what they are best suited, whether it is artistic or farming. England now has no government, money or marriage. The people are actually afraid of running out of work to do. It is truly interesting to see Morris' idea of utopia

Helen Murray says

I can honestly say I've never read anything like it. Scifi - but not as we know it. About the furthest thing from an apocalyptic vision of the future, yet with a grasp on the grim reality of revolution. Embodies the curious amalgamation of progressive socialism and nostalgic aesthetic craftsmanship in late Pre-Raphaelitism. Stimulating to the senses, intriguing to the critical faculties. Wonderfully odd!

Susan Marie says

A fine Utopian novel written in response to Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward" two years after the publication. Morris' purpose was to educate the 19th century about the pitfalls of current social and economic systems in place. Morris does something different in his novel when compared to most Utopian themed books, he focuses on art, poetry, architecture, and the natural order of things coming from a Socialist point of view. Read Bellamy first, then Morris. Both books are fantastic, similar, yet just different enough to get you thinking of better ways to recreate our current world. Absolutely mind-blowing book.

Bryan Alexander says

This is such a strange and moving book, a novel about ideas that largely avoids plot, an argument for a retro utopia build in science fiction.

News from Nowhere is a utopian novel. It imagines a future almost two centuries off, wherein the market economy is gone, governments are done with, and cities have been reduced to small towns and a returning countryside. The novel offers an anarchist vision, but doesn't use that word more than once, and then only in the preface.

The novel also rejects contemporary (Victorian) technology and civilization. While some Americans today flock to an imagined nineteenth century for steampunk delights, Morris hauls us back to the late middle ages. Time and again he shows us people dressed in medieval costume, living in medieval houses, working at premodern tasks (rowing, carving, hay mowing). The narrator compares what he sees to the fourteenth century at least five times. But gone is the *ancient regime's* theocracy; instead people do what they want,

trying not to hurt anyone else. There are a couple of hints about technology as work, like this tantalizing note: "All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery" (Kindle Locations 1322-1324). But we never see signs of that. Overall the novel's world is a bit like a cross between arts and crafts, Mr. Rogers, and punk.

Morris strives to make this work, partly through nice descriptions of happy people in a lovely countryside, but also through arguments, which constitute most of the novel. Our point of view character falls asleep in his time and wakes up sometimes in the 21st century, then wanders around talking with people. Each utopian denizen tries to convince "William Guest" that their way of life is superior. The novel's center is a long Socratic dialogue with a local elder who lives in the more or less abandoned British Museum, and who harangues the narrator about how awful his time was, then sketches out parts of the revolution which led to utopia.

I'm a reader who enjoys conversational texts. I also like philosophical novels. But I recognize how dull this can be. Morris runs smack into the problems of utopia - without unhappiness there isn't much room for plot. We get some discussions about scheduling and delicate steps around the possibility of offending characters, and that's about it. One solution to the narrative problem of utopia is to focus on its edges, where it meets other worlds. That's Iain Banks' frequent approach in his Culture stories. Morris' nowhere doesn't really have a boundary, and we're given to understand the world has been globally transformed into versions of his London. There are hints that love can upend society, as it often does in dystopias, but apart from one cautionary tale of ax murder (!) there isn't much sign of that actually occurring.

It is easy to poke holes in *News from Nowhere's* ideas. Its dispute-handling mechanisms would break down under determined opposition. Hoarding could easily upend a locality. A group of determined, organized, and violent people could have a delightful time trashing the place. And there isn't much room for psychologies other than that of Mr. Rogers. The landscape and general happiness has to do a lot of work to cheer people up. I would also cast a skeptical eye on the happiness of people without modern dentistry, or antibiotics, or anesthetics, and so on.

Ultimately this reminds me of the Marxist idea of reformatting human psychology by altering material conditions. The Soviets aimed to create a "new Soviet man" in the 20th century, someone who grew up in socialism, not capitalism, and would therefore have a different mix of desires. That didn't work out, and gave ammunition to anticommunists who insist on an immutable human nature. Morris is with Moscow here, as his utopians argue that removing the state and money would generate a different kind of human being.

What might interest today's reader the most is the novel's argument that people don't really want to be idle. While we discuss the potential of universal basic income, *News from Nowhere* offers a kind of version of UBI. People do take time off to enjoy watching the sky, but they also love work, because it's work they find meaningful. Morris' conceit is that the capitalist marketplace drives people to work at jobs they despise. Without that framework we'd turn our hands to make things and perform services that we delight in. Those goods and services should be better constructed and make their consumers happier than if they purchased mass-produced schlock fabricated by unhappy wage slaves. This is why everyone in *News* is so much happier. (Sam Harris and Andrew Yang recently made a related argument about IBU).

Another point of interest is Morris' feminist and semi-Freudian ideas about sex and violence. The elder informs Guest that they don't have much violence because they have far more sexual freedom. "[M]any violent acts came from the artificial perversion of the sexual passions, which caused overweening jealousy and the like miseries." What does he see as the cause of that perversion, religion or science? No:

Now, when you look carefully into these, you will find that what lay at the bottom of them was mostly the idea (a law-made idea) of the woman being the property of the man, whether he were husband, father, brother, or what not. That idea has of course vanished with private

property, as well as certain follies about the 'ruin' of women for following their natural desires in an illegal way, which of course was a convention caused by the laws of private property.(Kindle Locations 1098-1102)

This latter sentiment might connect well with today's readers.

As I approached the end of the novel my enjoyment had sunk as I kept poking holes in the world. The lack of narrative tension gradually wearied me. But the finale had quite the sting in store. Guest starts to attend a party, but then -ah, spoilers: (view spoiler)

On the SFF Audio podcast Jesse Willis drew our attention to that last line, that combination of hierarchy reinstalled (servility) and its deep embrace ("some real goodwill and courtesy"). What an effective way of showing the fall from anarchy into the world of law and states. (hide spoiler)]
So I recommend this to you. Read it with some energy. Be ready to argue.

Jake says

Utopias are never as good as dystopias. The reason why is summed up in this story of a man who falls asleep in industrial age England and wakes up 100 years later in a socialist/communist utopia (the words are used interchangeably in this and mostly mean a society with no government- it was written before the USSR after all). The protagonist comes across only one dissident in this post-capitalist/royalist/aristocratic England. This is an old man who misses the old books with their conflict and hardships and heroes and villains. He can't abide everyone being healthy and happy... Anyhow, the book is pretty unbelievable and boring. The highlight was when a different old man tells the protagonist the story of how society got where it was with a civil war and general strike. This is interesting in a history of literature type of way, but mostly yawn inducing.

Werner says

This isn't an actual review (and I wouldn't do a rating), since I didn't finish the book --just an explanation of why I didn't! When I started the book, I was hoping that Morris' vision of his ideal society as agrarian, pastoral and decentralized (as opposed to the typical Utopian visions of his day) would produce a novel markedly more interesting than the other Utopian fiction of that era. Alas, it didn't; the basic components of his vision are still the same clueless optimism about human perfectibility through socio-economic change, and the same total naivete about the workings of social and economic life, that characterize the writings of his contemporaries. And the delivery is the same boring, lecture-style essay in the loose guise of fiction.
