

Review of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, by Becky Chambers

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Chambers, Becky. *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. Tor Books, 2021..

A Psalm for the Wild-Built, published by Tor, arrived in the hands of readers in 2021. Becky Chambers' first foray into softer sci-fi, *Psalm* speaks to both readers' need for comfort in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and our alienation from the structures of "normal" daily life. *Psalm for the Wild-Built* offers a vision of what a different kind of life might look like. Sitting at the junction of science fiction and fantasy, the novella asks important questions about what a future built on sustainability and care might look like.

Psalm for the Wild-Built takes its audience on a journey into the far future, after an event called the "Awakening." The "Factory Age" has long collapsed and the world that emerges from the rubble is one in which humans strive, as much as they can, to allow the natural world to heal from the damaging effects of the past. In the catalyst to this worldview shift, the Awakening, robots gained sentience. Offered the choice to stay or to create their own society, the robots decided to go off into the forest "so that we may observe that which has no design—the untouched wilderness" (2).

We follow two characters. Dex is a nonbinary monk whose job it is to travel from village to village to offer tea service; feeling that something is missing from their life, they decide to travel off the well-worn paths of Panga—their world—to an old hermitage ruin. On the road, the robot Mosschap walks out of the forest to introduce itself.

When they meet, Mosschap reveals it has been sent on a mission by the robot community to answer the question "What do humans need?" It offers Dex an exchange: Mosschap will help Dex get to the hermitage ruins and in return, Dex will teach it all about human customs and culture. The book follows this meeting of first contact between robot and human and examines the unlikely yet tender friendship that forms between the two. Both must answer questions that get to the heart of being in the world: what do humans need? And, for Dex at least, what makes a life fulfilling and driven by purpose? As the series continues, these questions become inextricably tangled together.



Psalm for the Wild-Built explores speculative fiction's role in addressing our political and climate crises: how might the future look if we manage to survive? What can we build from the ruins? And how might speculative fiction build worlds to strive for?

Psalm for the Wild-Built draws on a recent trend in speculative fiction that focuses not on the future of technology or space travel but rather on the ecological consequences of decades of striving toward these things. The culture created by Chambers in the novella does not rely on technology; it avoids the trap of declaring technology itself as the root of all past evil and exploitation. For instance, *Psalm* takes seriously the question of artificial intelligence, though perhaps it would be better to call it "mechanical consciousness." My preference here lies in the distinction between "intelligence" and "consciousness." Will Douglas Heaven writes for the *MIT Technology Review* that "intelligence is about doing, while consciousness is about being" (Heaven). The decision made to go out and observe the untouched wilderness exemplifies what it means to be concerned with being rather than doing. And I opt for "mechanical" in place of "artificial" because artificial implies an opposing "natural." "Mechanical" represents the vessel of Mosschap's consciousness, its mechanical body, without having to imply that its consciousness is unnatural next to Dex's. Chambers imagines a world where humans exist only as one part of a vast network of both human and non-human species that work collaboratively toward all their survival.

What seems maybe the most significant about this book is the tenor of its emotion. The world-building is idealistic. Everyone in this world has food and shelter. Money does not exist anymore. The preservation of animal life and the environment is the top priority on Panga. And people are nice. For some readers this is a weakness of the text. Talking to a friend of mine recently, I was surprised by his critique of the idealism in the novella.

I am reminded of conversations that I have had over the past few years concerning the idea that any sort of belief in the inherent goodness of things is naive and therefore escapist or unrealistic. This is not just a conversation in Science Fiction Studies, but I am reminded here of Suvin's distinction between science fiction, which often has important conversation about ethics and society, and fantasy, which offered only escapism from society. But I am wary of the idea, too, that sincerity and escapism do not have a place as useful rhetorical modes in literature or that they are inherently uncritical. The low stakes of the novella may not draw some readers in, but for me they provide almost a meditative refuge in the act of reading--a moment of leisure that provides an escape from the seemingly never-ending drive to work and produce work.

And the novella does offer some concrete ideas about building a sustainable future that we might test against our current everyday experiences. The novel asks important questions about how science fiction can respond to the crisis of climate change and late capitalism without resorting to the same types of liberal humanist ideals about progress that got us here in the first place. The novel also imagines a world that is delightfully queer and accepting. Even if it may seem too good to be true, *Psalm for the Wild-Built* offers a mode of speculation that allows us, while reading, to exist in a world that we might one day wish to create for ourselves.

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I am planning on teaching this text in the fall 2023 semester in a class designed to look at how recent speculative fiction imagines possible futures. I am pairing this text and Catherynne M. Valente's novella *The Past is Red* because they offer two distinct ideas of what the future may hold. *The Past is Red* offers what might be considered the "more realistic" version of the future we are headed towards—a planet full of garbage and ruin and greed. *Psalm for the Wild-Built*, on the other hand, offers a world in which the impulse to care for each other and live sustainably becomes the dominant way of life. Is this naive? Or do such imaginings of worlds enable us to realize that they might also be possible for us?

Works Cited

Heaven, Will Douglas. "What an Octopus's Mind can Teach Us about AI's Ultimate Mystery." *MIT Technology Review*, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/08/25/1032111/conscious-ai-can-machines-think/>. Accessed 24 April 2023.