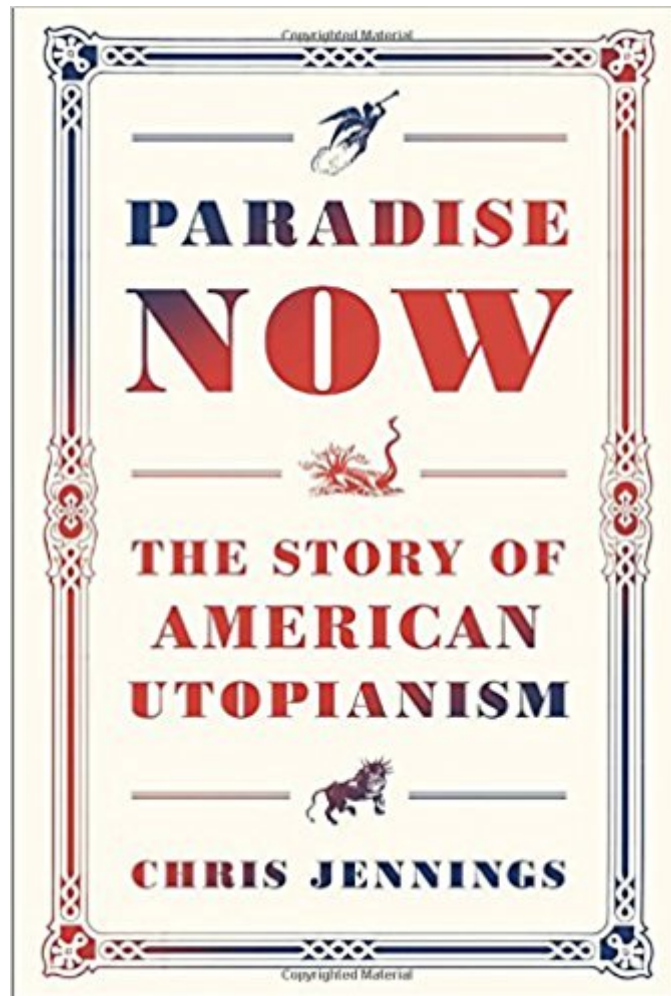




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Paradise Now: The Story Of American Utopianism



Synopsis

For readers of Jill Lepore, Joseph J. Ellis, and Tony Horwitz comes a lively, thought-provoking intellectual history of the golden age of American utopianism— and the bold, revolutionary, and eccentric visions for the future put forward by five of history’s most influential utopian movements. In the wake of the Enlightenment and the onset of industrialism, a generation of dreamers took it upon themselves to confront the messiness and injustice of a rapidly changing world. To our eyes, the utopian communities that took root in America in the nineteenth century may seem ambitious to the point of delusion, but they attracted members willing to dedicate their lives to creating a new social order and to asking the bold question What should the future look like? In *Paradise Now*, Chris Jennings tells the story of five interrelated utopian movements, revealing their relevance both to their time and to our own. Here is Mother Ann Lee, the prophet of the Shakers, who grew up in newly industrialized Manchester, England— and would come to build a quiet but fierce religious tradition on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Even as the society she founded spread across the United States, the Welsh industrialist Robert Owen came to the Indiana frontier to build an egalitarian, rationalist utopia he called the New Moral World. A decade later, followers of the French visionary Charles Fourier blanketed America with colonies devoted to inaugurating a new millennium of pleasure and fraternity. Meanwhile, the French radical Étienne Cabet sailed to Texas with hopes of establishing a communist paradise dedicated to ideals that would be echoed in the next century. And in New York— the Oneida Community, a brilliant Vermonter named John Humphrey Noyes set about creating a new society in which the human spirit could finally be perfected in the image of God. Over time, these movements fell apart, and the national mood that had inspired them was drowned out by the dream of westward expansion and the waking nightmare of the Civil War. Their most galvanizing ideas, however, lived on, and their audacity has influenced countless political movements since. Their stories remain an inspiration for everyone who seeks to build a better world, for all who ask, What should the future look like?

Praise for *Paradise Now*

“Uncommonly smart and beautifully written . . . a triumph of scholarship and narration: five stand-alone community studies and a coherent, often spellbinding history of the United States during its tumultuous first half-century . . . Although never less than evenhanded, and sometimes deliciously wry, Jennings writes with obvious affection for his subjects. To read *Paradise Now* is to be dazzled, humbled and occasionally flabbergasted by the amount of energy and talent sacrificed at utopia’s altar.”

—The New York Times Book Review

“Writing an impartial, respectful account of these philanthropies and follies is no small task, but Mr. Jennings largely pulls it off with insight and aplomb. Indulgently sympathetic to the utopian impulse in general,

he tells a good story. His explanations of the various reformist credos are patient, thought-provoking and . . . entertaining. *—The Wall Street Journal* “As a tour guide, Jennings is thoughtful, engaging and witty in the right doses. . . . He makes the subject his own with fresh eyes and a crisp narrative, rich with detail. . . . In the end, Jennings writes, the communards disregard for the world as it exists sealed their fate. But in revisiting their stories, he makes a compelling case that our present-day deficit of imagination could be similarly fated. *—San Francisco Chronicle*

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Customer Reviews

“Uncommonly smart and beautifully written . . . [Chris] Jennings’s sure grasp never falters. The result is a triumph of scholarship and narration: five stand-alone community studies and a coherent, often spellbinding history of the United States during its tumultuous first half-century. . . . Although never less than evenhanded, and sometimes deliciously wry, Jennings writes with obvious affection for his subjects. To read *Paradise Now* is to be dazzled, humbled and occasionally flabbergasted by the amount of energy and talent sacrificed at utopia’s altar. But then, as Jennings so memorably puts it, “Anyone nuts enough to try building heaven on earth is bound for a hell of his own making.” *—The New York Times Book Review* “Writing an impartial, respectful account of these philanthropies and follies is no small task, but Mr. Jennings largely pulls it off with insight and aplomb. Indulgently sympathetic to the utopian impulse in general, he tells a good story. His explanations of the various reformist credos

are patient, thought-provoking and . . . entertaining. [The Wall Street Journal](#) [“Thoughtful, measured, and surprisingly relevant.”](#) [Chicago Tribune](#) [“As a tour guide, Jennings is thoughtful, engaging and witty in the right doses. . . . He makes the subject his own with fresh eyes and a crisp narrative, rich with detail. . . . In the end, Jennings writes, the communards disregard for the world as it exists sealed their fate. But in revisiting their stories, he makes a compelling case that our present-day deficit of imagination could be similarly fated.”](#) [San Francisco Chronicle](#) [“Chris Jennings is a natural storyteller, and his *Paradise Now*, a five-part chronicle of America’s nineteenth-century utopian dreamers and doers, is the most clear-eyed, sympathetic, and inspiring account I’ve read of this vital chapter in American history in decades. What sort of future did they want? The Shakers, Owenites, Fourierists, Icarians, and Oneidans asked and answered the question, each group in its own way. Chris Jennings prods his readers to ask the question again—for ourselves.”](#) [Megan Marshall, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*](#) [“Jennings knows how to tell a story, and has the intellectual range to recover both the weirdness and wisdom of America’s brief bout with utopian illusions and ideals.”](#) [Joseph J. Ellis, author of *The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783–1789*](#) [“In a perfect world, work will be irresistibly pleasurable. Women will have equal rights. Money and property will be shared, as will spouses. Or maybe sex won’t be allowed at all? Even better! And once the ice caps melt, the sea will taste like lemonade. Bliss! With good humor, a lively style, and a deep knowledge of the historical scholarship, Chris Jennings tells the goofy, heartbreaking tale of nineteenth-century Americans who believed they could bring about heaven on earth, and managed to live out futures that the rest of us haven’t yet reached.”](#) [Caleb Crain, author of *Necessary Errors*](#) [“Despite marked differences separating these utopian movements, Jennings prizes in all of them their distinctive—and utterly American—optimism in facing a future in which their adherents believed they would usher in a glorious new social order. . . . Readers who resent the constraints of a barren realism will value this deep-probing inquiry into the quest for new social possibilities.”](#) [Booklist \(starred review\)](#) [“Jennings proves an able guide to these groups. \[His\] comprehensive research makes for absorbing reading as he shows how different people attempted to find perfection and how they failed or succeeded.”](#) [Kirkus Reviews](#)

Chris Jennings grew up in New York City. He graduated from Deep Springs College and Wesleyan University. He lives in Northern California with his dog.

Although it's popular history, this is a serious book -- not superficial or disrespectful of its human subjects. There are some light-hearted passages but the narrative never becomes silly. I had heard of and knew a little about most but not all of these groups but there was plenty of interesting information I had not come across before -- such as how some of the groups were (so to speak) kin to one another. Today, of course, "socialism" is a boogeybear in the USA -- don't look at me, Europeans, I've no idea why that should be. So it is especially interesting to learn more about how some prominent Americans in the past saw it as a key element in the construction of utopia and the future of not only the USA but humanity. I knew some utopian-minded people in the 1960s whose experiments also fizzled out. American may have been a tabula rasa, of sorts, but alas human beings are not. Not then, not now.

“It was a time when the imminence of paradise seemed reasonable to reasonable people.” (Kindle Location 140) I tend to clump stories about oddball cultures, cults, communes, and collectives, under the heading of extraordinary popular delusions and the madness of crowds...and am mostly fascinated by them. The outlandish stories of which we managed convince ourselves and each other never cease to amaze. Chris Jennings's non-fiction, *Paradise Now: The Story of America Utopianism*, highlights five of the most popular and influential utopian movements of 19th-century America, and rises to the level of amazing. Chuck-full of insights, illumination, and enlightenment, about those exercises in wishful thinking; it both informs and entertains. Recommendation: Worth the price and the effort (it's a bit exhaustive in places) just to learn of the concept of Bible Communism. As opposed to that godless Soviet kind, I presume. I was also surprised to learn that “Go west, young man,” Horace Greeley, himself, was so seriously involved with communalism movements. Eye opening. “Nobody risks inventing a new world if they like the one in which they live.” (Kindle Location 6965). “In a century and a half, the prevailing outlook has shifted from jubilantly millenarian to tepidly apocalyptic. None of these predictions are necessarily wrong, but compared with the unmeasured, action-inspiring optimism of the nineteenth-century utopians, it appears that we are experiencing a deficit of

imagination. *Paradise Now* (Kindle Locations 6999-7001) Random House Publishing Group.
Kindle Edition 9,757 Kindle Locations, 512 pages.

This took me several months to read because as I finished up each chapter....there was so much rich material and analysis left there....that I devoted some time with other references and books to answer questions I had. It is a remarkable book and full of interesting stories and lots of information. If you ever had a curiosity about utopias and how they fail....Chris Jennings takes you to several of these and lays out the basic facts. He also explains in great detail how each one came to fail (miserably) in the end. He is careful not to ridicule one particular religion or group....but he shows their weakness in planning. I would strongly recommend the book to amateur historians and college level students. If you are about to discuss utopias or address their fundamental nature....then you need to start with this book as your reference.

Besides the Shakers, I had never heard of any of these utopian societies before and found this book to give great depth to their ideas, how they got started, and what lead to their downfall. The narrative of each society is impartially written, which can seem like a feat given the implausibility of some of the ideas. I learned a great deal reading this book and was engaged throughout. It only took me about three days to read the entire thing because I was so engrossed.

The author presents lots of information (much of it interesting) in a readable way. It would deserve more stars if it were less repetitious, more "sparkling" in its story-telling, and more vivid in sketching the societal context in which these groups arose. Despite my interest in this topic, I have stalled after the second or third chapter.

Comparing several groups helps understanding each. There was a little bit of coverage of Joseph Smith but not enough to see how it fit in. Interesting that the groups all struggled with how to handle sexual relations.

Very interesting - I knew about the Oneida Community and the Shakers, but not the others.

Paradise Now is fantastic. Jennings discusses five main utopian societies in America, primarily in the nineteenth century. I wish though that he had cast a wider net and explained some of the other popular utopian societies. A great read though! Read it start to finish!

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