The Messiah and the Greens: The Shape of Environmental Action in *Dune* and *Pacific Edge*

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"The precariousness of the human ecological situation has gradually but inevitably become one of the major themes of SF," Brian Stableford notes in the "Ecology" entry of Clute and Nicholls's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. In his earlier entry in Nicholls's 1979 version of the Encyclopedia, he called that precariousness "a constant theme in post-War SF." Stableford's sketch of ecology in SF, from a mere sprinkling in the early pulps (he credits only Stanley Weinbaum in that period with "more than a rudimentary consciousness" of ecology) to "a constant theme" over the first few decades after World War II to "one of the major themes" by the nineties, traces the rapid growth of the impact on SF of the science of ecology and its implications for the future of humanity. SF has proved to be a particularly fruitful venue for explorations of environmental themes in such modes as the ecocatastrophe story, stories of alien ecologies—increasingly combined with terraforming projects in recent SF—or, as in utopian fiction, portrayals of societies that are less environmentally destructive than ours.

Critics have been rather slow to respond to the importance of ecology and its impact on SF. A survey of critical articles published in *Science-Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation*, and *Foundation*, 1984–88 and 1994–99, turns up many that make reference to environmental devastation or ecology or overpopulation, but only very few and recent ones that are centrally focused on what SF texts reveal about perceptions of humans' place in our natural world. (Rafeeq O. McGiveron's on wilderness in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; half of Donald E. Morse's on Vonnegut's *Galapagos* and *Bluebeard*; David Dalgliesh's review article on nature and transcendence in British SF, all in *Extrapolation*, 1997.) Critical studies
of human-alien relations in SF are not aimed at reflection on terrestrial relations between humans and other species. Critical studies that refer to environmental values or ecology do so en route to some other point—about feminism (as in Naomi Jacobs' "Failures of the Imagination in Ecotopia"), history and transcendence (as in Umberto Rossi's article on urban landscapes in two of Ballard's novels), form and politics (as in Heinz Tschachler's article on Callenbach's ecological utopias), or any number of other matters of interest.

In this respect, SF scholarship is not far behind other literary scholarship. Ecocriticism is a new literary field, given impetus by the same awareness of the fragility of our ecosystem among academics that is evident now among SF writers. The founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in 1992 heralded what has proved to be the literary growth field of the nineties. By 1995, ASLE's membership was over 750 (Glotfelty xviii) and, in 1997, its second biannual conference drew hundreds of participants and offered ten-track programming for three days. Its journal, Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment, features scholarly articles, book reviews, and creative writing. Most of its members are centrally focused on nature writing, but their studies are branching out rapidly—into representations in literature of urban ecology, for instance, and environmental injustice. Some members are theorists who are developing new critical approaches to literature under the umbrella term "ecocriticism." William Rueckert, who seems to have coined the term in 1978, defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (107). Cheryll Glotfelty, whose Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology effectively defined the field in 1996, describes ecocriticism simply as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii).

I was surprised to find virtually no awareness at the 1997 ASLE conference of what science fiction and utopian fiction have to offer to the field of literature and the environment. There was some movement in 1999, when three papers on utopian literature were included, but there is surely potential for more connection between the work of scholars of speculative fiction and scholars who study the relationship between literature and ecology. Not only does the subject of literature and the environment invite study of a broader range of texts than just nature writing, but also the expanding work of ecotheorists promises to suggest new approaches to the study of SF, or extended application of little-used approaches. Ecocriticism suggests that SF critics might be asking: In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into SF? To what extent does an SF text represent a world as an active subject and not just a resource? Are the values expressed in an SF text consistent with ecological wisdom? What constitutes "nature" or "the natural" in an SF text? What is the role of language in constructing the relationship between self and other, culture and nature in various SF texts?

An example of the application of some of these questions to SF texts is the following study in contrasts between Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge* (1988), two novels that have in common a focus on human interventions in dry ecologies in the context of the economic and political realities of their societies. My assumption is what Cheryll Glotfelty has called the fundamental premise of all ecological criticism: "that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xi); the question is how these two texts, both clearly reflecting that ecological awareness on the part of their writers, depict that connection. In particular, how consistent with ecological wisdom are the values implied in these texts?

Two texts provide a basis for my analysis of ecologically significant differences between *Dune* and *Pacific Edge*: Ursula Le Guin's "Carrier-Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986) and Joseph Meeker's "The Comic Mode," from his *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972). Both are included in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), edited by founding ASLE members Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm; Le Guin has been embraced by ecocritics as well as SF critics.

Le Guin contrasts the heroic hunter story and the realistic gatherer story as paradigms for fiction. She memorably parodies the former as "how I thrust my spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while Oob, impaled on one huge sweeping tusk, writhed screaming, and blood spurted everywhere in crimson torrents, and Boob was crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him as I shot my unerring spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while..." (142). From this perspective, which she traces to Elizabeth Fisher's "the tragic view assumes that man exists in human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix); the question is how these two texts, both clearly reflecting that ecological awareness on the part of their writers, depict that connection. In particular, how consistent with ecological wisdom are the values implied in these texts?

Meeker's analysis resembles Le Guin's except that hers is a feminist approach, using phallic and uterine images to contrast ways of constructing story from historically masculine and feminine experience, and his is more explicitly environmental. Le Guin contrasts heroic death narrative with realistic life narrative; Meeker contrasts tragedy with comedy, aligning tragedy with death and comedy with life, specifically with evolution. "The tragic view assumes that man exists in
a state of conflict with powers that are greater than he is [such as] nature, the
gods, moral law, passionate love, the greatness of ideas and knowledge . . . . The
tragic man takes his conflict seriously, and feels compelled to affirm his mastery
and his greatness in the face of his own destruction" (157). "Comedy is careless
of morality, goodness, truth, beauty, heroism, and all such abstract values . . . . Its
only concern is to affirm man's capacity for survival and to celebrate the conti-
nuity of life itself" (159). Though it has sometimes been argued that comedy is
pessimistic and tragedy optimistic in its measure of humanity, Meeker argues
that "this is true only if it is assumed that the metaphysical morality that encour-
ges man to rise above his natural environment and his animal origins is mankind's
best hope for the future" (158). On the contrary, Meeker points out, this view,
which has been adopted by Western civilization, has led to cultural and biologi-
cal disasters. He links comedy and ecology as "systems designed to accommodate
neces sity and to encourage acceptance of it, while tragedy is concerned with
avoiding or transcending the necessary in order to accomplish the impossible"
(163). "From the tragic perspective, the world is a battleground where good and
civil, man and nature, truth and falsehood make war, each with the goal of de-
stroying its polar opposite . . . . Comic strategy, on the other hand, sees life as a
game. When faced with polar opposites, the problem of comedy is always how to
resolve conflict without destroying the participants" (168). Comedy and evolu-
tion both show that "survival depends upon finding accommodations that will
permit all parties to endure . . . . The evolutionary process is one of adaptation and
accommodation, with the various species exploring opportunistically their envi-
ronments in search of a means to maintain their existence. Like comedy, evolu-
tion is a matter of muddling through" (163).

Dune and Pacific Edge were written a generation apart, both with the interplay
of social, political, and environmental forces central to the text, and both served to
heighten readers' awareness of ecological issues. Similarities end there, however.
Robinson was the inheritor of a profession of work published in the seventies and
eighties by feminists and other egalitarian who connected non-hierarchical eco-
logical principles to other movements in opposition to hegemonic dominance.
Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) epitomizes this sense of con-
nection among issues of racism, classism, sexism, and environmental abuse in its
assignment of a voice for the earth and a voice for animals in political debates
among her utopians who are without race, class, or gender hierarchies. The result of
this inheritance of Robinson's is a very fundamental difference between his
novel and Herbert's, which was written when conquering heroes were still over-
whelmingly in demand by publishers and readers.4 Dune is heroic in Le Guin's
terms and tragic in Meeker's—featuring Paul Atreides, Messiah—while Pacific
Edge is realistic in Le Guin's terms and comic in Meeker's—featuring Kevin
Claborne, Everyman and Green Party member. Dune, despite its ecologic al goal
of creating more life on Arrakis and Paul's climactic victory over all opposition,
Paul’s heroic adventures include a succession of discoveries about how the harsh environment of the desert planet, with its killer sandstorms and monstrous sandworms, may be an ally instead of an enemy. He uses a storm to escape death and convince his pursuers that he must have died. He learns that he can use sandworms for transportation, and that their voracious appetites can conveniently dispose of telltale signs of his presence. In the climactic battle scene, Paul employs multiple aspects of the natural forces of the planet to defeat his enemies. Herbert’s protagonist fits all the traditional measures of heroism. He is a Duke’s son, heir to the feudalism of a planet. He develops rapidly past the impressive capabilities of both his parents, reaching near-miraculous abilities in both rational and superrational powers of mind and body. Paul wins both union with the Imperial princess and the lifelong devotion of the women of the Fremen people. He is recognized as the savior of the Fremen. He risks his life time and again to gain new powers, to earn more devout loyalty from his followers, and to defeat his enemies. Finally, he triumphs over the combined forces of the political, commercial, and religious powers of his universe.

Despite his triumphs, Paul is a tragic figure, fully aware that he is not only the hero but also a victim of “the killer story,” which has cost him his father, his friends, and his son, and which will rage on across the universe because of him, despite his wish to stop it. He has stepped into the Fremen myth of the messiah Muad Dib, and while this role of religious savior adds to his power to accomplish his own ends, it also draws him into the role of leader of fanatic religious warriors. In “The Ambivalent Hero of Contemporary Fantasy and Science Fiction,” Juan Prieto-Pablos identifies Paul as “the most important representative of this type”—SF’s ambivalent hero—and notes that “the source of his tragic nature” is “in his awareness of the inevitability of his role” (66, 71). Herbert interrogates the role of the hero more obviously in later installments of the Dune series; Timothy O’Reilly quotes Herbert theorizing “that superheroes were disastrous for humans,” (5) and William Toupence asserts that although the Dune series “presents us with a charismatic hero .... Herbert is more interested in getting the reader to see the damaging effects these kinds of heroes have on their environments (Preface, npn). In Dune, however, he seems to be trapped with Paul in the killer story, the death story, which offers no solution to human problems, including environmental ones, and it is Dune, not any of its sequels, that is widely considered to be among the greatest SF novels.

R. J. Ellis explores the quandary of the killer-story aspect of Dune in “Frank Herbert’s Dune and the Discourse of Apocalyptic Ecologism in the United States.” The “apocalyptic ecologism” of Rachel Carson and Paul Bigelow Sears, which influenced Herbert, Ellis observes, “proposes imminent disaster and a dystopic future if no action is forthcoming; what it fails significantly to do is to articulate comprehensibly a political programme for such action” (115). Ellis blames American commitment to individualism and Social Darwinism for Dune’s lack of solution to the problems it raises. The Social Darwinist determinism in Carson’s, Sears, and Herbert’s writing, he argues, “hinders the coherence of the search for political solutions to the ecological problems they present, unless, that is, such explorations are formulated within the dominant discursive practices that legitimate laissez-faire individualism” (117). Herbert could have blamed Dune’s climatological blight on the multinational profit-makers’ greed for spice, but he doesn’t, Ellis points out (119). He could have emphasized the collective nature of the jihad to conclude that the answer is “a holy green war against the existing order,” but he doesn’t; the ecological story of the planet is compromised by the story of Paul as hero, he concludes (121).

So Paul’s heroic-combative story clashes with the ecological story of Arrakis. Herbert was not himself in sympathy with the sort of obsessive heroism that drove and trapped Paul (Scigaj 340-41, O’Reilly 5, 188). But given the set of assumptions that control the story of Dune, in which capitalist economic principles and deterministic Social Darwinism seem to go unquestioned, and religious fanaticism is required to motivate a people sufficiently to bring about environmental change, Herbert’s messianic hero is driven by the relentless struggle for domination Le Guin describes as the killer story. Meeker compares heroes like Paul to such pioneer species as dandelions and crabgrass, which thrive in tough conditions—but in most ecologies, he claims, pioneer species make way for other species to take root; in human societies, they just destroy others.

Kevin, the protagonist of Pacific Edge, could hardly be more different from Paul. In fact, teaching the two novels together in a course on Literature and the Environment, I was so struck by the extent of the contrasts between the novels that it seemed to me that Robinson must have set out to write an anti-Dune novel. However, he says it wasn’t so. He reports having “read most of Dune while driving through Alberta and British Columbia in 1971, with friends .... I scarcely remember Dune (Canada was more interesting) but who knows what sticks and influences one’s decisions later.” Still, it is clear that Pacific Edge is fundamentally positioned against the tragic-heroic story that Dune (1965) epitomizes, and in it Robinson provides some of the political answers that are enabled by removal of the blinkers of Social Darwinism and other aspects of the combative killer story. He undertakes the challenge of writing a realistic-comic life story about the effort to achieve a sustainable lifestyle in a dry-climate ecology. Robinson was aware of “‘writing against’ .. the high heroic tale, as in Le Guin’s dictum?” if not against Dune in particular, which does account for the fact that his story is, in every respect I can think of, Dune’s opposite. Five points of contrast in particular invite attention in an ecocritical reading: the stature of the protagonist, his relationship to nature, the scope of his environmental project, the process of decision-making and change, and the function of water images in the texts. All of these aspects of the novels relate to my central question of how consistent the values of the texts are with ecological wisdom—that is, with human practice that,
in Aldo Leopold’s formulation of a land ethic, “tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (262).

As posture, Robinson’s protagonist is just an ordinary guy. Ecologically speaking, he is seen more as a member of a community, in the context of relationships, than as a lone agent. Kevin is the novice on El Medena’s town council, a Green Party member who is outmaneuvered by his rival, the mayor, whose interest is in corporate expansion; he also loses out to the mayor in a love triangle. Kevin is distinguished by a remarkable batting average, but this is local news, hardly comparable to Paul’s victories over all the powers of his universe. If Kevin has another distinction, it would be persistence, again a far cry from Paul’s extraordinary abilities. Kevin’s objectives are to preserve the undeveloped high point in his community, Rattlesnake Hill, and to be first in the heart of Ramona. The first is a team effort; Kevin is just one of a determined small group that works to keep the hill natural. Carol Franko’s article on Robinson’s utopia emphasizes intersubjectivity and in particular, the communal nature of the scene of Tom’s memorial service that ensures the hill’s preservation (207–8). By the end of the novel, Kevin has succeeded with that goal and failed with Ramona, though this reader has the sense that life goes on, and neither Ramona’s marriage to the mayor nor the Rattlesnake Hill wilderness is guaranteed to last. In comparison with Paul’s, Kevin’s preoccupations fit Meeker’s observation that tragedy sees the world as a battleground, and its chief metaphor is warfare, while comedy sees life as a game, and its chief metaphors are sports and courtship (168). Softball and Ramona are Kevin’s delights, and his winning streak with both, followed by anxiety about threats to both and finally by the threats being realized, provide a mutually reinforcing parallel. Kevin takes both seriously and lives fully while engaged in sport and love, but the process is more important than the outcome. It’s living that matters—playing, loving, not winning, not conquering, not destiny. Kevin, unlike Paul, lives the life-affirming principles of Meeker’s comedy and LeGuin’s life story.

This sense that it’s being a part of life that matters and not heroic destiny is reinforced by the animal nature of Kevin and Ramona and their friends. Unlike Paul, who is mind and spirit, Kevin is emphatically a physical being, as the name “Claiborne” suggests. He feels his tired muscles after exertion and the cool of sweat drying on his skin after lovemaking; he enjoys “the luxurious sensation of immersion” in the sea (132) and the pulse of Ramona’s flesh under his fingers (168). The novel’s central episode, a hot-spring pool party in the hills on the night of the first Mars landing, features animal masks for all the characters. The images of naked bodies with animal masks accentuate Robinson’s portrayal of his characters as part of nature, not separate from it. In his introduction to Future Primitive: the new ecotopias, Robinson theorizes the mutual benefit of human lives lived in closer relationship to nature than is envisioned in urban industrialized futures—or the urban present, for that matter. “The world is not a machine we can use and then replace; it is our extended body. . . . Over the millions of years of our evolution, we grew bodies and minds that crave certain kinds of experiences—walking, throwing things, contemplating fire, dancing, sex, talking, spending most of every day outdoors, etc.” (10). Pacific Edge, a near-future utopia, portrays such a life, in which technology is employed judiciously, not as though it entirely determined quality of life. In Dune, Paul learns to use nature as an ally, and when he recognizes himself as a seed, as part of nature’s ruthless plan to strengthen the human gene pool, he is understandably appalled. Kevin doesn’t USE nature; he is nature, and nature to Robinson is not a battleground but fulfillment.

Paul’s environmental task is to transform a planet; Kevin’s is more modest in scope: to play his part in the community effort to live lightly on the land, and specifically, to guard his own backyard Rattlesnake Hill against corporate encroachment. Kevin shares in the community work of gardening and breaking up pavement that remains from the automobile era. His occupation is bioarchitecture; he transforms the inert boxlike living spaces that remain from an earlier lifestyle into dwellings that breathe, blending outdoors and indoors to create living space that is both attractive and ecologically efficient. His pastimes are softball, swimming, hiking, flying a human-powered light plane; his local transportation is a bicycle. Although Robinson devotes much attention to Kevin’s love life in an effort to make his utopia human and concrete, an equally important story is Kevin’s effort to block Hearttech’s plan to build on Rattlesnake Hill. In this undertaking, Kevin’s methods differ markedly from Paul’s, in keeping with the contrast between Green Party member and messiah. Kevin models a lesson of ecology, that it takes the interactions of many members of an ecosystem to sustain life; it can’t be done by one in a cataclysmic event.

In Dune, political process and law are almost irrelevant; everything seems to be settled by assassination, combat or awe. Paul’s leadership is military and religious. In Pacific Edge, political process and law are center-stage as the means by which decisions are made. Kevin is not leader but negotiator on both personal and political levels: a party member, a family member, a community member, a friend, a lover. Robinson offers a political-economic framework that holds out the possibility of sustained human life that leaves room for other life instead of killing off other peoples and other species in a battle for domination. Winning means persuading people to act in accordance with your wishes, including voting your way. To this end Kevin needs to stay alert enough at boring council meetings not to let his opponents slip anything by; he needs to gather information about Hearttech and its backers, about groundwater and water law and corporate law; he needs to mount an ad campaign and talk to voters. His chief allies are not a hardened and fanatic Fremen population but the other Green Party council member, Doris, and his grandfather Tom, who was instrumental in bringing about the legal changes that created this utopian society and has helpful contacts. Kevin doesn’t ride a ferocious giant sandworm into battle; he makes his getaway from a bit of corporate espionage with Doris on a bicycle. Unlike Paul, Kevin models...
actions in support of ecological sustainability that are within the capacity of any reader to perform.

In both novels the human heart is important, but what motivates people is quite different. The Fremen are a desperate people, threatened with extinction by the harshness of both the climate and the Harkonnens. Theirs is a struggle for survival; everything is life or death. A leader qualifies by being the victor in combat. No outsider less than a Messiah can win their allegiance. In Robinson’s El Modena people are not facing extinction; they are seeking the best balance between community prosperity and sustainable natural environment. They value other people for a variety of distinctive personal characteristics and their contributions to the community. In the background story that was Tom’s adult life, the political and legal changes that created a utopian society were a group effort: “It took everyone to do it. . . . A consensus of world opinion. Governments. The press” (283). In the foreground story of a local and specific effort that is one of the infinitely many needed over time and around the world to sustain the utopian impulse (Moylan, 3), what finally saves Rattlesnake Hill after all the legal sleuthing and political jockeying is people’s liking and respect for Tom, whose memorial plaque Kevin places strategically on the hill. Kevin and Tom are emphatically not messiahs or any sort of superheroes, but they do make a difference.

The uses to which Herbert and Robinson put their water imagery differ along with everything else. In Dune, water defines the difference between the rich and the poor and between life and death. It is luxury or salvation from death. Palm trees and conservatories and slopped water convey wealth. Water reclaimed by stillsuits, reclaimed from dead bodies, captured in dewcatchers and windtraps emphasizes the precariousness of Fremen existence in their environment. Two images are more portentous. One is the millions of decaliters of water the Fremen have hidden in underground pools intended for the ecological transformation of the planet. The pools convey the strength of tribal solidarity in the realization that no individual’s need outweighs reverence for this symbol of tribal salvation. The other such symbol in which water is invested with religious significance as well as reinforcing the fragile division between life and death is the Water of Life made from drowning a sandworm, which gives to one who drinks it either death or enhanced mystical powers. Water images in Dune depict Herbert’s Social Darwinism as well as the ways in which nature defines culture.

In Pacific Edge, water is equally pervasive but more subtly used to define the quality and textures of life. Contrasting with the display of wealth at the Atreides dinner party is the hot springs pool party enjoyed by Kevin and his friends. Water is to be enjoyed; it is delightful, sensuous, and it is a gift of nature. The trip Kevin makes into the mountains with Sally Tallhawk provides a fair parallel with the revelation to Paul and Jessica of the Fremen’s underground pool. Kevin and colleagues have come to consult Sally for her knowledge of water law, and she insists that they accompany her into the wilderness while she delivers an extended lecture on the natural distribution of local water and water law. They camp at a stunning site above the highest lake in the basin, and the setting adds another dimension to the lecture. Kevin recognizes that “this place itself was part . . . . of what she wanted to say. The university of the wilderness. The spine of California, the hidden source of the south’s wealth. . . . Around the wind, spirit of the mountains, breathed. Water, the soul of the mountains, seeped downward. Rock, the body of the mountains, stood fast. Held in a bowl like God’s linked hands, they slept” (109).

Wealth for Robinson is not economic, as it in Dune; it is the richness of nature. And the spirituality of Pacific Edge has none of the taint of manipulation by the Bene Gesserit that religion has in Dune; it is awe of nature itself.

The most stunning water scene in Robinson’s text is Tom’s death by drowning after being washed overboard in a hurricane. Here is nature at its fiercest, the process of dying truly detailed—and yet the water images are beautiful, water within him “quiet and blue black white, a riot of bubbles flying in every direction around him, glowing.” Tom’s last thoughts are of his dead wife, the pain of love given and lost, like life, while “all the blue world and its blue beauty tumbled around him” (295). This scene thirty pages from the end of the novel is mirrored by the concluding scene, in which Kevin sorrows over the death of his grandfather and the loss of Ramona in a setting of exceptional natural beauty. The ocean is before him, “a blue in blue, within blue inside of blue,” “white sunlight glancing off the swelltops” (325). The wind and clouds, the green and amber of Orange County behind him, surround him as he thinks of his unhappiness, and in the last line of the text, “he begins to laugh” (326). Water is the stuff of life and death in Pacific Edge, as it is in Dune, but the edges between life and death are not so harshly drawn. Death is part of life, as sorrow is. Kevin is a part of nature, which sustains him and makes the game of life well worth playing, despite its sorrows. Paul is above and beyond nature; for his sorrows there is no solace.

The students that read both Dune and Pacific Edge in my course on literature and the environment split fairly evenly in their preferences between the two. Those who preferred Pacific Edge dismissed Dune as “unrealistic.” I think it was not just that the planet Arrakis with its sandworms and melange seemed irrelevant to them, but also that Paul’s heroic exploits were beyond what they could aspire to. The students who preferred Dune thought Pacific Edge was “boring.” Mundane political process did not appeal to their imaginations. I wish now that I had polled them on their attitudes toward environmental change. I wonder if those who preferred Dune saw the set of actions needed for the long, slow process of reversing the environmental damage we have done as not exciting enough to engage in, or if they despised because while they might be willing to chain themselves to a tree in the path of a logging enterprise, they could see that that sort of action alone won’t suffice to save our world.

With respect to ecological wisdom, Herbert’s novel was an important first step for a generation of SF readers who needed to learn the fundamentals of ecology, and Robinson’s is better suited to the next generation that wonders, with their
better understanding of ecology, how we might change the socioeconomic practices that seem likely to destroy us. Of course, Pacific Edge is not the last word in the SF stories of life, the comedies of evolution that need to be told. However, comparing Dune and Pacific Edge demonstrates that when the issue we face is a need for change in the way we relate to the environment, the heroic actions of an individual are quite inadequate as a means of addressing the problem, and indeed, recognizing the hubris of that approach is one stage of advance in contemplating our relationship with the rest of nature. Dune’s ecological emphasis was more remarkable for its time than Pacific Edge’s. But Dune does nothing to show us a way out of the environmental crisis we face; its tragic/heroic form conflicts with the ecological truths Herbert espoused. Robinson points the way to avert environmental disaster in social change, differences in the ways we do things as a group, controls on individual aggrandizement and changes in the processes by which decisions with environmental implications (arguably all our decisions) are made: something like a Green Party platform. Robinson portrays in Pacific Edge a set of changes in social practices and attitudes including race and gender equality, which are not always linked to the ecological issues directly but are consistent in modeling practices that resist domination. They look instead to an ethic that preserves individuality but weaves it into a social fabric strong enough to support sane environmental policies. In his richly complex Mars trilogy, which tackles the same issues on a much larger and more detailed canvas, Robinson acknowledges implicitly the limitations of Pacific Edge, in which the challenges of getting from our present reality to the ecologically saner society of his characters are skinned over, but he retains in the trilogy the ecological wisdom of Pacific Edge that insists on relationships and small actions as fundamental to the well being of humanity in its biological context. Pacific Edge is a life story in both Le Guin’s terms and Meeker’s: unheroic, realistic, comic, consistent in form and content with ecological wisdom about how humanity might pursue a way of life that does not threaten the biotic community of which we are a part.

Notes

1. My thanks to Tara Hyland-Russell for her substantial help with the survey.
2. Environmental justice would be equitable distribution of environmental riches and hazards; environmental racism, for instance, is seen in disproportionate numbers of hazardous waste sites in native or black communities and parks in white communities.
3. The questions were suggested by the introduction to Gaard and Murphy’s Ecofeminist Literary Criticism (7), and Gaard’s “Hiking without a Map,” in the same book (245) and by Glotfelty and Fromm’s introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader (xxi).
4. Timothy O’Reilly quotes (188) John Campbell’s objection to Dune Messiah, which he declined to publish in 1968: SF readers “over the last few decades” have “persistently and explicitly” wanted “heroes—not anti-heroes. They want stories of strong men who exert themselves, inspire others, and make a monkey’s dance out of malign fates!”
5. Dune won both the Hugo and the Nebula, and it was voted the all-time best SF novel in a Locus poll in 1975 and again in 1982 (Toepounce, 119).

6. Quotations from and other attributions to Robinson that are otherwise unreferenced are from email correspondence on July 7 and 8, 1998. I am grateful to him for taking the time to read and comment on a draft of this article.
7. Robinson was also aware of “writing against” the tradition of the utopia, both in its form (as pure utopia/tract) and in the complaint often lodged against utopias that they were too abstract and bloodless. “One way to make it more novelistic and less bloodless was simply to personalize things, to make it very clearly my utopia, filled with my places and my activities and considerable chunks of my life story.” For instance, “Oscar’s house is the house I grew up in, and the ghost couple my parents. The creature—I seem to remember being stalked by it a few times, at night out in the orange groves. The symmetry of the old groves (rows files and diagonals all perfect) made them creepy places at night, like Escher landscapes.” The coyotes and geese that sleep with Oscar on the night of the Mars landing are “animals I remember from my childhood as being local still, in a mostly animal-depopulated landscape.”
8. Tom Moylan discusses the significance of softball in Pacific Edge in different terms, as an “oblique approach to two issues that the text provokes: the opportunities and limitations of control, and the social dynamics and political power of ritual” (2). While I don’t share his view that control is a big issue for Kevin, I do agree that the “intersubjective communal ritual (3)” of the mixed-gender softball games is a key to what makes Kevin’s world utopian.
9. Although Moylan (and some of my students) have seen Robinson’s description of women in animal terms as objectifying them in an unacceptable way (17), I believe his intent is to assert the animal nature of both men and women.
10. Carol Franko has observed that Pacific Edge insists “that the utopian vision of a human ‘home’ is founded on . . . responsiveness to difference, nonhuman as well as human” (235).
11. The same acknowledgment is explicit in a Foundation interview of Robinson by David Seed on the Mars trilogy.

Works Cited

Susan Stratton

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