

Two Version of Dystopia

Jonathan Hartmann

Olga Tokarczuk, *The Empusium: A Health Resort Horror Story*, translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Riverhead Books, 320pp., \$20 paper.

Laila Lalami, *The Dream Hotel*. Pantheon, 336pp., \$29 cloth.

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, WE HAVE THRILLED TO THE HORROR stories that leave us thankful for our shared privileges. Stories like Robert Golding's *Lord of The Flies*, where prep-school students veer into cannibalism. Tales of three wishes gone haywire, like W. W. Jacobs' "The Monkey's Paw" (*Can't happen to me! I never get any wishes. And if I did, I wouldn't be so stupid!*). By 2025, the dystopian world of the horror story shares considerable territory with the world we are promised in seemingly every advertisement: the techno-paradise. For although Artificial Intelligence can deliver a middling attempt at nearly any assignment you send its way, it has no cure for people mistreating each other.

Two recent novels take on dystopias—one a technological one, and both heavy on the mistreatment. Olga Tokarczuk sends up the man-centric world of Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*, set on the eve of World War I in an early sanatorium for patients with lung disease in Davos, Switzerland. Tokarczuk sets her story in 1913, at the health resort that inspired Davos, this one located in Gorbetsdorf, Silesia, abutting modern-day Poland and Germany.

The winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature, Tokarczuk spoke in her prize lecture of a “fourth-person” narrator, one

who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time.

Tokarczuk uses just such a big-picture, mythological approach to draw readers closer and closer to the history, culture and environment threatening to devour young protagonist Mieczys (Mieczyslaw) Wojnicz, a sewer engineer whose pronouns are they/them. Tokarczuk paints several of Mieczys’s fellow patients as molesters, pitting them against local feminine folkloric creatures the Tunschi in the fight for what will become of Mieczys. Reading the novel, I had no idea what to make of its title. Sanatorium, baths, yes—but what of the ancient Greek Empusa, a shape-shifting demon preying on young men?

The Empusium supplies Wojnicz, its young protagonist, with a retreat full of older men spouting sexist remarks, each of these drawn from the real-life statements of men including Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Jack Kerouac, and Sigmund Freud. As it does by channeling elements of *The Magic Mountain*, Tokarczuk’s novel uses the words of Mann’s male peers to point up the limitations of male chauvinism.

As the prolific science fiction writer Ursula LeGuin once noted, imaginative novels are distinguished not by the outlandishness of their scenarios, but by their adjacency to contemporary concerns, the proximity of their settings to the day after tomorrow. By this measure, Guggenheim and Fulbright-fellowship winning author Laila Lalami’s *Dream Hotel*, feels appallingly close at hand. In Lalami’s novel, the protagonist is detained by the authorities because of biometric data from her prosthetic device that is deemed threatening. We don’t have to wait for the software Lalami describes—the killer app Dreamsaver—to try to predict our behavior based on our dreams; we have seen predictive policing in action, as in the U.S. authorities’ sending pro-Palestinian demonstrators, including Mahmoud Khalil, to detention in rural Louisiana, as well as the Post Office scandal in the United Kingdom, during which 700 staffers were targeted by Horizon IT software for alleged theft and fraud. Many of them were imprisoned and several committed suicide. Many of our political leaders, also, would have their followers judge U.S. and global neighbors based on predefined categories rather than their individual merits.

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Dream Hotel foregrounds our willingness to sacrifice privacy, considerable sums of money, and the well-being of the less fortunate for our own immediate comfort. Today’s citizens vote with their digital pocketbooks—as illustrated in the 2008 film *Wall-E*, we ask ourselves not *What will my new vehicle be used for?* but instead *How comfortable a car can I buy?* During the COVID quarantine’s lull in Subaru, I bought a Forester with twice as many options as I can use. Buying the loaded Forester adds to the ways we seem to hasten the apocalypse through dependence on ever-more-powerful technology—i.e., by overusing conveniences like handing over our social-media posting to chatbots, enjoying heated-seat comfort within air-conditioned Dallas movie theaters, and video-chatting overnight so our boyfriend or girlfriend can watch us sleep.

Using dream sequences, flashbacks, and documents illustrating the rise of Dreamsaver and the criminalization of the every move of her protagonist Sara Hussein, Lailami dares readers to even try to turn away from the pages of *The Dream Hotel*. Tellingly, Sara’s first labor while detained is to review the efforts of software to create lifelike scenery for video games. Over and over, she is shown a sample and asked to answer the question “Is this real?”

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