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The Power of the Everyday Utopia: Becky Chambers' *Record of a Spaceborn Few*
A Review of *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018)

Reviewed by Ruth Booth

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THE POWER OF THE EVERYDAY UTOPIA

Review by Ruth Booth

Chambers, Becky. *Record of a Spaceborn Few*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2018.

During his 2019 series of Leverhulme lectures at the University of Glasgow, Brian Attebery proposed that works of Utopian Fiction need not describe large-scale, long-term changes to society to be successful. Indeed, he suggested that small-scale utopias may make Utopian Fiction more persuasive – even when the utopia in question comprises a single interaction between one person and another. Becky Chambers's third novel in the *Wayfarers* series, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018) serves as a singular exploration of this notion, portraying a reclusive, post-apocalyptic human society thrust by tragedy into the intergalactic community. In presenting the collective's resulting growing pains through the lives of the ordinary people caught in their wake, Chambers not only humanises issues of globalisation, but offers real, everyday solutions to issues that often feel too big to resolve.

The popularity of the *Wayfarers* books lies partly in their tackling of social issues with compelling, recognizable characters, which has led to favourable comparisons with *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) and *Firefly* (2002-2003). Long-term fans of the series will not be disappointed. Set on the Exodan fleet, a collection of 'Homesteader' spaceships originally constructed by humans fleeing climate change, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* explores the lives of four cross-generational Exodans at a time of upheaval in their society. Emphasising the necessarily socialist nature of this resource-limited society, the characters are connected by their roles: Isabel, an archivist, who also carries out baptism-like rituals; Eyas, a caretaker, who not only cares for the dead, but ensures their composting for crop growth; Kip, an impatient teen, and Tessa, a young mother and scrap worker facing redundancy due to mechanisation through alien technology. Further perspective comes from the experiences of two outsiders – visiting alien anthropologist Ghuh'loloan and new resident Sawyer, a "grounder," or human born on one of the many planets that form the inter-species community of the Galactic Commons. Those familiar with earlier novels will be delighted to note the return of a Santoso to the cast – Tessa is sister to Ashby from the first novel in the series, *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (2014) – as well as other Easter eggs aplenty.

Fans of the *Wayfarers* series will also expect Chambers's sensitive and well-drawn depictions of neuro- and cultural diversity. While this is the most culturally homogenised of their works due to its setting, Chambers has lost none of their powers of observation, giving us nuanced portrayals of frustrated teens, exasperating toddlers, over-worked parents, and blunt grandparents that any of us might recognise. Notably, this novel returns to the multiple viewpoints of the first novel, which depicted the experiences of the crew of a small tunnelling ship; however, this approach loses something in the wider context of a Homesteader, built to house hundreds of thousands. The minimal

time spent with disparate characters, coupled with the lack of strong emotional connection between them, lessens the impact of some events, even when they affect the entire cast. Consequently, the accident that occurs half-way through the novel loses the deep impact of similar pivotal events from earlier in the series, leaving us somewhat disconnected from the accident itself, if not its results.

However, this is the sacrifice for what Chambers does accomplish with this novel – namely, a skilful depiction of the interconnecting web of a post-apocalyptic human society through the everyday lives of ordinary people. It is the smaller things that Chambers deftly illustrates as holding the novel's tension: Tessa's trials as a lone parent and carer for their elderly father, for example. For each of these characters, though, their anxieties are rarely completely divorced from wider society. Isabel must negotiate their relationship with Ghuh'loloan, a Harmagian from a much more affluent society with very different customs, not only in the context of a society unused to, and sometimes even hostile towards aliens; their wife Tamsin is also suspicious of the Harmagian's motives for studying their society, and not shy about sharing their feelings – particularly in the company of their houseguest. The public and the private are entangled: connections to others are always primary, whether they are familial or communal, or physically embodied in the sharing of the environment and maintenance of its resources, as well as the birthright to food and shelter. Indeed, this is the true tragedy of the accident in the middle of the novel. Testament to Chambers's skill, what hits home is not the event itself, but Eyas's realisation that no one is coming for this person's body: the empty death ritual, the lack of benefit to their own family from their compost; the loneliness this embodies.

One might then ask whether the socialist Exodan fleet is a utopian community, despite their dystopian origins. Certainly, the barter-based economy, as opposed to the credits-based system used by other planets in the Galactic Commons, allows all a living in this community of limited space and means. But Chambers avoids making simplistic inside-good, outside-bad distinctions. The Exodan fleet uses credits to trade with the Commons; meanwhile, Ghuh'loloan is quick to point out in their reports that, while the Exodans are technologically backwards, they are not as impoverished as outsiders might think. The comparison between the two places, as well as the anthropological perspective of the Harmagian, places Chambers's Exodan fleet perhaps closest to Ursula K. Le Guin's ambiguous utopias of *The Dispossessed* (1974) and *Always Coming Home* (1985) in nature, if not content.

Despite this realistic approach, Chambers's novel is profoundly optimistic about the future. Humanity survives, somewhat the wiser for it, but is in many respects largely the same: teenagers still fight with their parents, toddlers are still profoundly frustrating – and, unfortunately, xenophobia and hostility persist towards those seen as outsiders. But there is also understanding and the desire to change in the wake of the accident, leading several characters to make life-changing decisions. And this is where Attebery's concept of small-scale utopias comes to bear on Chambers's novel: in its focus on intimate scales and the hope of kindness and change in the everyday, Chambers finds alternatives to the conflict and escalation that might otherwise tear society apart.

However, to consider this purely as a small-scale utopian text – or even one purely of the Exodan fleet – is to do this novel a disservice. The life-changing decisions of the characters come to

have wider societal impacts, and not just for their own communities. The Commons is always utmost in the mind of the characters, whether for its promise of escape for the teenage Kip, or its threat to the stability of the lives of elder community members Isabel and Tamsin. Ghuh'loloan's interest in the Exodan fleet relates to its nature at a point in history when Exodans are increasingly moving in and out of their own community. Indeed, it is the relationship between the Exodans and the Commons that creates much of the tension in the novel. This novel, at its core, with its notions of home and homecoming, is as much about large-scale issues of immigration and emigration in the wake of climate change and movement into global – or in this case, galactic – society as how we deal with them on intimate scales. Indeed, for Chambers, the one cannot be solved without change at the level of the other.

This is the great achievement in Chambers novel: in eschewing bombastic adventure and disastrous large-scale fears about globalisation and change for the intimate everyday, Chambers achieves the tricky balance of depicting an isolated society on an intimate level while at the same time tackling big issues. In highlighting the interlinkages between society, environment, and other nations within these small interactions, Chambers offers alternative perspectives on universal problems that, considered on their own terms, would feel too big to solve; instead, we are presented with achievable solutions in the everyday. In short, this is the persuasive power of Attebery's intimate utopias in action.

Towards the end of the novel, Isabel says: "Our species doesn't operate by reality. It operates by stories" (315). While this is offered as a cautionary tale to not accept prevailing narratives, this can also be taken as a rallying call. At this point in Western society, the problems of globalisation, climate disaster, and societal change seem almost insurmountable. While lacking some of the dramatic tension of the earlier *Wayfarer* novels, in applying intimate, everyday stories to such issues, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* offers a compelling call for change to reality not on a heroic scale, but on a very human one. As Attebery's conception of intimate utopias suggests, for that, it may be one of the most persuasive of this moment.

BIONOTE

Ruth Booth is a Creative Writing doctoral student at the University of Glasgow, UK. Their interests include adaptation and (mis)use of folktales, toxic masculinity and female complicity in genre communities, alternative heroism, and fantastic landscapes. Ruth has previously co-organized GIFCon and Eastercon 2019: Ytterbium, and recently joined the Promotions team for the Glasgow in 2024 Worldcon bid. Winner of the BSFA's Best Short Fiction Award (as Ruth EJ Booth), Ruth's multi-award-nominated stories are found in *The Dark*, *Black Static*, and *Pseudopod* magazine, amongst others. *Noise and Sparks*, their column for *Shoreline of Infinity*, won 2019's British Fantasy Award for Best Non-Fiction.