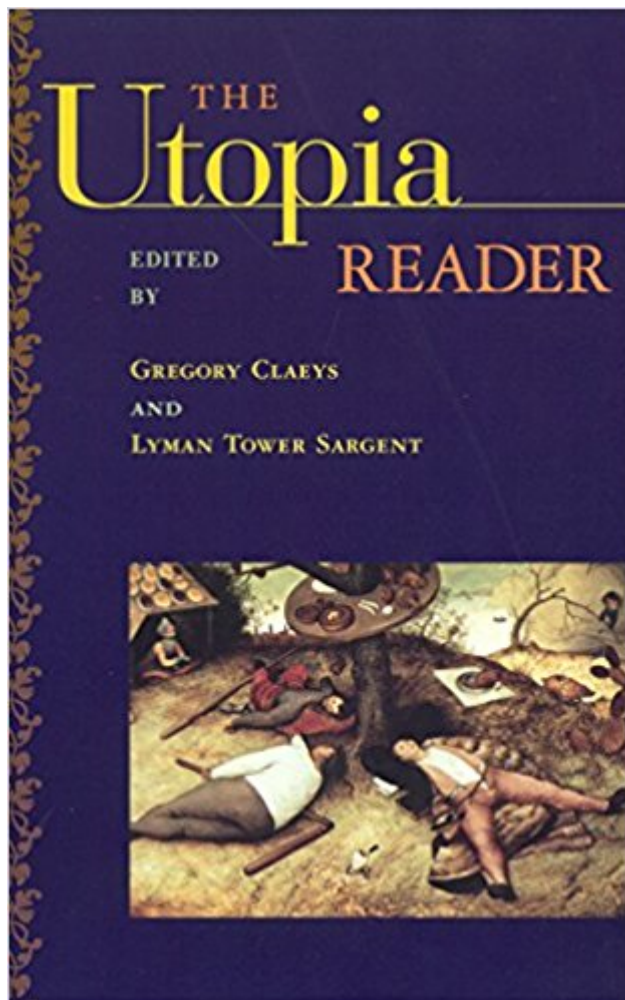


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# The Utopia Reader



## Synopsis

Utopian literature has given voice to the hopes and fears of the human race from its earliest days to the present. The only single-volume anthology of its kind, *The Utopia Reader* encompasses the entire spectrum and history of utopian writing—from the Old Testament and Plato's *Republic*, to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and George Orwell's twentieth century dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, through to the present day. The editors of this definitive collection demonstrate the various ways in which utopias have been used throughout history as veiled criticism of existing conditions and how peoples excluded from the dominant discourse—such as women and minorities—have used the form to imagine empowering alternatives to present circumstances. An engaging tour through the dissident, polemic, and satirical tradition of utopian writing, *The Utopia Reader* ultimately provides a telling portrait of civilization's persistent need to imagine and construct ideal societies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The Utopia Reader is a timely and provocative collection of utopia texts ... and an excellent introduction to the vast field of utopianism."-Moreana

Gregory Claeys is Professor of the History of Political Thought at the University of London, and author of several books. Lyman Tower Sargent, Professor of Political Science at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, is author and editor of numerous books including *Extremism in America* and *Political Thought in the United States*.

When I was told to put together a class on "Utopian Images: Fact and Fiction" I took an inventory of my personal library and began ordering books to fill the gaps. My primary goal was to order some of the less familiar utopian and dystopian novels that I did not already have, such as Francis Bacon's "New Atlantis," Samuel Butler's "Erewhon," Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Herland," Ygeni Zamiatin's "We," Katherine Burdekin's "Swastika Night," and even B. F. Skinner's "Walden Two." But I also ordered some theoretical and critical works on utopians, both literary and real world, and one of the first books I ordered was "The Utopia Reader," edited by Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent. What immediately caught my attention was that in these books there are excerpts from every single one of the aforementioned books, along with the proverbial much, much more. This reader provides extensive selections from the major utopian texts (Thomas More's "Utopia," Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward: 2000-1887," Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World"), along with samplings from dozens of others, stretching from Hesiod's "Works and Days" to George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four." The goal is to provide an overview of the history of utopianisms through both well known selections and more obscure but usually fascinating texts. After a brief Introduction, which defines the key terms and the scope of the survey, there are six additional sections:(2) Utopianism before Thomas More covers about two-dozen sources from ancient times to the 15th century. In stories about the Golden Age or various earthly paradises we find the roots of utopianism, as well as in Plato's "Republic," the legend of the Land of Prester John, and the monastic Rules of St. Benedict; (3) The Sixteenth Century provides a lengthy excerpt from More's "Utopia," supplemented by excerpts from Rabelais and Montaigne; (4) The Seventeenth Century focuses on the scientific utopias of Tommaso Campanella and Francis Bacon, as well as the more politically oriented works of Margaret Cavendish and James Harrington, with Shakespeare's "The Tempest" thrown into the mix.(5) The Eighteenth Century begins with Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" and looks at some lesser works from the period, most notably Timothy Dwight's "Greenfield Hill" and Thomas Spence's "The Constitution of Spensonia, which reflected the period of political revolution that would change the map of Europe and North America; (6) The Nineteenth Century is the most atypical section of the book because it begins with the historical examples of such American communal utopias as the Shakers, the Amana community, and Oneida, before turning to the works of Butler, Bellamy, and others, including Marx and Engels. The fact that there were actually communities other than those in the real world trying to build real world utopias is an important part of the evolution of utopianism; and (7) The Twentieth Century covers the works that are probably the best known utopian works, from Gilman, Zamiatin, and Burdekin to Huxley, Skinner,

and Orwell. The cumulative result is a solid introduction to the canon of utopian works, from classical to contemporary times, which is done through choice selections and excerpts instead of summaries. The commentary provided by the editors is more in the form of introductions, providing some historical and biographical background on the work and author, instead of constituting any sort of formal analysis. But then the title proclaims this volume to a reader, and it more than adequately fulfills that ideal. If there is a limitation in this collection it would be that for the most part it ignores utopianism in the realm of science fiction, even in terms of crossover dystopians like Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451," Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale," and Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Dispossessed." But it is certainly understandable that Claeys and Sarent are not interested in having to draw the line once they start talking about works in that field. With that caveat the only significant work missing for my money would be Anthony Burgess' "A Clockwork Orange" (but I am planning on using the film version anyway). But the bottom line remains that there is nothing comparable out there today that can provide you as solid introduction to the utopian tradition as this reader.

All of the works contained within this anthology are worthy of study. However, the excerpts provided are less than useful, often focusing so extensively on political theory that any other purpose is obscured (for instance, it selects Margaret Cavendish's constitution over her vastly more influential, and vastly more interesting, *The Blazing World*). The notes provided are useless, leaving the student to fend for themselves (and pray Google can explain some of the confounding elements, or spare some context). Professors, I beg you find another anthology--or have your students read the full text of each work you're covering. Your students will thank you. This book is dreck.

The textbook came in time for when I needed it and it is of great quality.

I bought this book for one of my college English classes. It is a great mix of stories that can be interpreted in different ways. I liked the variety. There is some "philosophical" ideas in here, so beware if you dislike those. Overall, it is a great collection of stories about Utopias.

Excellent book.

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