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REVIEW: The Carhullan Army by Sarah Hall

Posted on July 14, 2008 by Karen Burnham in Book Review // 16 Comments

REVIEW SUMMARY: A near-future examination of feminism and dystopia.

MY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

BRIEF SYNOPSIS: A woman escapes from the oppressive dictatorship of post-oil Britain and finds a way to fight for her rights.

MY REVIEW:

PROS: Resists easy answers; there's a lot here to engage (argue) with.

CONS: Unbelievable extrapolation and muddled political references make this an entirely unsatisfying work of feminism.

BOTTOM LINE: This book argues fiercely in favor of things most people already agree with, then undermines its own arguments.

Let's start with the world building. In a post-oil energy crisis world, in the space of about ten years, Britain has become an incompetent dictatorship that is more repressive than China. After the oil crash, everyone is rounded up into town centers, there's a total travel ban, and all the media (radio and TV only) is state-controlled and heavily censored. The Internet has ceased to exist. Power and food are rationed, and birth-control is mandatory. The most outrageous policy: all women are forced to have a uterine regulator implanted, which has visible external wires hanging off it. Thus, any woman can be hauled off the street by the police and forced to expose herself to them to "prove" that the implant is still in place. The narrator's husband can't understand why she's upset about this.

Is this in any way believable? That just because power is rationed, the Internet would cease to be a means of transmitting free information? That the UK would fall so far, so fast? That any Western man born in the last thirty years wouldn't understand that this treatment of women is outrageous?

Anyway, it's no wonder why Sister, the narrator, walks away from it all in search of something better: Carhullan. Even before the crash, it was an all-female farming co-operative; now it is

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one of the few places living independently of the dysfunctional government. Life isn't easy there, but they're making it work. The problem is Jackie, one of the original founders and an ex-Special Ops soldier in the British Army. Her paranoia about the threat from the government knows no bounds, and she eventually goads the women, including an enthusiastic Sister, to confront their oppressors militarily.

I can only assume that this set-up exists in order to portray a third-world level uprising against a first-world military. Presumably the author wants us to examine the situations under which violence, terrorism, and other unsavory tactics may be justified. Should we rise up when we see women's rights being violated? Is torture justifiable when the goal is protecting a safe place for women? To what extent should we risk small gains already made to try for big changes for women everywhere?

The problem is that Jackie ends up sounding as delusional as a hawkish neo-con while she urges the women to fight against an oppressive right-wing socialist government. She doesn't use Gandhian techniques that actually achieved their goals. She doesn't use the successful terrorist tactics that made the IRA and Al-Qaida household names (while not achieving their stated goals). She eschews guerrilla warfare in favor of direct military confrontation (the 'army' of the title is a little misleading; she's actually got a small platoon). Even if one might be in favor of terrorism as a tactic for liberation, I think we can all be opposed to stupidly executed terrorism.

That's really the primary problem of the book. It undermines itself at every turn. The framing device of a police interrogation is undermined by long descriptive passages. The depiction of the oppression of women is undermined by setting it in the near future West. The depiction of terrorist tactics is undermined by making the terrorists stupid. The empowerment of the narrator is undermined when she's given a bad case of **Stockholm syndrome**.

The spectres of other famous examples of British dystopianism loom over this book. Comparisons with, at the least, *1984* and *V for Vendetta* are inevitable. Oddly enough, both of them have more understanding of media communications and technology than shown by **Carhullan**, even if they were published in 1949 and the 1980s respectively, and Sarah Hall is writing in 2008. *V for Vendetta* portrays a future with some similarities to **Carhullan's** but is understandable as a product of its time, the 1980s of Reagan and Thatcher. **Carhullan** seems to predate even *V's* dystopia, throwing back to at least the 70's; it draws as much on the Vietnam war as the Iraq war.

This book seems unaware of the successful tactics that have actually advanced the cause of women's rights over the last thirty years: non-violent social and political activism, combined with aggressive legal strategies. In this book, none of that appears to have happened, so it's as if it comes from some alternate past. It certainly seems irrelevant to the important feminist struggles that are being waged today.

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About Karen Burnham (82 Articles)

Karen is vocationally an engineer and avocationally a sf/f reviewer and critic. She has worked on the Orion and Dream Chaser spacecraft and written for SFSignal, Strange Horizons, and Locus Magazine.

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16 Comments on REVIEW: The Carhullan Army by Sarah Hall



Derek // July 14, 2008 at 5:51 am //

I just brought this today so I'm not going to read the whole review. That said, I've read enough other reviews to know it's a real 'love it or hate it' book.



Abigail // July 14, 2008 at 6:41 am //

There's more than one way to make a feminist statement. While it's certainly true that *The Carhullan Army* is far from a realistic exploration of the effects of climate change or the possible shape of a Western totalitarian nation, it is equally true that this is far from Hall's focus. The crux the novel is the process by which Sister shakes off the helplessness and internalized victimhood that have been drilled into her and becomes an instrument of Jackie Nixon's will. This is quite intentionally portrayed as both a liberating and dehumanizing process, and one which the reader is expected to feel ambivalent towards.

I'm also tickled by your conviction that the wholesale control of women's reproductive abilities is something that modern men would be sure to rebel against. After all, doesn't our free, democratic, wealthy society make it its business to involve itself, both through legislation and peer pressure, in the question of when and whether women should have children? Sure, right now the pressure is on women to procreate, but if public opinion swung the other way I see no reason why public policy wouldn't follow.



scottsh // July 14, 2008 at 7:55 am //

Abigail, I see problems like this in near-future science fiction books many times. Was the point of the book to discuss the reality of society making this much change? Perhaps not – perhaps it was meant to be a character study of Sister's changes as you suggest. However when the backdrop inhibits your ability to suspend your disbelief, it undermines the entire book.

I agree with Derek though – a quick look around the web finds many reviews that are on opposite ends of the spectrum. I will note that most of the professional reviewers seem to be giving it a 'mixed bag' kind of review. They acknowledge it has good elements but also mention some of the things Karen has mentioned here as problems. Many reviewers seem to be having trouble with the ending – a warning for those who find that to be a critical part of a book's success.



James // July 14, 2008 at 9:01 am //

I really enjoyed it.

"That the UK would fall so far, so fast?"

Yes, seemed imminently possible to me.

Also, I took the point of the army not be terrorists, but to make a statement, something which full frontal military action did.

And I also loved the long descriptive passages.

And, initially I was disappointed about the ending, but thinking for a while after the book I think it made sense and worked. It's a book that makes you think after you've read it.

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TSP On This Day



Name Your Price for Phoenix Pick's Book of the Month: RED TIDE by Larry Niven, Brad R.

Torgersen, and Matthew J. Harrington

Published On: December 2, 2015

Red Tide by Larry Niven, Brad R. Torgersen, and Matthew J. Harrington is Phoenix Pick's new pay-what-you-want eBook special this month. Readers may download it for free or pay anything they wish. Here's what it's about: Loosely based on Larry Niven's 1973 novella "Flash Crowd," Red Tide continues to examine the social consequences of the impact of having instantaneous

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TOC: Clarkesworld #51

Published On: December 2, 2010

Clarkesworld #51 is now posted:

"The Taxidermist's Other Wife" by

Kelly Barnhill

"The Children of Main Street" by

A.C. Wise

Nothing This Fun Could be Good For You: A History of Evil

Entertainment by Nancy Fulda

Crossing Borders & Exploring Possibilities: A

Conversation with Theodora Goss by Jeremy

L. C. Jones

Podcast Audio Fiction: "The Taxidermist's Other Wife" by Kelly Barnhill,

read by Kate Baker

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SF/F/H Link Post for 2013-12-02

Published On: December 2, 2013

Interviews & Profiles The Skiffy and Fanty Show interviews

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Lindskold (Part 1). AMA readers interview

Marvel's Agents of SHIELD's Chloe Bennet.

Reading & Writing podcast interviews

Stephen R. Donaldson. Jeremy L. C. Jones

interviews David Drake. ABC Radio National

interviews Cory Doctorow. Wired interviews

Doug Dorst. Los Angeles Times interviews

Almost Human's J.H. Wyman.

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Pay What You Want for Phoenix Pick's Book of the Month: TAU CETI by Kevin J. Anderson and Steven Savile

Published On: December 2, 2014

Phoenix Pick has a new pay-what-you-want

eBook special ready to serve: it's Tau Ceti by



Karen Burnham // July 14, 2008 at 9:15 am //

I'm also tickled by your conviction that the wholesale control of women's reproductive abilities is something that modern men would be sure to rebel against. After all, doesn't our free, democratic, wealthy society make it its business to involve itself, both through legislation and peer pressure, in the question of when and whether women should have children? Sure, right now the pressure is on women to procreate, but if public opinion swung the other way I see no reason why public policy wouldn't follow.

Abigail – I see this as another case of the story undermining itself. Let's grant that your average Sensitive New Age guy, a liberal westerner, would immediately reject this situation as offensive. Now take your fundie religious right-wing misogynist guy. He may not have a problem with the tech itself, but part of his sense of power over the world comes from controlling access to the women under his control. There's no way that he'd be OK with a police officer randomly pulling his wife into a patrol car, pulling her underwear down, and possibly raping her.

Either way you look at it the men in question would be horrified. The fact that her supposedly-once-liberal husband sees no problem with it, and in fact finds it arousing, struck me as at best a straw man.

As for your first point, I just don't see the utility in showing a woman throwing off the shackles of oppressiveness, just to completely subsume her identity in another totalitarian leader. What did Sister gain by signing on with Jackie? She lost her safe space, her lover, and her liberty. In a very real way, she is no better off, except that she lost all that stuff in the course of a fight that she actively chose. It may have been somewhat justified if you could believe that her actions helped liberate the other women of England, but there's nothing in the text that allowed me to believe that.



Abigail // July 14, 2008 at 9:56 am //

scottsh:

I see your point in that I had similar problems with Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. In that case, however, I also felt that the novel was poorly written and thinly characterized, and I think that had I been able to connect to either the writing or the characters, I would have been less inclined to notice the gaping holes in Ishiguro's worldbuilding.

Karen:

I'm sure any number of individual men would object to the policing of women's reproductive abilities, but I have no trouble believing that society as a whole would accept it. Just think about the dirty looks women often get when they announce that they don't want to have children, or the disdain with which the 'childfree' discuss to choice to have them. This isn't, or at least not primarily, about men's desire to control women's bodies, but about the fact that society thinks of childbearing as a communal, rather than a personal, matter.

I just don't see the utility in showing a woman throwing off the shackles of oppressiveness, just to completely subsume her identity in another totalitarian leader

Why does there have to a utility? The fact that *The Carhullan Army* is a feminist book doesn't mean that it has to make an unambiguous, didactic statement. As I said, Hall is ambivalent about Sister's choices and expects us to be as well. That said, I can certainly understand how, to a person in Sister's position, the abdication of self she submits to in Jackie's compound is preferable to life within society. At Carhullan, she has power and a belief in the rightness of her cause, the right to make at least some of her own choices, even if the really big ones are made by someone else.



Karen Burnham // July 14, 2008 at 9:57 am //

It's a book that makes you think after you've read it.

Kevin J. Anderson and Steven Savile! This book, which won the 2013 Lifeboat to the Stars award, is part of Phoenix Pick's Stellar Guild series, where an accomplished writer teams up with a relative newcomer to deliver two related stories. Here's what it's about: Jorie [Continue Reading →](#)

Top 20 SF Signal Posts for November 2010

Published On: December 2, 2010

In case you missed them, here are The Top 25 SF Signal Posts that first appeared in November 2010: Mind Meld: Favorite SF/F Games MIND MELD: Fantasy Books/Series That Are Better Than The Lord Of The Rings The Syfy Re-Branding Hasn't Helped Them One Bit MIND MELD: Great Gift Ideas For Geeks and Science Fiction and Fantasy Fans FILM REVIEW: Harry Potter and the Deathly [Continue Reading →](#)

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James – on that point we are in complete agreement.



Karen Burnham // July 14, 2008 at 1:12 pm //

I'm sure any number of individual men would object to the policing of women's reproductive abilities, but I have no trouble believing that society as a whole would accept it.

Abigail – When you put it that way, I agree with you. What I found disingenuous was her husband's complete (and to me, inexplicable) lack of empathy. To me it seemed to be a straw man: look, look how awful men are!

I agree that the ambiguity of the plot/message is intentional, I guess I read too much of it as self-undermining to no purpose. What would you say the overall message of the story is, then? Or does it not have or need one? Is it simply the portrait of an oppressed woman yearning for something better and then getting kind of messed up?

Probably one of the reasons that I was so frustrated with the book was that I kept mentally going back to Joanna Russ' "The Female Man," which was amazing. Although some of it is dated now (e.g. it's much easier to keep one's career after marriage), a lot of it is exactly as relevant to women's experience now as when it was written. Compared to that, "Carhullan's Army" felt *less* relevant; it felt like a step backwards.



Pete Tzinski // July 14, 2008 at 4:20 pm //

I was glad to see V for Vendetta mentioned. I took note of this book, read the description (and now the review) and think I'll just stick to Alan Moore's classic. It's a pretty tough contender to try and beat anyway.



Cheryl // July 14, 2008 at 4:31 pm //

One of the interesting things about the book is that it very clearly illustrates how readers from different backgrounds have different levels of tolerance for various aspects of it. I suspect that Hall's mainstream readers will have less difficulty accepting her future history because they are not used to reading near-future SF. Science fiction readers are much more likely think about the world she has portrayed and question whether it would come to pass. They would ask questions about whether the Internet would completely collapse, what would happen with mobile phones, whether that level of authoritarian control was possible, and if so how come the Carhullan camp stayed free for so long?

But we can divide out analysis of her world into two areas: the technological, and the psychological. A science fiction analysis can, to a large extent, only tell us whether the description of the world is feasible. There's a separate question as to how likely it is that Britain would succumb to a dictatorship.

Of course the more British readers there are that find her future believable the more it proves her point. Her future history says that the British will just roll over and accept The Authority. If British agree with that supposition then there's a good chance it could happen in practice.



Alice // July 14, 2008 at 5:09 pm //

I wrote a long rebuttal, but am too angry to post it. It boils down to cultural differences – very few Americans would be capable of getting much from this book. This is not the author's fault. She has written a book deeply rooted in place and instead of accepting her version, as you would if it were an alien culture, you have tried to project your imaginary version England without considering that you might not know us very well.



Karen Burnham // July 14, 2008 at 5:24 pm //

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Alice – I am sorry that my review upset you. If you'd be more comfortable, you're welcome to email me: Karen.Burnham[at]gmail.com, and we could discuss it privately.

If not, thanks for your comment. It's certainly another thing to think about.



Pete Tzinski // July 14, 2008 at 8:17 pm //

It seems to me (he says, knowing nothing) that people are getting upset about the issue itself, rather than the book. By which I mean, the argument is not burning away about whether or not the book dealt with its subject well and consistently (which is what I thought the review addressed nicely) but the subject itself, if you see what I mean.

(For my own part, I didn't read the book because it didn't make me go MUST READ...but there are plenty of books that don't do that, and plenty of books that do, so it's not the end of the world.)

potters off to drink some tea and be an amiable nutter



Abigail // July 15, 2008 at 12:22 am //

Karen, I found the husband's devolution into a *Daily Mirror*-reading terrified conservative quite persuasive, and his blithe acceptance of the indignity visited on his wife struck me as an extension of that. It's not that he (or men in general) doesn't care about his wife, but that other things are more important, and can't she see that and do her part without complaining?

I think that, yes, I would describe the 'message' of *The Carhullan Army* as a portrait of burgeoning fanaticism, but more importantly it's also a portrait of a woman discovering her strength. That's not always a pretty thing but I think Hall did enough to make it compelling even in spite of that unprettiness.

I should stress that I don't think *The Carhullan Army* is a perfect feminist work. When I reviewed it a few months ago I called it dated – it feels like a product of the 80s and doesn't seem to have much to add to works from that period. But I did find it successful on the character and emotional level.



andyl // July 15, 2008 at 4:04 am //

I would agree that the purpose of the 'stand' of the Carhullan Army at the end wasn't to win. It was to spark the silent objecters into disobedience, to waken the English sense of fair play. The use of such overwhelming force to crush a small bunch of women is more likely to do that than the gradual (or rather not so gradual) erosion of freedoms or a set of small-scale terrorist victories.

I'm English and I would agree that the political situation as described in the book is not realistic (but then I don't think that it was necessarily supposed to be). Sure there are some who would go along with a plan (and some who might propose it if they could get away with it), but there is a sizeable proportion who wouldn't. It may well work rather better as a warning against the loss of rights and freedoms in general (something which has been in the air over the past few years) rather than a purely feminist reading.

What your review does not pick up on is the wonderful sense of geography that Hall shows in this book. In the sections where she is talking about the fells she is at her best. She really does capture the feel of the place. It is the highpoint of Hall's writing for me.



Karen Burnham // July 15, 2008 at 9:31 am //

Abigail – Aha! I finally found your review of it. I'd looked before, but my Google-fu was weak.

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Blog Roll

I see that we agree about almost everything but emphasize different points. You liked it enough to emphasize the good stuff, I didn't. We're pretty much on the same page (especially about it feeling dated) but arrived at different judgments about the book. Ah, the joys of subjectivity!

Comments are closed.

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