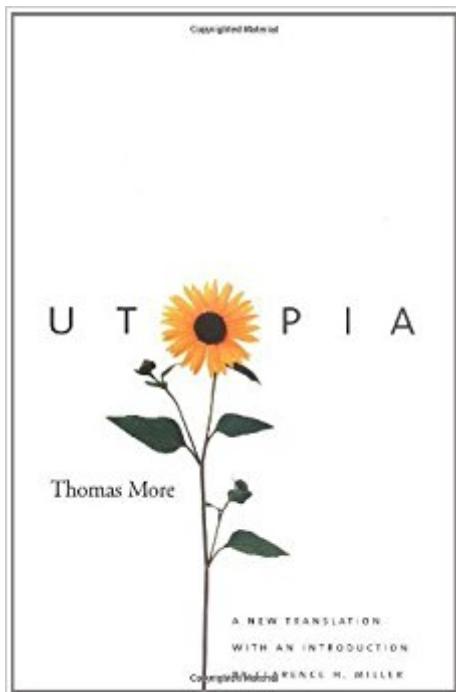


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Utopia: Thomas More (Yale Nota Bene)



Synopsis

First published in 1516, Saint Thomas More's Utopia is one of the most important works of European humanism. Through the voice of the mysterious traveller Raphael Hythloday, More describes a pagan, communist city-state governed by reason. Addressing such issues as religious pluralism, women's rights, state-sponsored education, colonialism, and justified warfare, Utopia seems remarkably contemporary nearly five centuries after it was written, and it remains a foundational text in philosophy and political theory. Preeminent More scholar Clarence H. Miller does justice to the full range of More's rhetoric in this new translation. Professor Miller includes a helpful introduction that outlines some of the important problems and issues that Utopia raises, and also provides informative commentary to assist the reader throughout this challenging and rewarding exploration of the meaning of political community.

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Customer Reviews

I enjoy listening to classics, and this is a very good book. The narration is somewhat dry. Although I realize this is a difficult piece of literature to read, the narrator could have done a bit more to add

animation and emotion to his performance. The narrator does a very good job of pronunciation, pacing, and dealing with words that aren't used much anymore. My review is not a synopsis of the book, but rather my opinion of it. I received a free copy of this audiobook at my request and have voluntarily left this review.

I very much enjoyed this classic piece of literature. Unlike some other reviewers, I don't think it is meant to be a model for a real society. It is in fact a quixotic idea of what a perfect society might look like, but I am not going to criticize a work of fiction just because it is not necessarily a realistic plan for a real state/country/world. That being said, I do believe the purpose of More's work is to make people seriously consider some of the things that are wrong with our culture and how to improve upon it. I found myself highlighting scores of passages, particularly those about education. (Full disclosure: I am a teacher, so naturally I have idealistic views about education.) More writes in very long, drawn-out sentences, but the basic idea of one of my favorite passages is, "If we do not properly educate people so they cannot be financially independent and so resort to stealing, what else are we doing but making thieves and then punishing them?" As a teacher for at-risk students, I see this behavior all too often, and I do believe that many of society's ills can be corrected in youth if only schools have the resources. My main issue with this book was More's writing style. As I mentioned before, he writes in extremely long sentences, mostly separated by semi-colons, which can make for tedious reading. Sometimes one sentence takes up a whole page. Other than that, I enjoyed the work.

As usual, Oxford does a good job with translations, introductions and notes. More's "Utopia" is the longest and best of the three works presented in this book, at least as far as fleshing out the details of how a utopian civilization would really look, particularly when situated among other civilizations. But, since most people are familiar with it to some degree, I'll discuss the other two writings in more detail. Bacon's "New Atlantis" is the least satisfying of the three utopian civilizations. First, it isn't complete, barely beginning before it ends. Second, it seems to be more about scientific specialization (i.e. how the New Atlantic culture has made great strides in various fields of science [e.g. agriculture, astronomy]) than about utopian society per se. It is interesting how Bacon relates these islanders, far from Europe, to the famed ancient Atlantean society. Neville's "Isle of Pines" is an interesting tale of shipwreck and discovery. A ship sinks near the coast of a faraway island, killing everyone except a man with the last name "Pine" and a few women, one of whom is black. What follows is a fascinating story of old/new-world racism and debauchery. Basically, the Pine

fellow starts bedding ALL the women (two of whom, if I recall, are sisters) because, you know, they're not getting rescued any time soon and they've got to keep civilization going. Eventually, they all dispense with the wearing of clothes. Then ALL the women get pregnant and turn into baby factories and everyone breeds like rabbits until there are hundreds of people within one or two generations. The interesting tack that Neville takes is that Pine only sleeps with the black woman at night, she "craftily" sneaking into his bed. In addition, her progeny happen to be the bad apples of the island, which is discussed from the perspective of some visiting sailors many years after the shipwreck. Fascinating view into the European mind from several centuries back.

I would not want to live in this Utopia. Although the laws are stated to be few and easily understood, the culture is packed full of restrictions and expectations for its members. I would suffocate in that culture. However, it is a very interesting reporting of a different culture, akin to socialism and communism, that gets one thinking.

This historic text may be of great interest to historians, who research what life and attitudes were like in former times. Reading it on my early day kindle, with its limitations on movement through the text became almost as much a chore as the ancient language style. On most books with my Kindle, I experience the lack of freedom in tuning back a few pages to check a fact, but this was the worst. Also, More indulged in many attempts at humor, both sharp and broad, which would confuse a reader at any age of reading. This book is best reserved for the researchers.

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