

REVIEW OF *THE MEMORY LIBRARIAN*

I've been to places that 'welcome everyone' before. ... They all sing the same lyrics until you scare them, and then they need a solution for who you are.¹

Confession: I hadn't listened to Janelle Monáe's music before. One of the side benefits of my book club choosing this book was that it inspired me to go listen to her albums, and discover I really like some of them—particularly the *Metropolis* EP and *The ArchAndroid*.

Anyway, these stories are pretty good. My favorite is "Timebox", which presents an interesting thought experiment: what would you do if you had a way to step outside time—a room you could lock yourself in for as long as you like while no time passes for anyone else? The story highlights a perhaps-underappreciated form of inequality in our society: how some people are constantly pressed for time, being run ragged to complete their daily responsibilities, while others of us have the time to think and work at our own pace. I also like how one character's obsession with high-minded ideals and an abstract notion of "community" is contrasted against her infuriating lack of empathy for her partner.

"Save Changes" is about the dilemma between safety—for yourself and your loved ones—and the pursuit of happiness. The protagonist is fixated on the risks her sister takes on in pursuit of her desires, to the point that she cannot appreciate how important the pursuit of those desires may be.

The only story I don't like is the final one, "Timebox Altar(ed)". It's essentially utopian, which I appreciate; I feel contemporary media is overly prone toward cynical visions of the future. But while it dreams of a world where everyone lives in harmony and takes care of each other, it doesn't indicate how such a world can be achieved.

Perhaps anticipating my complaint, an article reprinted in the book notes that:

Black futurist artists are often regarded as prophets, and expected, unfairly, to foretell the path that will lead us to a brighter tomorrow.²

Point taken. And I absolutely love the Octavia Butler quote that that article opens with:

¹"Nevermind," in *The Memory Librarian: And Other Stories of Dirty Computer*, by Janelle Monáe and Danny Lore, First edition (New York: Harper Voyager, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2022), 135.

²Mary Retta, "Welcome to Janelle Monáe's Dreamworld," *Wired*, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://www.wired.com/story/janelle-monae-afrofuturism-book-memory-librarian/>.

There's no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.

Still, I want *something* more from a utopia than a cozy description of how great it would be if we could all just get along. The book's dystopian government, New Dawn, is dystopian precisely because it is obsessed with getting everyone to hold the same set of beliefs and values—which means it has to forcibly change or marginalize anyone who demurs. Yet the glimpses of a utopian society we get in “Timebox Altar(ed)” also suggest a society where everyone holds the same set of beliefs and values. Better values, certainly; but you can't expect that people are going to be universally persuaded to agree on the best set of values. Unless you have a vision for how to better handle disagreements, or how to make those disagreements matter less, the temptation will be to seek utopia by simply getting rid of all those troublesome people who refuse to see the wisdom of your value system. Which is the same kind of thinking underlying New Dawn and real-world totalitarianism. By contrast, the story I quoted at the start of this review, “Nevermind”, shows more awareness of the meta-problem.

(The other reason “Timebox Altar(ed)” doesn't resonate with me is that it seems to rely heavily on the trope that true wisdom is found by looking deep inside yourself and getting in touch with some sort of fountain of infinite specialness and magic at the core of your being. I find it over-the-top, though I can see the value of this message as a corrective against the opposite extreme perspective—that you have nothing to offer or no agency in the world.)