



# Future West: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction

*William H. Katerberg*

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What is the future of the American West? Is it fated to shine with the benign promise of Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*? Or will it instead dissolve into postapocalyptic dust, as in Walter Miller's classic novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, or devolve into relentlessly dark and rain-soaked urban landscapes, as in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*?

William Katerberg takes a new look at works of utopian, dystopian, and apocalyptic science fiction to show how narratives of the past and future powerfully shape our understanding of the present-day West. Combining intellectual history, literary analysis, and political philosophy, his study boldly encourages readers to reframe their understanding of both popular Western culture and American political culture.

The frontier has long fostered America's persistent desire to leave the past behind and begin anew—a desire that has nurtured the utopian dreams of westerners from Progressives to Earth First!ers. Katerberg revisits the frontier mythos (and iconic figures like Buffalo Bill Cody and Frederick Jackson Turner) and explores the West of future-oriented novels and films, in which the frontier is long past and American society is aging. He suggests powerful new ways to think critically and hopefully about American history—and about politics and civic life in the present.

Ranging widely over science fiction subgenres—from alternative futures to cyberpunk—Katerberg takes us on a tour of utopias of all stripes, whether exclusivist, reactionary, or progressive. Here are Douglas Coupland's postindustrial West, Callenbach's eco-utopian Pacific Northwest, and Kim Stanley Robinson's critical utopian view of Orange County. He considers how Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* ties revitalized Native American traditions to their hopes for the future, and he uses such stories of race wars as *The Turner Diaries* to compare reactionary visions to progressive utopianism.

By looking at how American frontier mythology plays out in the imagined West of the future, Katerberg offers a new approach to understanding the region's popular culture. Through this artful juxtaposition of history and projected futures, he reminds us that what's to come is not yet determined—and that, even for a nation desperate to leave the past behind, history holds ideas that can light the way to a brighter society.

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