

THE CHILD GARDEN

or

A Low Comedy

Geoff Ryman

Introduction by Wendy Pearson

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INTRODUCING THE CHILD GARDEN

Wendy Pearson

Literature for me . . . tries to heal the harm done by stories. (How much harm? Most of the atrocities of history have been created by stories, e.g., the Jews killed Jesus.) I follow Sartre that the freedom the author claims for herself must be shared with the reader. So that would mean that literature is stories that put themselves at the disposal of readers who want to heal themselves. Their healing power lies in their honesty, the freshness of their vision, the new and unexpected things they show, the increase in power and responsibility they give the reader.

—Geoff Ryman, “An Email Conversation with Geoff Ryman”

The difficulty with writing a foreword to Geoff Ryman’s *The Child Garden* is knowing where to begin. There is simply so much honesty, such freshness of vision, such new and unexpected richnesses of the imagination and, indeed, so much generosity of spirit in this fabulous novel that it’s difficult to highlight one thing without losing sight of many others. Yet all are equally important to the complexity of Ryman’s vision of a future London that, unlike the simpler warnings of Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, is both utopian and dystopian at once. Ryman’s future-London is a place of hope and despair, beauty and ugliness, extraordinary wonders and unimaginable costs. It is, above all, a novel about healing—healing from disease, healing from the trauma of becoming human, healing from the ugliness and despair of the world.

The Child Garden, originally published in 1989, is Ryman’s second novel, following *The Warrior who Carried Life* (1985). *The Child Garden* won both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and brought Ryman to the notice of the wider science fiction community, those who were not already cognizant of his remarkable short fiction. Ryman was born in Canada, educated primarily in the USA and has lived most of his adult life in the United Kingdom. His fiction covers all of that territory, alongside a life-long interest in Asia (*Air* is set in a fictional futuristic version of Kazakhstan, while *The King’s Last Song* re-tells, among other things, the story of Cambodia’s twelfth-century king, Jayavarman, VII in the context of Cambodia’s current history and immediate past). Ryman’s third novel, *Was*, interweaves three narratives, the ‘true’ story of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, the life of Judy Garland, and

the story of Jonathan, a young Canadian actor who is dying of AIDS. What all of these novels have in common is a sense of the way in which the world hammers at and distorts us and the sometimes unlikely but urgent possibilities for healing—for using the stories that heal to undo the damage done by stories that harm.

The protagonist of *The Child Garden* is a young woman named Milena. Milena is an oddity in her world because, unlike all of the other children, she is resistant to the viruses which manipulate the individual's genes and infect them, among other things, with language and the world's knowledge. As a result, Milena is unique. And in Milena's uniqueness, as it turns out, lies the great hope of the cure for the cure for cancer. And, no, that's not a typographical error.

The Child Garden thus starts with an irony. Cancer has been cured. The most feared disease of the 20th—and, thus far, of the 21st—century has been defeated. Cancer no longer exists. But curing cancer turns out not to be the miracle for which we have all hoped. Cancer, it turns out, “had been rather important. Cancer cells did not age. They secreted proteins that prevented senescence. They had allowed people to get old. Without cancer, people died in or around their 35th year.”

Ryman spells this conundrum out for the reader in the first four pages of the novel. We enter it knowing that the human lifespan has been halved, in part because the wealthy were able to buy (and accidentally release) the cure for cancer before it has been properly tested. Without needing to know if there is any validity to the assertion that cancer gives us the ability to age, we are already in familiar science fictional territory: a scientific thesis has been advanced. We will enter into the novel as part of Ryman's thought experiment in what a world that has paid such a high cost for the elimination of cancer might look like. As readers we are prepared to do this because the novel is, after all, science fiction and such thought experiments are one of the standard modes by which science fiction operates. But we are also prepared because Ryman tropes on discourses we all already know—the greed of ‘Big Pharma’ (though Ryman never even mentions pharmaceutical companies), the shoddiness with which high-profit high-stakes drugs are sometimes tested, the extraordinary and sometimes extraordinarily unethical things people will do in order to prolong their lives at any cost. Really, is Ryman's premise that far-fetched? And does it matter. Let's take him at his word: Cancer has been cured and the human lifespan has been reduced by more than half. Where does that leave us?

In a technologically-advanced society, short of finding a cure for the cure for cancer, it leaves us with technological solutions. Like the cure for cancer itself, the solutions—perhaps one might best regard them as stop-gap measures—lie

in further genetic technologies. So, at the end of page 4, our protagonist, Milena, terrified of the viruses which, if they succeed in infecting her, may also cure her of herself (more on this in a minute), sits on a bus and looks at the children around her: "They had been given viruses to educate them. From three weeks old they could speak and do basic arithmetic. By ten, they had been made adults, forced like flowers to bloom early. But they were not flowers of love. They were flowers of work, to be put to work. There was no time."

On the one hand, this is a stunning feat of the imagination, a world in which children are forced, like prize flowers, to bloom early—and, like prize flowers, a world in which they die prematurely. On the other hand, this—like all good science fiction—is also about us. While we are educated by viruses and speaking at three weeks of age, what the novel does is to literalize the very contemporary sense of the compression of time. In the West, at least, our average life expectancies are higher than they have ever been—and yet our lives go past so quickly, seeming to rush by faster every day. Like Ryman's children, we live at speed. We feel that there is no time. And this, too, is something where we may seek healing, perhaps even in seizing the time it takes to sit down and read a novel.

There are a couple of other things about Milena that are very important. Milena is not a full citizen of her world, because when the authorities finally succeed in getting the viruses to infect her, at the age of ten, she becomes too ill to be Read. 'Reading' is the process whereby a personality model of every citizen is created, mental disorders are discovered and cured, and the personality models become part of the Consensus, the government. Without going too much into Ryman's vision of a government by Consensus that is still, like all governments, a hegemony with political and ideological principles—expressed primarily through the Party—that can override human needs, desires and talents, it is hard not to note the irony of this both in relation to the novel's original publication in 1989, the year before Thatcher's Conservatives went down to defeat in the UK and in relation to the current Conservative-Liberal alliance with its view of privatization and citizen 'responsibility' under the tendentious sobriquet of the 'Big Society.'

Conservative politics are not entirely by the by here, however, particularly in relation to Milena's fear of being Read. Milena has very good reasons to fear being Read, even though she is now as infected by the viruses of common knowledge as any other citizen in her world. And here is another reason Milena is unique: Milena is a lesbian. According to the Party, same-sex love is a "semiological product of late period capitalism." Milena suffers from Bad Grammar. If you want to get academic about it, there is something both deeply Derridean here (in the sense of Jacques Derrida's arguments about the functioning of

language in, for example, *Of Grammatology*) and deeply Foucauldian (in the sense of Michel Foucault's argument, in *The Order of Things*, about the way in which languages structure and are structured by social order, so that re-ordering things in ways that appear to make so sense, within our particular epistemologies, also appears to fracture language itself). Life in London where she has no hope of finding a partner and must boil her cutlery to avoid infection makes Milena angry. But Milena is also scared, not just of viruses but because she is "certain that one day soon the Party will try to cure her . . . of anger, of being herself."

A couple more things are needed to complete our picture of Milena's life in this future London: Milena is an actress in a Shakespearean company. Again, there is plenty of irony here. Milena actually is an artist: she is full of theatrical visions which, as the novel progresses come to remarkable and spectacular fruition in Milena's holographic production of an operatic version of Dante's *Commedia*. But Milena's artistic talents are of no use to the Consensus. In Milena's world, there is only one authorized performance of any Shakespearean play, just as there is only one authorized interpretation of it. The Tykes before whom Milena and her troupe perform are bored out of their minds: after all, they were infected with this performance and this interpretation when they were only weeks old. As Milena points out, when the novel takes us back to her own childhood, the teachers only ever tell the children to remember. They never need to learn and, more importantly, they are never asked to think. Indeed, they are never asked to make ethical decisions, because behaviour, like knowledge, is caught from the viruses. The children, by and large, are cheerful and honest and helpful, not out of some sort of native virtue, but because viruses make them so.

In other words, though I began by saying that *The Child Garden* is a more complex mixture of the utopian and the dystopian than *Brave New World*, it has much in common with that novel in relation to the misfit protagonist and the world in which everyone is pre-programmed to be what their society needs. The Consensus is, in all sorts of ways, both better and worse at it than Huxley's England. The possibilities of hope are both within the system, which has degrees of built-in tolerance of which Milena is unaware (and she is correct in her suspicion that such tolerance would not extend to her same-sex desires), and outside of it, as anything so dependent on the use of viruses for genetic engineering is also deeply vulnerable to random mutation. The Bees who appear late in the novel are an example of this: humans who have caught the mental patterns of others through mutated viruses and who now exist in a kind of hive mentality.

The Child Garden is thus also a novel as viruses. As such, it is very much a product of its time and place, a world in which gay men were caught up in an HIV epidemic that, today, is more associated with heterosexual women and Africa.

The AIDS epidemic is not directly part of *The Child Garden* but it is, in part, what the novel is about. It is about how systems, viruses, languages, social orders, mutate, change, die and are re-born. Indeed, the virus is central to the story, just as it is to the theoretical work of Jacques Derrida. And this is made clear when Ryman cites one of Derrida's works, "Plato's Pharmacy," at almost the exact centre of this novel. Again, Milena, who actually reads books and thinks about their content, is posed against the other Tykes, who already know the content of each work and its supposed meaning.

Their argument is about both writing and reading—something that can scarcely be peripheral to any novel, but most particularly to a novel about a future in which citizens are Read. It is also about the dual meaning of the word 'pharmakon,' which denotes both cure and poison. For Plato, the development of writing was a pharmakon because, on the one hand, it provided a cure for failing memory, but, on the other hand, poisoned the need for memory in the first place. The idea of the pharmakon recognizes the fact that so many things function both as medicines and poisons—a little foxglove (*digitalis*) can be very helpful in cases of atrial fibrillation, particularly with congestive heart failure, but even a very little bit more foxglove can equally be toxic, specifically to the heart. Derrida takes up Plato's argument, among others, as a way of pointing out that writing, like the virus, is an undecideable—both poison and cure and often both at once.

If a science fiction novel has at its heart the idea that writing—and reading—can be an undecideable, as easily harmful as helpful, what does that tell us about the potential of science fiction to affect readers, particularly about its potential to nudge us toward 'real world' change? Is Ryman, as my epigraph seems to indicate, hopeful that his book will help to heal the world? Because it is clear that Ryman sees stories themselves as a pharmakon—both capable of causing great harm and of healing the harm that other stories have caused. In *The Child Garden*, Milena is both a symbol of that harm and the hope of its healing.

In the face of a universal prohibition on lesbianism in her society, Milena still finds someone to love, the 'polar bear' Rolfa, a young woman from a genetically engineered race of Antarctic miners. And Rolfa, too, is more than she seems, because Rolfa, despite all of her genetic heritage and family conditioning, is not only a lesbian, but an artist. Rolfa is an opera singer and composer. After Rolfa and Milena's affair ends badly, as it can only end in a society as closed towards alternative expressions of desire as this London is, Milena discovers that Rolfa has translated a number of works of literature into operas, among them the three books of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. With much effort, Milena stages Rolfa's opera as a holographic spectacle in the world's skies.