

# Cooperative Futures Imagined—From Earth to Mars and Back

By Thomas Mengel

Communal values and reciprocal community building play a large role in imaginative fiction about the future—and cooperatives are an important part of this. Kim Stanley Robinson is my go-to (science) fiction writer of choice<sup>1</sup>. In addition to his fictional work, he continuously and critically comments on social and economic issues resulting from the crisis of capitalism. He does so from a social democratic perspective. In several of his writings he explores cooperative ways of organizing human endeavours. He lives in a cooperative and consent-oriented cohousing community in Davis, California, experiencing first-hand and contributing to an existing and promising alternative of communal living.

In his Mars trilogy, Robinson combines his best-known fiction novels. He follows the human trajectory by imagining how it might evolve towards a far-out human future away from earth<sup>2</sup>. Written in 1992 and imagining what happens from 2026 onward, the first volume, *Red Mars*, describes how humans first will take their issues and current solutions with them: clashing worldviews and positions, dominance of transnational capitalist corporations, personal conflicts, and transnational wars. As a result, conflicts on Mars and interstellar wars continue even 100 years later into the second volume, *Green Mars*, written in 1993. Only the increasing crises and chaos on Earth allow the Martian settlers to break free, “resettle in political autonomy and with newfound hope for the future”<sup>3</sup>. In *Blue Mars* (written in 1996), set in the 2220s, settlers successfully complete the “transformation into transglobal harmony and security and towards spreading human civilization further through space and time”<sup>4</sup>. Both on Earth and on Mars, more democratic and cooperative organizations replace the traditional businesses. Collaborative, if not cooperative, governments and hybrid economic systems beyond the capitalism-socialism-divide begin to prevail both on Earth and on Mars (and beyond), resulting in the hope for a cooperative, secure, and harmonious future at the end of the trilogy.

Writing at almost the same time as Robinson, Octavia E. Butler<sup>5</sup> never finished her Parable (Earthseed) series. After publishing *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *The Parable of the Talents* (1998), Butler experienced writer’s block, suffered from depression, and switched to exploring other themes in her writing<sup>6</sup>.

*The Parable of the Sower* imagines a dystopian California in the 2020s and 2030s, where a teenaged protagonist, Olamina (Lauren), survives the gang-related violence and creates a new belief system—Earthseed—based on the inevitability of change, on god as change, and on change as god. Olamina, like Earthseed, also envisions a future of humans on another

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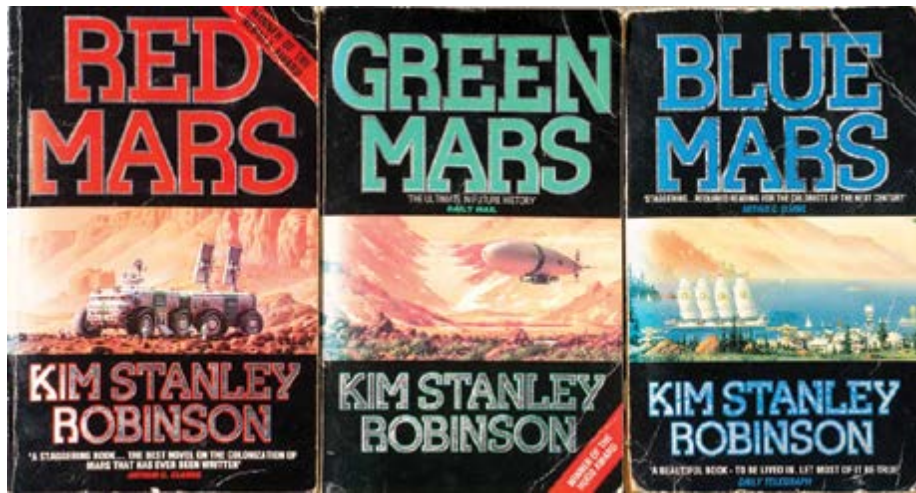
Without a significant paradigm shift towards communal values and cooperative practices, we will likely fail.

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*Trapeze artists fly through the air, holding on to trust.*

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through-the-air-holding-trust.



planet. Together with some fellow travellers, Olamina relocates to a new community in Northern California called Acorn. The sequel, *The Parable of the Talents*, is set after Olamina's death some 30 years later. It describes "the invasion of Acorn by right-wing fundamentalist Christians, Olamina's attempts to survive their religious 're-education', and the final triumph of Earthseed as a community and a doctrine"<sup>7</sup>, with the first interstellar Earthseed colonists taking off for a new destiny, decades after the dire beginnings. "Only the name of the spaceship gives us pause: against Olamina's wishes the ship has been named the *Christopher Columbus*, suggesting that perhaps the Earthseeders aren't escaping the nightmare of history at all, but bringing it with them instead"<sup>8</sup>.

When working on *The Parable of the Trickster*<sup>9</sup>, Butler felt it was too hard to push through with her third book out of seven as envisioned for this series. She died of a stroke in 2006 without ever having finished the Parable series. However, from interviews and notes we know what she imagined for the future of communities based on the Earthseed beliefs.

The Earthseed colony of the future at first was not what the founder had hoped for, given the colonists had indeed brought their earthly issues with them. Butler herself noted that "what they're going to have to deal with is themselves. There's no going home. Nobody will follow within their lifetimes.... The real problem is dealing with themselves, surviving their promised land"<sup>10</sup>. Butler had also imagined a society of individuals with "hyperempathy" for each other (like Olamina and some of her fellow travellers, perceiving and feeling the pain of others as their own). Instead, and based on the realities she experienced in the mid to late '90s, darkness, misery, and homesickness appear to prevail in this middle of the seven-part series. "Four more books. That would be how long it would take, in Butler's estimation, for the human beings of the future to move past their homesickness, their biology, and their history and truly become capable of working towards a common decency. She saw hope, but only a long way off"<sup>11</sup>.

"What the all-important dream of the Destiny offered Olamina, offered Butler—offers us—was a chance not to *abolish* human nature but to perhaps temporarily suspend it; the extrasolar colonies are the chance to start over in circumstances whose radical hardship would offer a chance to build new practices of solidarity and collective life rather than indulge the selfish impulses the bad habits of capitalism and the bad instructions in our DNA have ingrained in us....they can choose: either live together, work together, struggle together, and pray together, or else hoard food alone, scheme alone, lose their minds alone, breakdown and die and murder each other alone. And the tragedy is she was never able, in her short life, to think through the hopeful part"<sup>12</sup>.

Back to Earth and to our own not-so-distant future, Robinson did just that. Published in 2020, his book *Ministry for the Future*<sup>13</sup> begins in 2025 and paints a glimpse of hope into the picture he sees emerging from the disasters ahead. Written as climate fiction and based on hard facts, the main plot follows Mary Murphy, the head of the fictitious Ministry for the Future established as result of the 2015 Paris Agreement for climate

change, and Frank May, the American aid worker who has been traumatized by the catastrophic heat wave in India at the beginning of the novel. Ecology, economics, and events unfolding in the near future create the dynamic background of the novel and for the various human and organizational responses.

Throughout the novel, Robinson explores the role various cooperative endeavours could play in collaboratively addressing the issues resulting from climate change and the failures of competitive capitalism.

"It wasn't going to happen from the top. The lawmakers were corrupt. So, if not top-down, then bottom-up. Like a whirlwind, as some put it. Whirlwinds rose from the ground—although conditions aloft enabled that to happen. People, the multitude. Young people? Not just congregating to demonstrate, but changing all their behaviors? Living together in tiny houses, working at green jobs in co-operative ventures, with never the chance of a big financial windfall somehow dropping on them like a lottery win?"<sup>14</sup>

Cooperative financial institutions like credit unions, employee-owned worker cooperatives, agricultural land cooperatives, and (co-)housing cooperatives are being discussed by various individual and organizational actors in the novel. The conversations don't shy away from the challenges that need to be overcome for the cooperatives to succeed and to be sustainable. Thriving examples like the Basque worker cooperatives of Mondragón<sup>15</sup> and the greater cooperative movement are discussed as hopeful alternatives enacting the cooperative principles of "open admission, democratic organization, the sovereignty of labor, the instrumental and subordinate nature of capital, participatory management, payment solidarity, inter-cooperation, social transformation, universality, and education"<sup>16</sup>. Towards the end of the novel, Mary and Frank independently find their home in different housing cooperatives, despite the challenges—and are ready to take them on.

Several lessons learned emerge from the writings of Robinson and Butler that serve as guidelines and encouragement when imagining and co-creating a cooperative future:



• To the extent we humans and our societies continue the path of competitive capitalism without a significant paradigm shift towards communal values and cooperative practices, we will likely fail or at least face a long and hard road ahead.

• Escaping Earth on our way out into space—which given the scientific projections about Earth heating up to a degree of becoming uninhabitable in a couple of billions of years may indeed be the only way for humankind to survive in the very long run—will at first not help our species escape from the issues we experience on Earth. Human settlements in outer space will still have to work hard on community development and on overcoming the legacy of competitive capitalism, worldview clashes, and the resulting violence and warfare.

• Survival of and hope for our species and for our societies in the long run may depend on our ability to adapt and to flexibly co-create values systems very similar to the current cooperative values and principles: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity<sup>17</sup>.

• Existing cooperative communities suggest that a better cooperative future is indeed possible one step at a time. However, we will have to collaborate more—across national, organizational, and institutional boundaries—to overcome additional challenges, catastrophes, and the resulting chaos in the near future. Together we can and must do our best to help the cooperative future grow and to make it sustainable. 🌸

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1. While I did refrain from referencing Wikipedia in my academic writing for various reasons, it is an impressive cooperative attempt of co-creating and sharing knowledge. The following is a comprehensive description of the writer and his work: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim\\_Stanley\\_Robinson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Stanley_Robinson).  
2. Blok, F. (2020). Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars Trilogy. Available at [www.3develop.nl/blog/kim-stanley-robinson-mars-trilogy/](http://www.3develop.nl/blog/kim-stanley-robinson-mars-trilogy/).  
3. Mengel 2021, p. 204.  
4. Ibid. p. 205.  
5. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octavia\\_E.\\_Butler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octavia_E._Butler).  
6. Canavan, G. (2014). "There's Nothing New / Under The Sun, / But There Are New Suns": Recovering Octavia E. Butler's Lost Parables. Available at [lareviewofbooks.org/article/theres-nothing-new-sun-new-suns-recovering-octavia-e-butlers-lost-parable](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/theres-nothing-new-sun-new-suns-recovering-octavia-e-butlers-lost-parable); Jansma, K. (2017). Now More than Ever, We Wish We Had These Lost Octavia Butler Novels - 'Unfinished Business' examines the groundbreak-

ing sci-fi writer's plans for her 'Earthseed' series. Available at [electricliterature.com/now-more-than-ever-we-wish-we-had-these-lost-octavia-butler-novels](http://electricliterature.com/now-more-than-ever-we-wish-we-had-these-lost-octavia-butler-novels).  
7. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octavia\\_E.\\_Butler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octavia_E._Butler).  
8. Canavan, Ibid.  
9. Canavan, Ibid.; Jansma, Ibid.  
10. Canavan, Ibid.  
11. Jansma, Ibid.  
12. Canavan, Ibid.  
13. Robinson, K. S. (2020). *Ministry for the Future*. London, UK: Orbit; [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Ministry\\_for\\_the\\_Future](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ministry_for_the_Future).  
14. Robinson 2020, p. 252. Orbit. Kindle Edition.  
15. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mondragon\\_Corporation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mondragon_Corporation).  
16. Robinson 2020, pp. 272-274. Orbit. Kindle Edition.  
17. International Cooperative Alliance (2024). Cooperative identity, values & principles. Available at [ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity](http://ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity)



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