



# Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism

By Chris Jennings

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**For readers of Jill Lepore, Joseph J. Ellis, and Tony Horwitz comes a lively, thought-provoking intellectual history of the golden age of American utopianism—and the bold, revolutionary, and eccentric visions for the future put forward by five of history’s most influential utopian movements.**

In the wake of the Enlightenment and the onset of industrialism, a generation of dreamers took it upon themselves to confront the messiness and injustice of a rapidly changing world. To our eyes, the utopian communities that took root in America in the nineteenth century may seem ambitious to the point of delusion, but they attracted members willing to dedicate their lives to creating a new social order and to asking the bold question *What should the future look like?*

In *Paradise Now*, Chris Jennings tells the story of five interrelated utopian movements, revealing their relevance both to their time and to our own. Here is Mother Ann Lee, the prophet of the Shakers, who grew up in newly industrialized Manchester, England—and would come to build a quiet but fierce religious tradition on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Even as the society she founded spread across the United States, the Welsh industrialist Robert Owen came to the Indiana frontier to build an egalitarian, rationalist utopia he called the New Moral World. A decade later, followers of the French visionary Charles Fourier blanketed America with colonies devoted to inaugurating a new millennium of pleasure and fraternity. Meanwhile, the French radical Étienne Cabet sailed to Texas with hopes of establishing a communist paradise dedicated to ideals that would be echoed in the next century. And in New York’s Oneida Community, a brilliant Vermonter named John Humphrey Noyes set about creating a new society in which the human spirit could finally be perfected in the image of God.

Over time, these movements fell apart, and the national mood that had inspired them was drowned out by the dream of westward expansion and the waking nightmare of the Civil War. Their most galvanizing ideas, however, lived on, and their audacity has influenced countless political movements since. Their stories remain an inspiration for everyone who seeks to build a better world, for all who ask, *What should the future look like?*

### **Praise for *Paradise Now***

“Uncommonly smart and beautifully written . . . a triumph of scholarship and narration: five stand-alone community studies and a coherent, often spellbinding history of the United States during its tumultuous first half-century . . . Although never less than evenhanded, and sometimes deliciously wry, Jennings writes with obvious affection for his subjects. To read *Paradise Now* is to be dazzled, humbled and occasionally flabbergasted by the amount of energy and talent sacrificed at utopia’s altar.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Writing an impartial, respectful account of these philanthropies and follies is no small task, but Mr. Jennings largely pulls it off with insight and aplomb. Indulgently sympathetic to the utopian impulse in general, he tells a good story. His explanations of the various reformist credos are patient, thought-provoking and . . . entertaining.”—*The Wall Street Journal*

“As a tour guide, Jennings is thoughtful, engaging and witty in the right doses. . . . He makes the subject his own with fresh eyes and a crisp narrative, rich with detail. . . . In the end, Jennings writes, the communards’ disregard for the world as it exists sealed their fate. But in revisiting their stories, he makes a compelling case that our present-day ‘deficit of imagination’ could be similarly fated.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*

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### **Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism By Chris Jennings Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

“Uncommonly smart and beautifully written . . . [Chris] Jennings’s sure grasp never falters. The result is a triumph of scholarship and narration: five stand-alone community studies and a coherent, often spellbinding history of the United States during its tumultuous first half-century. . . . Although never less than evenhanded, and sometimes deliciously wry, Jennings writes with obvious affection for his subjects. To read *Paradise Now* is to be dazzled, humbled and occasionally flabbergasted by the amount of energy and talent sacrificed at utopia’s altar. But then, as Jennings so memorably puts it, ‘Anyone nuts enough to try building heaven on earth is bound for a hell of his own making.’ ”—***The New York Times Book Review***

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“Chris Jennings is a natural storyteller, and his *Paradise Now*, a five-part chronicle of America’s nineteenth-century utopian dreamers and doers, is the most clear-eyed, sympathetic, and inspiring account I’ve read of this vital chapter in American history in decades. What sort of future did they want? The Shakers, Owenites, Fourierists, Icarians, and Oneidans asked and answered the question, each group in its own way. Chris Jennings prods his readers to ask the question again—for ourselves.”—**Megan Marshall, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life***

“Jennings knows how to tell a story, and has the intellectual range to recover both the weirdness and wisdom of America’s brief bout with utopian illusions and ideals.”—**Joseph J. Ellis, author of *The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783–1789***

“In a perfect world, work will be irresistibly pleasurable. Women will have equal rights. Money and property will be shared, as will spouses. Or maybe sex won’t be allowed at all? Even better! And once the ice caps melt, the sea will taste like lemonade. Bliss! With good humor, a lively style, and a deep knowledge of the historical scholarship, Chris Jennings tells the goofy, heartbreaking tale of nineteenth-century Americans who believed they could bring about heaven on earth, and managed to live out futures that the rest of us haven’t yet reached.”—**Caleb Crain, author of *Necessary Errors***

“Despite marked differences separating these utopian movements, Jennings prizes in all of them their distinctive—and utterly American—optimism in facing a future in which their adherents believed they would usher in a glorious new social order. . . . Readers who resent the constraints of a barren realism will value this deep-probing inquiry into the quest for new social possibilities.”—***Booklist* (starred review)**

“Jennings proves an able guide to these groups. [His] comprehensive research makes for absorbing reading as he shows how different people attempted to find perfection and how they failed or succeeded.”—***Kirkus***

## ***Reviews***

### About the Author

**Chris Jennings** grew up in New York City. He graduated from Deep Springs College and Wesleyan University. He lives in Northern California with his dog.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Loren Benton:**

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