



Welcome to Utopia: Notes from a Small Town

Karen Valby

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Utopia, Texas: It's either the best place on earth, or it's no place at all.

In the twenty-first century, it's difficult to imagine any element of American life that remains untouched by popular culture, let alone an entire community existing outside the empire of pop. But Karen Valby discovered the tiny town of Utopia tucked away in the Texas Hill Country. There are no movie theaters for sixty miles in any direction, no book or music stores. But cable television and the Internet have recently thrown wide the doors of Utopia.

Valby follows the lives of four Utopians—Ralph, the retired owner of the general store; Kathy, the waitress who waits in terror for three of her boys to return from war; Colter, the son of a cowboy with the soul of a hipster; and Kelli, an aspiring rock star and one of the only black people in town—as they reckon, on an intensely human scale, with war and race, class and culture, and the way time's passage can change the ground beneath our feet.

Utopia is the kind of place we still think of as the “real America,” a place of cowboys and farmers and high-school sweethearts who stay together till they die. But its dramatic stories show us what happens when the old tensions of small-town life confront a new reality: that no town, no matter how small and isolated, can escape the liberating and disruptive forces of the larger world.

Welcome to Utopia is a moving elegy for a proud American way of life and a celebration of our relentless impulse toward rebirth.

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