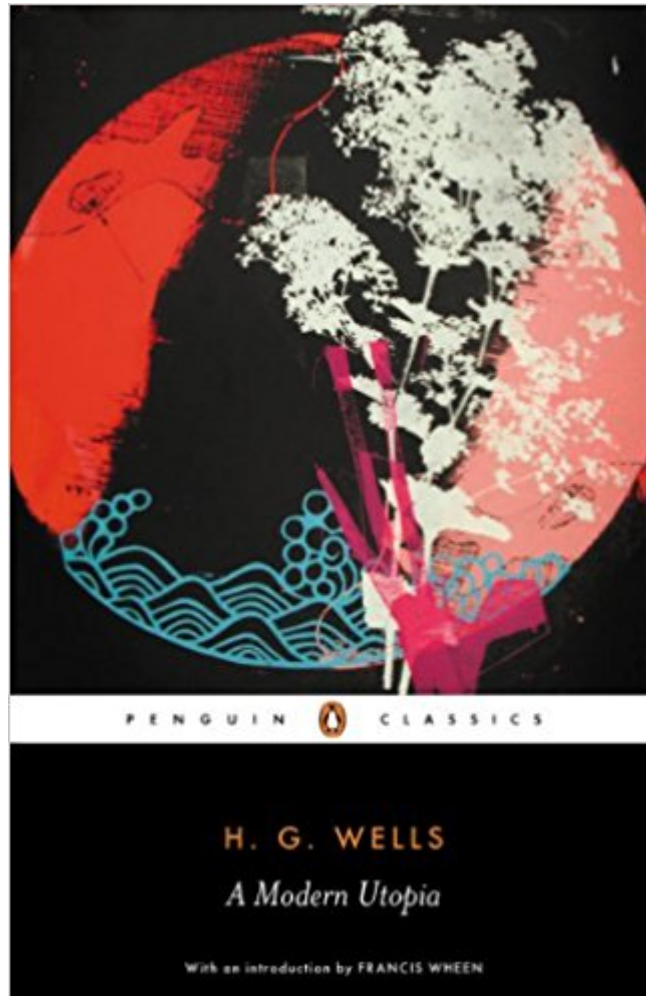




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A Modern Utopia (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

While walking in the Swiss Alps, two English travellers fall into a space-warp, and suddenly find themselves in another world. In many ways the same as our own - even down to the characters that inhabit it - this new planet is still somehow radically different, for the two walkers are now upon a Utopian Earth controlled by a single World Government. Here, as they soon learn, all share a common language, there is sexual, economic and racial equality, and society is ruled by socialist ideals enforced by an austere, voluntary elite: the 'Samurai'. But what will the Utopians make of these new visitors from a less perfect world?

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Customer Reviews

A Modern Utopia (1905) by H.G. Wells deals with two men who are transported instantaneously to a distant planet that is physically identical to Earth. However, this planet contains a worldwide, kinetic, and socialistic Utopian society that differs radically from that of our own world. Wells dispenses with some of the disbelief involved with a certain amount of charm: The whole world will surely have a common language, that is quite elementarily Utopian, and since we are free of the trammels of convincing storytelling, we may suppose that the language to be sufficiently our own to

understand. (17) Perhaps the first thing to note about *_A Modern Utopia_* is that it contains some very perceptive criticism of Utopian literature: There must always be a certain effect of hardness and thinness about Utopian speculations. Their common fault is to be comprehensively jejune. That which is the blood and warmth and reality of life is largely absent; there are no individualities, but only generalised people. In almost every Utopia-- except, perhaps, Morris's "News from Nowhere"-- one sees handsome but characterless buildings, symmetrical and perfect cultivations, and a multitude of people... without any personal distinction whatever. (9) Does *_A Modern Utopia_* escape these problems? Perhaps not entirely. But it comes close to doing so. First, there are the characters. The visitors to Utopia are the narrator, a portly, middle-aged version of Wells and a rather petty botanist, who is constantly mooning about a shallow romance of his youth. Shortly after they enter Utopia, they meet a blond-haired, sandal-shod, back-to-Nature spokesman (modeled on William Morris), who has nothing good to say about Utopia.

In narrative style, this is about the oddest Utopia story I've seen. It alternates almost seamlessly between the usual kind of Utopian fiction and a here-and-now narrative in a voice that seems to be Wells's own. In the here-and-now, the speaker ponders the human state and reasons closely on an idealized world that still has room in it for fallible, real people. Then the thought gels, and the fantasy world comes to life to play out the points discussed. A companion joins our speaker throughout the story, fact-like and fantastic parts both, and embodies plenty of the human condition that would need to be accommodated: in need of immediate gratification, given more to involuntary emotional reaction than to thinking, and self-centered in a way that's blind, innocent, and pervasive. As promised in the title, it's modern in ways that many more recent Utopias aren't. Wells considers the unavoidable inequality of child-bearing duties, and turns full-time motherhood into a paying profession. He acknowledges acquisitiveness and cupidity - rather than wide-open warehouses, his Utopia uses money to add wisdom (or at least thought) to the choices made in what to take home. He discusses race and racial superiority in terms that his 1905 audience would have found familiar. In the end, he argues for economic and legal equality not on the grounds of actual equality, a point that he leaves undecided, but on the grounds that no group in history has ever shown that it deserved to hold the upper hand. There's more, much more, including a wealth of references to other Utopian literature - that by itself might almost have justified the cost of this book. Wells's interleaving of multiple levels of fiction also makes for an unusual reading experience.

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