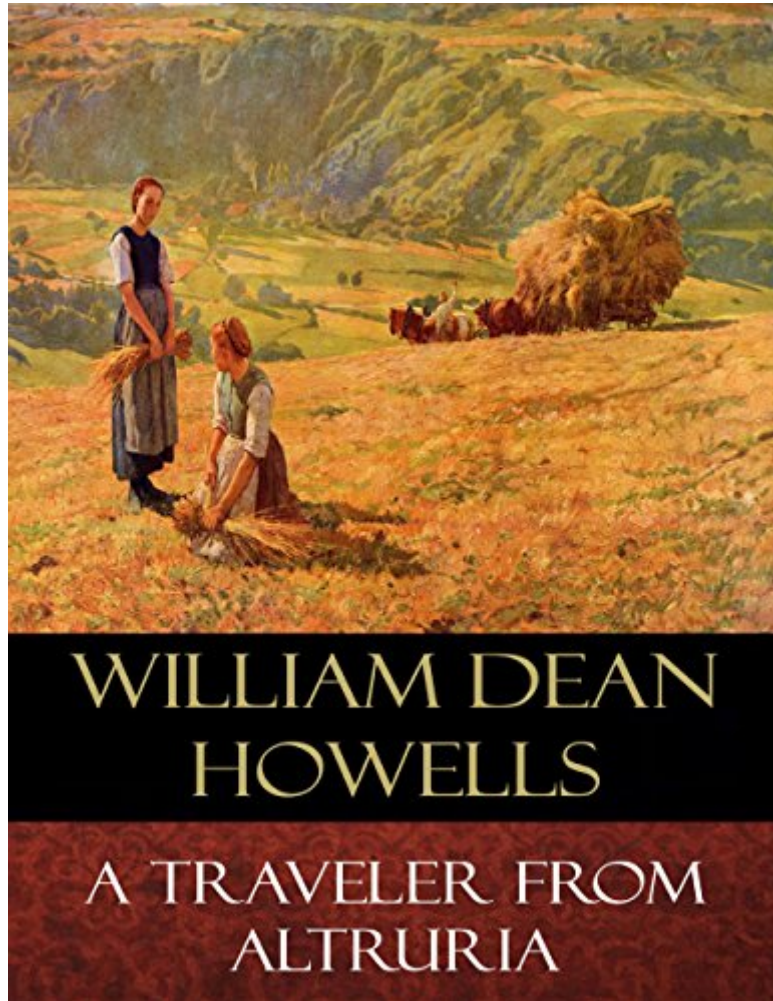




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A Traveler From Altruria



Synopsis

A Traveler from Altruria by William Dean Howells. Originally published in instalments in Cosmopolitan, this piece of utopian fiction by William Dean Howells delivers a vision of a "one-class" socialist utopia while at once offering a biting critique of unfettered capitalism. The story centres around a visit to America of Mr Homos, a citizen of a mysterious island called Altruria, which is home to a one-class socialist Christian society, with no monetary system and no concept of the rich and poor. In the course of Mr Homos's visit he is appalled by what he sees occurring in late-19th-century America, a society which he likens to his country's own before "Evolution". He is clearly confused by the class system, continuously embarrassing his hosts by carrying his own luggage, bowing to waitresses, and other such acts and finds certain activities simply bizarre, for example exercise for its own sake: To us, exercise for exercise would appear stupid. The barren expenditure of force that began and ended in itself, and produced nothing, we should if you will excuse my saying so look upon as childish, if not insane or immoral. In Altruria, all people are guaranteed a share of the national product on the condition they work at least three hours a day. In 1894, the year in which Howells's story was published, the fiction attempted to become reality when a Unitarian minister Edward Biron Payne inspired by the Christian socialist principles espoused by Howells's book founded "Altruria", a community in Sonoma County, California, which he set up with thirty of his followers. A hotel was started, and orchards provided fruit sold to a shop in Berkeley owned by Job Harriman (who himself set up the commune of Llano del Rio in 1913). Unfortunately, "Altruria" ran into unsurmountable financial troubles and it was abandoned in 1896. Howells would go on though, eventually creating an Altrurian trilogy, with the publication of Letters of an Altrurian Traveller (1904) and Through the Eye of the Needle (1907).

Book Information

File Size: 401 KB

Print Length: 194 pages

Publisher: BertaBooks (July 31, 2017)

Publication Date: July 31, 2017

Sold by: Â Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B074DYY9TJ

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #520,753 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #103

in [Kindle Store > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines >](#)

Utopian #132 in [Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Teen & Young Adult > Literature & Fiction >](#)

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Customer Reviews

Somewhat interesting historical piece for a lover of utopian literature, but this one is pretty tame.

Nothing surprising, but it does, unfortunately, speak to the world we live in still, to a great extent. I read and passed it on to the library sale.

The attitudes displayed in Howells' book by the Traveler's host and new acquaintances are completely complementary to much the passes for class and race relations in 2015 in this country. No doubt, Howells was a hopeful utopian, but realized human nature would never change sufficiently for Paradise to be reclaimed. Most surprising of all, Howells style as not as stilted-not stilted at all-as I anticipated when first opening the book. A wonderful read. Just sorry I didn't read it when it was assigned in. History course in college. I wouldn't have to wait 50+ years to read this marvelous book, and I wouldn't have flunked the course for failing to be able to answer questions on the final exam based on the book.

Although this isn't considered one of Howells' better novels, it's one of my personal favorites.

Towards the end of his career, this "dean" of American letters became increasingly concerned with political issues. In particular, he began to align himself, to an extent, with the socialist movement. He never became a full-blown socialist, but he did appreciate their philosophy and understand the limitations of our American democracy. As a result of this growing interest, Howells' fiction turned from socio-cultural concerns to matters of politics. A Traveler from Altruria is a fine example of this change in subject matter. Despite the fact that many critics have interpreted this ostensibly utopian novel as a blind--and rather naive--call to socialism, I heartily disagree. In fact, I contend that

Howells was self-consciously and ironically questioning the socialist movement and the utopian tradition. Howells' underappreciated effort is concise, witty and sophisticated. I recommend it to all fans of American literature and to all students of political science. The Bedford edition is exquisitely packaged and shrewdly conceptualized. The introduction, appendices, and other ancillary materials make for a thorough and savvy document.

I really enjoyed this book although I thought at the beginning that it was really going to be dreary. I actually read it in a class taught by the editor of the book, David Levy. His insights during class made the book more interesting to me and I ended up really liking it. The utopia that it presents is unusual and quite unlike any I have encountered in any other piece of literature. The end of the novel does seem to kind of go off track into a seemingly endless socialist rambling, but overall the book is very good. Seeing our society from the Altrurian's point of view was kind of jolt and made me look at many things differently. Overall, I would recommend highly recommend this novel.

It was somewhat interesting but not a book I couldn't put down. It DID make me think a bit more about my politics!

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