Review of *The Seep*

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Chana Porter. *The Seep*. Soho Press, 2020. Hardcover, 216 pg. $20.99. ISBN 978-1-6412-9-0869.

Chana Porter's debut novel *The Seep* is a vibrant and colourful piece of fiction. Often called a Utopian novel, Porter's science fiction explores the deepest depths of 'being human,' freedom, and what matters to the 'individual.' The Seep appear to be an alien hive-mind-esque species who slowly take over the world and use human beings as hosts. The world abruptly changes around the humans who choose to live through this invasion. Those who remain can either accept and embrace the Seep, fight against them, or escape to the Compounds which are void of the Seep's influence. Those who welcome the Seep begin to change, resulting in the human condition becoming something malleable and unstable. Concepts of mortality, death, love, grief, and sadness all come as part of the package deal of 'being human,' but the Seep challenge this and strive to remove the more difficult human attributes from everyone they encounter. Porter's almost phantasmagorical narrative explores humanity, loss and the ever-changing world in which we live in. In using the unusual guise of "The Softest invasion" by all-loving aliens who want to suffocate all pain and unhappiness out of the world, Porter forces the reader to confront the knowledge that mortality and grief are built into the very fabric of who we are (3). *The Fantasy Hive* rightly notes that Porter's novel 'marks the emergence of a crucial new voice in speculative fiction,' as this striking novel delves deep into 'what it means to be human.' Porter certainly does this and more; through her exploration of humanity in her speculative fiction, she also reaches into the realms of the individual. From the marginalized, the silenced and the ignored, Porter offers every individual a voice that can be heard, leaving no one behind. hero.

The novel is set slightly in the future, in a society not completely different from our own. Humans are concerned with longevity, relationships and affairs influenced by capitalism; the difference is that the Seep are here, and intend to stay, and so the world will never be the same. The novel begins by telling us that "The Seep had already infiltrated their city's water supply. They were already compromised, already bodily hosts to our new friends" (9). We are introduced to our characters at a dinner party, because during the initial alien invasion "throwing a dinner party was all Trina and Deeba could think to do," surrounding themselves with like-minded people and old friends to watch the apparent end of the world, as it was engulfed by the Seep (7).

Quickly, the novel has familiar echoes of other omnibenevolent-alien-invasion narratives. A distinct similarity unites the Seep of Porter's novel with Yivo, a sentient tentacle monster from *Futurama*'s "The Beast of a Billion Backs" (2008). Yivo loves all humans and wants only love in return. Before contact, characters in the year 3,000 are terrified of Yivo, but once contact is made, all fear of the tentacle fades away, with love and unity in its place: "thou shalt love the tentacle." This distinct change of attitude of the humans, towards the sentient species that has come to Earth, is also seen in *The Seep*: "Eventually, everyone understood that those who had already made contact with the aliens felt fine about the extraterrestrial invasion, while those who had not felt no shortage of panic, despair, rage, and powerlessness" (11).

The reaction to this abrupt attitude change indeed fuels several of the concerns that linger throughout the narrative, without any drastic crescendo. Concerns and issues flicker throughout this novel, such as societal constructs and ideology, freedom, ethics, theories of reality, and the trustworthiness of human perception. The whole novel flickers with uncanniness and uncertainties that help the narrative thrive and encourage you to push on through the unfamiliar territory. At the beginning of the novel, characters at Trina's dinner party question life and the numbness of it all, leading Trina to question her own reality: "what did Trina believe in with total certainty? [..] what was more mutable than her own perceptions?" (7). There seems to be a thin layer of ideological suggestions painted throughout the novel's pages, which add to the uncertainty and questionable sanity surrounding the behavior of everyone in the novel.

After several years of The Seep taking over, Trina is unhappy as everything is different. The Seep know this an constantly harass Trina, trying to get inside her to remove all the sadness, "We are revealing the sadness you carry around you like a coat, like a skin. Let us in, let us in, let us in…" (151). The world has completely changed; the Seep have removed war, famine, and disease. Capitalism has fallen. The Seep "took away money and illness, the sickness of the land, the poison in the water and the air," and can provide humans with anything they desire (177). Now humans can do whatever they choose; they do not have to work and can choose longevity and immortality; once you have connected with the Seep death becomes "an opt-in procedure," one that you can choose to participate in or not (44). Human experience has been augmented and manipulated by the Seep, into something distant and unrecognizable. The Seeped human experience has familiar elements of the intoxicated aesthetic quality found in Jeff Noon's *Vurt*, in which humans long to remain in a drug-like state of adventure or euphoria brought on by Vurt-feathers. Individuals choose to drink Seeped punch and release Seep into the air to make their music more enjoyable, enter into euphoric and aggressive orgies, or change themselves somehow. Once connected with The Seep, humans can feel the pain of buildings of stone, can choose to grow antlers, or be young forever. But they can never, ever be alone.

Whilst many may call this text a Utopia, I would push to label this text, as Margaret Atwood might, as an *Ustopia*. As Atwood states, Ustopia is a combination of "utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because […] each contains a latent version of the other. In addition to being, almost always, a mapped location, Ustopia is also a state of mind, as is every

place in literature of whatever kind." Atwood uses examples such as 'Hell' as a place and a concept in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, because "In literature, every landscape is a state of mind, but every state of mind can also be portrayed by a landscape. And so, it is with Ustopia." Atwood's definition of an Ustopia describes Porter's novel appropriately due to the uncertainty within the novel and the clear and defined binaries we are confronted with throughout the text.

The uncertainty of the novel does not only refer to the Seep themselves, their agenda, and the dramatic changes society is embracing (or rejecting), but also the uncertainty of what is "real," in many of the scenes. Often, it is uncertain whether the places Trina visits are a memory, artificial, or reality and many occurrences are described in such a drunken-dreamlike way it is difficult to know whether one is reading about a real-time event in a mapped location or being taken on a walk-through of Trina's mind. The defined binaries I mention refer to the drastic attitude changes characters have, from mortal fear to a deep respect and love, calling the Seep "our greatest teachers" as the abuses of the Seep simultaneously occur (25). Some use the Seep knowledge for the good of mankind, such as in the medical field, whilst other's use the Seep to excess, forcing groups of people into hordes of orgy-like frenzies or stealing other people's faces and wearing them. Porter acknowledges that even in a utopian future swaddled by sentient and benevolent aliens, there will always be a darker, dystopian underbelly.

Whilst this novel is a speculative piece that focuses on pain, mortality, and grief as vital human attributes, Porter also explores the physicality of the human and individual perceptions of the human body. By centering human characters that desire to change their bodies or become something nonhuman altogether, the novel acknowledges that part of who we are is retained in the core of our bodies and trapped beneath our very skin: "Our bodies may be containers, but they still carry specific histories. And these histories are still meaningful. Of course, The Seep doesn't understand that – they're amorphous beings with no physical bodies!" (36). Whilst this is acknowledged, there is also mixed attitudes surrounding identity and the body: "everyone who has been joined even once with The Seep knows that we're all the same. We're all of the same essences, all layers of identity are just that, layers, and you can play with them just as we play with our appearances…" (35). This attitude upsets Trina sometimes. As a Trans woman before the Seep, Trina had faced difficulties in her life trying to obtain the body she felt was truly hers, and now that people can change whatever they want with the Seep, she is not tempted to change again: "But Trina had labored for this body! She'd fought and kicked and clawed to have her insides match her outsides, and now people changed their faces as easily as getting a haircut" (145).

The novel explores and confronts these contemporary struggles and concepts of identity in a way that dramatically fuels the rest of the narrative, making the novel 'Powerful, beautiful, moving and uncompromising' (The Fantasy Hive). This novel is a haunting but mesmerizing take on the alien invasion and Utopian, or Ustopian, or Dystopian visions of Future Earth. Posthumanism drips off the page at every opportunity, but more than that the concept of the human is questioned, unpicked, pulled apart, then reconstructed again and again, because "With The Seep, anything is possible" (35).

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