

**FUTUREtakes**

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### **Futurist Book Group Discussion**

### ***Future Washington***

**by Ernest Lilley (ed.)**

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*Synopsis of the Futurist Book Group April 2006 meeting; summarized by Ken Harris*

On April 5, the chapter's Futurist Book Group for the first time deviated from its practice of discussing non-fiction books about the future and had a very lively discussion of a collection of short science fiction stories, *Future Washington*. Two of the authors, Brenda Clough and Nancy Jane Moore, joined us for the discussion. The book's editor, Ernest Lilley, is a trustee and former secretary of the Washington Science Fiction Association (see <http://www.wsfa.org>). He and their current president Sam Lubell often attend our monthly meetings the first Wednesday evening of the month at **Politics and Prose**. (See the latest schedule on the chapter website <http://www.natcapwfs.org>.)

**FUTUREtakes** readers will find this collection of 16 stories about future possibilities for our capital city very thought provoking and entertaining. Indeed, I suggest you and your significant other each buy a copy and take them on vacation with you. The stories will give you a lot to talk about at the beach or a long plane ride or cruise. My general comments, shared in large measure by the other attendees, are as follows:

- All the stories have at least an obscure connection to Washington by being set in Washington or describing things that happen here. You may not see the Washington connection in "Ignition" by Jack McDevitt unless you have been a Washington tour guide or paid close attention to the monuments downtown. (Hint: See if you can find it in one of the other stories!)
- There is hardly any gee-whiz sci fi. "Agenda" by Travis Taylor mentions a quantum membrane transportation system. "The Lone and Level Sands" by Travis Taylor talks about transport by space elevator. Only a couple of the stories involve interaction with alien races.
- There are several recurring themes, mostly involving bad or partly bad futures – Washington is no longer the capital city, global warming has caused flooding or other dire consequences, over dependence on technology has caused disastrous problems, homeland security has been taken to excess, the President commits treason, and religious fundamentalism triumphs.

- Most of the stories are written in the first person. This gives them a feeling of reality they wouldn't otherwise have.

My favorite, having attended many a Washington party where the conversation turns to “real estate is more valuable than gold,” is Brenda Clough’s “Indiana Wants Me.” It’s sometime after 2009. The scare caused by a pocket nuke in a Department of Agriculture men’s room caused the federal government to move out of town. The legislative branch was moved to Indiana, and a new White House was built at Fargo, North Dakota. Thus the Washington real estate market has tanked. The narrator Susan is both a hedge witch and a real estate agent. Lynn, an Indiana realtor, drops in on her and asks her to help implement a plan to move clients’ houses from Washington to Indiana, to take advantage of the booming real estate market there. Susan agrees and Lynn has to run off to a meeting, but leaves her pink bag in Susan’s office. Susan drives home easily. There is no rush hour traffic now. She greets her coven of cats. One of the cats makes her recall that Lynn’s bag is in the car. She looks in the bag and finds papers showing that the Indiana real estate agents conspired to have the pocket nuke placed in the Agriculture Department men’s room and then turned in the terrorist who did it. Lynn calls and not only finds out Susan has the bag, but that she knows about the plot. Susan faxes the papers to Solomon, a sorcerer in Delaware to whom she is selling kittens two of her cats are pregnant with. Indiana real estate agents come to Susan’s house in the night and try to get her to let them in, so they can retrieve the bag. Susan does her best to stall them while her old, slow fax machine faxes the papers to Solomon. She calls the police, and they take the Indiana realtors away.

If you like satire on bureaucracy, you will love Sean McMullen’s “Empire of the Willing.” The narrator, Labarrvien-18-1 of the Administrat, visits Washington in the mind of an Australian businessman to study the American governance system in order to take over the planet. The more he studies it the more he realizes how complex it is to understand. Americans can understand it, but he and his people cannot without the aid of a hyper-associative computer, which earthlings do not have. He keeps asking for and getting more and more mindfarers to come to Washington to gather data for their computer model, and they find 5,947 variables are needed to model the system. While in Washington, he meets a mindlord from Oligarron, who is living in a garbage skip behind the Smithsonian along with two cats. They get acquainted and he gives him a kitten Petronius. Labar wonders why the Oligarron have not taken over earth as they are a superior race. Eventually Labar takes him to meet Valentina, a Beaurician, who has come to try to accomplish the same thing. The Administrat is much pleased with Labar and concludes that the Washington system is the perfect one to pacify client worlds because it so convoluted nothing can get done.

Finally, **FUTUREtakes** readers who have lived in Washington for any length of time and received one of those invitations giving directions from all points of the compass will chuckle when they read Nancy Jane Moore’s “Hallowe’en Party.” (*Out-of-town readers, Maryland suburbanites easily get lost in the Virginia suburbs, and vice versa, while DC residents may not leave the city very often.*) A scenario in the form of directions to a Halloween party in 2015 in the part of Northeast Washington bordering Takoma Park. Maryland, tells us what awful things have happened in greater Washington and the country. Internal passports are needed to cross state lines. There is open hostility between the states. The Sousa Bridge has been washed out by floods and not repaired. A bridge on I-95 has been blown up in a terrorist attack and not repaired. Terrorist attacks, apparently by domestic terrorists, are common. Citizen patrols enforce law and order, etc. In a way, I found the story optimistic because, despite multiple disasters, in this scenario ordinary citizens cope very well. If all these things really happened once, would they?

I hope these three summaries encourage you to read all 16. Enjoy!