

Archived at the Flinders Academic Commons
<http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/dspace/>
This is the author's radio script of this article.

Utopian Man. Lisa Lang. Allen & Unwin, 2010.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 25 August 2010.

In 2007 Lisa Lang published a short biography of E.W. Cole, the man behind Cole's Book Arcade in Melbourne and *Cole's Funny Picture Books*. She has now followed this up with a fictional treatment of Cole's life, titled *Utopian Man*. This novel won the 2009 Australian Vogel Literary Award.

Cole was a wit and a visionary, an Australian W.S. Gilbert with a progressive social conscience. But he was also a bold entrepreneur, who took risks and expanded his business when others were laying off staff during the great depression of the 1890s. The novel begins as he is about to open his famous Arcade in 1883, excited about the 700,000 odd books, the red uniforms of his employees, the very chairs his customers will be invited to sit in and read at leisure. As the years pass and his young family grows up in the flat above the arcade, he expands to fill a whole Bourke Street city block, adds a tea room, a conservatory and a room full of monkeys.

Cole had his own printery, and would run off leaflets with titles like 'What 40 Eminent Japanese Say of the White Australia Act' and 'The Better Side of the Chinese Character' for distribution in the arcade. Lang has imagined a friendship with Alfred Deakin for Cole, with long philosophical chats which tail off when Deakin goes in to federal politics and throws his support behind the White Australia Policy, which, for Cole, marred the coming of federation.

Lang clearly has great admiration and affection for Edward Cole: it is evident on every page. He almost seems too good to be true, with his liberal views and intelligent responses to adversity. Her Cole is a vivid dreamer, and on the whole the frequent inclusion of his dreams within the narrative works well. And here he is, having a discussion with his stolid, unimaginative manager:

'A freak show. You are turning this Arcade into a freak show,' says Owens, sweat beading on his forehead, droplets forming before Edward's eyes. He imagines Owens' body dotted with saltwater reservoirs just below the skin. An entire wetland, populated with tiny fish and birds, thriving in his agitation. A species of dwarf crocodile lazing beside an artery.

Owens puffs out his lips. 'Are you listening, Mr Cole?' (131)

I love the way she carries the image into the realms of the fantastic. The man who conceived the idea of a monkey room in his bookshop must indeed have had such a lively imagination. The novel's language only occasionally strays from the late Victorian idiom into the jargon of the twenty-first century, when Cole thinks, after the death of one of his daughters, that 'despite the sadness in the house,' his other girls 'still needed permission to play and to dream,' for example, or when his son suggests they stock cricket bats in the arcade, exclaiming: 'how great would that be?' Well, at least he didn't say, 'how cool would that be.'

Utopian Man is a warm and intelligent novel, backed with solid historical research used imaginatively and perceptively: a pleasure to read, from beginning to end.