

# THE GOLD COAST – KIM STANLEY ROBINSON (1988)

## CONSTRUCTING A HOME IN A CALIFORNIAN DYSTOPIA

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*The Gold Coast* by Kim Stanley Robinson (Tor, 1988) tells the story of Jim McPherson and his search to make a home in Orange County, Southern California. His friends and family join Jim in this quest, each seeking to achieve happiness in their own particular ways, to varying degrees of success. Throughout the novel, Jim tries many different paths to making a home, often appearing unfocused and rootless, and yet by the end, he finally comes to terms with Orange County, and his ability to make a home there.

In the middle decades of the twenty-first century, Orange County is a snarled mass of freeways and shopping malls. Robinson describes the County by nighttime as “The great gridwork of light” (p 2) in which cars steer along tracks on the freeways that tower high above the cities below in several layers of concrete. Jim calls Orange County “The end of history, its purest product [...] They stopped here and did it [...] Everything here is purely organized, to buy and sell, buy and sell, every little piece of us” (3). This land is an “autopia,” a soulless metropolis constructed for the automobile. The needs of individuals seem secondary to the needs of a machine that seems to have a life of its own. Construction crews have torn down the famous orange groves and the government has sold off all of the free land. Office blocks have replaced free space and military research companies have blossomed as the military-industrial complex has spiraled out of control. Robinson supposes the continued existence of the Soviet Union for this scenario – which at first glance appears hopelessly outdated – and yet the military-industrial complex still exists without the USSR, and the “Star Wars” SDI initiative, which is so prominent in the novel, is still under development. Thus, this is a future Orange County that could conceivably happen.

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Jim McPherson is searching for something that Orange County does not seem able to provide. He lives in the metropolis, but it is not his home. His home is not some other place, but some other time, a period irrevocably lost to concrete and “progress.” Without a true home, he is lost: he has two dead-end jobs and a succession of unsuccessful ‘alliances’ with women; his relationship with his parents is tense, especially that with his father, an engineer for an armament research company. Restless, Jim spends a great deal of time with his friends, partying. His friend Sandy has approached the problem of living in Orange County in his own way: he manufactures and sells designer drugs, which he also takes in large quantities to the point that “It’s just everyday reality for him, stonedness, it’s a handicap he barely notices any more” (136). Jim and all of Sandy’s friends take these drugs without a second thought, a means to see their environment through different eyes. Yet this is not enough. The drugs cannot take away the hollow feeling, for Jim or for his friends. They see the glimmering lights of the night city in new ways, but the drugs cannot make it feel more like home, rather numbing them to the lack in their lives.

Some characters, especially Jim’s father Dennis and his friend Abe, attempt to construct a home in Orange County by focusing their efforts on their working lives. They both do work that they truly believe will help create a better place. Abe is an ambulance driver, hurtling his rig from one traffic accident to another with his partner Xavier, both clinging desperately onto their sanity in the neon nighttime. Abe is not happy, but he understands his place in Orange County and despite the frequent tragedy of his work, he connects to city in a way Jim cannot. Jim’s father, Dennis, is a more complicated figure. His work would seem to be ultimately destructive, apparently

unconnected to the lives of the people of Orange County. Yet, he believes that by creating the ultimate offensive weapon, he can make wars unwinnable and thus pointless to fight. He can bring stability to an unstable world. Dennis believes he can engineer stability, at home as well as at work, tinkering with his cars, tinkering with his weapons, attempting to construct solutions. Jim has no such options. His own work only seems to confirm the futility of his living situation. His work at a community college teaching reading is soul-destroying: so many students are functionally illiterate in the mass-media age, uninterested in art or history or politics, wanting only the skills to allow them to get better jobs and consume more. When he clerks at a large realtor's office, the situation is even more miserable. He has to watch first hand as the realtors and corporate sharks plan to construct unwanted office buildings on the last wilderness land in the County.

Jim considers himself a poet, and attempts to find a connection with Orange County through his poetry. Throughout the novel are snatches of poetry, yet Jim is unsatisfied with his work, unable to find that connection. He admires and a little envious of his fellow-teacher and lover Hana, an artist. She paints, almost obsessively, the Orange County in which she lives, and appears unaffected by the shallowness Jim sees elsewhere. She achieves a meditative state while painting, creating golden cityscapes, glittering reflections of the metropolis. She can see the beauty in the County, can accept the flaws, does not need her home to be perfect to be her home.

Unable to find fulfillment or happiness in Orange County, Jim turns to terrorism. Ostensibly, while Arthur and Jim devastate armaments research companies to fight the culture of military escalation, to Jim it is more personal, more important. As the rockets fire towards the factories, Jim is attacking the effects of the industry on his home, upon both Orange County and his parents. He is swiping out at Orange County itself, trying to destroy what he sees as wrong, so that someone can create something better. As his anger builds, he finally sees that the factories are not what he is truly angry at, and explodes in a whirlwind of uncontrolled, hysterical, stupid violence. He

attacks the realtors' office where he works and the OC Board of Supervisors who have allowed unrestrained development, he attacks the malls, rips apart his apartment, he thrashes wildly at the factories, he even attacks a closed Fluffy Donut shop, but really, he is flailing at his own sense of disconnection, of helplessness.

In the aftermath of his rampage, Jim flees Orange County with his friend Tashi. Together, the two travel into the Sierra Nevada Mountains and spend three precious, important days camping and walking. Finally, away from "the mad realm" of Orange County, Jim begins to come to terms with his life, with Orange County, with California. One night, contemplating the stars, he realizes that Orange County is part of a greater place, and that he *can* acknowledge that place as a home. Jim sits, "Each moment, long and quiet, spent discovering a world he never new existed – a home. He had thought it a lost dream; but this is California too" (364). Even upon his return, finding amid the disaster that was his apartment that he had "just the same old materials at hand" and asking, "How do you start a new life when everything else is the same" (378) he has a newfound strength to find meaning.

Ultimately, Jim finds meaning and manages to begin to build a true home in Orange County through a love of history. Throughout the novel, Robinson has inserted snippets of the history of the region, from the beginnings of the earth, through the Indian and Missionary periods, to the coming of the Anglo-Americans and the present day. These are revealed to be the work of Jim, as he compiles a lyrical and sad history of his home, culminating in the destruction of the orange groves and the changing of his world. Whereas earlier in the novel, Jim's interest in the history of the county is as unfocused as the rest of his life, his new understanding brings him focus. While before Jim's interest in history was passive, collecting old Thomas maps or listening to his Uncle Tom's reminiscences, now his appreciation of history becomes active, constructive. He writes, and he connects. He connects not only to the Orange County that once was, but to the Orange County that he lives in. He learns to

appreciate the small things, the places and people of the metropolis. He finds a home.

Jim McPherson's mission to make a home out of the seemingly soulless dystopia of twenty-first century Orange County is the heart of this novel. Unable to

connect to the metropolis through methods his friends and family use, Jim turns to violence only to realize that in creation, not destruction, lies the answer to his quest. Connecting to the earth and to the past allow his to confront the present and make Orange County his home.