

Looking into the sun: American author Charles Baxter's novel *The Sun Collective*

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Were it only for its confrontation with the profound contemporary crises we face, Charles Baxter's most recent novel, *The Sun Collective* (Pantheon, 2020), would be worthy of attention. Baxter, however, is a sagacious and important writer, and in *The Sun Collective* he appears to have invested himself without reserve, technically or conceptually, in the attempt to understand and portray where we are. There is an immediacy, an urgency to this novel, a sense that the author, like his characters, is desperate to come to grips with our critical historical moment.

The Sun Collective is Charles Baxter's sixth novel. His previous novels include *First Light* (1987), a beautiful and technically brilliant narrative told in reverse chronological order, and the magnificent *The Feast of Love* (2000), which was a National Book Award finalist. He is widely acknowledged as a master of the short story, with collections including *The Harmony of the World* (1984), *A Relative Stranger* (1990), *Believers* (1997) and *There's Something I Want You to Do* (2015).

Born in Minneapolis in 1947, Baxter taught at Wayne State University in Detroit, the University of Michigan, where for years he headed the Creative Writing Program, and at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he is now a professor emeritus. His fiction has been lauded for its incisive portrayal of middle-class America, for its psychological depth and for its verbal artistry.

On the first page of *The Sun Collective*, we are introduced to Harry Brettigan, a retired bridge designer who possesses "the uneasy intelligence of someone who has few illusions to comfort him." Brettigan and his wife Alma are empty nesters, living with a dog and a cat in a house recently vacated by their son Timothy. Once an actor, Timothy has left home to live on the streets of Minneapolis in what he calls "an experiment." Harry and Alma grieve their son's disappearance, and Harry occasionally imagines he sees Timothy when he is out in the city.

In addition to this shared grief, Harry and Alma suffer from decades of marital familiarity ("I'm omniscient," she tells him early in the novel. "I'm the eye at the top of the pyramid. What haven't you told me by now? Nothing.") The result of this familiarity is not only the expected occasional impatience and bickering but also a profound mutual unease about their marriage. Alma dreads that Harry will leave her. Harry is quick to suspect Alma of having an affair, though he does not mention this to her, and his general uncertainty about the foundations of his life—his marriage, his family, his identity—provides deeply affecting

moments in the novel.

Like almost all the characters in *The Sun Collective*, the Brettigans feel viscerally that the state of the world has deteriorated to an intolerable point, and they cast about for what they can do to help somehow. Into their lives come Christina and Ludlow, a young couple who invite the Brettigans to join the Sun Collective, an organization whose meetings Alma has been attending.

The Sun Collective appears to be comprised of ordinary people from around the city who want to improve the world, again, *somehow*. Their meetings are "chaotic," groups of liberals, social democrats, basic universal income advocates and anarchists all speaking at once. Nevertheless, the organization does manage to accomplish practical acts of charitable work, like establishing community gardens and free-clothes boxes, accomplishments that impress and attract Alma.

Their manifesto, however, is unhinged and hints at darker purposes, including something called "microviolence." In this manifesto, Baxter offers up a lampoon of some of our moment's less astute rhetoric ("We live in a post-ideological age") but also conducts a trenchant criticism of those illusions that can give birth to self-satisfied closed mindedness and even terrorism.

Christina may be the novel's most interesting character. She is certainly the most reckless. A former Ivy League grad student, she now works in a bank and spends much of her time seriously altered by a designer drug called Blue Telephone, which can place her in both the present and future at once. Spaced out, judgmental, lonely and bored, Christina takes pity on the ragged Ludlow when he collapses from hunger in her yoga class. Ludlow is homeless when she meets him, sheltering in the winter by breaking into suburban homes whose owners are away and "house sitting" for them. This character quickly becomes disturbing when he claims he is a "bright angel" sent to Christina from heaven.

The Minneapolis of *The Sun Collective* is not quite the Minneapolis one would expect to find in a work of more traditional realism, but then, as Christina says to a co-worker, "Reality isn't what it used to be." For one thing, the city's homeless population is being terrorized, beaten and sometimes killed, by someone. Rumor has it that the attacks are being carried out by a group calling itself the Sandmen, "rich young men in their Mercedes and their Audis" who leave notes on their victims, such as "You will not be missed. A parasite has been removed from the body of society. This is a War on Poverty. You are nothing. *You*

have been erased.”

Meanwhile, the city’s wealthiest citizens have been suffering an unlikely spate of fatal accidents. Or are they all accidents? In an odd and deeply uncomfortable dinner scene, Ludlow tells the Brettigans that he endorses the murder of the rich and, over his plate of curry, asks Harry, “Will you join us? We mean business.”

Equally strange, after a fainting episode on a picnic with Harry, Alma begins to believe that she can communicate with their dog and cat and holds extended conversations with them. Not knowing what to make of this, Brettigan foresees years of expensive psychiatric care for Alma, but for the time being accepts her claim of telepathic powers as yet one more improbability to which he must adapt.

Later, Harry will himself suffer an episode in which a stream of insightful talk, Alma fears, approaches a fit of madness. The world of *The Sun Collective* is largely a world of sensitive, intelligent people quietly reaching breaking points in the context of a society that seems itself to be breaking apart.

The US president in *The Sun Collective* is one Amos Alonzo Thorkelson, a fascistic blowhard who reads a book about a violent truck to a classroom of children in order to teach them the valuable lesson of looking out for Number One. He discourages Americans from doing “too much reading,” however, which he compares to trespassing, “looking into places and matters where you don’t belong.”

Thorkelson is Donald Trump, of course, a smug and cruel buffoon with immense power. But he also has his literary precursors, such as President Buzz Windrip of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, his 1935 novel about fascism in America.

In the second half of Baxter’s book, events swirl and accelerate like a gathering tornado—there is a murder, a wonderfully tense scene with a canny police detective, a blinding, and the reconciliation of a family in the aftermath of its own purgatory. The falling action is intriguing, the ending poignant.

Baxter’s writing in *The Sun Collective* is variously beautiful, jarring and restrained, all under the author’s control. Here, as in all his fiction, he is a master of voices with a well-tuned ear for American vernaculars. But most of all, the writing in this novel is more spare than in most of Baxter’s fiction. Even in descriptions of gorgeous summer days and Minneapolis snowstorms, even in comical exchanges between characters, the deep current of the narrative is never diverted, and the water of its themes is bracingly, sometimes frighteningly, cold.

Poverty, homelessness, murder, mysterious organizations, mysterious deaths, talking animals, encroaching fascism. By training his focus on these variously grim and bizarre objects through the lens of the grieving but materially comfortable Brettigans, Baxter is able to do a number of things at once. First, *The Sun Collective* explores but also amplifies the phenomena of upper middle class guilt and the compensations it turns to, the sorts of comforting illusions Harry no longer permits himself. It is worth noting here that as the epigraph to the novel, Baxter quotes these lines from the poet Louis Simpson:

It’s complicated being an American,

Having the money and the bad conscience, both at the same time.

Perhaps, after all, this is not the right subject for a poem.

Another achievement Baxter manages in *The Sun Collective* is its overall effect, its embodiment of the unmoored feeling of the American present. It may be that with American bourgeois democracy at death’s door and unprecedented levels of social inequality (to say nothing of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had not yet struck when Baxter was writing the book), recent realistic fiction seems suddenly to be not quite adequate. It perhaps presumes too much that is no longer true.

In the novel’s adjusted realism, the inexplicable is, if not commonplace, accepted as a hazard. For many in the novel, too much is happening too quickly, there are too many sources of contradictory information, poverty nips at more and more heels, and intimations of fascist violence haunt the edges of our lives.

There are objective explanations for what is happening in America and the world. Baxter hints at some of these explanations, foregrounding class tensions and making reference at one point to the Minneapolis general strike of 1934. The novel has a definite antagonist, and that antagonist is capitalism. Baxter makes no bones about that. The homeless in the novel are not accepted facts of nature but are identified as “victims of capitalism.” The middle class are in tragic thrall to consumerism at the novel’s Utopia Mall. Of the working class we see and hear little, but the sense is that the world of the novel is a world of quickly metastasizing unemployment and poverty.

But the purpose of this novel is not to conduct a political-economic analysis. Its purpose seems to be to convey what it feels like to be alive in America right now. Standing apart from much contemporary fiction that attempts to address social and political reality, *The Sun Collective* is not a pessimistic complaint about “things in general” nor a Puritanical screed about the depredations of a damned humanity. Rather, it is a complex portrait of the torn American psychological, social and verbal tissue in a time of unprecedented upheaval. As such, it is an important novel of our time.



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