

The Pleasures of Pessimism

Sample Q&As for Interviews with Natasha Moore:

Q: Are we more pessimistic than we used to be?

A: This is a hard thing to prove. And certainly it's been what we might call *fashionable* for quite a long time – nearly 200 years ago, the philosopher John Stuart Mill was complaining that 'it is thought essential to a man who has any knowledge of the world to have an extremely bad opinion of it'.

But I think there was once a utopian strain to Western culture that we don't have a lot of now. Mostly the stories we tell about the future are strongly *dystopian*. And one effect of the 24-hour news cycle and social media is that we're bombarded with more bad news than ever before – and almost all of it gets presented in terms of crisis, as though it's the end of the world as we know it. We seem to have become (I love this word) *apocaholics*.

Q: What makes you think pessimism is pleasurable?

A: Well, Exhibit A would be the endless disaster movies and dystopian novels we consume. There's something mesmerising about contemplating the end of the world! Exhibit B would be our clickbait habits – we may think we prefer good news about the world, but we're much more likely to seek out the bad. I think this is partly because it seems sophisticated and wise to be pessimistic rather than optimistic. But I would argue that it's also a kind of shadow side to more positive desires for our collective future – we play out disaster as a way of measuring what's important to us, how we would like things to be different, what we're afraid of but also what we long for. I think you see that in the pandemic – we start asking questions in a crisis like this about the status quo, and what we'd prefer our society to be like.

Q: What are the downsides to our cultural pessimism?

A: There are quite a few of them. One potential pitfall is that it makes us apathetic – instead of mobilising us to take action, to make sure the future *doesn't* turn out the way we fear, it can make us feel hopeless and fatalistic. Another biggie is that it entrenches how polarised we are from each other. We tend not just to think that everything's falling apart, but that it's *their* fault – whoever 'they' are – and that we'd be just fine if *those people over there* would stop being terrible. That makes it hard to work together to cope with real crises – like Covid, and climate change of course.

Q: Things look pretty grim right now. Do you really think there are reasons to be hopeful?

A: I do! But I think at the end of the day your sense of what the future might hold is going to be a function of what you believe about the nature of the universe, and about human nature too. I argue in the book that we need a healthy pessimism about human nature (we have a great capacity for destructiveness), but also I think that things like justice and hope are built into the fabric of things, they're not just human constructions. So they can be fragile, but they're not ultimately *that* fragile – the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice, as Martin Luther King Jr used to quote. It might not look that way at any particular point in time. But your sense of the big picture will change how you approach the crises of the present.