

The Liberal Zone

Luke Paulson

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The Liberal Zone is a satirical short story collection that examines topical political issues via sensationalist twists.

Luke Paulson satirizes sociopolitical issues in the short stories of *The Liberal Zone*.

In these stories, everyday people find themselves fighting forces much larger than themselves, including the government, the medical establishment, and new social norms that they don't understand. The friends and family members whom they thought they could count on for support fall away, leaving them confused and bereft. Though they stick to their beliefs and fight with all that they have, none of them can escape the "strange new world" of the Liberal Zone.

This is a satirical work that exaggerates contemporary issues and imagines dystopian futures to make its points. However, many of its stories are undermined by incorrect or unproven assumptions: "The Masks" is based on misinformation about Covid-19 treatments and preventatives; "Changing Him for the Better" espouses misunderstandings of sex and gender; and "Seeing Her for Who She Is" depicts a bigoted character in a heroic light while embracing transphobic talking points about transwomen. Such perspectives overshadow any lessons or humor that might otherwise have been derived from the stories' hyperbolic premises.

Further, the entries are brief and short on worldbuilding, descriptive language, and character development. As a result, the morals of several stories are muddled; tales like "The Child or the Parent" follow characters whose actions are not contextualized enough to make sense. And the book's children often speak like adults, further undermining their credibility as characters.

There are intriguing moments throughout, though. "Untapped Power" criticizes mob mentality and warns of the dire consequences of taking action without knowing all of the relevant facts, while the fascinating story "What Do You Stand For?" follows a contemporary protester who's transported back to the time of the Civil War to witness atrocities committed by Union soldiers. In the latter case, however, questionable conclusions are suggested, including the notion that both sides were equally terrible, and that protesters opposed to Confederate statues do not have an adequate understanding of history.

Drawing inspiration from *The Twilight Zone*, the book includes narrative inserts reminiscent of the show's opening and closing scenes. Otherwise, the conceit is tenuous: only three of the six stories employ the type of ironic twist endings that made the show distinctive, and one of those twists is placed in the closing narration, rather than explored in the story itself, making it feel like an afterthought. Punctuation errors and non-dynamic prose further undermine the collection.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (March 19, 2022)

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