



# **Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America**

*Robert Charles Wilson*

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In the reign of President Deklan Comstock, a reborn United States is struggling back to prosperity. Over a century after the Efflorescence of Oil, after the Fall of the Cities, after the Plague of Infertility, after the False Tribulation, after the days of the Pious Presidents, the sixty stars and thirteen stripes wave from the plains of Athabaska to the national capital in New York City. In Colorado Springs, the Dominion sees to the nation's spiritual needs. In Labrador, the Army wages war on the Dutch. America, unified, is rising once again.

Then out of Labrador come tales of a new Ajax—Captain Commongold, the Youthful Hero of the Saguenay. The ordinary people follow his adventures in the popular press. The Army adores him. The President is...troubled. Especially when the dashing Captain turns out to be his nephew Julian, son of the falsely accused and executed Bryce.

Treachery and intrigue dog Julian's footsteps. Hairsbreadth escapes and daring rescues fill his days. Stern resolve and tender sentiment dice for Julian's soul, while his admiration for the works of the Secular Ancients, and his adherence to the evolutionary doctrines of the heretical Darwin, set him at fatal odds with the hierarchy of the Dominion. Plague and fire swirl around the Presidential palace when at last he arrives with the acclamation of the mob.

As told by Julian's best friend and faithful companion, a rustic yet observant lad from the west, this tale of the 22nd Century asks—and answers—the age-old question: “Do you want to tell the truth, or do you want to tell a story?”

## **Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America Details**

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# From Reader Review Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America for online ebook

## Beth says

This is a great adventure story - funny, dramatic and bittersweet - and my favorite sf novel that I've read this year. The old-fashioned tone is completely convincing, and switches easily between a humorous moments and serious ones. The exposition is really well done, in such a way that it's probably quite accessible to people who don't read much SF (although it doesn't seem to be well known enough to get much of that readership).

Set a century and a half after a combination of peak oil + disease + economic collapse reduces modern civilization to Civil-War-level tech, this book takes place in a future North America where Canada is part of the United States, the presidency has become dynastic and is ruled by the Comstock family, and true political power is in the hands of the religious authority known as the Dominion. The post-apocalyptic society in the book emulates the 19th century, but it has all the American 19th century's flaws, without some of its key virtues; the actual 19th century was a time of overall progress, while the society in the book is clearly in decline. Oh, and the United States is at war with the Dutch over control of the Northwest Passage.

The narrator, Adam Hazzard, becomes friends with the president's nephew, Julian Comstock, whose life is loosely inspired by the life of Julian the Apostate. They get conscripted into the army... it's hard to say more than that without giving too much away, though.

This review says that *"Wilson himself described it by saying he was reading a US Civil War memoir called 'Frank on a gunboat' and thought that was good as far as it went, but it would be better if it was Julian the Apostate on a gunboat and that's what this book is—..."*

There's an interesting interview with the author here:

<https://www.tor.com/2009/05/25/a-conv...>

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## Stephen says

First the *Postives*: The book was well-written had a nice "new book" smell. Okay, on to the ~~negatives~~ **MEHgatives** , beginning with the advisory label I would require if I was Emperor of Literature for the world:

There is not a whole lot more that I can add to that so, like the book, I will just sort of d.....r.....a.....w.....t.....h.....i.....n.....g.....s..... o.....u.....t. Or maybe I could just emulate the book and say the same thing several different ways. You know like you say something and then you say the same thing but just a little bit differently. Kind of take the first thing you said and say it using some different words. For example, you could make a statement and then you could say it again but not quite the same way.

I suppose I should pause for a moment and make clear that I did not hate the book. Hate requires strong feelings and I could not muster enough emotion about this one to even be irritated with it. It was just sort of there, all Meh-like and boring in its worn out structure and new idea lackness.

For those of you who have not read this, here is a quick plot summary. It is the end of the 22nd century and due to your usual combination of resource-depletion, natural disasters and nation against nation slap fests, the world has regressed into a kind of 19th century quasi-industrial feudalism where people travel mostly by horse but there are also coal running trains. You get the idea...you've seen it before...many, many times.

There is a government organized around a President for life, a federally elected senate and the Dominion of Jesus Christ (the DJC) which is basically a combination IRS and Patent Office for churches (and...just between you a me....the DJC also acts as a neat little vehicle for the author to bash on organized religion.....yawn...we've seen this before....many, many times).

So against that recycled background, you have one boring character narrating the life of the boring title character who hates religion and the DJC and dreams of putting Charles Darwin to be on the One Dollar bill.....and 500 pages later, the book ends.

Along the way there is lots of meandering exposition, some pointless conversations, some dialogues that are forgettable enough that I can not remember them and a WHOLE LOTTA WALKING. Now, there are also a few military skirmishes and several fairly large battles but the excitement has been miraculously edited out of them.

So in the end...Meh....If I have never read another book like this, I would have rated it higher as the quality of the prose was good. But this was a case of been, there done that, been there, done that, been there, done that.....and so Meh!!! 2.0 stars.

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## **Sandi says**

I really don't know what to say about this terrific book. It's the fourth book I've read by Robert Charles Wilson and the best by far. (I really didn't think he could top Spin.)

Let's be clear that this book is not about Julian Comstock. It is about the narrator, a young man named Adam Hazzard. Along with his best friend, Julian, we are taken on a tour of what must be every aspect of post-apocalyptic America. In this case, the apocalypse is brought about by the collapse of oil, pollution, plague, infertility, and global warming. By the time this story starts, America has sort of been reformed.

I really loved Adam Hazzard. He is sweet, innocent, and a loyal friend. He's an unabashed romantic. This story has a refreshing innocence to it thanks to Adam's narration. For example, it's quite apparent that Julian is homosexual. In a society that is controlled by religious zealots, that is the ultimate sin. Although Adam tells us things that indicate that Julian is gay, he never says it outright and I suspect that he doesn't even realize it. I found it refreshing the way he talked about his physical relationship with his wife, Calyxa in a manner that's much like an old movie where the door closes and we don't see what happens behind it.

Julian Comstock A Story of 22nd-Century America is wonderful on so many levels. I highly recommend it to anyone who loves a good story, even if they aren't science fiction fans. (It really doesn't read like science

fiction, but it is.)

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## Liviu says

This is just a superb book written in a very quiet and understated manner. I \*had\* to reread it twice, it was so compelling that I could not leave its characters and universe easily.

Set in a late 22nd century USA, essentially - 2172-2176 - with glimpses from the past and an epilogue some years later, we visit an America that is very familiar from the history books of the 19th century with some twists.

After the "age of Oil and Atheism" ended in catastrophe, with the "Fall of the Cities", the rise of "estates" worked by indentured labor and of the Dominion - "of Jesus Christ on Earth" a unifying religious umbrella governing the "approved" - all Christian - churches, and having a powerful influence on secular life gathered in the time of the "Pious Presidents", headquartered in Colorado Springs, America is both the same at a level of the 19th century technology, but also different.

The power resides in the President whose imposing fortified palace occupies the grounds of today's Central Park in Manhattan, Washington having been abandoned a long time ago, the Senate, the Army - there are two of them, of the East, "Laurentian", and of the West, "Californias" and of course the Dominion, the Supreme Court has been dissolved by the 52nd Constitutional amendment, election by inheritance has been allowed by the 53rd, and the Comstock family has been occupying the Presidency for 30 years now. So both continuity and change, with the 22nd century USA resembling to some extent both Tsarist Russia and the Roman Empire in structure, though change is in the air.

Of course the Comstocks do not form a happy family, with Deklan "Conqueror" the current President and former chief of the Laurentian Army having sent younger and more popular brother Bryce and the army of the Californias on a dangerous expedition in Panama to occupy the Canal against "Brazilian" provocations, and when that succeeded only too well, Deklan had Bryce recalled and hanged for treason. Bryce's only son and Deklan's only "heir", Julian has been spared being a child as well due to his mother Emily's powerful aristocratic connections, but he was sent far away in Athabasca to a small estate-town for protection.

There is an ongoing decades long war in Labrador against the "Dutch" settlers, actually the German - Deutsche - speaking forces of "MittelEurope", though Netherlands being under the sea due to increasing sea level, many Labrador settlers are indeed of "Dutch" origins, and the important city of Montreal, currently American is close to the front lines.

The repopulated cities are much smaller, the technology is at a roughly 19th century level, most people outside the Eupatrids and the clergy are illiterate, the 20/21st century is both a myth and a warning "the sin of free inquiry and of prosperity", the Moon landing is considered a legend though there are preserved books with actual pictures, and Charles Darwin is the ultimate "apostate" in popular "culture".

Adam Hazzard is an 18 year old "lease-boy" in Athabasca - what passes for middle class in the rural estates, the skilled workers straddling between the masses of indentured laborers not better than slaves and the Eupatridians - and the similar aged Julian befriends him on a hunt, while Julian's tutor/surrogate father, retired officer Sam Goodwin, who is secretly Jewish, Judaism being sort of tolerated by the Dominion, but beyond the pale socially, arranges that Adam becomes Julian's companion, by essentially "purchasing" his

skills from his parents who were understandably afraid of associating with an aristocratic semi-outcast.

The novel is told through the eyes of Adam as his later recounting of the times of Julian the "Apostate" and "Conqueror", in a clear homage to the later Roman Emperor of the same name that battled the rise of Christianity and died young in battle and is peppered with notes that illuminate the backstory.

Julian Comstock is not particularly soldierly while being a lover of philosophy, arts and culture; his one dream is to make a movie called "The Life and Times of Charles Darwin" and of course take Deklan's head if ever having a chance...

Adam matures quickly from a naive country-boy to a seasoned soldier and writer, and his endearing voice stayed with me long after finishing the book.

As is Mr. Wilson's customary style exhibited in his great novels like the Hugo winning Spin, the action focuses on the day to day vagaries of life, whether in the trenches or in the familiar and strange Montreal and later Manhattan of the novel, so we have less high level politics and such, but a lot of glimpses in the life of the regular soldiers, battles that would be familiar to Civil war buffs, an unforgettable shootout on Montreal's rooftops, love, marriage, childbirths, deaths of relatives and all the stuff that "life" is made from.

Just superb!!

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## Cindy says

1 part Tom Sawyer  
+ 1 part Handmaid's Tale  
+ 1 part Thucydides

Stir contents vigorously. Serve with eggs on hard tack with maggots butter.

Sounds implausible, doesn't it?

The narrator, Adam Hazzard, tells the story of the rise of Julian Comstock, nephew and unwanted heir to the current President Deklan Comstock in 2172.

The world has survived an almost-apocalypse with the End of Oil and the Plague of Infertility. By the start of the story, new mega-countries have been formed, the population is growing again, and America is at war with Mitteleuropa over Labrador and has effectively replaced the Supreme Court with the Dominion of Jesus Christ on Earth. (I should mention that America has 60 states and covers most all of North America. The Presidency is effectively a hereditary emperorship prone to coups.) It's all a bit Republic of Gilead, don't you think?

This new world isn't all bad - as a matter of fact, it's very much like America in the 19th century. Horse, carriage and trains are the main modes of transport, women generally wear long skirts, and people are expected to maintain their lot in life. Wars are fought mostly with rifles and cavalry in trench warfare, but

"new" weapons are starting to tip the scales. Movies are very rare and still don't have sound.

Adam Hazzard gives the story an "aw, shucks" naive tone. Many of Adam and Julian's hi-jinks will have you amused and laughing like you did at Tom Sawyer. Adam and Julian are boyhood friends from Athabasca (northern Alberta) who love to shoot and fish together. Despite Adam's lower caste (lease-holder, one step above indentured servant), Julian (a high-born Aristocrat) tries to share with Adam the knowledge of the Secular Ancients that he's gleaned from non-Dominion approved antique books. This knowledge is in effect heresy, because it claims that space travel existed and evolution was accepted science.

Once Adam and Julian get conscripted into the Laurentian Army to fight in Labrador, the stories of training and warfare take over. Normally this is where my eyes would gloss over; I'm definitely not a fan of war stories or strategies on the battlefield. However, Wilson seems to move deftly from battlefield to human stories, and kept me interested throughout.

I can't really tell you too much beyond this without spoiling the story. Adam develops a love of writing and telling stories from his childhood and his path to becoming a writer is an amusing subplot. Even more amusing are his attempts at romance with the "fairer sex." It's rare that I laugh out loud while I read, but I was chuckling over and over again at Adam's naïveté, or supposed innocent observations. However, all the characters Adam describes end up being deliciously flawed and curiously interesting.

Likewise, the near-dystopic society Wilson creates is fascinating: it's in the future, but it's backwards! Certainly it will have you contemplating society's future after Peak Oil, although hopefully in a fictional way.

Julian Comstock A Story of 22nd-Century America is a seriously fun romp. It's speculative fiction at its best!

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## **Stefan says**

Robert Charles Wilson's new novel "Julian Comstock" is set in a vastly changed 22nd century USA - after the end of the age of oil and atheism has ended in disaster. Technology is mostly back to pre-20th century levels, and the population has been vastly reduced due to social upheaval and disease. Society has become fully class-based, divided in a Eupatridian aristocracy, middle-class lease-men, and indentured servants. The country - which now stretches across most of the North American continent - is involved in a lengthy and brutal war with the Dutch over control of the recently opened Northwest passage.

In this setting we meet the novel's extraordinary hero, Julian Comstock, the nephew of the dictatorial president Deklan Comstock. Julian is a free-thinker with a deep interest in the apostate Charles Darwin (whose heretical theories are anathema to the Dominion of Jesus Christ, one of the three branches of the government with the president and the senate). Julian is forced to flee his country hide-out with his friend Adam (the amazing narrator of the novel) and Sam Godwin, who is Julian's mentor since his father died in battle - his father being Bryce Comstock, army commander and brother of the president, who was sent into a hopeless conflict by Deklan, fearing his brother's growing popularity would endanger his own tyrannical rule.

While all of this may sound grim, the tone of this story is often actually very light thanks to Adam, the narrator, who combines a certain naïveté with a generally positive outlook on life and a willingness to see the

good in everything. Adam often doesn't fully understand what is happening, and sometimes his general decency forces him to brush over certain things. At other times, his strong conscience puts many things other characters do in a very stark perspective. Part of the beauty and the fun of "Julian Comstock" is seeing it through the prism of Adam's growing understanding.

This novel pulls off something extraordinary: it is written in the style of a 19th century novel, but set in the 22nd century, AND somehow manages to deal with issues that are relevant today. The skill with which Wilson pulls this amazing trick off is simply dizzying. While some of the content might be controversial, I find that Wilson does a great job of extrapolating from current events to an all too plausible future without explicitly taking a definite position.

It's been a while since I've read a novel that so deftly combines so many different elements. The characters have amazing depth, even if you don't always initially realize this due to the narrator's style. The story moves at a brisk pace that makes it impossible to put down. There are moments of high comedy and moments that are so immeasurably poignant and moving that I simply can't stop thinking about them. I cannot recommend this novel highly enough, both to SF fans and to anyone who loves a good book.

One note: I found it odd that the author included some quotes in Dutch and French but didn't include a translation, especially since the book has many footnotes. This was probably done because the narrator doesn't understand either language and the author didn't want to break the consistency of the narrative, but as someone fortunate enough to understand both languages, I can tell you that some of those sections are very funny and, in several cases, very relevant to the story. I think a brief appendix with the translations would be a great idea for future editions.

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### **Bryan says**

At time hilarious, this book shows how a book can succeed on its stylings. The plot is basic, and I could summarize it in two or three sentences (and there's very few twists that occur, so I'd capture the essence of the story quite easily).

But that's not the purpose of this book. The plot is fine, if a bit simplistic, but it only exists as a backdrop for these amazing characters. Lead male Adam Hazzard is a wondrous character - simple and naive, but capable of narrative description that really makes the events come alive.

As for the science fiction, it's low-tech post-apocalyptic. One review called it pastoral, but that's appropriate. Perhaps the author makes religion too much of an evil here, as well -- it would be better to be a bit more grey instead of so starkly black-and-white as the character comes of age and examines his beliefs.

An offbeat read, often hilarious as mentioned previously, but one that I enjoyed immensely. Well worth your time - acquire a copy and enjoy!

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### **Chinook says**

I don't know if it's just because I read this while travelling solo, so it was my constant companion for 2 days, or if it really is worth the 4.5 stars I would give it if I could, but I loved this look at what the world might be



like after oil. I laughed my ass off when I realized the author was Canadian, what with Canada becoming either a state or a battleground between the Americans and the Europeans.

The day after I finished this, I went to visit Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur. Petronus being an oil company. Yep.

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### **Sarah says**

This is the funniest and most charming dystopic novel I've ever read. The setting in some ways seemed to be extrapolated from the events of Kunstler's *World Made By Hand*, though this book took itself far less seriously. It still raises some great questions about religion and war and the possible future toward which we are heading, but it does so in subtler ways.

Wilson's genius was in choosing Adam Hazzard as the narrator of Julian Comstock's story. Adam's innocence (bordering on obtuseness) withstands war, politics, and all other human machinations. Adam reports everything without necessarily pausing to interpret what he has seen or heard; when he does interpret, it is often incorrectly. This is for the most part amusing, since I as a reader could form connections that Adam had not. It only got a little irritating when my meager French failed me (just as Adam's failed him) and I didn't have a computer handy for translation purposes.

All in all, an entertaining and thought-provoking novel.

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### **Lori says**

A brilliant concept depicting a not-so-distant US after some post apocalyptic event - it reminded me of *The Handmaid's Tale* in that the Church of Christianity has gained the ultimate power in ruling over all individuals and government. And like *The Handmade's Tale*, it is completely realistic, and very possible outcome.

For the first half I was loving this, but for some reason I can't quite pin I grew more disillusioned as I progressed with this book. Perhaps part of it is the detachment I felt from the narrator? There's an aloofness that is probably a result of his own character - he is very much a part of his world, yet the Christianity he was brought up in is not "approved" by the Church, he has good reason to be somewhat excluded. So while still being a part of all that, he can also see the bad.

Not sure that's the reason I felt more emotionally distant towards the end, but there you have it. I wonder if it has to do with the growing excitement and anticipation in light of the glowing reviews as I awaited my turn on the library holds list?

Still, I will continue reading Wilson, loved *Spin*, liked this one quite a bit - I would most definitely recommend it to others.

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### **Nikki says**

I'd been reading this since I visited my girlfriend in January. Finally I'm doing a bit of Mount TBR busting, and I picked this up and just steamed through what I had left of it. The fact that that was an effort, combined

with how long I just left it mouldering on my to read pile, probably influences my rating.

I don't think I've read any of Robert Charles Wilson's work before, though I do have another of his novels on my shelf somewhere. I'm not sure I would read more if it weren't for that. I got bored of the world he painted -- it wasn't unbelievable, exactly, but it was predictable and his characters were about as intriguing as my morning bowl of cereal. Quotidian, run of the mill, etc.

All the key parts of the plot are summarised in the wikipedia article, which is... not very long. It's a lot of talking and not much happening. There's nothing that bad about it, I just... don't care.

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## Claudia says

*“Do you want to tell the truth, or do you want to tell a story?”*

Of course I wanted a story and what a story I have been given! Amazingly beautiful told by the best narrator I have ever listened. Adam Hazzard (predestined name) is perilously close to become my addiction. His words are rolling, enveloping you in a world seen through the eyes of one of (if not) the kindest, honest, naïve (in appearance), plain-spoken and reliable friend ever.

Quoting him: *I mean to set down here the story of the life and adventures of Julian Comstock, better known as Julian the Agnostic or (after his uncle) Julian Conqueror. Readers familiar with the name will naturally expect scenes of blood and betrayal, including the War in Labrador and Julian's run-in with the Church of the Dominion. I witnessed all those events firsthand, and at closer proximity than I might have liked, and they are all described in the five “Acts” (as I call them) that follow. In the company of Julian Comstock I traveled from the pine-bark Eden in which I was born all the way to Mascouche, Lake Melville, Manhattan, and stranger places; I saw men and governments rise and fall; and I woke many a morning with death staring me in the face. Some of the memories I mean to set down aren't pleasant ones, or flattering, and I tremble a little at the prospect of reliving them, but I intend to spare no one?we were what we were, and we became what we became, and the facts will ennoble or demean us, as the reader chooses to see it. But I begin the story the way it began for me?in a town in the boreal west, when Julian was young, and I was young, and neither of us was famous.*

As always, RCW gives life to perfect characters; his stories are wrapped around people and their experiences in various circumstances. Do not expect out of the ordinary events or last-minute twists; do expect though to be amazed by how compelling the story of two young men in their journey to adulthood can be.

We are in the 22nd century; United States are regressed to 18th century development due to the fall after the end of oil. The country is a Republic, but Dominion Church (of Jesus Christ on Earth) is having a tremendous power. Books and movies from previous era have been banned – the fewest can read, the better; Darwin is considered the ultimate apostate. Society is divided in three classes: the Aristos (owners) – from which Julian Comstock is, the leasing class (workers of different crafts) and the indentured laborers (the owned) - our narrator, Adam is in between these last two. But he knows how to read and write and has a deep love for books. When Julian arrives in his town, fleeing from his murderer uncle (the president), they became good friends, sharing their love for books and knowledge. And so, their journey begins.

Of course there is more than just the story of the two. RCW touches a lot of sensitive subjects related to society, religion and humanity in general. And through the words of Adam you'll get the thoughts and

convictions of a philosopher (Julian) and simple people like Adam or others but who are willing to learn and are open minded; pursuit of knowledge is a key issue in the book.

I think Julian's character was inspired by the Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate. He was a prominent philosopher and won a crushing victory against a Germanic army, same as here. According to Wikipedia, *Julian was a man of unusually complex character: he was "the military commander, the theosophist, the social reformer, and the man of letters". He was the last non-Christian ruler of the Roman Empire, and he believed that it was necessary to restore the Empire's ancient Roman values and traditions in order to save it from dissolution. He purged the top-heavy state bureaucracy and attempted to revive traditional Roman religious practices at the expense of Christianity. Julian also forbade the Christians from teaching classical texts and learning. His rejection of the Christianity imposed on him in his youth, and his promotion of Neoplatonic Hellenism in its place caused him to be remembered as Julian the Apostate by the church.* Pretty much the description of our Julian.

Albeit him being such a complex character, I deeply rooted for Adam - he will stay with me forever; I am certain that I will come back and reread the book in the years to come.

And I could say a lot more about this book, but I don't have the words to capture its beauty and geniality. Instead, I will leave some fragments with you – I think they are much more convincing than I am.

*I was feeling magnanimous?the day was bright, the air had a delicate warmth, and a general languor had descended over the camp (along with the swampy smell of the thawing prairie and an unfortunate breeze from the latrines).*

[After teaching a fellow private, Lymon Pugh, to read and write]

*"I guess I can tell you how to make a fine Knocker."*

*"That might be a good example, since I don't know what a Knocker is."*

*"Oh, well," (warming to his subject), "I guess anyone can make a crude sort of Knocker?you've probably done it yourself, though maybe they call it by some other name in Athabaska. A Knocker, Adam, you know: the thing you use when you want to knock someone about the head."*

*"Perhaps if you described it."*

*"Put a stone in the end of a sock and you have one. Swing it in a circle and bring it down on the skull of your enemy: bang!"*

*Lymon Pugh came by as I was deep in these reveries, and I showed him the letter. He puzzled over it a moment.*

*"My lessons in reading don't seem to have advanced this far," he said.*

*"Of course you can't read it. It's written in Dutch."*

*"Dutch? They don't just speak that noise, they also write it down?"*

*"I was moved by her somber expression, which implied a soul less hardened than she liked to pretend; and I was even more moved when she found the Christian charity to utter a quick prayer for the soul of poor dead Job. ["Passe mon bonjour au Diable quand tu le verras ."]"*

*"And eventually that child of God was returned to his Creator?scorned, insulted, beaten, humiliated, and finally nailed to a splintery cross and suspended in the Galilean sunshine until he died of his wounds both physical and spiritual. "God received this much-abused gift by return mail, as it were, and He was ferociously scornful, and said to humanity, 'See what you do with Innocence? See what you make of Love and Goodwill when it looks you in the eye?' And so saying He turned His back on Mankind, and determined*

*never to speak to the human race again, or have any other dealings with it.*

*“And even this,” Julian said, “might have been a useful lesson, taken as such; but Man misunderstood his own chastening, and imagined that his sins had been forgiven, and put up effigies of the tortured demigod and the instrument on which he had been broken, and marked the event every Easter with a church service and a colorful hat. And as God made Himself deaf to Man, so Man became deaf to God; and our prayers languished in the dead air of our cavernous churches, and do so to this day.”*

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## Nicholas Whyte says

<http://nwhyte.livejournal.com/1456594.html>

Rather fortuitously I read this novel while also working through Gibbon's chapters in **The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire** on Julian the Apostate, the mid-fourth century Roman emperor who tried to reverse his uncle's adoption of Christianity and failed. (See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).) Julian Comstock, nephew of the 22nd century president of a post-apocalypse America, is modelled a bit on his namesake of 1800 years earlier, though there are some significant differences of detail - Julian Comstock is not promoted to junior co-ruler by his uncle, he is not proclaimed emperor by his own troops, he doesn't have to march across a disputed continent to claim the throne, his uncle doesn't conveniently die of natural causes, Julian doesn't then take up arms against the traditional enemy to the East, and then doesn't die in battle. It should also be added that the real Julian the Apostate was a fervent pagan believer rather than an atheist, was never forced to enlist in the army under a false name, and was a writer of polemics and satires - sometimes self-deprecating - but certainly could not have written a musical screenplay about the life of Charles Darwin.

Still, it's interesting to compare the two narratives - Gibbon on Julian the Apostate, Wilson on Julian Comstock - because in the end both are about rulers who acquire imperial office through family relationships and military success, and then try to reverse the evangelical Christian regime established by their predecessors. (I haven't read Gore Vidal's novel **Julian**, which may be a more direct source than Gibbon for Wilson). There isn't a lot of suspense in either case; we have a pretty good idea how things are going to turn out. The reader's interest in both stories is engaged by the incidental details of the plot and the way in which the story is told.

As to the details, both writers are covering a world we barely recognise. Gibbon has Julian proclaimed Emperor in the great hall of the Roman baths in Paris, which we can still see today. Wilson has the presidential residence located in New York's Central Park. Wilson of course has the harder task here, as he is inventing a setting rather than retrieving it from historical accounts, and there are only three groups of settings described in much detail - the small village where Julian and the narrator grow up, the battlefields of Canada, and New York when Julian arrives as ruler. Wilson's future America has suffered economic and military catastrophe, and seems not to have many non-white people in it (though it does have invading Europeans and persecuted Jews). For Gibbon's past Roman Empire, the big catastrophe is yet to come, though he sees his Julian as the last, lost hope of reversing the Decline and Fall. Each story has a central military set-piece, the army of the West's march from Gaul to the middle Danube and the battle of Goose Bay (in both cases prepared by the central character's earlier military successes) and Wilson has the edge over Gibbon here as he can make up an eyewitness account rather than try to analyse other people's reports.

The most memorable feature of both stories is the way that they are told. The delight of reading Gibbon is that he thinks he is smarter than the reader, and nonchalantly shows it at every stage. Wilson's narrator, Adam Hazzard, is probably not as clever as the reader, and probably not as good a novelist as he thinks he is;

luckily for us, both the woman he falls in love with and his friends Julian and Sam are smarter than he is, and this drives the book's humorous side. As for the central character, though, I found Gibbon's Julian more interesting and convincing than Wilson's. (NB that the author in both cases is sympathetic to the project of rolling back Christianity, though Gibbon disapproves of the details of the attempted restoration of pagan superstition and Wilson's narrator isn't as sure of the virtues of the project in the first place.) The similarity of background and basic plot is there; but Wilson's Julian, once he gains power, starts to become dictatorial while also writing a screenplay about his hero, Darwin; Gibbon's Julian as emperor seems much more consistent in character with his behaviour before gaining power (including his continued literary output).

A final point on languages. Gibbon can nonchalantly throw in extended footnotes in Latin (in fairness, he doesn't do this often) in the expectation that the reader of 1781 will be able to follow the argument without too much difficulty. Wilson has the odd phrase in French (mostly from the narrator's Canadian lover) and most strikingly a letter in Dutch (p. 189) from an enemy soldier, killed in Canada, to his lover; I wonder how many readers will follow it (no translation is given) and get the rather grim joke about the dog on the next page?

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### **Lightreads says**

A very cool book, mildly disappointing. Post oil crisis United States, with a constricted population, Presidential-military-religious government, nineteenth-century values. Country boy Adam Hazzard tells the story of his life with the President's nephew, Julian, in the army and in the capitol of New York.

What's great about this book is that it's post-apocalypse specific written as a boy's own adventure nineteenth-century novel. And that makes it kind of awesome. The world building is the treat here, because this fundamentalist, stratified, technologically backward future is sad and believable. And Wilson's writing and his control of structure and theme, as usual, shine. This is a book about change and time, about how the future is an imperfect memory of the past, and so is growing up.

So I do give Wilson points for having an actual, you know, reason for the style other than, well, stylism. But that doesn't mean it's not also frustrating and occasionally painful to be confined to Adam's pious, naïve narration. The book is limited to Adam's limitations, except for frequent and often hilarious dramatic ironies (honey, your best friend doesn't like "esthetes," he is *so gay*. Gay gay gay).

Clever, beautiful in places, perfectly styled. But disappointing to me because of the limitations and all of the classist/sexist baggage that comes along with this kind of pastiche. It's not that Wilson doesn't know about it, because he does. It's just that I got pretty sick of it, after a while, and the way it kept me at a distance.

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### **Nzric says**

I had high hopes for this novel. The idea and the overall plot is very strong, and the world is well imagined, but overall this story has the feel of something that was outlined in an essay format and stamped out in a formula.

Likes:

- Consistent style of writing, the 'period' language is consistent throughout, with no noticeable slips in tone/style.
- General world building is ok - basic politics and some attempt at a timeline.

Dislikes:

- unbelievable 'future history'. This book should have been written as an alternate past history based around 18-19th century America being a dictatorship. It falls flat with the attempt to layer in a future history. The author seems to think that - although some groups hoard knowledge and political power - these groups don't take advantage of any knowledge (for their own benefit) beyond a 19th century level of understanding. I kept waiting for the layers of hidden/'lost' knowledge to be revealed as the characters moved further into the hierarchical politics and power structure. I thought that was the whole point of the book. But.... well, don't hold your breath.
- the main character is written as 'naive and loveable', which is fair enough for the first section of the book detailing their impressionable youth, but there is little if no character development in the main character. A naive narrator blundering into events he barely understands is okay for the first few chapters, maybe forgivable for a third of the book, but by the end it just grates.
- I don't want to give any spoilers away but I'd say generally the last third of the book rests on trite pop culture references and there is little if any escalation and no real climax to the novel. The plot itself takes a ninety degree turn in the last part of the book - bringing in new themes from way left-field, and everything seems to be wrapped up all too nicely at the end.
- Something good happens around page two hundred and fifteen (I'll just say "the song"). Apart from that I don't have any other real highlights.
- Otis. What's the freakin point? It's not adorable, it's not funny. It's something you'd expect to see in a high-school short story, not a serious novel.

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## Alan says

Allow me to add my voice to the chorus of praise attending the celebrated Mr. Robt. Chas. Wilson's novel. For Wilson has done something truly extraordinary—he has taken the tired old subgenre of post-apocalyptic pastoral sf and revived it thoroughly.

Adam Hazzard, Wilson's narrator, is a pitch-perfect American voice, recreating the cadences of a 19th-Century orator in prose that brings to mind the elegant simplicity of a Mark Twain or a Nathaniel Hawthorne. It's a polished yet straightforward style that invites emulation. Wilson's rolling phrases are an ongoing pleasure to read, even were they not placed in the service of such an interesting story.

Julian Comstock is a sophisticated and aristocratic youth who, though very much a child of privilege, is unlucky—he is the nephew of one of the most ruthless leaders America has ever known. Julian's father died a hero's death, sent into battle to meet that fate by his brother Deklan. Julian himself lives in virtual exile in the Pacific Northwest, then (as now) far from the centers of power, sent there from new New York by his mother, who hopes he will escape his uncle Deklan's notice.

Deklan Comstock is President of a 22nd-Century America which is finally resurgent after a long descent; global warming, the end of cheap oil and assorted other catastrophes caused a collapse from which the country is only now recovering.

Unlike typical post-apocalyptic scenarios, however, the Comstocks' America has not *entirely* lost its continuity with the past. Wilson deftly and plausibly portrays this evolution as backstory, without getting in the way of the events Adam Hazzard is relating. These United States have a strong Constitution and a continent-spanning culture that clearly bear a close relationship to our own. Yet they are also much changed, and not for the better. While the forms of democracy have been preserved, their substance has largely been lost; most Americans are serfs, vassals whose votes and very lives are controlled by feudal masters. And the Constitution that unifies the country is nevertheless a very different document; it has been altered to suit a triumphant Dominionism. You may profess any faith you like now—as long as it's Christian, and as long as it's approved by the Dominion.

With government firmly in the hands of feudal aristocrats and military ministers, Deklan Comstock's power is secure—at least in the territories he controls. The United States flag has more stars than the Ancients knew, but the "Dutch" (European colonists, not all of whom are from the Netherlands) hold far too much rich northern farmland to be suffered. Armies must be raised and sent to war. And Deklan has by no means forgotten that his nephew Julian is a healthy young man just turning eighteen...

"Accuracy and drama are the Scylla and Charybdis of journalism, Adam."  
—Theodore Dornwood, to Adam Hazzard, narrator. p.130

Yet I must not let my enchantment with its style and plot blind me to the novel's flaws, few though they may be. Julian Comstock's 22nd Century hews perhaps a little *too* closely to the 19th. It seems very unlikely that America's future could truly hold so many parallels to its past, and to such a specific period in its past at that, even granting the efforts of an agency dedicated to recreating that period. Wilson's world-building, despite (or because of) the obvious research and effort that went into it, seems... a little lazier than it could have been.

And it must also be said that the very qualities of Julian Comstock himself that make him stand out against the Dominion's bucolic backdrop—his big-city sophistication, his rebellion from a patrician youth, and most especially his anti-theistic stance—eventually make him sound a little too shrill, like a homespun Richard Dawkins. Julian's skeptical, articulate theological and scientific views are—as the best SF always is—a trenchant commentary on today's most adamant believers. But Wilson's point eventually becomes not at all subtle, and I think the novel suffers for never explicitly acknowledging that the Dominion, in many ways, succeeded in preserving a country and a civilization in the face of the manifest failure of other forces. Not that I disagree with Wilson, or with JC (the initials *are* telling, aren't they?), but I do think that more balance in Adam's tale would have been better.

Nonetheless, I truly thought this book was amazing—and I am not by any means the only one.

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## Norman Cook says

Expanded from his Hugo-nominated novella *Julian: A Christmas Story*, Robert Charles Wilson has crafted a

magnificent future history that is a compelling and somewhat chilling vision of what America could become. As I recall, I did not enjoy the original novella very much because it was difficult to place the events in context. The novel does a wonderful job of filling in the details needed to fully understand the story. And creative details they are! Julian Comstock is a tale of America 160 years from now that shows the aftermath of the breakdown of our technological society. As a memoir ostensibly intended for readers of the time, the book only hints at the turmoil and upheaval visited upon the world at the end of the 21st Century, on the assumption that readers will be thoroughly familiar with those events. The pre-apocalypse time of the “Secular Ancients” is known as the Efflorescence of Oil. America emerges as an agrarian, Christian theocracy from the False Tribulation and Fall of Cities. Somehow Canada (and possibly Mexico) has been annexed to form an America with 60 states. The Presidency is now essentially hereditary, with sham elections to ratify the candidates that are approved by the real power, the Dominion of Jesus Christ on Earth, a coalition that suppresses dissidence and free speech. (Perhaps the most chilling reflection of the Dominion’s oppression is a passing reference in a short footnote that the 53rd Amendment abolished the Supreme Court.)

Seventeen-year-old Julian Comstock is the Aristo nephew of President Deklan Comstock. Deklan Conqueror, as he is commonly known, is the man who executed Julian’s father to help ensure his continued reign. Julian’s mother, fearing that Deklan will extend his fratricidal ways, sends Julian west to the town of Williams Ford, Athabaska, with Julian’s mentor Sam Godwin. There Julian befriends Adam Hazzard, the son of a lease-man (the new middle class lease land from the Aristo dynasties and manage the indentured laborers who work the land). It is from Adam’s point of view that the novel’s events take place. Adam is a naïve and somewhat unreliable narrator who nevertheless captures the essence of Julian’s life.

At Christmastime 2172 the Army arrives to conscript the town’s youth for the ongoing war in Labrador against Mitteleuropian (primarily German) forces. Julian, Adam, and Sam sneak out of town, knowing that Julian’s lineage would put him in danger in the Army. However, the trio eventually ends up in the Army anyway, using assumed names. Julian’s charisma, bravery, and luck quickly propel him to greater things. Meanwhile, Adam hones his burgeoning writing skills by documenting Julian’s exploits, eventually leading to the revelation of Julian’s real identity to the public. Julian’s triumphs and tragedies continue through Christmastime 2175, affecting the entire fabric of American government, class struggle, and religiosity.

Wilson’s portrait of a future America is fascinating, original, and frighteningly plausible. The people in this world are generally ignorant of the ways of the Secular Ancients because digital records are inaccessible and everything else is censored by the Dominion. Technology has by and large reverted to the level of the mid-19th Century. The theocracy persecutes scientists, sectarians, and free-thinkers like Julian. The pertinent background information is slowly revealed without unnecessary exposition.

*Julian Comstock* is an excellent novel, with authentic, three-dimensional characters, a believable yet unpredictable plot, and large doses of humor. The writing rings true to Adam’s perspective without being archaic. The novel is a contemplative and persuasive parable that illustrates the dangers of the collapse of technology and the rise of religious extremism. This is science fiction at its best.

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## Clay Kallam says

Back in 1964, Gore Vidal wrote a very good historical fiction novel called “Julian”, which was based on the life of Roman emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus, whose brief reign was from 360-363 CE. Julian the Apostate, as he was known by his Christian enemies, tried to turn the empire away from Christianity,



especially the church hierarchy, which was at that time doing its best to stamp out what it considered heresies.

Now, in 2010, Robert Charles Wilson has written “Julian Comstock” (Tor, \$25.95, 416 pages), which, for no apparent reason, transfers the story of the ancient Julian to a 22nd century that bears a very strong resemblance to 19th century America. There are major differences, of course, as this society has emerged after the collapse of our present culture, and the United States is ruled by a president who for all intents and purposes is like a 4th century Roman Emperor, and the Christian church has enormous power.

Wilson drops hints early, and more often as the book goes on, that his Julian is much like the previous Julian, which just makes me wonder why he didn’t just write about the Roman emperor, and skip the fantasy America. Nonetheless, I enjoyed “Julian Comstock” because Wilson is a fine writer and his narrator (a friend of Julian’s writing after the fact, just like the ones in Vidal’s book) is an appealing character.

Of course, most readers will not have encountered Vidal’s book, nor will they know much about Julian the Apostate, so this will all be new – and even if it isn’t new, “Julian Comstock” is still a good read.

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## Michael says

*Note: this review is newly placed here as a review of a different book was placed here due to faulty importation when I joined GR--apologies and embarrassment*

Quite a fine, old-fashioned novel about two boys making their way in a challenging world. But in this case, it is two centuries from the end of oil and civilization has recovered only to a level resembling the 19th century.

One boy, Julian, is the nephew of the U.S. president/king and is being raised far away in the northwest to avoid the dangers surrounding succession. The other, Adam, is a former stable boy, whose education and companionship with Julian puts him in the position of chronicling the story of Julian's rise to the presidency. Both are conscripted into the army to fight in the wars against the Dutch over the valuable eastern outlets to the open waterway between the Atlantic and Pacific.

Julian, under an assumed name, rises to popular leadership and proves to be talented in the campaigns, despite his more peaceful ambition to become a philosopher and make a movie about Darwin. But his agnostic and libertarian beliefs puts him at odds with the powerful and dogmatic Christian church hierarchy, and even his aristocratic mother cannot keep him out of political trouble.

The tale is fascinating meditation on cultural and social evolution after the apocalyptic collapse due to the end of oil. The projection that a strong class-based society like the 19th century would return seems plausible, as does the persistence of forces for a more egalitarian society. At the human level, the novel does well to cover how the individual's hunger for knowledge and love will continue to be a driving force to preserve and improve upon all that has passed before.

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## Jeff says

After The Efflorescence of Oil, the Fall of The Cities, and the False Tribulation, America is once again becoming a world power uniting most of the North American continent, from Panama to Labrador, under the thirteen stripes and 60 stars of the American flag and for the sake of the Dominion of Jesus Christ on Earth.

But all this is backdrop. The immediate story is of young Adam Hazzard, naive and trusting lease-boy, born and raised on a fuedal estate on the north-central plains of Athabaska (ree Canada) and his involuntary odyssey across a large swath of America and the mid-22nd century with his friend Julian Comstock, exiled nephew of the murderous President (read Emperor), Deklan the Conqueror.

The plot is fairly straight-forward and easy to divine, but the real pleasure of this novel comes from Adam's voice and innocence about the world at large. He is the classic American Abroad, full of faith and nobility, charming and diasarming in his innocence and openness, yet unafraid and undaunted. A great amount of humor is discovered as the reader realizes a greater understanding than Adam of what is really going on. Also, the style is that of a 19th century Letter to the Dear Reader...with footnotes!

Others have mentioned parallels to the story of Emperor Julian in Gibbon's *Rise and Decline of the Roman Empire* and Vidal's *Julian*. As I have read neither, I am forced to leave comparison's of the three works up to the literary acumen of the Reader. (As Adam Hazzard would phrase it).

Robert Charles Wilson creates a unique post-apocalyptic world logically extended from current trends and forecasts. His world will stick in your memory because of the voices of the characters he draws.

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