



# Utopian Man

*Lisa Lang*

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## **Utopian Man** Lisa Lang

An exquisite historical novel about a remarkable man who chose his own path, charming and scandalising others in equal measure. Co-winner of the 2009 Australian/Vogel Literary Award.

It's the 1880s and Marvellous Melbourne is a lavish and raucous city where anything could happen. Eccentric entrepreneur Edward William Cole is building the sprawling Cole's Book Arcade and filling it with whatever amuses him, or supports his favourite causes: a giant squid, a brass band, monkeys, a black man whose skin has turned white, a Chinese tea salon, and of course, hundreds of thousands of books. When Edward decides to marry he advertises for a wife in the newspaper, shocking and titillating the whole town. To everyone's surprise he marries his broadsheet bride and the Arcade grows into a monumental success.

But the 1890s depression hits Melbourne - and Edward - hard, and the death of one of his children leaves him reeling. Grief, corruption and a beautiful, unscrupulous widow all threaten to derail his singular vision. But it's not until he visits Chinatown one night - and his own deeply suppressed past - that the idealist faces his toughest challenge. Utopian Man is the story of a man who lives life on his own terms, and leaves behind a remarkable legacy.

## **Utopian Man Details**

Date : Published 2010 by Allen & Unwin

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Author : Lisa Lang

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## From Reader Review Utopian Man for online ebook

### Kirsten says

I saw the author at the Sydney Writers Festival, she was part of a panel of three being recognized by the SMH as best young writers under 35. Decided to give her book a go as she sounded so bright, articulate, and optimistic. She took a true Aussie tale as a base, the creator of Melbourne's Coles Book Arcade, which really does sound like a magical place from the 1890s; and then weaves here story around lots of interesting tidbits from his life.

It was a sweet read, and I'm glad I know this little bit of Australia's history.

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### Lisa says

I romped through this book in a just a few hours and as a work of light fiction I enjoyed it. Utopian Man weaves its way into the mind as if the ideas within were memory rather than the author's cunning invention. It fills the reader with nostalgia for a time too long ago for any of us to remember – and yet it seems impossibly familiar because the images are so vivid and clear...

Lisa Lang's debut novel was co-winner of the Vogel Literary Award in 2009 (with Night Street by Kristel Thornell, see my review); the same books were also shortlisted for the 2011 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Having now read both these novels I can see what a difficult task the judges must have had - these authors both chose to create fiction from the lives of authentic figures in Melbourne's history. Utopian Man is based on the more well-known life of E.W. Cole, the eccentric entrepreneur who enlivened Marvellous Melbourne of the 1880s with his astonishing book arcade.

To see the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2011/10/09/ut...>

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### Steve lovell says

Ms Lang shared the 2009 Vogel Award for this novel with Kristel Thornell's compelling 'Night Street'. Both efforts featured famous Melburnians – the former with EW Cole, famous in his own time – the latter Clarice Beckett – famous belatedly in ours. Now, having read both, I can see the problem the judges had for both are very fine. Perhaps Thornell just pips Lang and possibly only because Beckett is one of my favourite artists. Cole, noted for his arcade and funny picture books, intrigued Melbourne from the boom times of the 1880s, through the bust of the 90s and into the first decade of a new century in a federated country. This is a terrific imagining of his life and times, being well based around the bones of his 'real' biography. He could be described as a Tim Burton of his day, starting off as a bookseller and ending creating a 'wonderland' for the citizens of his metropolis. Devoted to his plain Eliza and children, with Cole Lang takes the reader on a magical rollercoaster ride that was the blessed life of this self-made man. There were setbacks, including the deaths of loved ones, a child's addiction and the impact of a dark secret. Both the historical and the fictional Cole rose above the notorious White Australia Policy to champion multiculturalism well before it became a by-word for our second city, and I wish there was such a figure engaged in our present furore over those seeking a safe life in our country.

Along the way we meet other historically prominent figures, most notably Alfred Deakin, our second PM who is usually regarded as one of our most significant. Lang's treatment of him struck me as curious. Biographies state he was a devoted family man, but the author turns this on the side by having him conduct an affair with the bewitching Joy, then dump her when the relationship might potentially affect his career. Is it okay to play around with the reputations of revered figures? Will a future novelist have John Howard being naughty in the Lodge?

Still I immensely enjoyed this journey through the history of Marvellous Melbourne and I look forward to reading her next offering, along with Thornhill's

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## **Cheryl A says**

Years ago, I read a number of historical fiction set in Australia and really enjoyed them. Then, I started working in a library and my time was spent reading the newest "hot" titles and for a time I strayed from the more obscure titles in the American market. I just discovered this title, winner of numerous Australian awards and now owe myself a head slap.

Utopian Man is the story of E W Cole, the owner of Cole's Book Arcade, a destination in the late 1800's Melbourne. Simply, but beautifully written, this novel tells the story of not only the man behind the Arcade but of Melbourne at the time. The author does a wonderful job in portraying Cole as a devoted family man as well as a man who wanted to share his sense of wonder and the tenets of basic human decency with all those around him.

From the goldfields and the Murray river, from true love found in a newspaper advertisement and devastating loss, Cole was a man whose past truly influenced his day to day life. His ideas, as presented by Lang, were utopian, but without the naivety or egomania that often strikes dreamers. Although other characters in the novel are secondary to Cole's story, they are still well rounded.

I was not familiar with the people in the novel, but the author still brought them all to life.

The epilogue summoned up the philosophy of not only the life of Cole and his Arcade, but of the novel itself...

"But how to put into words the feeling that it gave you: that possibilities abounded, that the world was wide and that you yourself were capable, adventurous, destined?"

A simply joyful book.

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## **June Ding says**

I suppose you feel an instant connection with a book when its topic is of interest to you, whether it is about a place, a thing or a period of time that you are curious about. The curiosity keeps you engaged. The book can take you to that special time and place and let you experience something you would otherwise never would. In this case, my connection with the book is Melbourne. It is a light history fiction that is based on the true stories of one of Melbourne's famous sons. And there is more: the hero's life was centered around books. The story stirs me from inside: of a man who was born poor, immigrated to Australia in his youth to make a

new life for himself. He dug gold mines in Victoria, found love and inspiration at its first public library, sold lemonade, run a second hand books stall and finally made himself a rich man and built the world's biggest bookstore at the time. His personal stories seem to suggest how a city could become such a great city in such short period of time: through enlightenment and common sense. After all, it is a city that had the first free public library in Australia for every citizen who wants self improvement via learning. It had Cole's book Arcade. Next time I visit Melbourne, I promise myself that I must visit both places.

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### **Naomi Faye says**

I was immediately struck by the energy and flair of a man who led a life unconstrained by convention or public opinion," says author Lisa Lang of Edward Cole, who opened Cole's Book Arcade on Bourke Street in Melbourne in 1883, and inspired her book Utopian Man. Cole's Book Arcade was not an ordinary bookstore, it was filled with animals, a brass band, a Chinese tearoom, optical illusions, and a fernery. Edward was someone who saw magic in everything around him, and invested time making his imagination become a reality.

Edward Cole would be an inspiring individual in any century, and certainly a visionary during a very conservative time in Australia. Through thorough research and creativity, Lang was able to give light to an inexhaustibly idealistic real life character, and when put on paper, he becomes absolutely majestic.

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### **Heather says**

I wanted to love this book, I really did. It had all the makings of a great novel- an interesting setting, a quirky protagonist, a beautiful dream, and many substantial hurdles, but it didn't at all deliver on its promise. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't AWFUL, but nothing infuriates me more than books which seem to be leading in particular directions but never quite get there, and this book does it like none other I've ever read. Without fail, EVERY SINGLE story arc that is introduced falls flat- the sultry widow & her effect on the protagonist's marriage, the impact of the Depression, the protagonist's work in the Gold fields, the effect of a character's drug addiction. Not one of the plot points (or characters) is given enough attention so as to leave the reader with a strong sense of who these people are and of the impact of the story arcs on their "lives", and thus we're left with wooden, 2-dimensional characters and seemingly irrelevant events. The end result is an overall feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration with the book, and the sense that you were a little ripped off by the author. I'm unsure whether this writing style is intentional or due to a lack of experience on the author's part, but as this is her first book I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. And it wasn't all bad- it's well-written, magical in places, and extremely easy to read. That said, I can't promise that I'll be rushing out to read any of her future works any time soon.

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### **Clio says**

A balanced work of fictionalised history. E.W. Cole books used to be everywhere in my family, and I thought it was an international thing. Turns out, it was a Melbourne thing. I had NO idea. This book takes the history of Cole and turns it into a narrative. It's fairly compelling in places, especially when we start to to Australia growing as a nation, with the introduction of the white Australia policy and Coles reaction to others' racism. I feel a lot of respect for Cole, although he is portrayed very sympathetically, there must be

some truth in his reactions in the book.

If you're a Melbournian, enjoy the boom before the great depression or are a fan of early entrepreneurs then you may enjoy this book.

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### **Laura says**

In 1880s Melbourne visionary entrepreneur Edward William Cole opens Cole's Book Arcade. Alongside the books, he fills the shop with a band, tea salon and monkeys - anything that amuses him.

This book is stunning. The writing is beautiful and the characters are so real you'll feel like you know them.

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### **Jane (yesmissjane) says**

Cole's Book Arcade was a massive three-storey bookstore in the heart of Melbourne that opened on Cup day in 1883. But this was a bookshop with a difference. It had a fernery, a wonderland with funny mirrors, a music department, a band which played every afternoon, its own printing press, a lending library, secondhand books for sale, a Chinese tea salon, even a live monkey display! The arcade was the embodiment of one man's vision and humanitarian ideals: Edward William Cole. While the arcade stands no-longer, a few of its artefacts remain on display in the Melbourne museum; I grew up dreaming of the Book Arcade by virtue of a copy of the still periodically in-print 'Cole's Funny Picture Book' first put together in his office at the top of the arcade by Cole of the Book Arcade himself. Truly Edward Cole was one of the largest of larger than life characters from the days of Gold Rush-enabled "Marvellous Melbourne".

Lisa Lang published a short factual biography of E.W. Cole a number of years ago, which I read with great enjoyment. It turns out that this was insufficient to get the man out of her system, because in 'Utopian Man' she has produced a fictionalised biography of the later half of his life, showing his amazing heart, imagination, passion and ingenuity pulled in a number of different directions: as a loving father, seeking to help direct his growing children to find their own passions; as a business owner and employer, seeking to feed the best in all people under his influence, and still pay his bills; and as a political pundit, appalled with the move post-federation towards an insular and excluding version of Australia, most clearly encapsulated in the White Australia Policy of his own erstwhile friend, Alfred Deakin, Australia's second Prime Minister. Full of lovingly re-created detail of the period, and of Cole's own life, there is much food for thought in these pages. Race in Australia is easily the biggest thematic concern, but also the value of books and ideas being available to all. One of the largest over-riding concerns of Cole's own life (religion : Cole was the son of an English clergyman who left the church at quite a young age, and who's first writing for publication was a re-examination of Jesus & Paul in a far from orthodox light) is given fairly short shrift in the novel: this may be simply because on this score modern-day Australian society sings along fairly closely from Cole's own song sheet, and so there wasn't much left for Cole to 'teach us', as is evidently not the case with race, where Australia continues to underperform.

While I did enjoy this story, I'm not convinced that Lang's book is entirely successful. Surely, the main reason to create a biography in novelised form is to provide insight into the inner life of the subject under study. And while there are a small number of significant tragedies, and a few dark patches in Cole's psyche pointed to (at least momentarily) he continues to overcome obstacles right and left, with barely a wobble in his self belief. Death seems to be literally the only foe that Cole is unable to vanquish merely through force of his superior will. The man, as written, seems simply too good to be true. Which is not to say that I am not

still just a little bit in love with him, and wish that the world of today was inhabited by a just a few folk suffering from his version of crazy.

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### **Megan says**

Maybe it's because my maiden name is Cole - and Melbourne is my town...yes, biased...but...this book made me cry and the next day I still had trouble talking about it. Lisa's EW Cole 'voice' is wonderfully real. Elegant writing, with a gentle touch. A tale of a grand soul. Let's hope there are more EW Cole's in the world.

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### **Mike says**

A lovely historical novel about Edward Cole, a self-made bookseller at the end of the 19th century in Melbourne, Australia. I don't know how much of the history is accurate; Lang has also written a scholarly biography of Cole (E.W. Cole - Chasing the Rainbow), so I assume she knows her facts. The fictional Cole is a character I would have loved to meet: he does what he loves, and loves what he does, in total disregard for business sense. When the Australian economy collapses, he expands his bookstore; he adds a publishing business, a tea room, parrots, and monkeys (just because he likes them), building what was arguably the largest bookstore in history. And he almost goes to ruin defending his Asian employees against the legally enforced racism of time.

A wonderful and surprising book.

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### **Halena says**

Fun read. Enjoyed the setting and the historical info.

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### **Maha Abed says**

I prefer reading non-fiction. If I read fiction, something about it has to attract me and make me want to read more. I usually test a fiction book by scanning through the first few pages, and if it doesn't pique my interest, it is discarded and I move on to something else.

The first two things that made me borrow this book from another campus was the title. Then, I saw commentary and a recommendation from another author, Cate Kennedy, whose works I've always enjoyed reading. I scan through the first few pages.... and on page 8, this passage captured me and made me want to reach the conclusion:

"He was twenty-five the first time he entered a large public library, and was almost flattened by the weight of his own ignorance. There was just so much there. He had hoped to find a book on carpentry; there was more than a dozen. He chose one at random, his hands grey against the paper despite the cake of good soap the library provided. He was sleeping in the street then, living in a world of dark and narrow lanes, and the

sudden excess of light and space and knowledge was brutal. He felt exposed in its glare, grubby and uncouth. He slid the volume back. There was shame in the way he dropped his head, his hand trailing columns on his way out. But by looking down he saw a simple plaque, missed on entering, which read: "For the people of the city". It stopped him in his tracks. The people of the city - wasn't that him? It was true that he was grimy, ignorant and all the rest, but that library was there for *him*. He could read any book he liked. He could read all day, every day if he chose. Nothing was stopping him. Nothing! The power of this thought was dizzying: the world spread before him."

Ok... maybe this is a huge clue as to why I became a librarian. :)

The book's setting is Melbourne in the 1800s, going through Federation to the 1920s. The author, Lisa Lang comments that this piece of fiction is based on an actual person by the name of Edward Cole. I'm yet to find out how much of her book is factual, but I was engaged the whole way through. I also enjoyed her vivid descriptions of Melbourne in this time period, and even though she doesn't always name places like we know them now (i.e. the Paris end of Collins Street), as a Melbournian, you instinctively know which part of the CBD she is referring to. A great read, hard to put down. Akin to another Australian work I enjoyed by Alan Marshall, titled *The grass is singing*

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## **Petris Schrodelis says**

This is a beautiful and well measured book, which handles some difficult themes very well. The author does an excellent job of showing the flaws in the protagonist's optimistic world view without making the reader feel like he is a fool. There are scenes and elements in the book that could very easily have tipped over into sentimentality and maudishness (the sickness of a beloved infant, scenes of family happiness and the goodness of certain characters), or into melodrama (drug addiction, the specter of infidelity) yet it never does.

In terms of plot, I found it a very enjoyable read and a fascinating story that was hard to put down.

I applaud the author for her skill and maturity. A wonderful first novel, and I hope the judges of the Miles Franklin award set its merits, because Australian literature needs more books like *Utopian Man* to be recognised and publicised.

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