

The Water Knife by Paolo Pacigalupi opens with Angel, an enforcer for the Southern Nevada Authority (SNWA) looking down at a Cypress arcology or Eden in a world where the water has run dry and the west is a desert. Using legal documents and loopholes provided by Charles Braxton and on behalf of his boss Catherine Case, Angel protects or simply allows Las Vegas to hoard water providing it to people who are oblivious to his protection but destroying the water facilities of other states like Arizona. This is a world much different to ours but similar to the 1900-1920s, a period of water wars where civil engineers like William Mulholland were seen as angels by their communities or devils by those who lived in the Owens Valley. Enacting on behalf of a city, history repeats itself in the book set in not-too distant future where city agents and now water knives or enforcers are fight for water. However instead of buying water rights, building dams and aquifers, the setting of the book is that of a hell where the water has run dry and Apache helicopters blow up water processing plants.

However the world is not too different from ours. Due to the aqueducts and reservoirs which bring water from rivers across hundreds of miles, those who live in the southwest today have forgotten that the west is a desert. Similarly, the oblivious residents of the Las Vegas arcology are isolated and differ from those who live in Phoenix which include the journalist Lucy. In her dreams, she refers to water as “GodWater” a parallel to when the drought stricken residents of Los Angeles had first drank from the Los Angeles aqueduct and thought of Mulholland as a saint. In the book, Merry Perrys (Texans) and Zoners (Arizona residents) have a religious belief that water will come. Catherine Case who relies on hard statistics in contrast to Mulholland is not as beloved serving as a devil figure or water witch who destroys towns.

Central to the story is Catherine Case who can be thought as both the Virgin and La Santa Muerta, bringing life to Las Vegas by destroying the Carver City’s water processing facility. Following Cases’ orders, Angel passes by Las Vegas and the Colorado River surrounded by life symbolized by the lights and water and death as shown the destruction targets that are highlighted in Angel’s tactical visor feed. Similar to the current events of the documentary, Chasing Rivers, the Colorado River is diminished in the story. What had once been a sacred confluence worshiped by the Indian Tribes with near unlimited resources is now slow, but it still amazes Angel who states that Hindus worship rivers. Lake Mead is also referenced in the book, said to be at an all-time record low of 39% in the documentary but now empty with bath tub rings in the story. The world where Angel lives in is one where water is life and people are willing to kill because the well ran dry as best summarized by Ben Franklin.

Lucy’s story in the novel focuses on how journalism deals with the collapse of society. Whereas in Mulholland’s day people focused on life and the advancement of society with an endless supply construction and water projects for Los Angeles, Phoenix appears to be going the opposite direction and refereed to as “down the tubes”. Journalism which had once been print is dominated in the novel by a merger of online news outlets with Kindle/Washington Post, Google/The New York Times, and Hilton 6 an odd merger of Hilton and Motel 6. Behind these mergers might be themes of isolation and the dehumanization of people with only Lucy, a traditional journalist, developing attachments with the community around her.

Another character is Jaime, Lucy’s former coworker whose eyes are viciously gouged and is killed for his plan to sell senior water rights. The most apparent symbolic theme is he knew too much.

The novel borrows concepts from the movie Chinatown where a mysterious cabal maims one of the characters for being too nosy. There may also be a religious theme where he might be a Christ-like figure where his death represents a sacrifice because he tried to expose the truth about the corrupt water system. This ties into the theme of water as a sacred and life-giving resource, and those who try to manipulate it for personal gain are punished. The fact that Jaime is killed for trying to sell senior water rights, which are essentially ownership of water, highlights the power dynamic at play in the novel. Those who control the water hold immense power over the lives of others, and will stop at nothing to maintain that control. The novel is a glimpse both into our future and our history over the fight for water.

Works Cited:

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