

The Angels & Demons of *The Water Knife*

The *Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi opens with Angel, an enforcer for the Southern Nevada Authority (SNWA), looking down at a Cypress arcology, or Eden: a world where the water has run dry, and the West is now a desert. Using a maze of legal loopholes provided by Charles Braxton on behalf of his boss, Catherine Case, Angel allows Las Vegas to hoard water, providing it to those oblivious to his protection while destroying the water facilities of rival states. Although the idea of a violent future over water might seem unreal, the author stated in an interview that water scarcity is a reality, and the book is a possible "what-if" scenario where civility and peace have disappeared with water (Eveld).

The fictional world shares many historical similarities with the 1900-1920s, a period shaped by water wars with civil engineers such as William Mulholland, who was regarded as both an angel by his community and the devil incarnate by those in the Owens Valley ("Cadillac Desert"). Set in a not-too-distant future, the entire southwestern United States has devolved into a hellscape where the water has run dry, and city agents are now enforcers in a water cold war. Instead of litigating and buying water rights, along with building dams, states still litigate but also use Apache helicopters to blow up water processing plants of entire cities. Angel's reality is one in which water is life, and many will kill for the supply.

The novel ties water with the themes of faith and ignorance. In the residents of the Las Vegas arcology live isolated lives, ignorant of Angel's role in their water supply and oblivious to the situation of Zoners living in Phoenix who are without a guardian angel. The Merry Perrys are modeled after Rick Perry, who during the 2011 drought, organized prayer circles and called upon all to "pray for rain" (Fritz, "Texas Prayed for Drought-Busting Rain"). In Angel's desperate and violent world, hopeful characters still hold fast to dreams of water one day falling from the sky. The situation is similar to reality where the Colorado River provides drinking water to over 36 million people but has been over-allocated to the Southwest. Lake Mead, said to be at an all-time record low of 39%, is now empty with bathtub rings in our story ("Chasing Rivers"). Due to the aqueducts and reservoirs that bring water from rivers across hundreds of miles, those who live in the Southwest today have largely forgotten that the West is a desert ("Cadillac Desert").

The theme of angels and demons plays out in the novel through Angel and similarly in history through Los Angeles which shares similarities with the character in both name and characteristics. Los Angeles translated to "The City of Angels" has a history of destroying other cities such as Owens Valley to secure their water supply ("How Los Angeles Got Its Nickname"). Similarly in the novel, Angel, as the "water knife," uses any means necessary to secure water for Catherine Case, a woman symbolizing life or the Virgin Mary for Vegas and the skinny lady or La Santa Muerta for other cities. This theme of Santa Muerte, the patron saint of death, is used to add a sense of foreboding and danger to the story when Case orders Carver Cities' destruction. Case a fallen civil servant now engaged in acts of evil may even be tied to the biblical Lucifer, when she says the phrase "If they can't police their damn water mains, they can drink dust", being the equivalent to "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (Milton, Book 1, line 263). The Virgin theme is also present, as the city of Las Vegas is referred to as "Our Lady of the Desert," emphasizing the importance of water to the people who live in this harsh environment. Godwater, the belief that water is a divine gift, is also a recurring theme throughout the novel, highlighting the importance of water to the characters' lives.

This reverence for water also ties in with Lucy, a journalist who dreams of rain and refers to it as "Godwater". Similarly, a historical parallel occurred when the drought-stricken residents of Los Angeles first drank from the Los Angeles aqueduct and see William Mulholland as a saint. Angel, the

saboteur of water supplies, remains amazed by the Colorado river, reflecting that the Hindus had once worshipped rivers. In contrast, Catherine Case, regarded as a cold-blooded water witch, relies on hard statistics and espionage to destroy towns similar to her historical counterpart Pat Mulroy ("Killing Colorado"). Catherine remains a central figure to this story, bringing life to Las Vegas while destroying the Carver City's water processing facility. Following Case's orders, Angel passes through Las Vegas, a symbol of life with its glimmering lights and plentiful supply, and then takes aim at the Colorado River, lining up destruction targets in his tactical visor feed. What had once been a sacred confluence worshiped by Indian Tribes and a near unlimited resource is now a slow trickle.

Lucy's section in the novel also focuses on the theme of societal collapse and themes of death. Whereas in Mulholland's day people focused on life and the advancement of society with an endless supply of construction and water projects for Los Angeles, Phoenix appears to be going the opposite direction and referred 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. The mergers show that journalism itself is dying and being replaced with the equivalent of vultures that profit off collapse and death of communities. While Lucy clicks through her feed, her published story of collapse is outdone by one focusing on the violent destruction of the water facility. Lucy's world is one where the theme of death is a competition either to be inflicted or to be reported.

The violence continues in Jaime, Lucy's former coworker, whose eyes are viciously gouged and ultimately murdered for his plan to sell senior water rights. The story seems to borrow concepts from the movie "Chinatown," where a mysterious cabal maims one of the characters for being a little too nosy (Polanski and Towne). The theme of martyrs is also present in the story where characters suffer for their communities. Although no Saint Jesus and motivated by profit, Jaime's death represents a figure who knew the truth whose sacrifice pushed others such as Lucy to seek the truth. Another example is Simon Yu who nearly martyrs himself trying to protect the water facility. 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 is essentially ownership of water, highlights the power dynamic at play in the story. 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 reminder and warning about our history and a possible violent future over the fight for water.

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