

Los Angeles c. 2231

It's never too early to start planning for the big four-five-oh.

by MIKE WINDER

FOUNDED IN 1781, El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles del Río de Porciúncula—or just “Los Angeles” as the Anglo minority likes to call it—celebrates its 225th birthday on Sept. 4. Now don't make that face—225 isn't that old! Why, London is over 1,700 years old, and she's still got some spark left in her. In fact, compared

WALKING IN L.A.

For those of us who spend two hours a day commuting, the most pressing question about the future of Los Angeles is undoubtedly, “How's the traffic?”

In *Snow Crash*, Stephenson's Southern California “doesn't know whether to bustle or just strangle itself on the spot.” Congested freeways have been privatized by competing firms Fairlines, Inc.

“arsonist” caught your attention, then you've probably guessed this is no rosy vision of the future. In a Southern California where climate change has made water a scarcer commodity than gasoline, and civil society has been replaced with a predator/prey/scavenger nightmare, carbon emissions and long commutes are the least of people's concerns. Far from being congested, freeways have turned into efficient, albeit dangerous, means of getting around—by foot. “It's against the law in California to walk on the freeways, but the law is archaic,” Lauren explains, “Everyone ... walks on the freeways sooner or later.”

YOU LOAD 16 TONS...

Robots replacing human workers used to be a staple of dystopian science fiction, but nowadays people fear outsourcing more than Uniblab. Looking into the future, what types of jobs might Angelenos hold?

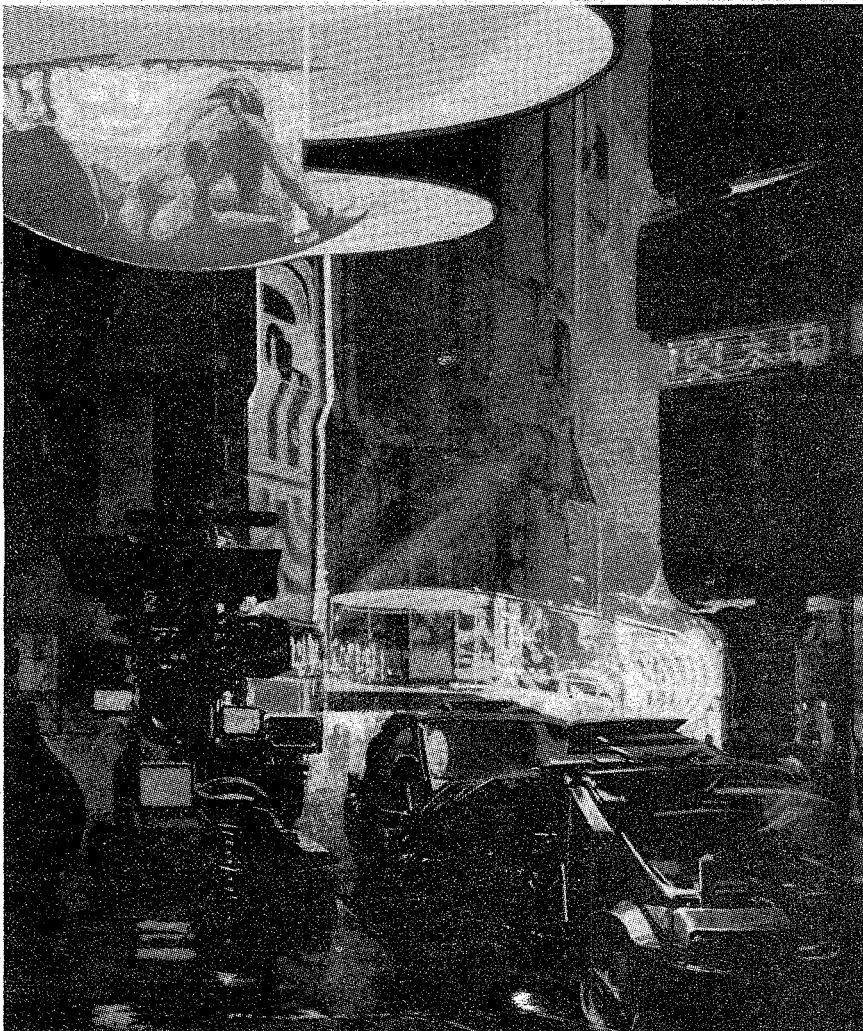
In William Gibson's *Virtual Light*, the answer is security, security, security. The novel begins in Los Angeles with protagonist

ing cars may consider a job as a gargoyle. Gargoyles are “human surveillance devices”—individuals who linger at concerts, parties and other social functions while scanning retinas, doing background checks on individuals, recording conversations, and uploading all the information to the enormous Central Intelligence Corporation database. Gargoyles “wear their computers on their bodies, broken up into separate modules that hang on the waist, on the back, on the headset ... [n]othing looks stupider.” If you never take off your Bluetooth headset, always post photos to flickr and videos to YouTube, and update your blog every 15 minutes, consider yourself qualified.

In *Parable of the Sower*, everyday living has become so dangerous that the unfortunate souls who need to leave their neighborhoods to work, only do so once a week. Biking to work has turned into “a kind of terrible gauntlet that has to be run over and over again.” As a cure worse than the disease, companies have begun buying cities and offering their

currency is the “Kongbuck”), White Columns (“very southern, traditional, one of the Apartheid enclaves”), and Nova Sicilia (run by Uncle Enzo, the figure behind CosaNostra Pizza). And since burbclaves are franchised, you'll always know what to expect when living in one, regardless of which state (or country) you're in. But where you live in the real world is inconsequential once you enter the digital realm of the Metaverse. In this futuristic Internet to the nth degree, people are represented by outrageous digital *avatars* (Stephenson's usage of the term in this novel became the de-facto way of describing digital self-representations) and spend much of their time on a swank stretch called The Street (imagine Times Square on steroids stretching into infinity). “Your avatar can look any way you want it to ... you can look like a gorilla or a dragon or a giant talking penis in the Metaverse. Spend five minutes walking down The Street and you will see all of these.”

Digital playgrounds couldn't be further from reality for the citizens in *Parable of the Sower*. The



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Delorians, TVs and hovering naked chicks? Now that's a future.

to other cities around the world, L.A. is still in the early stages of its evolution. Or its intelligent design. Whatever.

What might the future hold for Los Angeles? What can we expect in the next 225 years? Three science fiction novels from the '90s offer some intriguing and terrifying possibilities. *Snow Crash* (1992, Bantam Dell) by *Cryptonomicon* author Neal Stephenson offers a vision of a city split into franchised ethnic enclaves; the L.A. portion of *Virtual Light* (1993, Bantam Dell) by *Neuromancer* author and cyberpunk granddaddy William Gibson presents a high-tech society obsessed with security; and *Parable of the Sower* (1993, Aspect), by recently deceased *Wild Seed* author Octavia E. Butler, paints a portrait of hope against a brutal landscape of climate change and societal collapse. And for fun, let's see if we can look at these three novels without once mentioning *Blade Runner*. Oh, hell.

and Cruiseways, Inc. On these freeways, Hiro Protagonist (yup, he's the good guy), a brilliant computer hacker and master samurai swordsman, makes ends meet by delivering pizzas at 120 kilometers-per-hour for CosaNostra Pizza, a mafia-run pizza delivery franchise; and teenage messenger grrl Y.T. (short for Yours Truly) works for Radical Kourier Systems, whose daredevil employees ride high-tech skateboards and use magnetic harpoons on passing vehicles to get across town.

Those concerned that car culture promotes an unhealthy lifestyle may be comforted by Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, whose teenage protagonist Lauren Olimaya writes, “[E]xcept for arsonists and the rich, most people have given up buying gasoline. No one I know uses a gas-powered car, truck, or cycle. Vehicles like that are rusting in driveways and being cannibalized for metal and plastic.” If that pesky word

Berry Rydell working as a rentacop for IntenSecure, a Singapore-based company that provides armed-response security for gated communities. Low-paying rentacops are generally mentally unstable former police officers—the state of SoCal “had stricter regulations for who could or couldn't be a hairdresser”—in charge of protecting the wealthy. Though rentacops don't earn enough to live in “stealth houses”—posh subterranean bomb-shelter-like homes—or in well-to-do neighborhoods like the translucent green Century City II, they do get cool toys. Rydell drives a six-wheeled Hotspur Huszar, “an armored Land Rover that could do a hundred and forty on a straightaway,” and carries a “chunker,” an air-powered Israeli riot-control device that fires 1-inch cubes of recycled rubber that, “at close range could chew somebody's face off.” Badass as that may sound, that hardware is mere child's play compared to the LAPD's rocket-pod and chaingun-equipped flying gunships.

If shooting criminals at close range with recycled rubber doesn't sound like your dream job, *Snow Crash* offers a few alternative career paths. Those who prefer research and analysis to the adrenaline-fueled thrills of delivering pizzas or harpoon-

residents a secure living environment in exchange for their labor. To make matters worse, most residents of these company towns are barely able to pay their bills with their low wages, so they wind up in debt to the company. When the federal government makes it legal for companies to confiscate the children of bankrupt parents, debt slavery becomes a sanctioned way of life.

I WANT TO LIVE IN LOS ANGELES

OK, so working and commuting in Los Angeles will be a bitch. What else is new? What about our daily routines? What kind of quality of life can we expect?

If you think the housing situation is bad now, in *Snow Crash*, Hiro lives with a roommate in a “spacious” 20' by 30' U-Stor-It bin near the airport. “The room has a concrete slab floor, corrugated steel walls separating it from the neighboring units, and—this is the mark of distinction and luxury—a roll-up steel door” that offers them views of sunsets over LAX. In Stephenson's future, anybody who's anybody lives in a burbclave—city-states with their own constitution, border, laws and currency that cater to specific ethnicities or classes. Burbclaves include the Chinese-owned Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong (their

novel's disenfranchised population still relies on old-fashioned radios to get news from outside their neighborhood's walls. The fortress surrounding Lauren's 11-household community helps keep out the unwanted—street poor, gangs, arsonists, feral dogs, thieves, cannibals—but isn't failsafe, which requires neighbors to form armed community watch groups. For all its apocalyptic imagery, *Parable of the Sower* actually presents hope for the future, a notion manifested in Lauren's “hyperempathy.” A condition caused by her mother's drug abuse, “hyperempathy,” or “sharing,” allows Lauren to feel both the pain and pleasure of those around her. Despite her sensitivity to suffering, or perhaps because of it, Lauren is determined to survive, and she leads a group of individuals into safer northern territory while forming a new religion called Earth Seed, whose mantra is “God is Change.”

As for the future of the society she leaves behind, Lauren writes in her *Earth Seed: The Books of the Living*. “In order to rise from its own ashes, a phoenix first must burn.”

In other words, Angelenos, stock up on marshmallows—apocalyptic fires may hurt property values, but they'll be perfect for toasting s'mores. **LAA**