

“I Had a Farm”-Writer’s Commentary

Mike Resnick’s short story “Old MacDonald Had A Farm” has always been my most favourite read over my undergraduate years. So fond of it, I wrote two stories just based on this (another one is called “Feed, Pet, and Heaven” which is from the perspective of a butterball). If you haven’t read Resnick’s agonizing tale and mine, I am going to stop you here. Go read them! You will not regret it! Resnick’s can be a really extraordinary reading experience. Reading Resnick’s first or mine first doesn’t matter. Just Google it or ask me for a copy. You done? Good, we can continue.

“Old MacDonald Had A Farm” in my opinion is famous for, spoiler alert, featuring talking animals. The narrative follows a journalist’s journey in discovering that the latest artificial meat animal butterballs can talk. This particular writing is extremely devastating, so traumatized, I clearly remember skipping meat for two days. For an absolute meat addict, that is something. Henceforth it had always been my dream to write something based on this. The result is “I Had a Farm”, and I am exceedingly proud of the result. Having chosen the narrative of the missing character in Resnick’s version, Mr Caesar MacDonald, this can be treated as a prequel. And being a prequel, it sure does bound to many settings of the original one. And my biggest mission is to fill in some details not mentioned in the original. And the most significant question is, Why do the butterballs talk? Resnick didn’t specify an answer, but I assume that human genes are added to their DNA, but why? Explanation and details please refer to the story. In short, MacDonald needs livestock that can grow in a short period of time and not compete for food with humans. Therefore they shall be fed purely on chemicals. He ran out of animal feed too. However, his current experiment subjects cannot digest all the chemical-based feed. He later recognizes that humans have been the fitting lifeform who has been feeding on processed food consisting of chemicals. No kidding, I once watched one episode of *Food Insider* where the host Harry successfully made a Big Mac just using a table of laboratory chemicals. And that, is what this prequel achieved and I feel that I shall make it clear here.

Despite the original version included MacDonald in the title, he is seldom mentioned. As a prequel from his point of view, we sure need a background story for Caesar. Other than that he created the butterballs, we know that he has several PhDs (presumably in Genetics), had a wife, and he is a Colorado native. How exactly did he engineered the butterballs can be found in my own version of the story, basically modifying embryos with experiments. I am no scientist, so I may not be so precise on the process. Yet if a scientist can understand my work, then it works. A much more interesting clue is Caesar's origin. He is a Colorado native. I actually did Google a bit about the state. It takes research even in fictional works so that made-up details are convincing. The Spring Dance in the beginning of the story exists according to what I know. It goes like, loosely like how it is depicted in the tale. People grind jaw bones or chin bones against a log to replicate bear growl. If there are bones, there is meat. And that is the fitting starting point of MacDonald's story. Does his backstory work? Why don't you tell me. One thing for sure, is that I genuinely enjoyed the process.

Another must-speak-of character, is Cotter. MacDonald's assistant Judson Cotter in Resnick's story easily gives the impression of a high-class cold ass who has no trouble eating talking animals. If there is an antagonist in this tale, it would be him. He is exactly the character I must expand, and frankly I am really satisfied with my own version of Cotter. If there is one quote to conclude this man, that would be "Ethics is good, but that is after humans sustain basic life requirements". You may agree, Cotter is not wrong, he is not evil, he is just practical. One prominent conflict of this writing is whether or not we shall eat sentient beings for food, given that food is scarce and hunger is a worldwide problem. When complete food shortage is an issue, this man makes sense. Hate him or not, his motivation in developing butterballs is clear, he has seen horror (see quote "Mr MacDonald, have you ever witnessed people slowly dying out of hunger") and yearns to solve it. Cotter acknowledges the struggle and many times he brings up the need of feeding several billions people, that includes eating potentially intelligent beings. Feel like if he is a bit more extreme, he will eat human corpses. One contrasting character is Caesar's research assistant Grace Merce. Like her name, she is set to be good, merciful, compassionate. Even before butterballs can

speak, Grace doesn't mind playing with the animals and treating them well. In fact, originally there shall be a scene of Grace joining a meat tasting section and performing a list of actions to pay respect before eating the animal she raised. For some reason that part stays in conceptualization. After knowing these meat stocks can talk, she resigns. She and Cotter are supposed to be the two sides of an argument. Food, the need of human beings versus moral choices and animal rights. She is perhaps like most people, who values the lives of all lifeforms. And cannot bear the burden of consuming talking animals. Cotter is pragmatic, he is determined to solve real issues using whatever means. And Grace is sympathetic, once that animal can speak, she cannot face feeding on their meat. This character is, however, quite flawed in one way that she is not really empathetic. Yes, she refuses to eat butterballs, but she doesn't really show empathy or else she would have quit the whole research earlier knowing that all lives are actually sentient in their own ways. You may apply some Ecology Studies to argue whether Grace's interactions with the animals are showing empathy or just underlining kindness of average people. Cotter and Grace are, at least during conceptualization, the angel and devil of this story when MacDonald has to face doubts and conflicts.

Time as a setting actually tells you more than you think. In this case, that gives you an idea of how far the writer expects things to be. I took a few contemplations before deciding on the year. If food shortage becomes an issue that no easily accessible meat is available, this is severe. Originally I planned to set the date as 2100 or later. In the end, we all know, at least in the first parts, the year is 2040. That choice is for a really special reason, I want to bring characters from my other work *The Windownesian*. Formed by 8 chapters, each chapter focuses on a topic such as AI, aliens, migration, feminism, The Singularity and more. (And according to what people complain, "It's a fuking book"). Meander who interviewed Caesar is from that fictional work. That work is set in 2027, and here we see the characters grown up and have kids. Jonathan and Meander's kids are instrumental in MacDonald's ideas, inspiring him to add human genes into the butterball DNA. And setting the year to be THAT close doesn't sound too off for me. Remember, this is a tale about mass producing meat when none is available. The shortage of food is caused by climate change, that brings

us to the next topic. Title this paragraph as “Climate Issue in Fictional Works”. Many predict that by the year of 2035, the polar regions will completely melt. The impact as mentioned between the lines, now that more water is in the ocean, the sea becomes less salty and flows faster, thus causing more extreme weather, is thermohaline circulation. Typhoons and storms are going to be increasingly frequent and stronger because of that. Thermohaline circulation is real, according to what I have learnt. Let’s say extreme climates devastate crop and meat production, then food becomes hard to get due to the loss of supply. And adding the factor that humans consume and waste a lot of food daily, causing complete food shortage in ten years is not a crazy idea. Still not convinced? Climate change is a hot topic starting from several years ago. Recently (it is now December 2021, so actually no further than a few weeks ago), world leaders had just had a meeting about climate change in Glasgow. In 2021 alone, the Hong Kong Observatory issued over 80 “very hot weather warnings”, we had one typhoon no.8 on Saturday 9th October and another following closely on Tuesday. And by the time I am writing this commentary, it is freezing cold and that is just the beginning of December. By the time of MacDonald’s story, things would only get worse. You know schisse is real when you spot words such as “Typhoon Signal No.12” and “Amazon Desert”. Yes, I know world leaders are working on carbon emission but I doubt the effectiveness. Now, not that I don’t trust the government, but any issue we face involves way too many stakeholders and it is close to impossible to mediate between different views and needs. About climate change, that is even more complicated considering not just the environmentalists, but also third world nations, the economy and the military. I am not naive, I don’t believe in a solution to satisfy everyone. Countering climate change is tough. Back to the story, we see that climate change is an issue. Although I didn’t specify, the cause is overuse of human technology. Technology is a double-bladed sword, it helps us a lot, and it causes problems. The significant issue here is food shortage caused by extreme climate. And MacDonald is solving the problem with biotechnology of genetics. The thing is, when setting a hazardous world in a year this close, what I fear like most dystopian writers is that, fiction will be closer than reality.

Okay, climate change is a really heavy issue, let's talk something relaxing: easter eggs. Easter eggs and references in a work can be difficult to spot the first time around, you need to ask the writer. Start with *The Windownesian*. We know that Meander and Jonathan from that series are here. This adds a few things to these two characters as well. First, the last time we met them they were university students. Now they have kids, Muse and Minerva. Muse is kind of the Greek idea of inspiration, thus the "call upon muse", MUSic, MUSEum things. Minerva is the Roman name of Greek Goddess of War and Wisdom Athena. Athena is also a prominent character in *The Windownesian*, she is Jonathan's friend Zedekiah's girlfriend. Her family is full of gods too. The mother is Juno, Roman name for Hera. Aunt Juno calls her husband "Jup" which can be Jupiter, Roman name for Zeus, god of all gods. Her older brother is Apollo and her younger brother is Bacchus. The family's interaction is truly enjoyable, read chapter 5 and 6 to find out. Second is that, Jonathan ends up to be the one taking care of the children when Meander has her own broadcast. Which answers the question in *The Windownesian* chapter 6 about feminism when Elnaz asks them about who is in charge of the kids. We also see Meander finally achieving her dream from being a part-time host to being the director of a programme. Also, these two are not in Hong Kong now, which echoes with chapter 4 "As the Tree Rooted" about migration. Other characters are also mentioned or appeared such as Professor Dawn Wong who is an important scholar in the series, Dr Albert Epoch and the human-AI interface he created named Alex McSheen, as well as Lamar Zu, the Neuron scientist in chapter 7. Now that these characters are here, one detail has to be added. Since these teens had butterballs as midnight snacks and dinner in chapter 1, that established the connection between my two works. In this story, butterballs had been cloned and sold as meat before, but cloning ended up exhausting the source DNA and they stopped there. One detail is also affected by another based-on writing of mine. Resnick writes that the whole animal can be consumed, yet in "Feed, Pet, and Heaven", their lungs, stomach and livers are disposed, claiming that they are too toxic to eat. This is also mentioned in this story when Cotter hosts the tasting section. Realistically, they consume chemicals, so I guess their stomach to digest and liver to clean things will be less desirable to eat. Also, who eats lungs anyway. Caesar's dinner "Impossible Meat"

actually exists in the real world. It is priced at around 60 HK dollars in park'n'shop or Taste supermarkets. Warn you, a waste of money. It is way too chemically-seasoned. It tastes like an awful version of that "Spiced Beef" snack packaged in a yellow and red bag. It is also way too oily and tender to be meat. It also chews like foam. What "Impossible Meat", it is impossible to eat. If you really want to try one, I am not going to stop you from suffering. Moving on. I don't know if you have noticed, but the location of Caesar's farm and where exactly is Caesar is never specified. But hey, +64 telephone code, driver's seat on the right, Taranaki Savings Bank, I have been dropping hints like crazy. Oh, I cameo as myself too as a scholar. While the whole presentation is made up and there is no *The Claws of Men*. My other paper "Plants Have Hearts: Intersecting Biosemiotics, Translation Studies and Chinese Poem" however exists. It is my term paper for the Eng 409 Interdisciplinary Studies course. After the semester, I was too fed up with being bound to the word count, so I expanded and translated it. Finally, a huge source of reference is Star Wars. I particularly grew with the Prequels and The Clone Wars, so expect to see a few easter eggs. When Timothy introduces himself in the conference, he says "I am just a simple scholar, trying to write my way in the academic world", that is a quote "I'm just a simple man trying to make my way in the universe" when Jango Fett meets Obiwan Kenobi on Kamino. When Cotter argues with MacDonald about the fact that the butterballs talk, he screams "The ability to speak doesn't make them intelligent", which is what Qui-Gon Jinn says to Jar Jar Binks but changing "them" to "you" after Jar Jar says "but mesa can speak". This batch of butterballs which talk is batch 214, which is another reference. If the numbers represent the sequence of the alphabets, 214 means bad, batch 214 means Bad Batch, hence the latest Star Wars animated series *The Bad Batch*. Do these have to mean something? Why do they have to, they are just for fun. The clones in Star Wars however, deserve some attention. Depends on how you view it, Star Wars is loosely science fiction featuring all the spaceships and gadgets. The clones, however, is what I will boast as science fiction. Sci-fi can be anything involving science and technology. Good sci-fi in advance, makes technology matters to the storytelling. Computers don't just exist, the internet blurs the definition of what is real and what is virtual and therefore *The Matrix* is amazing. Time travel is not just a

simple plot device but it means something to the characters. Now the clones. Cloning is a biotechnology manipulating lifeforms using scientific means. In this particular setting, clone troopers are bred from the same template for war. Additionally, in their birth process, an inhibitor chip is added to make them execute Order 66 and kill Jedi. Sith's grand plan. These are all valid science and technology. Yet Star Wars does more than that. To clones, this matters to their own story. For a clone, it matters to show individuality in an army where everyone looks like you and sounds like you. *The Clone Wars* and now *The Bad Batch* follows some clone troopers and enrich them as characters bred in a lab. It is science, but it is also creative discussions of one's uniqueness and uniformity. Please, watch the TV shows when you have time. I personally recommend *The Clone Wars* Season 4 Episode 7 to 10 known as The Umbara Arc, full of stunning intense firefight, arguments of complying with superiors even when knowing that they can be wrong, moral choices of a lab-bred being, pawns take king...everything a Star Wars fan could wish for. Furthermore, watch Season 7 episodes 1-4 and 9-12. Search for them online, they are fun to watch.

Above are what I wish to explain as an author of this work, at least for now. To me, creative writing is truly what I enjoy most. Yes, these are all made up. But between the lines we can freely reflect on some theories, and contribute our own input. If you feel that this story is quite academic, it is. And heck, if you see university conferences, descriptive interviews, intense reflections, it is academic. Overtly I am narrating as Caesar MacDonald. Subtly, I am debating over biotechnology, arguing whether to satisfy human's appetite or free animals from being meat, and many more. Don't get me wrong, it is natural for us to feed on animals. Just that mass-producing life forms that are somewhat sentient as meat can be controversial. True, we need to feed the many mouths the Earth has. But think again, from an ecological point of view, do humans actually matter that much? Or all are just anthropocentric? These issues are very vivid in many places. I write, not only because I enjoy it. Also because I want to voice out my views on certain issues. Afterall, I am an English Major. We think difference differently.

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