



Tropic of Kansas

Christopher Brown

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The United States of America is no more. Broken into warring territories, its center has become a wasteland DMZ known as “the Tropic of Kansas.” Though this gaping geographic hole has no clear boundaries, everyone knows it's out there—that once-bountiful part of the heartland, broken by greed and exploitation, where neglect now breeds unrest. Two travelers appear in this arid American wilderness: Sig, the fugitive orphan of political dissidents, and his foster sister Tania, a government investigator whose search for Sig leads her into her own past—and towards an unexpected future.

Sig promised those he loves that he would make it to the revolutionary redoubt of occupied New Orleans. But first he must survive the wild edgelands of a barren mid-America policed by citizen militias and autonomous drones, where one wrong move can mean capture . . . or death. One step behind, undercover in the underground, is Tania. Her infiltration of clandestine networks made of old technology and new politics soon transforms her into the hunted one, and gives her a shot at being the agent of real change—if she is willing to give up the explosive government secrets she has sworn to protect.

As brother and sister traverse these vast and dangerous badlands, their paths will eventually intersect on the front lines of a revolution whose fuse they are about to light.

Tropic of Kansas Details

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Author : Christopher Brown

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From Reader Review Tropic of Kansas for online ebook

Lou says

Sig (white, long straight hair, crazy green eyes)

Tania (black, Sig's foster sister)

Kansas

New Orleans

Cedar Rapids

Midwest

Patriot Militias

Incursions of Militiamen

Insurgents

Bandits

TAZ

Colonisations

Deluges

Guns

Hawk-Eye Self Defence Militia

Maxine Price author/revolutionary/separatist

Rogue corporate coup

Political movements

Conspiracies

Theories

Betterment of life

Drones

A midwestern odyssey of sorts with Tania and Sig on the road in ways, one on trail of the other, the other a most wanted man, one of skill and manoeuvrability and trained to defend and attack, an America gone topsy turvy in a haunting and alarming read.

The author has done a great job at reporting on a world that just one does not quite want and would hope is not something that may read as historical fiction in the future.

He takes you through a land where there is anarchy and fight for power between people with guns and varying agendas in wanting a different America.

Guns and militia on land and Drones in the skies terrify and policing, shortages of all kinds of essentials, and reader will be hooked in reading with the element of hope through to a silent and more free and peaceful America ultimately.

There is the thrill and dystopian sense of place, imaginative writing and the prose has brevity and some good craft in descriptiveness keeping you reading with some thinking also, a thinking thriller.

Almost a reading I could treat as an addition to the Road by Cormac McCarthy as the other side of the fence, tale of the other citizens the world the realm of that we didn't see, masterly envisioned, stark and haunting but beauty with the human struggle intertwined with hope at hand and some heart.

<http://more2read.com/review/tropic-kansas-christopher-brown/>

Steve DuBois says

War-porn that will appeal mainly (possibly exclusively) to dedicated progressives. Imaginative and well-researched, with an interesting alt-historical twist. But the plot is diffuse to the point of anarchy, and the main protagonist's utter indestructibility robs the action of any meaningful weight; for me, it was less a novel than a video game I was watching someone else play.

Bill says

This is an examination of what it could be like aa couple of decades post-Trump, if Liberals do not gain power. It is mostly about civil collapse and politics, but the effects of climate change are mostly implied. Brown's take on a dystopic USA future is rational and possible. He did not examine effects of Theocracy, but did of Plutocracy and Fascism.

The journey is interesting. I was rather disappointed by the too quick ending and victory of the protagonists. Power to the People! An ending left up to the reader would have made it better in some ways.

Well written, a quick and easy read: 7 of 10 stars

Mike says

Parts of this book were brilliant. A great examination of politics. But the meandering narrative does this book no favors.

Tate says

Dark and violent, but definitely a story for our era.

I've been having a lot of trouble reading books like this--dystopic and fascist--because of the current administration in the United States. However, for some reason, I was able to get into this one and go the distance. I suspect that Brown's writing style had something to do with it. It's pretty brutal in places, though, so I'm not sure I would recommend it to anyone. Read at your own discretion.

Charlie - A Reading Machine says

Overall a well written novel with engaging characters and an eerily plausible dystopian setting. I honestly think this is not far off the future we'll see with the current asshats in charge. Corporations are given rights human beings are not in the name of making a profit and keeping enough people stupid/poor/alienated/full of seething hatred that they live their lives as angry trolls and blame their neighbour for their problems instead of the people in charge.

3.5/5

Jennifer says

I like a good dystopian novel, and this one sounded so promising. It was good until it wasn't; about 2/3 of the way through, I lost interest and gave up. The story just didn't seem to be going anywhere; the characters got in a bind, then they escaped. Then they got captured, and then they escaped. Over and over and over again.....

Adam Alliss says

Clever and Intelligent Alt Future Road Trip

From the clever title to the swiftly intelligent writing and sympathetic characters, it was clear to me that I had found a special piece of literature in 'Tropic of Kansas'.

The immediate impulse, even before starting the book and based on the synopsis alone, was to draw comparisons to current events and put myself in that head space. Instead, when I was introduced to one of the protagonists, Sig, I immediately felt like I was fifteen again and reading Kerouac. At that age, when confronted by those who lived a bohemian ideal, the whole thing felt subversive to me and in fact, compelled me to have my own 'On The Road' experiences. Now, at Forty-One, and reading an entirely different book, I was filled up with that same yearning to subvert the course of the norm. I wanted to hit the road again. To escape the responsibilities of modern life and try and exist beyond societal expectations.

It was a feeling that stuck with me the whole way through the novel. Initially, there isn't much to draw the free and wild Sig and his more conservative foster sibling, Tania, together, except a loose, familial bond. But once you begin to recognise that both characters long for the same thing, just from opposite sides of the fence, then you really get to the heart of things. Both are prisoners, to some degree, of a shared history, and both long to escape. But of course, this is the future, and in the future, there never truly is an escape.

Brown's speculation is not so much future as alternate future based on alternate past, although to be honest, it's not much different than the one we live in now. The weird mesh of celebrity propaganda, constant surveillance, ecological terrorism and uneasy foreign policy is just as current as it is in our own timeline. It's interesting to see the author's take on it and I was fascinated by his use of the written word to crystal ball things and put a new spin on past and present problems.

Everything fits well from a world-building sense, but never occludes the plight of the protagonists, which is sometimes an easy thing in novels of this caliber. Never once was I left feeling disassociated with what either Sig or Tania were attempting to achieve. That makes everything so much more heightened and believable and the pay-off for the reader is worthwhile. The ending left me feeling hopeful, which is a rare and valuable achievement with the current state of play at home and abroad.

Ultimately, I'll return to my modern day life of spreadsheets, reports, meetings, scrolling through feeds, eating and drinking too much and exercising not enough. The difference is that now, I have had time out from the humdrum by reading this book. The journey amongst the pages of Tropic of Kansas allowed me to escape on a road trip of invention that catered to my rebellious side, if just for a little while.

Austin Bates says

I don't get it.

Let's open with that. I don't get what this book was striving to be. There doesn't appear to be any specific guiding theme, any stylistic aspiration, any particular mood that was being projected. Ostensibly, this tells the story of an America that has fallen under dictatorial control by a pseudo-President of narcissistic leanings. So, as one can imagine, most readers will think, especially since this was published in 2017, that this is a side-long commentary on Trump ... but it's not even that either. In fact, the President / "TV Tyrant" (as a Canadian border-guard jokingly calls him in the first chapter) features in this book for approximately half a chapter. Further, his reputation as a mean dude is mostly just heavily implied (other than through one indirect cataclysmic event very early on).

Back to the point: this novel has no idea what it wants to be, and this is most thoroughly demonstrated through one of the worst examples of "telling" instead of "showing" the reader what is happening, that I've ever come across. If I were to ballpark it, I'd say maybe 85% of this novel is a summary of something that happened, past tense, rather than an "in-the-moment" accounting. At first, this was passable. Okay, story needs to move forward a little faster than X scenario would allow for. Oh, and here it's used to cover an interim in which characters are traveling long-distance. But eventually this got so bad that there were multiple chapters of just a half-dozen paragraphs, and sometimes these chapters would occur consecutively. There were probably at least a dozen chapters that were no more detailed than an "Breaking News" push alert.

Let's say we discount this: each author has their own style, and maybe you're the kind of reader that likes a brisk read that doesn't get bogged down in long conversations and sensory details. It's still a problem. Oftentimes the author will decide to have a scene of action (there's a lot of violence in this book, BTW), and so we have people shooting, or fighting, or running, and the author will describe in detail part of this action, giving a blow-by-blow accounting, and then just skip to five minutes later ... or in the case that really broke the book for me and made me ask for a refund, days later. In the scene in question, a shootout starts, people are running, it's intense. Another character runs for the roof, sees an autonomous helicopter drone, jumps on it ... and then literally it says something like this: "The chopper was full of fuel. The apartment fire lasted for a day." END CHAPTER, jump forward to days later, and all of the characters in that scene are scattered and in completely different places. What? What just happened? Did ... did I get a copy missing a few chapters? Did I get a glitched out Kindle copy that deleted every fourth or fifth chapter or something? Is this the first draft of this novel that was uploaded?

This brings me back to the beginning of this review: this novel has no idea what it is trying to be. Is it a pseudo-political action thriller? Nope, because see above, and most action scenes are a few paragraphs at best, patchy and confusing as all hell at worst. Is it an alternate history dark commentary on America? Maybe, but the author never actually stops to clearly explain where events in this book diverge from real American history. The best I got was that things went sour when, during the attempted assassination on Ronald Reagan in the 80s, he actually died (instead of living), which ... something something political stuff didn't happen something something endless war. And that's the other problem: you kind of have to be both of a certain minimum age to understand the unspecified allusions and implications in this novel, and/or be a political history buff. Is this a sci-fi? There sure are a lot of semi-autonomous and even fully autonomous robots in this book, which plays as a big non sequitor at one point because the novel seems to veer from

being about constant civil unrest and light guerilla mischievousness to "HERE'S A BIG ROBOT MOOSE / HORSE THING THAT ACTS LIKE A GIANT CAT" (that is the theme of literally one whole chapter in this book, not a joke). The talk of drones was one thing; we have those right now, I get it. But even though this novel ostensibly takes place in a bizarro-world version of present day, somehow there are super advanced killing machines everywhere. Is this book about humans and their impact on the environment? Could be. The author keeps bringing up commentary about how unrestrained bio-engineering lead to some non-specific collapse of the farming industry that also somehow poisoned the environment and made most of the Midwest hostile to agriculture (best I could tell this was a vague copy-paste of a unsupported doom's day theory that's been floating around for decades). What this has to do with literally ANY other part of this novel is anyone's guess, but my theory is that this author had been wanting to write this book since the 1980s (when all of the environmental and political stuff was really churning), and sat on it for 30 years before writing it with no effort to pull in the current state of the world (other than a few mandatory callouts and the whole running bit of drones being used in war).

As we get through the guts of the novel and enter the final 10%, the author then decides to just phone it in and literally none of the chapters that follow, except for the very brief and oddly disconnected epilogue and one chapter, are anything more than a history book recounting of events. Which is really bizarre and made worse by the fact that the first two-thirds of this novel are ostensibly about a disgraced government agent being plied to track down her one-time adopted brother turned nomadic trouble-maker, and yet the final bit of the novel concludes with a pass-over civil war spanning what sounds like whole months of action.

Finally, the characterizations in this novel, as you can probably guess, are quite lacking too. There is exactly one person that receives anything more than a glancing physical description, and even then her arc is really not complete or clear. With no surprises of any kind, she turns out to be the "unenthusiastic government goon who jumps to the other side as soon as she begins talking to any of the bad guys" cliché. The other primary protagonist is about as fleshed out as a zombie. I know he had long hair, was of mixed race, and was thin. Beyond that, he had no personality of any kind, fewer lines than most of the throwaway characters that come later, and no clear motivations or direction and certainly nothing resembling a developmental arc. This is a story that really cannot find much of a reason to get you to care about anyone or anything. Sure, there's the tingling empathy that comes from the conflict of someone abandoning all that they know to pursue a dangerous and uncertain future, there's the threats of death that visit many characters, and there's that sense of inherent patriotism stirred up when reading a story of "America's Evil Twin". But beyond that, I kept confusing people's names, and the few characters that seemed interesting would appear, play one brief role, disappear for a long time, and then conveniently reappear when needed with no explanation of how they just happened to show up at a much later time and much more distant place.

To end this review bluntly: this is a first draft of what could have been a really interesting dystopian thriller novel. This was a decent idea that was really badly executed. This is the outline of a movie plot with none of the scenes written out. This should not have been published in its current state. I give the book 2 stars just because the ideas were solid; there was something promising under all of the junk. And occasionally the author would lapse into almost poetic scene descriptions and characterizations. Plus, any book that would rate 1 star is probably not a book I would even finish anyway. So, 2 stars it is.

Paul says

Actual rating: 3.5 stars.

Most dystopias exist in a near future, extrapolated from current events. Christopher Brown's takes place in the present, the extrapolation point the assassination of President Reagan in the 1980s. In the assassination's wake, Alexander Haig takes over, awarding himself a sixth star (a nice touch) and ushering in an era of powerful and autocratic governments headed by current and former military leaders. In other words, the events in "Tropic of Kansas" unfold in an alternate timeline, different from our own but plausible.

In Brown's timeline, the civil and governmental structures of America have broken down. Wide swathes of flyover country, still nominally states, are under the control of corporations, which have denuded the land and destroyed the rivers and lakes. Policing in the part of the midwest popularly called the Tropic of Kansas is performed by gang-like civilian militias. The power of the federal government manifests itself in tight control over the media and internet, political dissent, and population movement. And prisons.

The novel's two main characters are, in a way, siblings: Sig, once the white foster child of a black family, now a feral teenager on the run in the Tropic; Tania, his older foster sister, now an FBI agent in Washington DC, in trouble with fascist agents of the current all-powerful president. Tania, threatened with persecution for subversive activities, agrees to go undercover in the Tropic in order to get the goods on revolutionaries who have figured out how to communicate and organize by using obsolete radio and television technology. Sig has become involved the revolutionary movement, and Tania, working underground by posing as a friend of the revolution, increasingly focuses her efforts on finding him.

My trouble with the novel is the revolution. The dystopia, as mentioned, is grounded and plausible, real and chilling. Sig and Tania, at least in earlier chapters, are well-developed characters. Their adventures, as Sig escapes from one trap after another and Tania penetrates deeper into the underground, are tense and exciting.

Then, somehow, the taciturn loner Sig becomes one of the leaders of the revolution and begins spouting hippie dippy mystic crystal revelation buzzword bullshit (I almost threw my Kindle across the room when he started talking about "crowdsourcing the revolution"), and credibility goes poof. At least Tania's character remains consistent, and thank goodness, because Sig and his fellow revolutionaries go off the charts.

Which is to say I loved the book until the final chapters, when I quit believing Christopher Brown's scenario. My overall impression? A fast, exciting read with a muddled and unclear end.

Christopher Shawn says

In the not-too-distant future, the United States is no more. Warring factions have divided up the country, and what's left of the federal government holds absolute control over those it still governs. The Constitution has been suspended, and "permanent emergency" powers have given the President, a former television star, dictator-like status.

This all seemed so far-fetched not so long ago.

Militias have taken control of large swaths of land, and operate their own brutal prisons, with only the faintest whiff of government oversight. An underground resistance is growing, using smuggled information, weapons, and currency as a means to restore civilization to the former America.

A wild-eyed young man, his sister, and the idealists they meet along the way set off in this incredible adventure full of action, intrigue, and the feeling that it may not be all that "science fiction" in the very near

future.

Robert August says

This story exists within a dystopian future America, where the central portion of the country is a political and economic wasteland known as the Tropic of Kansas. The story follows Sig and his foster sister Tania in separate narratives through this harrowing tale of a broken America.

Brown paints the picture of this grim future with unrelenting realism. It is a cruel world that feels like the natural evolution of today's vitriolic political climate. Perhaps because of this, it can be a hard story to read sometimes; the sense that this might be the world our children inherit is depressing, and always close to the surface of the narrative. It is a testament to Brown's skill as a writer that the story pulls you onward despite this grim milieu. There is no doubt after only a few paragraphs that you are in the hands of a master storyteller.

Sig is a feral youth on the outside of the law. At the story outset he is deported from a Canada standing apart from the chaos in America, and is delivered into a detention center. He escapes and heads south, fighting and fleeing the whole way. Through his eyes we encounter the desperation and ugliness of the dispossessed people on the fringe of this dystopia. Tania, on the other hand, begins the tale as a government investigator, but with no illusions about the compromised nature of the politicians she serves under. As her story progresses, she learns more and more of the ugly innards of this system, and finds herself increasingly ostracized.

As you might guess, the narrative threads of Sig and Tania eventually come together. I won't add any plot spoilers as to how this all wraps up, but I will say that there is no neat and tidy happy ending. In fact, such an ending would be a poor fit for this tale. This is a clear cautionary tale that has no room for joy. This might be a novel to avoid if you're prone to depression; however, if you can handle the bleak possibilities of this possible future, you'll be treated to a gripping tale by a skilled writer.

Jason Pettus says

As I've been regularly discussing here at Goodreads this year, I'm going through a bit of an existential crisis as a reader in 2018; namely, now that I'm no longer professionally reviewing 200 contemporary novels a year for the CCLaP website, for the first time in a decade, I've found my tolerance for contemporary novels to be suddenly dropping like a brick in a lake, and am finding it impossible to read any this year that don't depressingly remind me of a hundred contemporary novels I've already read that are almost exactly like it. Christopher Brown's *Tropic of Kansas* is a great example, an "American Wasteland" style post-apocalyptic novel that I picked up specifically because of Cory Doctorow's effusive praise of it over at BoingBoing.net.

And while it certainly hits all the right beats that you would expect from such a story, the problem is that this is all it is, essentially a checklist of American Wasteland story beats that Brown seems to be moving through like a shopping list. Charismatic fascist President? Check! Abandoned shopping malls turned into Guantanamo-style military prisons? Check! Radioactive section of the American Midwest that has turned into a lawless Mad-Max-style slayground? *Check check check!* Is it unfair to complain about what is ultimately a well-written book, simply because it reminds me as a well-read fan of a dozen other novels

covering almost exactly the same ground? Well, yes and no; for on the one hand, those who haven't read as many American Wasteland-style novels as me will undoubtedly like this a lot more than I did, but on the other hand, are we really doing anyone any favors when the only way we can praise a book is by saying, "It's great if you're never read a single other book even remotely like it?" I'll leave the philosophical arguments to others, now that I'm taking a break from being a professional book reviewer myself; but certainly this novel continues what is starting to become a long streak of books I was disappointed by in 2018, for no other reason than for feeling so completely, heartbreakingly unnecessary.

Lace says

This was a fun read for me. I am really into dystopian novels, so this one was perfect for me. The characters were well developed and the plot moves along nicely. I highly recommend this book.

Izaak GHS2020 says

A political satire and an excellent dystopian novel, Tropic of Kansas follows the story of Sig and Tania, who in order to survive must navigate a broken America, filled with lawless militias, corrupt justice systems, and a totalitarian leader who controls everything from the media to citizens rights. through the main characters experiences social topics that are very pertinent in today's world are touched upon. Things such as race, class, and religions are frequently brought up. political topics that parallel the issues we face in the real world such as consumerism and environmental sustainability are also touched upon. A must read for those who are into more serious literature and politics.
