

Q1: What were your goals in writing Puerto Paz?

A1: To me, Puerto Paz is the rational moderationist's response to Ayn Rand's libertarian-centric novels. My hope is that readers find Puerto Paz enjoyable regardless of whether it is the political background story, or the interpersonal relationship foreground story that speaks to them.

A1: I wanted to write two overlapping stories:

- 1. The background story being a satirical look at what would happen to the USA if the political climate became so contentious that the four main political factions decided to split the USA into two countries. The obvious split is between liberal and conservative, so in the Puerto Paz story I had the former USA partition east and west, with the Mississippi River as the dividing line between the liberal country of Western United States, and the conservative country of Eastern United States. Less obvious is that liberal and conservative ideologies are further split into factions that favor either order (rules) or freedom, and that the only thing holding the order and freedom factions together in modern USA is the winner-takes-all, plurality election system, that naturally results in a duopoly (Democrats and Republicans). My thesis is that if any of these four philosophies were to take control and become extreme, they would lead to stagnation and a semi-dystopian culture.*
- 2. I wanted to deliver the background story, which on its own may a bit heavy and cerebral, via a lighter and more emotion-driven foreground story.*
- 3. The foreground story being the coming-of-age road trip story of the main character, Marcus Coleman, and his best friend, Dylan. It is about finding oneself, and interpersonal relationships between young men. Marcus is black. Dylan is white. The two boys are polar opposites in terms of personalities, which creates conflict that rises the farther they travel. Their home culture beat an unhealthy sense of loyalty into them, but as they discover themselves and what they want from a new home, they find themselves testing the limits of their loyalty to each other.*
- 4. The boys come from the order-conservative region of the former USA. Neither of them can stand their home culture, so they run away from home, which sets them on a road trip through the other extremist cultures, thus revealing the backstory.*

Q2: What themes are expressed in Puerto Paz?

A2: In the background political satire or dystopian/utopian story:

- 1. That extremism leads to stagnation of economy and to unhealthy cultures. Moderation (of quantity, not of quality) and balance are needed to develop a healthy culture.*
- 2. That the world is not black and white, despite human nature to force it into simplistic categories. Most things are shades of gray with nuances and exceptions to the rule.*
- 3. A healthy society needs a properly functioning democracy (with ranked-choice voting, election days made holidays, and a system where the government, corporations, and citizens all serve as checks and balances against one another) and "Symbiotic Capitalism" that advocates for collaboration over competition (but doesn't eliminate competition entirely), and more fairly distributes money.*

A2: In the foreground coming-of-age story:

- 1. The limitations of loyalty. How being loyal can be harmful if taken too far.*
- 2. Self-discovery and staying true to oneself.*

Puerto Paz Q&A with author Jefferey J. Reese

3. *How culture influences personal development and choices.*
4. *Racism. Religion. Tribalism. You know, the easy, light topics.*

Q3: What books do you consider most similar to Puerto Paz?

A3: *Probably "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn", except that "Puerto Paz" is written with an adult audience in mind. Both are essentially road trip stories, that involve naïve main characters who travel through different cultures to reveal the flaws of those cultures. "Gulliver's Travels" might be another similar story, except that "Puerto Paz" is fully grounded in reality, rather than science fiction.*

Q4: Did the story's themes influence your writing?

A4: *Yes. One of the major themes was that moderation leads to healthiness. As a result, I wanted to make my writing style balanced between extremes. More descriptive and verbose than Hemingway's minimalist style, but less flowery and focused on small details than Atwood. There is even an Easter-egg relating to the naming of characters that is tied into that theme, hidden in the story.*

Q5: What is the history of the novel?

A5: *I had the initial ideas for the book in late high school, after reading Orwell's "1984" and Huxley's "Brave New World", circa 1992. The idea of the semi-utopian country having begun with a virtual reality computer game was definitely influenced by the 1990s computer game "SIM City". I have computer files from the mid-1990s with outlines of story ideas, made using the now-defunct word processing software "Word Perfect". The book that really set me on the trajectory I ended up on was a non-fiction political book by Lawrence Chickering called "Beyond Left and Right". That was where I got the ideas regarding four main schools of political ideologies: Order Conservative, Freedom Conservative (libertarian), Order Liberal, and Freedom Liberal (hippies).*

A5: *In circa 2000 or 2001 I sat down and wrote a long prologue (that I later mostly scrapped, but sprinkled the prologue information into the story at various points) and the first couple of chapters. I was in my mid-twenties, still very early in my professional career as an engineer. I think I didn't go further with the story because at that point in my life I felt a sense of not having enough life experience to really do this story justice.*

A5: *In 2015 I was suffering from a foot injury and unable to train for triathlons. My mother-in-law came to stay at our house for her second two-week stay of the year. I'm not good at sharing my space for more than two or three days, and I'm rather introverted, and a month of having to share my space with her in a one-year period led me to hide in my home office a lot. While there, I rediscovered the ideas that had been bouncing around in my mind for twenty-five years or so, and started writing the story in earnest. The first draft was written within one year. It was the review and rewriting process, with Beta readers, then a professional developmental/line editor, then a copy editor, that took years. It was difficult to find time while working a full-time, demanding job as a structural engineer.*

Q6: Are you as centrist and moderate as a Puerto Pazian?

A6: *No. I am liberal. Always have been. But I do find some attitudes and behaviors of my fellow liberals very annoying. I often find myself criticizing fellow liberals more harshly than conservatives, and I do believe though, that liberalism taken to too far of an extreme can be a bad thing. Writing this novel may have pulled me slightly more toward center though.*

Q7: One of the goals of the main character, Marcus, throughout the story is to swim in the ocean. Are you an avid swimmer?

A7: Yes. I've been on youth swim teams, adult Master's Swim teams, and done triathlons and other open-water swimming events. I was also a lifeguard in my late teens. Olympic swimming is my favorite sporting event to watch. The increase in shark sightings and attacks off the coast of Massachusetts has been freaking me out in recent years though, so I haven't been in the ocean as often. I suspect that I'm more likely to die from drowning due to a panic attack induced by a piece of seaweed brushing against me and making me think there's a shark, than I am from an actual shark attack though.

A7: Not only did swimming influence my writing, but my writing influenced my swimming. After I wrote the chapter "Bi-lateral Breathing", in which an important character from Puerto Paz recommends breathing both to the left and right while swimming, I began to feel an intense sense of peer pressure to make sure I bi-lateral breathed whenever I swam. I feel much more comfortable breathing to the right, and the more tired I get, the harder it is for me to breathe left.

Q8: Your book is broken into five parts: four dystopias and one semi-utopia. Were some parts easier to write than others?

A8: It is easier to tear something down than it is to build something up. Dystopia was definitely easier to write than utopia. The dystopias had weird environments that would impact characters' lives and influence their decisions and actions. In Utopia it is bland and boring because none of those environmental problems would pop up. Everything is good. Like in Structural Engineering how when you do your job well, nobody notices you or your work. It is only when you do a bad job, and something collapses, that you get any (negative) attention. It is easy when something fails to notice it and complain, but when it succeeds, it just blends into background and nobody notices it. In utopia you have to write life moving smoothly, and nothing out of ordinary popping up. With the lack of environmental drama, all of drama has to be interpersonal and character development drama.

Q9: Your day-job is as a structural engineer. Work on any buildings we might know?

A9: Independence Hall in Philadelphia (just a railing around the tower); The Old Corner Bookstore in Boston (unfortunately a large window through an historic interior brick wall); Harvard Divinity School; several small projects in the Charlestown Navy Yard; numerous lesser-known historic New England town halls, schools, and churches.

Q10: Why do you describe Puerto Paz as a "semi-utopia" rather than a "utopia", whereas the four former USA regions you describe as "dystopias"?

A10: I don't believe a true utopia can exist. One person will think a utopia is one way, the person next to them will think it is slightly different, and the next person will think it is even more different. They can't all have society be their idea of perfect simultaneously. Plus, everyone's idea of perfect is constantly shifting and changing, and it would be impossible for a society to keep up with even one person's moving target of what a perfect society is. The best you can do is a semi-utopia, where differing ideas are merged as best as feasibly possible.