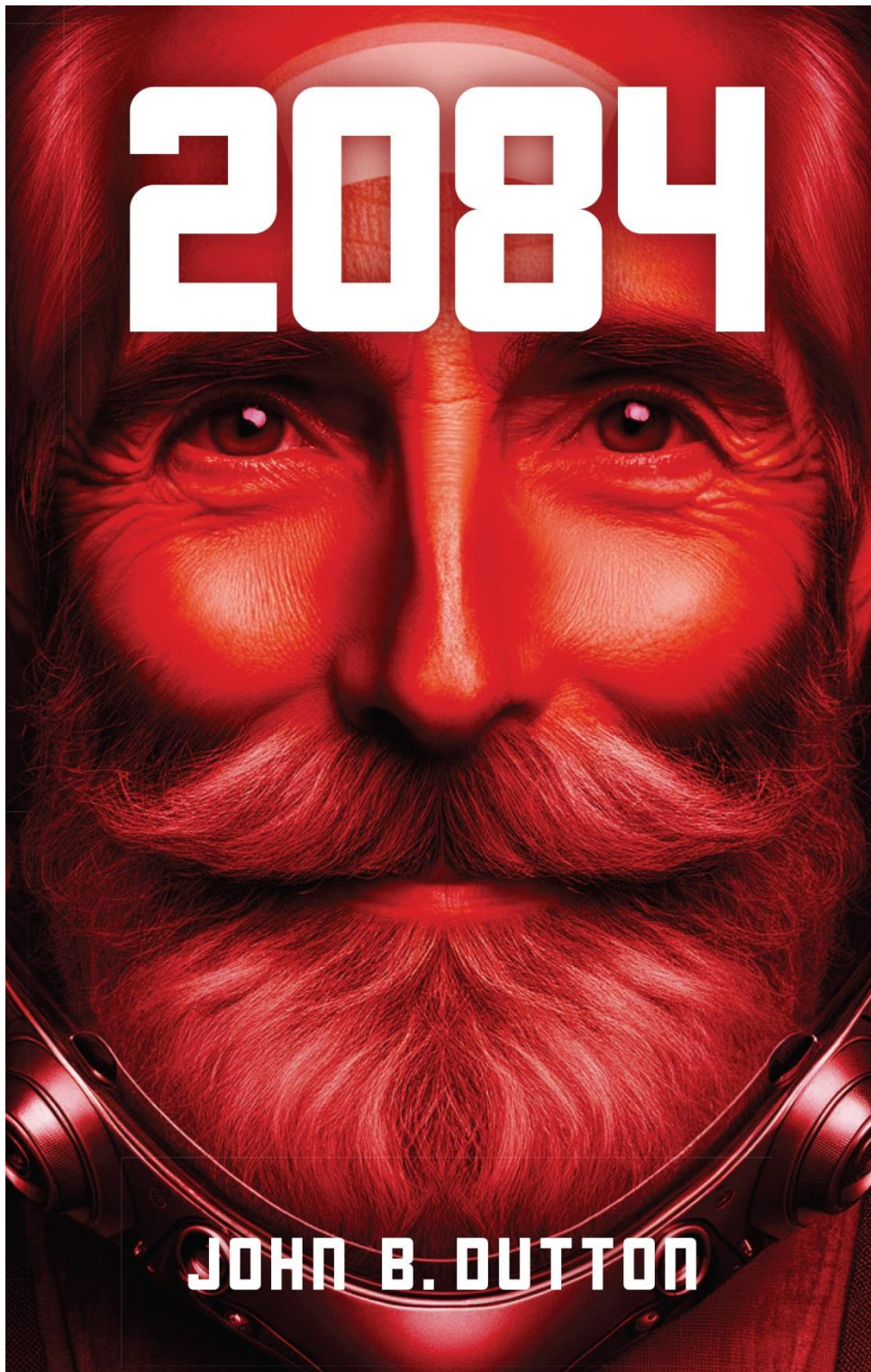


Excerpts for reviewers



Excerpt 1

Preface: The history of the future

There used to be a country called the United States of America. Then came the pandemics. And the heat and the storms. And the quake. The markets collapsed and the people migrated. The USA dried and drowned as the Great Green North blossomed and thrived.

The tech giants relocated to the country once called Canada, merged in the ultimate economy of scale, and rebranded their currencies with a common name. The uDollars issued by the United Corporations flowed seamlessly from employer to chip implant to device to webstore. The banks swiftly withered, becoming store-houses for pointless paper and worthless metal. Governments lost control of the monetary supply and pensions were converted by gutless unions. Soon, the corporate carpetbaggers won elections in both countries, vaulted into office by the political power of lobbyists' bottomless pocketbooks and the public influence of news stories carefully crafted by UC artificial intelligence and shared on UC-owned media.

In the early 2040s the municipal land selloff began, and by the middle of the decade privatization had achieved unstoppable momentum. The UC evolved from a disparate patchwork of corporate campuses and gated communities to a coherent tapestry of branded havens straddling the border from Calgary to Chicago to Toronto to Montreal and down to the sodden remnants of New York City.

A flurry of Freedom from Taxation laws passed in 2047, voted for by the urban majority who now worked for United Corporations companies, lived on United Corporations property, went to United Corporations schools, received healthcare at United Corporations hospitals, and saw no reason to contribute to the wasteful spending of the governments that gave them nothing. Within two years, the tax bases collapsed and the governments' whimpers fell on ears deafened by the UC's media.

2051 was a tipping point: the impoverished north-eastern and Great Lakes states seceded to join the provinces that neighbored them in the newly minted United Corporations of Canada, where all citizens became share-holders, the government shrank to a board, and the military was run by the UCC's proprietary AI technology.

A ravaged, mutated United States of Amexica declared itself the keeper of the flame of democracy, but within two months platoons of UCC fencebots had shut out the gun-wielding savages to the south, leaving them to fight among themselves for the few pockets of land that weren't poisoned and parched.

The United Corporations of Canada was recognized in all corporate communications to be the pinnacle of human achievement. A place where security was assured and health was genetically optimized. Where income was guaranteed and uDollars could buy anything. And where being uHappy was the only goal worth striving for, in a life where everything just worked.

Chapter 1

“Our grandparents worked with computers. We work for computers.”

“That’s a good thing, Santi.”

An eyeroll. “Ride off, kid. Of course you’d say that.”

“No, I mean it. I’ve got a squirtload more perspective than you. The CEO’s, COO’s, CFO’s... they were basically CFU’s.”

“Ha.”

A knowing pause. “Santiago Khan. Seriously? Have you really forgotten the zeitgeist of your youth? Managers were power-hungry dudes who groped their interns, and their bosses rose to the top because they were sociopaths or, if they weren’t, because they copied their behavior.”

An embarrassed clearing of the throat. “We don’t say things like sociopath anymore.”

“Yah, yah. Bite me a lychee.”

Santi reclined his cocoonchair and smiled. His memoryself floating in the convocast projection smiled back. “Kay. Happy Monday, kid. Talk soon.”

“See you later!”

Always the same ironic sign-off.

Santi flicked his hand dismissively and the convocast vanished. He looked around his studio. Plentium, the element that keeps on giving, was piled up beside the 3D printer in neat foot-square bricks ten high. Enough for three or four sculptures. He could deliver the week’s statue commissions and still have some left over for the masks.

So, what was bothering him? Why the social angst? After all, he counted himself lucky to be one of the few in the new Canada who didn’t work for an AI-run corporation. He was his own boss, and Sculpturize had given him the freedom to do what he loved on his own terms. The commercials that people plugged into for hours to earn their basic YouBucks? Not only was he not forced to watch them, some of the ads were for his own company. So why had he wandered out of the bathroom with an existential frown?

Life was good. But that was the problem – life was too good. That’s exactly why his father began his stand-up routines with this deceptively simple joke: *It’s a dog-eat-dogfood world*. Everything was convenient, everything was easy.

A rumble in his belly. His wristline flashed a low blood sugar level.

“Room, help me with breakfast,” he said.

The room answered. A warm, engaging voice like an accomplished mother of three: “Two slices of AuthentiCo toast with thin slices of uCheese topped with Agralife blueberry jelly. AuthentiCo green tea.”

“Do it,” he said, and the thought crossed his mind that AuthentiCo was featuring more frequently among his food brand options.

“Emeraldia is awake now,” said the room.

He felt a tingling in his dick. The sexologist had been absolutely right: rebranding his wife had made the mere mention of her name trigger the hormonal reaction that had seemed hobbled or hidden. Everyone’s uHappy rating was improved by engaging in unselfish love, intimacy, and care. But Santi actually enjoyed the *feeling* of love. Did that make him selfish? Did it matter?

Excerpt from 2084

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Excerpt 2 – The artsperience

Mira glanced back at the artwork and locked eyes with a woman whose broad, pink, unlined face betrayed a European lineage undamaged by sun. The woman had also been reading her garmscreen. She swiped, then tapped on it, and Mira received a consent request. Mira's "K" revealed the woman's name to be Lo (Paloma) MacDonald. Mira consented to the three rung contracts that swiftly followed: permission to text, permission to voice chat, permission to speak.

By now, Albert had managed to worm his way through the throng. Rex stood back and messaged his sister: "Outta here. Not my scene."

"Shit," said Mira under her breath, responding to the message with a noncommittal emoji. She'd known this would happen. Now she was stuck with Albert, who appeared at her side.

"Hey," he said, eyes puppy, nose floppy.

She smiled at him the best she could. "Hey! So... Rex bailed. Guess you're stuck with me." She squeezed his forearm. "Watch this – should be fun."

Lo had sidled next to Mira. She had long, asymmetrical hair and was about ten inches taller than Mira. Her wide shoulders supported a stylish double-breasted black suit jacket over a lilac tunic. Mira found her visually arresting, yet psychologically unimposing. Must have been due to the subtle slump in her posture or a conspicuous uncertainty in her body language.

"Lo, this is Albert," said Mira. "Albert, meet Lo."

Albert nodded at Lo. He was instantly attracted to her height and blond hair but he suppressed the feeling and turned his attention back to Mira.

At this point, the onlookers, each glad that someone else was willing to take the plunge, were expectantly watching the two physically mismatched women to see what would happen.

"Are we doing this?" said Lo.

"For sure! Did you read the instructions?"

"Yah, well, no. I watched the last couple do it. We have to stand under the donut on opposite sides, put an arm in one of the egg-shaped things, then close our eyes."

"It wants a kay."

Both women clicked on the artwork consent screen.

"Let's do this," said Mira and circled the artwork.

"Non-garmscreen hand, kay?" said Lo.

They gave each other one last look of encouragement, placed their hands inside the holographic wheel, and closed their eyes. The pedestal was in fact more than a pedestal. Triggered by the disruption to the hologram, two round openings appeared under the women's hands. A metallic wand appeared from each hole and moved upward, stopping a couple of inches from their downturned palms. Two even thinner non-metallic extrusions curved out from each wand and surrounded the women's wrists, molding around them like form-fitting bracelets. Then a single nanoneedle punctured the main vein on each of their wrists.

The women's hands were locked in place inside the pulsating hologram. The only change that Albert witnessed from this point on was the expression falling from Mira's face as the genetic exchange took place.

Mira's arm which was now clamped by the bracelet cuff grew icy numb. She forgot her muscles. The next sensation was like a gulp of hot liquid descending her esophagus, giving her strange sensations in parts of her insides that nobody normally feels. Then a sort of prickling

between her shoulder blades. Then a warmth in her thighs and between her legs. It wasn't exactly unpleasant but was totes not pleasant either. The sensations abruptly ceased. Mira wanted to open her eyes but she couldn't. A moment of confusion. A fleeting wish that she'd read the artwork consent terms properly. The twinkling abstract shapes on her retina resolved themselves into recognizable forms. Suddenly, she could see, but in a dreamlike way where the details of objects outside her zone of attention were imperceptible or unimportant to the events of the dream. She could sense the crowd and clearly see the shimmering artwork with her arm inside it, the cuff around her wrist. Except that it wasn't her wrist. When she raised her head to look at Lo, Mira gasped. She was looking at herself.

A mirror as wide as the artwork was descending from the ceiling. At least, that's what Mira saw. But to Albert and the other spectators, nothing was happening, the two women stood motionless, with blank faces and closed eyes.

Once the mirror was lowered into place in front of her, Mira could see herself reflected as Lo. She blinked her eyes, now blue. She pouted her lips, now full. She brushed back her hair, now blond. And she was tall.

Lo was having the inverse experience. She gave the reflection in her side of the mirror a half-smile, realizing that she was suddenly much shorter. Beyond that, she had the sensation of occupying less space in the world. What a difference this made to her sense of identity! Now, as Mira, she was... impish. Sure, the mohawk was a conspicuous change, but hair was always restylable. Narrower shoulders, smaller breasts – that was a kranpow disconnect.

Although the artsperience had a two-minute duration, Mira and Lo perceived it to last far, far longer. As in a dream, they were unmoored from real-world time.

Mira was perturbed by her new identity. In her every-day metaphorical mind, she was a firefly or a hummingbird, and now she'd become an oversized, silken-haired dog – one of those modified breeds that need to be birthed out-of-womb. Normally she craved new experiences, but this one was way outside her very wide comfort zone.

Lo felt herself acquiring a level of sexual confidence that was unnatural to her, yet enticing. But Mira was upset. She had become... plain. She wondered how much of her self-assurance stemmed from her physical appearance. It was unsettling, rapidly lurching toward upsetting.

And then, without warning, the artsperience ended. The mirrors lifted, the bracelet-cuffs unlocked, the wands withdrew, and both women opened their eyes. For a few moments, each of them was unsure of what they were actually seeing. The person in front of them was the same person they had just seen in the mirror.

A localized buzz among the onlookers, who could tell that the participants had undergone a profound and mysterious change. Mira's sparkle was gone. Lo was staring at her intently.

Excerpt from 2084

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About the author



After graduating from film school in London, England, John emigrated to Montreal, where he lives with his two children. After spending over a decade as a music TV director, he moved into the communications industry in the early 2000s, writing for clients such as Cirque du Soleil and Skidoo. Until recently he was Chief Creative Officer with international ad agency Camden, and he writes regularly for leading industry publications Strategy and Forbes Agency Council. He has also written screenplays, a stage play, novels and short stories.

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