

## A Conversation with Rebecca Doll & James Gordon, authors of *2033: THE YEAR THINGS FELL APART*



*What led you to decide to write about this future in particular?*

**Rebecca:** I think since 2016, we've been dealing with this rising panic in our lives and in our friend's lives. On the one hand, a lot of good things have happened for us personally, but I also feel a lot less safe than I did before 2016 because I identify as non-binary and queer, and people like me have been targeted and hurt or killed. We hope this will be something cathartic - a way for myself and others to address those fears and put a name and a face on them.

**James:** I see a whole lot of people around me who are very scared. I've always been very political, and I read a lot of obscure politics from around the world. What I increasingly read is that we're very right to be scared. Good, decent, sane people are in the majority in the United States. But dictatorships are often founded on the principle of minority rule, particularly when you have a strong minority that traditionally has held power. And that's not something we're immune to in the United States. Our system not only doesn't protect us from that, it is not well set up to protect us.

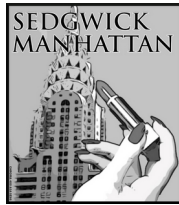
***How is this story personal to you? Is it a fantasy or something drawn from your lived experience?***

***Rebecca:*** My girlfriend and I had a house in a very nice suburban neighborhood, and our car was vandalized. I've had looks and threats directed at me because I "look queer," and that changes your feeling of safety - of where it is and isn't okay to go, what sorts of places it might be fun to go, and what places are going to be emotionally stressful. A few weeks back, I drove out to a cute restaurant in the country to meet a friend for lunch, which I was looking forward to, but the moment I walked in, I was met with glares, and the back of the menu had a rant about the place "not being politically correct." It was uncomfortable all the way around.

***James:*** I've never been really mainstream or conformist, but I was raised with a lot of privilege and taught a lot of lies about how the country was. I was taught that everyone gets a fair chance and that we lived in a time when there was a safety net so that only a handful of outsiders fell through that net. And as a society, we now know that's only true if you're very white and privileged to begin with, and maybe not even then. It's been a long journey, slowly burning through the illusions I was raised with and coming to understand where we fall short as a society. And I can understand the adversaries in this novel as the people who are saying, "No, that's too painful, or threatening, or inconvenient to me; let's paper over those truths." And I understand that way of thinking enough to know that it's very dangerous, not just in terms of sustaining injustice, but in making it far worse.

***In the last two years, some critics and literary figures have suggested that dystopian works may actually be at odds with their purpose. Rather than rousing people to change, they may promote paralysis by suggesting that we're already doomed. Could this book end up causing paralysis instead of change?***

***Rebecca:*** I think that particular criticism is really focused on climate apocalypse. I'm an educator, and I was trained as a biologist, which means thinking about things from a scientific point of view, and from that viewpoint, climate and politics are apples and oranges. Most of the core issues with climate change are driven by corporations and the government, and it's not necessarily easy to impact them directly. Politics is something everyday people can and do impact. There are obvious action steps: vote for candidates that hold Democratic values, make small-dollar donations on the left to offset those on the right, and support legitimate journalism.



**James:** I'm going to talk on a larger scale and say I disagree with the premise. Stories are how we learn. While we have admittedly shorter time than we did, the climate battle, like the battle for Democracy, isn't going to be won this year or next year. Non-fiction is excellent at teaching us exactly what we need to do and what the risks are. But it's not very good at helping us internalize and emotionalize things we need not just to believe but to teach to our children. Fiction is a slow burn. I think you'd be on very shaky ground to say that 1984 or V for Vendetta had not influenced how the West thought about totalitarianism and how resistant we are to it.

**Did you write this book with a message in mind? Something that you wanted readers to take away from it?**

**Rebecca:** The nature of fiction is that it's a set of experiences, and you decide what message you get from it. We don't provide an easy solution in this book. There's not an underlying message to vote for this or that specific person, party, or even political theory. There's no clear "right choice." What we want is for people to think about the gravity of what they do and about the price of inaction, so if that's a message, maybe that is the takeaway.

**James:** I think there's no hidden agenda. The message is that Civil War is very bad and messes up your life and, more importantly, the lives of the people you love. And that it can happen in places where everyone thought the government was stable. I have studied enough about historic and ongoing civil strife that I've internalized that message, made it part of my emotional DNA, and taken it to bed at night. But there's no "do this, don't do that" lesson. It's a story, not a textbook.

You've said that there is a story here. Is it a story anyone is going to want to read? But is there hope in it? In the novel some bad things happen, some very intense things. You've said that this is about emotionalizing bad things that might happen. Are you concerned that's going to hit too close to home for some people and cause them to put it down?

**Rebecca:** I'm not going to say it's necessarily all cheery or uplifting, but I don't think it's crushing or hopeless either. We think it's a good story about normal people in tough circumstances.

**James:** I'm going to jump in to say that true crime does pretty well, selling people images of violence close to home. That said, fiction has to be exciting. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* isn't a polemic about the Cold War, it's also an intense drama. I don't think we're giving too

much away to say there's an espionage plot. We didn't sit down like Jack Torrance in *The Shining* and type "Civil War is very bad" over and over again. I do think there's a good story here, along with some loss, but also some hope.

***The protagonists of this book are self-identified queer people. Do you think that this is a sort of queer genre piece, or is there something in it for an audience that doesn't have that experience?***

***James:*** I think there's a universality to it. I think we've all heard the story that ends: "When they came for me, there was no one left." If you're a White Nationalist, sure, this book may not speak to you, and we're okay with that.

***Rebecca:*** Most people who would go anywhere near a work of fiction like this are aware there is something about them that means we are not one the "chosen people" that a totalitarian regime driven by a warped form of nationalist Christianity would embrace and I think most readers are savvy enough to understand "this could be me" because however they identify they would not fit into that world.

***So, final question. How realistic is this? Will this happen? And why in 2033, why not next year?***

***Rebecca:*** I don't think anyone can look into the future and say, "this will happen," and that's not the point of a novel. The point of fiction is to tell a story that could happen, and there is an implicit idea that "these and other things like it" may happen.

***James:*** Setting the novel down the road a little gives us the ability to deal with the core issues without getting mired in the specific personalities of 2024. Because this is not a problem unique to 2024, 2033, or any specific year. Totalitarianism is a barrier to the slow movement toward a world that is democratic in terms of people respecting each other, which is a concern that stretches away into the future.