

When designing your future, start with dystopia

By  Bronwyn Williams

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This week I (finally) finished reading Hilary Mantel's epic *Wolf Hall Trilogy*. The Man Booker Prize-winning series covers the latter (most interesting parts with all the wives and the beheadings) of the reign of King Henry the Eighth and his court, across three weighty, what can only be called tomes: *Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies* and *The Mirror and the Light*.



The trilogy is a masterwork of accurate, in-depth historical research embellished with fictional details that add a humanising touch to bring the long-buried characters introduced (and all too often brutally killed) in the course of the narrative back to life.

Reading the books, a common thread stood out: getting what we want is often the worst thing that can happen to us.

Getting what we want

The *Wolf Hall* series is written from the vantage point of Thomas Cromwell and follows his incredible, methodical rise from poverty and obscurity to the position of King Henry's most trusted and influential advisor, and, ultimately, his precipitous fall from grace. From humble beginnings, Cromwell works his way painstakingly up the ranks of the English court, mostly by finding ways to give his king exactly what he wanted, only to be himself beheaded by the self-same king mere pages after finally receiving the title of Lord of Essex he worked so hard and sacrificed so much (and so many others' lives) to be awarded.

But Cromwell is far from the only character to be ruined by getting exactly what he wanted. The first book, Wolf Hall focuses on the increasingly desperate lengths King Henry himself went to, with Cromwell's help, in order to divorce his first wife Queen Catherine of Aragon, in order to marry the object of his passion, Anne Boleyn. Of course, as we know from history, after finally succeeding securing his wish and wedding his new bride, he soon became dissatisfied with her and regretted the personal and political consequences of his desire that soon diminished on its satiation. King Henry went on to repeat this mistake multiple times with many more women.

The same pattern was repeated with Anne herself, her patient shrewd scheming to make the king fall in love with her and crown her queen of England ended with her being beheaded by her own husband just a few short years after her coronation.

The moral of the story is that we should be careful what we wish for, because we just might get it.

(Goodness knows, citizens of the world in the year 2020 should know this phenomenon all too well by now, as our demands to "be lead" by our governments have backfired into unintended consequences including some of the largest and fastest permanent losses of personal wealth and liberty in history that we are only just beginning to understand.)

Knowing what we don't want

In order to avoid making the mistakes of Henry, Thomas and Anne, perhaps we should spend more time thinking carefully about what we don't want for ourselves, our businesses and our societies and less time obsessing over what we think we want.

For this reason, my good friend and fellow futurist Nikolas Badminton suggests that when it comes to dreaming up and designing our futures, we should <https://medium.com/@NikolasFuturist/start-with-dystopia-3a3d9d1211bd> start with dystopia.

By this, Badminton suggests that we should carefully consider what could go wrong with our plans if they go "right". The aim is to think through the possibilities for the unintended consequences of getting exactly what we want and then to adjust our goals to protect ourselves and our businesses from our own objectives.

So, do you really want what you want? Or do you need to reconsider your goals?

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