



Farthing Jo Walton

Author Background

- Birth—December 1, 1964
- Where—Aberdare, Wales
- Education—University of Lancaster
- Awards—Copper Cylinder Award, Hugo, John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, Kurd Laßwitz Preis for best SF translated into German, Nebula Award, Mythopoeic Award, Prometheus Award, Robert Holdstock Award, Romantic Times Reviewer's Choice Award, World Fantasy Award
- Currently—Lives in Montreal, Canada

Jo Walton is a Welsh-Canadian fantasy and science fiction writer and poet. She won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2002 and the World Fantasy award for her novel *Tooth and Claw* in 2004. Her novel *Ha'penny* was a co-winner of the 2008 Prometheus Award. Her novel *Lifelode* won the 2010 Mythopoeic Award. Her novel *Among Others* won the 2011 Nebula Award for Best Novel, and the 2012 Hugo Award for Best Novel, and is one of only seven novels to have been nominated for the Hugo Award, Nebula Award, and World Fantasy Award.

Walton was born in Aberdare, in the Cynon Valley of Wales. She went to Park School in Aberdare, then Aberdare Girls' Grammar School. She lived for a year in Cardiff and went to Howell's School Llandaff, then finished her education at Oswestry School in Shropshire, and at the University of Lancaster. She lived in London for two years, lived in Lancaster until 1997, then moved to Swansea, where she lived until moving to Canada in 2002.

Walton speaks Welsh, saying "it's the second language of my family of origin, my grandmother was a well known Welsh scholar and translator, I studied it in school from five to sixteen, I have a ten year old's fluency on grammar and vocab but no problem whatsoever with pronunciation".

Walton has been writing since she was 13, but her first novel was not published until 2000. Before that, she had been published in a number of role-playing game publications, such as Pyramid, mostly in collaboration with her husband at the time, Ken Walton. Walton was also active in online science fiction fandom, especially in the Usenet groups *rec.arts.sf.written* and *rec.arts.sf.fandom*. Her poem "The Lurkers Support Me in E-Mail" is widely quoted on it and in other online arguments, often without her name attached.

Farthing was her first science fiction novel, placing the genre of the "cozy" mystery firmly inside an alternate history in which the United Kingdom made peace with Adolf Hitler before the involvement of the United States in World War II. It was nominated for a Nebula Award, a Quill Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for best science fiction novel, and the Sidewise Award for Alternate History. A sequel, *Ha'penny*, was published in October 2007 by Tor Books, with the final book in the trilogy, *Half a Crown*, published in September 2008. *Ha'penny* won the 2008 Prometheus Award (jointly with Harry Turtledove's novel *The Gladiator*) and has been nominated for the Lambda Literary Award.

In April 2007, Howard V. Hendrix stated that professional writers should never release their writings online for free, as this made them equivalent to scabs. Walton responded to this by declaring 23 April as International Pixel-Stained Technopeasant Day, a day in which writers who disagreed with Hendrix could release their stories online en masse. In 2008 Walton celebrated this day by posting several chapters of an unfinished sequel to *Tooth and Claw*, *Those Who Favor Fire*.

Walton moved to Montreal, Quebec, after her first novel was published. She is married to Ireland-born Dr. Emmet A. O'Brien. She has one child, a son named Alexander Walton.

In her own words: "She comes from Wales but lives in Montreal where the food and books are much better. She writes science fiction and fantasy, reads a lot, talks about books, and eats great food. She plans to live to be ninety-nine and write a book every year."

(adapted from Wikipedia & the author's webpage)



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Book Summary

Farthing

Jo Walton, 2006

Constable & Robinson Ltd.

316 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781472112972

Farthing is an alternate history mystery, first in the Small Change trilogy. My all time favourite description of the book is “a stiletto wrapped in a buttered crumpet”. It’s a cosy mystery — a country house murder of the Agatha Christie style, where somebody is killed in an absurd way and everyone is a suspect and a detective arrives. But it’s set in 1949 in a world where Britain made peace with the Third Reich in May of 1941, and Hitler holds everything up to the Channel and fascism is creeping closer on the British side. The division point is the Hess mission, which in that world succeeded, because Churchill had a slightly different cabinet which insisted on considering the terms. Britain alone could not have won WWII from May of 1941, and there was no indication of US help, which probably would never have been forthcoming without the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Keeping on fighting in the circumstances was quite extraordinary.

The novel alternates between two points of view — the first person of Lucy Kahn and the third person of Inspector Carmichael, the series’s continuing Scotland Yard detective, who has secrets of his own. Lucy is a daughter of the aristocracy but married to a Jew. She seems at first to be an idiot, but as the book goes on we get to see her core of solid good sense.

(extract from the author’s webpage)



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Discussion Questions

1. The novel combines a murder mystery (English country house murder), political intrigue, and alternate history. How successful is the mix? How well is each aspect of the mix handled?
2. The novel is set in 1949 England. How successful is the author at giving you a “feel for the time period” – for example, English (especially upper class) culture; the English class system; etc.?
3. Chapters alternate between a first person narrative by Lucy Kahn and a third person narrative from the viewpoint of Inspector Carmichael. How did this affect your enjoyment of the novel?
4. What do you think of the LGBT content? How do you think the differing social and legal/political opinions about homosexuality affected “gay life” in England in 1949? What do you think about how the author depicts the following relationships: David Kahn and Hugh Eversley; Peter Carmichael and Jack?
5. What is your opinion about the novel’s conclusion? What do you feel about “the devil’s bargain” that Carmichael agreed to? What do you think about the final scene between Carmichael and Sgt. Royce?
6. Did you enjoy FARTHING? Why or why not?

(from www.lambdascifi.org)

In her interview with *Science Fiction Book Club*, Jo Walton is asked:

I’ve read that you wrote your latest novel, Farthing in 17 days because you were “white hot furious” about current politics...Was there something in particular that sparked Farthing?

She replied:

When the Iraq invasion happened I just couldn’t believe Britain and the US would go ahead and invade without UN sanction. I was living in Canada, and Canada refused to do it, but it meant I was quite isolated in my reaction. If I’d been around other people feeling the same thing, protesting and so on, there were huge protests in Britain, the feeling might not have manifested itself in writing Farthing. What I felt was that you might expect history to repeat itself but I never thought I’d see history repeat itself with my country as the aggressor nation. And then there were all these terrible things, no weapons of mass destruction, the revelation that Blair had lied to parliament, the Abu Graib thing, and my reactions to the fact that these sorts of things really can happen all went into the book...

In what ways do you think Jo Walton’s political convictions effected the novel’s plot and tone?

(<http://papersky.livejournal.com/280799.html>)



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From the Author

Ignoring the Body in the Library: The World of Farthing

I've always liked cosy mysteries like those of Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, and most especially Josephine Tey. You know the kind of book; there's a ridiculously contrived murder in a country house and a detective and lots of suspects. You can settle down into their lives and try to guess who's guilty while the servants bring tea and buttered crumpets. It's easy to lose track of the fact that somebody really has been violently killed, an event that would in any normal circumstances be horrifying.

The way they're written is soothing, with lots of physical detail and lots of complicated relationships and motivations and somehow the violent death gets lost in the cosiness.

I realised one day that the cosy mysteries that weren't written in the thirties seemed to be set in an imaginary version of the thirties that had just gone on, past the point in history where things began to change during and after World War II. And that set me thinking about the thirties going on, with country houses and people complaining about the servants and offstage appeasement and poverty, and just how horrible that would have been. Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night* takes place the same time as George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

Farthing and its sequels (the Small Change series) take place in an extended version of the thirties. There is an abbreviated WWII and Britain and the Nazis agreed to call it a draw in May of 1941. In reality, Hitler kept offering Britain peace terms and couldn't understand why Churchill didn't take them. Any of the governments of the thirties would have. In the Small Change universe, when Hess flew to Britain with Hitler's offer, Churchill had a slightly different cabinet, one that pushed him to negotiate. They made peace, with Hitler keeping everything up to the Channel. The US never came into the war. The thirties went on, and in 1949, a body is found during a country house weekend and a detective comes down from Scotland Yard to investigate.

I realised that I could use the language and conventions of the cosy mystery to talk about fascism. In the same way the cosy sidles up on death, I could sidle up on evil. Evil is so often an abstraction. People talk about the horrors of fascism; nobody talks about the appeal — and yet it did appeal. All those thousands of people in the torchlit marches in Nuremberg were there to have fun. Diana Mosley wrote, "Poor dear Hitler." How could anyone write "Poor dear Hitler"? And how can you step away from knowing the monstrosity and the history to talk about how somebody could say that? Well, with tea and biscuits and a conservatory and a bit of a love story, the same way cosy mysteries approach the body in the library.

I did it in a different history, so that you can't be sure of your ground. It's very easy with history to feel safe, no matter what awful things you're reading about, because you know they're over, you know how things came out. In an alternate history you don't know that. History isn't inevitable, history is contingent. And history isn't over. We are building history all the time, every moment, with every choice we make. All the choices we make add up to history. They are what history is. We are building history for the future.

I used to say that *Farthing* is a book about how good people do bad things. But now I prefer to say it's about how all people do bad things — we're compromised and imperfect and afraid for ourselves

<http://torforgeblog.com/2013/03/04/ignoring-the-body-in-the-library-the-world-of-farthing/>

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Reviews

Jo Walton's novels are all quite different from one another. If any observation can be made about her work, it is that she has a gift for taking a familiar storyline and crossing it with an unexpected trope to present something not just new, but that informs and thus transcends the elements she draws upon.

Her last book was the splendid **Tooth and Claw**, which takes the structure and some of the character types of Anthony Trollope's **Framley Parsonage** and crosses it with dragons. The result is a delightful tale that engages smilingly with the savagery of so-called civilization, in particular at the top of the social ladder: the dragons are such noble beasts, beautiful, admirable, and apparently domesticated until they curl a lip

to show a startlingly long incisor, or move a foot to snick out a talon the length of a switchblade to remind you that, yes, these are dangerous beasts. I've not since been able to reread Trollope's novel without thinking of Walton's work -- or, for that matter, I can't begin a dragon story without its being superimposed by a vivid image of Walton's dragons and their hats.

Farthing begins like an English country-house murder mystery. The reader meets people of privilege -- people who pride themselves on their gentility in manner and blood -- who discover a corpse in a bedroom, one of their own done to death by violence. Walton paints the scene deftly, evoking the period when country-house mysteries were at their height, and raises the expectations of a typical cozy mystery among the social elite. Gradually the reader comes to discover that this is not in fact our universe, but one over; in this one, England's portion of WW II never really happened, because in 1941 the government, currently led by political conservatives nicknamed the Farthing Set, made peace with Hitler.

The chapters alternate between two points-of-view. There is the first person account of Lucy Kahn, daughter of Farthing Set leaders. (The nickname comes from the name of their country house.) Lucy's relations with her family are strained because she married a Jew despite the family's censure. So she's a born insider who chose to become an outsider, because one of the issues, of course, in making peace with Hitler is accepting what he's doing over on the continent. She and her husband, David, did not want to come to this house party, but her parents were insistent, and so, to keep a semblance of peace, Lucy caved in. She was already regretting her decision before the body was found and everyone confined to the premises.

The alternate chapters are third person from the viewpoint of Inspector Carmichael of Scotland Yard, sent down to investigate the murder. He's frustrated because he senses that not everyone is telling the truth, but he has to parse the body language and tones of people whose upbringing is so different from his -- he's an outsider in various ways forced inside to complete his investigation. Meanwhile, Lucy, who knows the people, how they move and think, is looking at the mystery from another angle -- because her husband becomes the chief suspect. No one is behaving quite right, though she cannot define how, any more than she can believe there is a conspiracy among all these people who have been familiar to her since childhood. In the meantime, do not forget a government that can buy peace at the cost of compromise with the Nazis.

Does the mystery resolve? Yes, but no more hints about how -- or more importantly why. Just this. **Farthing** may begin like St. George's dragon couchant, but this time the dragon shows teeth and claws with deliberate menace before it launches -- and strikes with draconian resonance more than once. I had gotten about a quarter of the way in before I realized I was not going to be able to put this novel down, after which it left me stunned and unable to Jo Walton's novels read anything else for quite a while after.

SF Site

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Reviews (continued)

PERHAPS THE BEST MAGIC THAT speculative fiction can perform is a slight of hand that lets you see reality as it truly is, despite the fact that the genre is mostly concerned building realities that don't exist. It's a delicate trick that's easy to arse up. But when it's done with panache and skill, the magic of misdirection helps the medicine go down.

Jo Walton's 2006 *Farthing* and 2007 *Ha'Penny* (both published by Tor Books) show an illusionist working at the height of her powers. These first entries in her "Small Change" series, which she has also jokingly called "Still Life with Fascists," cunningly change history with one simple question: What if the British had brokered a truce with Hitler in 1941? From there, Walton has firm footing on which to perform her show.

Alternate histories are nothing new in the genre. In fact, an interested editor could assemble several volumes with the stories that have the South winning the Civil War. Most read like programming on the History Channel which is endless repetitions of facts that prove how much the writer knows about the period while giving the barest nod to conventions of storytelling such as plot and character. Add the voice of a ponderous narrator and you've got a bestseller on your shelves.

Walton takes a more subtle approach. The history and her extrapolations on the "what if?" are set dressing, rather than the entire show. *Farthing* starts like a good P.G. Wodehouse Blanding's yarn, complete with a murder mystery, an English country house, a flighty heroine, and a crusty Scotland Yard inspector. Walton uses two narrators --Lucy, the daughter of the manse who is married to a Jew, and Inspector Carmichael, the cop who has a compromising secret of his own--to set the book's tensions quickly. After the story's first third, it becomes clear that *Farthing* won't end in a frothy farcical romp, unless you find fascism frothy.

Which isn't to imply that *Farthing* is about politics or history. It is, mind you, but only in how the outside world impinges on individual lives. *Farthing* is as much about sex and marriage as it is about Hitler and the Holocaust. And it's as much about Bush and Blair as it is about World War II.

"The Communist Party, along with its newspapers, was to be outright banned. The Labour Party was to be checked by M15 for secret Communist 'sleepers' that might have infiltrated their ranks. The line taken was that the innocent had nothing to fear. Nobody protested in Parliament at this, probably because they were all too afraid," Lucy explains. Depending on your level of cynicism about our current administration, the words "Terrorist" or "Liberal" can be inserted at will.

Ha'Penny picks up shortly after the events at the *Farthing* estate play out. Cop Carmichael remains, as does the convention of two narrators. Viola, an actress, steps in for Lucy and offers a considerably different side of life under a government that remains in power by instilling fear in its citizens. But where *Farthing* was front-loaded with action--a dead body is found at the outset--*Ha'Penny's* real action comes at its end. Because of this, *Ha'Penny* feels more introspective than *Farthing* did, as the two narrators do less and think more.

Walton's skill, however, saves such ruminations from bogging down in excessive navel gazing. She works in subplots involving former IRA agents, a ditzy socialite or two, two gay military men, and Hitler while never once making you doubt the veracity of the world she's created. Perhaps most telling is that you want both narrators to succeed, despite the knowledge that one wants to kill four people and the other will betray the innocent in order to save his own reputation.

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Reviews (continued)

Her rich fictions are compulsively readable only for their characters and plots. But it's her observations about power that make both hard to put down. "[Carmichael] had learned from the Farthing Set that you couldn't just change things from the outside, you had to change how people felt. If people stopped being afraid, they'd get rid of the dictators for themselves," she writes in *Ha'Penny*, and it becomes clear what her larger mission is.

Rather than change one outcome in order to distill history into bite-sized chunks that make for easy consumption, Walton compresses it into a series of hard choices that illuminate what it feels like to live against such backdrops. Who knows what magic she'll pull out of her hat when the next book, *Half a Crown*, is released next year.

Baltimore City Paper

In an alternate reality in which a group of English nobles overthrew Winston Churchill and made peace with Adolf Hitler in 1941, a murder is committed at the home of Lord and Lady Eversley, and suspicion falls on David Kahn, the Jewish husband of Lucy Eversley. Only Inspector Carmichael of Scotland Yard believes that something else might be at work and that the Kahns could, in fact, be victims themselves. World Fantasy Award winner **Walton** (Tooth and Claw) serves up an chilling tale of the future that could have been in a world both far different from and eerily similar to today's. An excellent example of alternate history that for, this novel belongs in most sf collections.

Library Journal

It's 1949: Eight years after Sir James Thirkie brokered a peace with Hitler and abandoned Europe to the Nazis, the fight-wing political gang known as the **Farthing** Group have routed Winston Churchill, seen off a short-lived Labor government and seem poised to take control of the Conservative party and Britain itself. Lord and Lady Eversley have invited guests--including their daughter, Lucy, and her Jewish banker husband, David Kahn--to **Farthing** House for a formal weekend. Soon, in true Tey-Sayers-Christie fashion, notorious homosexual MP Mark Normanby finds Sir James Thirkie dead in his dressing room, apparently stabbed with his own knife and regaled with a yellow star of the sort Jews are required to wear on the Continent. Inspector Carmichael of Scotland Yard soon grasps that the "blood" is in fact cheap lipstick, and that Sir James was stabbed after he died--of monoxide poisoning. As for the Jewish star: In a country that barely tolerates Jews and widely despises them, somebody clearly wants to pin the vile deed on David. To further confuse matters, a card-carrying communist gunman wounds Lucy and her father and is shot dead for his pains. Lucy, who knows David is innocent, wonders what her mother was doing wandering the corridors early on the morning the body was discovered, and what Normanby, the deceased's brother-in-law, and the other **Farthing** Group members are plotting. As the political ramifications widen, Carmichael begins to understand that his superiors care more about politics than justice.

Despite a rather fumbling approach, **Walton's** sinister political conspiracies pack a considerable wallop.

Kirkus Reviews