

# Futuretrack 5 Short Guide

## Futuretrack 5 by Robert Westall

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## Overview

Futuretrack 5 examines the divisions within contemporary society: differences in educational background, personal wealth, class standing, technological ability, and employment status.

These attributes determine who is privileged and who is underprivileged.

Westall presents a future Britain where the wealthy Ests, or upper-middle classes, enjoy a pleasant and luxurious existence at the expense of the underclass Unnems who live a life of urban violence and poverty. This country is obviously a fantastic anti-utopia where advanced technology and military police keep the general public under control. But in this depiction of a horrible tomorrow, we can see how our own prejudices influence and divide people.

These biases often determine how we run our schools, colleges, courts, and police forces. Futuretrack 5 examines the conflict from a democratic point of view, one with great sympathy for individual human needs.

The main character Henry Kitson finds he, like many in their late teens, must make choices that will seriously influence his adult life. But Kitson is an overachiever and dissatisfied with the limits and formality of his totalitarian world. The rebellion of adolescence achieves heroic significance in this novel, for it, through Henry, becomes a force for change for the better, a force that desires freedom for all people regardless of class, wealth, or education.

The story of his quest presents plenty of exciting action and suspense tempered by serious moral concern.

Futuretrack 5 celebrates the possibility of individual action against a repressive society. Although the success of this effort may be in doubt, Westall defines the need for personal awareness of and responsibility for the repressive tendencies of our industrial and technological system. The novel speaks out for young people as well, railing against the professional labelling that begins in high school with its evaluation of the vocational-technical and the college-preparatory tracks for students. Westall believes democratic values provide freedom in the real world and that we must all be aware of the encroaching technology that threatens to take away our individual rights.

## About the Author

Robert Atkinson Westall was born on October 7, 1929, in Tynemouth, Northumberland. He grew up in Tynemouth, graduated from the town high school, and finally left his childhood home in 1948 to attend Durham University. After college he served two years in the British Army's Royal Signals corps. In 1955, Westall received a doctorate in the Fine Arts from the University of London's prestigious Slade School of Art. Since then he has taught art at a local private school, produced art reviews for local and London papers, sold antiques, and written thirty books for children and young adults.

Westall claims to have started writing novels when he was twelve years old, but his first book to see publication was *The Machine-Gunners* in 1975.

He wrote the work, his most critically acclaimed novel, for his son Christopher who was then twelve years old.

At eighteen Christopher Westall was killed in a motorcycle accident, yet he lives on in several characters of his father's novels. Aspects of the main characters in *The Devil on the Road* and *Futuretrack 5*, for example, resemble the boy.

Westall's works have won many awards. *The Machine-Gunners* and *The Scarecrows* were awarded the British Carnegie Medal in 1976 and 1982, respectively. In the same years these novels, as well as *Break of Dark* in 1983, received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Books citation. In 1979, *The Devil on the Road* was an American Library Association "best book" and a Carnegie Medal nominee. *The Machine-Gunners* (in 1988), *Futuretrack 5* (1990), and *The Promise* (1991) have all received the German Leseratten Prize. Other works by Westall have earned numerous commendations and nominations.

But the many honors alone do not explain Westall's popularity. His novels present realistically and unsparingly the conflicts and problems of youth. These depictions often include swearing, violence, and sexuality, but they do so with sincerity and honesty.

Westall is an author with integrity as well as a unique creative spirit.

Westall died April 15, 1993 in Cheshire, England, of respiratory failure brought on by pneumonia.

## Setting

The novel is set twenty years in the future, in a Britain where class differences are enforced by violent military law. The country is partitioned into districts by "wires," or fences, patrolled by the futuristic military police, the Paramils. The officers monitor not only where people are, but what they think, by means of a mind-reading "psycho-radar" transmitted from helicopters, or "psycho-copters." The lowest class, the Unnems, are segregated to the urban slums of the big cities like London and Glasgow. Here there are few police and no laws; the only opportunities for survival are careers, or "futuretracks," such as crime or brief media celebrity. The suburban class, the Ests, live in nice houses and go to college. But the Ests suffer from overpopulation, so their children must take E-level exams to guarantee their class status for life. If they fail the exams, they are banished "across the wire" to the slums of the Unnems.

Behind the scenes of this fragmented society are the Techs, a class of technical wizards and computer operators who run the complex networks of state supervision. Among their responsibilities are the maintenance and operation of the National Computer, Laura. She controls the state and contains information on everybody.

Henry Kitson is an Est boy who becomes, to his surprise, a Tech. His intelligence and training allow him to move from place to place, from class to class, in Britain. With his Unnem girlfriend Keri, he manipulates the system in hopes of changing it for the betterment of everybody. But the risks are great, and threat of their own death or imprisonment is always there.



## Social Sensitivity

Futuretrack 5 repudiates the traditional English class system by projecting an exaggerated version of it into the future. Social and economic class are important aspects of British life, and Westall's criticisms have great validity. Futuretrack 5 underscores the contemporary social concerns of England. American readers may not be as class-conscious, but they will still find reflections of their society in the novel.

Women and nonwhites seem to populate singularly the Unnem class, while the Tech and Est positions of power are dominated by white males. The crises provided by educational opportunities or the lack of them certainly exist here as well. We already have a schism between blue-collar and white-collar jobs, the latter having greater prestige. Also, concepts of ghettoization and upperclass dominance are familiar to all Americans. While the particulars of Westall's satire may be lost on some North American readers, the critiques of segregation and class manipulation will not.

Westall's portrayal of realistic characters and situations includes much graphic violence, some explicit sexual situations, and some harsh, if idiomatic, language. Certainly these instances are understandable given the work's overall content and plot, and the scenes are presented with restraint. Caution, however, should be taken with younger readers.



# Literary Qualities

Westall's novel can be understood as an action thriller, a detective story, a tale of a questing knight errant, or a rite-of-passage narrative. Most important is the work's ability to engage the reader and carry him or her through a complex plot. The narrative voice of Futuretrack 5 drives the novel. Westall constructs a fully realistic and engaging character in Henry Kitson. We perceive the action and events through the boy's singular impressions, and his vision seems clear, persuasive, and intelligent. Our understanding of Kitson's responses throughout the novel reinforce our acceptance of its fantastic elements, for the character is our touchstone with reality.

Certainly Westall provides plenty of vivid description, as he must create a new world in his novel: Henry's hatred of the Paramils flows "like red-hot lava;" deadened Unnems watch a musical group, the audience "like ghouls at a road accident"; the fresh, wet reeds along the Nine Mile Bank in Fenland "shone pale green in the westering sun, like pointed sword blades"; Keri disguises her voice using "the Computerspeak of a Femtech." But much of what Westall creates in Futuretrack 5 is not as it appears on the surface. Kitson's wry commentary reveals the hidden truths beneath the rhetoric of description. The physical properties of objects are not what they should be: Wooden boats are plastic; tomato soup is artificial; northern towns are vapor; storekeepers are spies; bird watchers are eavesdroppers. As in futuristic anti-utopian novels such as George Orwell's 1984 (1949) or Aldous Huxley's Brave New World (1932), Westall's work presents the conflict between appearances and realities, and the dangers manifest in the inconsistency.

The novel's suspense is most effective. Scenes change with surprising rapidity, a Westall trademark. We are never left feeling bored as Henry and Keri race all over Britain on their mission. The pacing is tightly constructed as few events are left unincorporated into the action as a whole. Each shift of scene presents a new clue to solve the mystery of Scott-Astbury's secret plan.

As the details assemble, the immensity of the social crime comes apparent.

Henry is forced to act, but he cannot succeed. The final ironic twist provides a sudden and surprising ending that, while not optimistic, certainly well emphasizes Westall's overall point of view.



## Themes and Characters

Futuretrack 5 presents a cross-section of English life in A.D. 2012. The characters, each representative of one of the rigidly separated social classes, all maintain a semi-repressed hostility toward the domineering aspects of their government. Sadly, this underlying hatred is often vented at fellow social victims and not at authority itself.

Henry Kitson is the main character and narrator of this novel. At the start he is a young, successful student, Head Boy at his boarding school. But it is always clear that despite his achievements, Henry finds himself dissatisfied. His relationship with his family, like that of most Ests, exists only superficially. The boys at his school feel isolated because not only are they away from their families for years at a time, but they also have to compete with their friends and fellow students for placement into the Est class. At the end of his secondary-education Henry gets a rare perfect score on his E-level exams, raising him out of the Est into the Tech class. Here he becomes assistant to Idris, the mastermind behind Laura, the state supercomputer.

Idris, an old and eccentric Tech, runs Laura, which makes him powerful but also leaves him lonely. His job also may be driving him crazy with guilt, for he is a decent man who is responsible for much suffering. He comes to trust Henry and teaches the boy some of Laura's secrets. Among them is the name Scott-Astbury, who Idris believes is evil and dangerous. Although Idris appears to be disorganized and irrational, he endows Henry with a sense of purpose. After the old man suffers a nervous breakdown, Henry is promoted to chief analyst. When Idris commits suicide, Henry finds he must find and defeat Scott-Astbury alone.

Henry's explorations beyond the wire into London, land of the Unnems, introduce him to a whole new side of England. Several Unnems become his friends or allies, people Henry works for or with in his struggle to solve the Scott-Astbury mystery. George, a man of color, helps Henry become pinball champ by aiding the Tech and managing his career. While George certainly benefits from Henry's success, the Unnem's kindness and generosity helps Henry adjust himself to his new—and dangerous—surroundings. George and his grandmother let Henry live with them and, for a time, give the boy the home he lacked on the Tech side of the wire. They are proud of him and protect him.

Henry also befriends, and sleeps with, an ex-Est prostitute named Vanessa. Prostitution is a common futuretrack for female Unnems. Vanessa, however, has trouble finding customers, for she photographs secretly all of her clients to earn extra income from pornographic snapshots. She, a young woman who cannot even sell herself, represents the absolute failure and hopelessness implicit in all Unnem lives. Keri Roberts, in contrast, embodies the ferocity of Unnem existence. As the National Champ of motorcycle racing, she risks her life in every race, for the streets are in poor repair and cruised by dangerous robot-controlled trucks. By grasping fully the violence and peril of Unnem life, Keri makes it work for her, not against her. She achieves a kind of desperate success, although everyone acknowledges she most likely will die in a fatal crash.





Keri's intensity attracts Henry, and he falls in love with her. Her energy motivates him into full and total action, and her Unnem heritage guarantees that their efforts against Laura transcend class hostility and suggest a new, united society.

Together Keri and Henry face many dangers in north Britain as they search for Scott-Astbury. The duplicitous storekeeper Vic tries to trap the couple for the Paramils. In a fight with Henry, the old man is accidentally killed.

While he is not directly responsible for Vic's death, guilt plagues Henry. The underlying violence of his world threatens to consume him. The Glasgow gangster Blocky personifies the essential savagery, evil, and chaos ever-present in Futuretrack 5. Blocky kills casually and deliberately, and he has quite literally sold his soul to a mysterious demon. While he helps Henry and Keri, he does so in hope of luring them into his satanic circle. Occult issues aside, Blocky's cynicism and cruelty destroy his humanity. He represents the utter loss of idealism, a state Henry and Keri must avoid.

In the rural land of the Fenmen, a working-class agricultural people who were spared in order to grow vegetables for the Ests, provides a kind of ideal community in the novel. Pete Yaxley and his wife Joan, both Fenmen, let Henry and Keri live and work with them. The Yaxleys are stereotypical independent English country folk. They work hard, live simply, and have an innate moral sense. Pete and Joan have no great love for the Paramils or the Ests; their simplicity is not stupidity.

The countryside gives them a basic decency lost everywhere else. Even so, Scott-Astbury's plan threatens this last outpost of true humanity, and Henry must work to save it. Futuretrack 5 presents the conflict between nature—human or otherwise—and technology. The simplicity of the romantic countryside faces destruction from the technocratic police state. Progress, in both its social and scientific forms, threatens to make mankind unnatural, to make people live and behave in ways that hurt them and cause them unhappiness. Henry, because he is smart and has had an Est and Tech education, can see the entire system for what it is.

Idris, like Henry's father and even Blocky, attributes the nation's problems to Scott-Astbury. But just as Scott-Astbury never appears directly in the novel, the blame cannot be firmly affixed to him. The plan to rebuild a feudal England by exterminating the Unnems may not even have been his alone. Westall's novel attempts to remind us that there can never be a single person responsible for a whole society's ills. Although he may be evil, Scott-Astbury is not the villain. The people of this futuristic Britain refuse to try to resist and change things for the better, and they are the real problem in Futuretrack 5. Henry and Keri try to stop Laura, but they cannot complete the task by themselves. Social betterment requires all citizens to share in the responsibility.



## Topics for Discussion

1. How are adult characters represented in the novel, and how do they compare to the younger characters?

2. To what extent are technological advances used to assist, rather than hinder, the people in the novel? How might the Fenmen help us arrive at an answer?

3. How significant is Major Arnold's role in the book?

4. If Idris is so unhappy, why does he not use Laura to make things better?

In what ways is he prevented from helping his country?

5. Why does Westall have Henry and Keri travel by motorcycle? Does it add meaning to their journey?

6. Henry is offered an opportunity to get help from Blocky's strange demon.

Why does Henry choose not to do so, and what does this tell us about good and evil in the novel?

7. How does the novel treat its female characters? Does Keri's behavior in the Fenlands reveal an overall concept of essential female achievement?

8. How do Henry's attitudes about death and killing develop throughout the novel?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The novel makes reference to A-, O-, E-, and X-level exams. What is the current examination system in Great Britain, and how does it contrast to the one portrayed in *Futuretrack 5*?

2. Westall sets his story in many different regions in Great Britain. The Fens, for example, are a real place. Research one or more of these different geographical areas of Britain (an encyclopedia or a good atlas would be a fine place to start), and discuss how Westall alters or intensifies their general characteristics. What kind of changes are made? Can you explain why they are made?

3. Festivals and plays of the kind Pete Yaxley produces are common in Britain. Explain their general significance. How does the play and fair make a comment on the novel itself?

4. The preservation of nature reserves and historic landmarks is a major British concern; the National Trust is one example of this undertaking.

Given that the bird sanctuaries and Scott-Astbury's plan are essentially examples of this protection, how does the novel comment on preservation efforts?

5. Evaluate the use of violence in *Futuretrack 5*. Does the novel present violence as a legitimate method to solve societal problems? Is this depiction responsible?

6. Compare *Futuretrack 5* to either George Orwell's 1984, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange*. How are the books similar?

## For Further Reference

Draper, Charlotte W. Review. *Horn Book Magazine* 60,2 (April 1984): 204-205. This review finds the book's themes applicable and understandable in light of concerns about contemporary society.

Estes, Sally. Review. *Booklist* (February 15, 1984): 853. A review that compares the work to 1984 and *A Clockwork Orange* and finds the novel a vivid depiction of a brutal future society.

Fox, Charles. "Beyond Tact." *New Statesman* (December 2, 1983): 26-27.

This reviewer finds that Westall's book presents energetically a suspenseful story of a quest.

Greenland, Colin. "The Romantic as Terrorist." *Times Literary Supplement* (September 30, 1983): 1047. This article finds the novel to be full of action and detail, a book that not only finds pastoral life superior, but calls for the destruction of the technological world.

———. "Science Fiction." *British Book News* (March 1984): 134-136. An article that notes Westall's book is a moral work as well as an exciting one, and claims the novel's lesson is all-important for older adolescent readers.

Laski, Audrey. Review. *Times Educational Supplement* (July 12, 1985): 21.

The reviewer finds the book treats troubling social themes with a sense of humor.

Rees, David. "Macho Man, British Style." In *Painted Desert, Green Shade*.

Boston: Horn Book, 1984: 115-125.

Rees provides an examination of Westall's depiction of character in many of the author's other works.

Sutherland, Zena. Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 37,9 (May 1984): 177. This review praises the novel's plot and finds the ending an ironic surprise.

Unsworth, Robert. Review. *School Library Journal* (August 1984): 87-88.

This reviewer questions whether American students will completely understand the first chapters of *Futuretrack 5* because they specifically satirize British education, but believes that the exciting plot will overcome these concerns.

Woolf, Jenny. Review. *Punch* (August 15, 1984): 45. This English reviewer thinks so highly of the novel because it questions contemporary society that she wishes all school children had to read it.

## Related Titles

Most of Westall's novels are set in the past, often in England during World War II, or in the present, but rarely in the future. However, they all rely either on strong suspense or absorbing action. *Yaxley's Cat*, although it borrows a character name from *Futuretrack 5*, presents an anxious tale of a contemporary family who are threatened by the inhabitants of a small village and a ghostly cat. *The Devil on the Road* is an ambiguous mystery of a young motorcyclist who transcends time to save a girl accused of witchcraft in the seventeenth-century. *Urn Burial*'s science-fiction plot places a young boy into the middle of extraterrestrial battles. All of these have been commended by book reviewers for their fine presentation and excellent storytelling.



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