



# Farthing

*Jo Walton*

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## **Farthing** Jo Walton

One summer weekend in 1949 — but not our 1949 — the well-connected "Farthing set", a group of upper-crust English families, enjoy a country retreat. Lucy is a minor daughter in one of those families; her parents were both leading figures in the group that overthrew Churchill and negotiated peace with Herr Hitler eight years before.

Despite her parents' evident disapproval, Lucy is married — happily — to a London Jew. It was therefore quite a surprise to Lucy when she and her husband David found themselves invited to the retreat. It's even more startling when, on the retreat's first night, a major politician of the Farthing set is found gruesomely murdered, with abundant signs that the killing was ritualistic.

It quickly becomes clear to Lucy that she and David were brought to the retreat in order to pin the murder on him. Major political machinations are at stake, including an initiative in Parliament, supported by the Farthing set, to limit the right to vote to university graduates.

But whoever's behind the murder, and the frame-up, didn't reckon on the principal investigator from Scotland Yard being a man with very private reasons for sympathizing with outcasts... and looking beyond the obvious.

As the trap slowly shuts on Lucy and David, they begin to see a way out — a way fraught with peril in a darkening world.

## **Farthing Details**

Date : Published August 8th 2006 by Tor Books (first published 2006)

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Author : Jo Walton

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## From Reader Review Farthing for online ebook

### Megan Baxter says

I got off to a rocky start with Jo Walton. *Among Others* didn't wow me - I liked it, but the pacing felt off, and keen tension lacking. Since then, however, I've read two of her other books that have simply blown my mind. *Tooth and Claw* - Victorian society with dragons - made it on to my Top 10 list of last year. And I will not be at all surprised if *Farthing* joins it there next year.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

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### Rob says

#### Haiku review:

*How can you expect  
a happy end in a book  
where Hitler still reigns?*

#### Review:

Though a bit slower to start than I expected, *Farthing* was (overall) an outstanding allegory on fascism disguised as an alternate history novel disguised as a murder mystery. By the time you're about one-quarter to one-third of the way through it, you will have trouble putting it down. The attention to the language is excellent (though I found myself pining for a bit of Irvine Welsh-style slang and cockney) and author Jo Walton pays peculiar attention to certain banalia like apparel, cooking, and eating.

The narrative structure follows a curious A/B pattern with odd chapters written 1st person (as Lucy Kahn) and even chapters written 3rd person (as Carmichael). It falls into a good rhythm that helps to control the pacing and the various reveals.

Walton's use of the alternate history platform seems to be a device to cast the setting of the murder mystery. The chapters that follow Carmichael have a nod to the classic pulp mysteries (I'm thinking Raymond Chandler) and honor those tropes such as re-hashing the events of the crime and narrating through theories about that crime.

One thing I feel disinclined to comment upon is the plausibility of this alternate history. Walton gives an oblique nod to Philip Roth's novel, *The Plot Against America* that makes me suspect that if Roth's alternate post-WWII world "works" then the story presented in *Farthing* could be grafted onto that timeline equally well. My knowledge of the WWII-era politics and military history run a bit thin however and I am hesitant to render an enthusiastic "it could have happened". That said, there is a bit of fearful symmetry between *Farthing* and the post-9/11 United States; this seems especially the case as you race through those last fifty pages telling yourself that it will be all right, that there is still a chance for a happy ending, even as you turn into the last chapter.

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## Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

On the back cover is a wonderfully written blurb/review from *Publishers Weekly* - I wish I could write like this! So succinct!

"World Fantasy Award-winner Jo Walton (*Tooth and Claw*) crosses genres without missing a beat with this stunningly powerful alternative history set in 1949, eight years after Britain agreed to peace with Nazi Germany, leaving Hitler control of the European continent. A typical gathering at the country estate of Farthing of the power elite who brokered the deal is thrown into turmoil when the main negotiator, Sir James Thirkie, is murdered, with a yellow star pinned to his chest with a dagger. The author deftly alternates perspectives between Lucy Kahn, the host's daughter, who has disgraced herself in her family's eyes by marrying a Jew, and Scotland Yard Inspector Peter Carmichael, who quickly suspects that the killer was not a Bolshevik terrorist. But while the whodunit plot is compelling, it's the convincing portrait of a country's incremental slide into fascism that makes this novel a standout."

That covers things pretty well.

I'm not a fan of generic crime books, but when a crime book/murder mystery is combined with interesting, well-developed characters and a unique premise, there's a lot more for me to get out of it. Having two narrators - Lucy Kahn in the first-person point of view, and Inspector Carmichael in third-person point of view - alternate chapters is quite clever. You never get bored with one because they balance each other so well. It's interesting how Lucy, without her knowledge of the details of the murder, arrives at her conclusions, knowing what she knows about her family and the other guests; and Carmichael, not knowing about the more intimate details of the family, arrives at his. It ensures that the reader knows more than either alone, but the whodunit is far from obvious.

As the blurb/review thingie stated, the book's framework is a murder mystery but it's really more about society and culture, prejudice and superiority and the "slide into fascism". Lucy's sure they were only invited to Farthing so her Jewish husband David would be a scapegoat for the murder. The police, except for Carmichael, are ready and willing to accept obvious clues, like the Star of David that was pinned to the dead man's chest having been bought by Kahn in France - even though you would hardly give your real name, and Kahn hasn't been to France (which could have been verified) and in fact would be stupid to go to France, which was conquered by the Nazi's. They're happier jumping to the obvious conclusions set up for them to jump to, and when Carmichael finds out who really did it - well, suffice it to say this book doesn't have a typical resolution. With my more modern-day, open-minded sensibilities, there were many cringe-inducing moments.

The world is tense and scary - it's not just Jews who are persecuted but homosexuals as well (and there seem to be a lot of them about!) - it's obvious to the reader that England is almost as scary and an uncertain place to be as Nazi Europe, even if you're not a Jew. The language and tone of the 1940s is spot-on, the small details all making you think it was written in the 40s and England really had signed a peace treaty with Hitler. The repercussions of such a thing are mind-boggling and far-reaching - and followed up in the next book, *Ha'penny* (more to follow perhaps?).

It's the prejudices that are really frightening. Many are still around today, though at least on the surface people pretend and hide their real opinions. In *Farthing*, there's nothing wrong at all in saying the most horrible things not just about Jews and other races/cultures, but about the lower classes too. And yet, it's really not all that different from the real 1949. The aristocracy was still hanging onto it's superiority with decaying claws, I'm sure, and the lower classes were still just as maligned. But with Walton's premise, England is slipping into a 1984 world (in *Farthing*, this book is called 1974 - why the change I wonder?).

The resolution unsettled me quite a bit, I have to admit. It makes sense and fits but it's not what you expect. The story itself takes place over the course of a week, and the pacing is steady and a little slow - not dull slow, but not rushed or hyperactive at all, giving you time to absorb all the little nuances of this well fleshed-out world and the characters who inhabit it. Because it's speculative fiction, you'll find it in the fantasy section, but it's not, strictly speaking, fantasy. If fantasy doesn't interest you but you love *1984* and *A Clockwork Orange*, I think you'd love this. If you love Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie or any other non-contemporary crime writer, you'd probably love this. And if you love reading about the early 20th century, this'd be good for you too, because even though the path England and the world is travelling down is not the "real" one, it's so well written and fascinating, that you can learn a lot about the period and people's sensibilities as well. And it's an interesting social experiment, on top of it all.

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### **Nick Fagerlund says**

A good-natured little cozy mystery about power, privilege, fascism, genocide, evil, and tea.

I lie, it's not good-natured in the slightest. It is, however, good. Go read it.

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### **Sarah says**

My local library system has three copies of this book, at three different branches. One branch files it under science fiction, one branch files it under fiction. At my library I tracked it down in the mystery section. What is it, then? Like Jasper Fforde's Tuesday Next books, it is set in an alternate England in which certain wars went another way than in real life. Also like Tuesday Next, the protagonist's brother was killed at war, and she married his best friend. That's where the similarity ends. Where those books are exercises in absurdity, this one feels gut-wrenchingly real.

Jo Walton has created a world in which Hitler's march on Europe went unchecked. A group of politicians known as the Farthing Set brokered an agreement with Germany that allowed England to remain autonomous. The US, under President Lindbergh, is increasingly isolationist, and has closed its doors to Jews. Europe's Jews live with yellow stars and ration books and ghettos and camps. England's Jewish population is free, but faces strong prejudice. This alternate history is the only SF aspect of the book, which otherwise reads as political mystery and social commentary (on the British class system, justice, anti-Semitism, and homophobia).

A few months ago a friend suggested that I try reading Dorothy Sayers, but warned me that her books could be read as somewhat anti-Semitic. I found that in those cases I could dismiss it as a product of the time; not so with this book. I found the treatment of the Jewish characters in this system of casual ingrained bigotry to be absolutely gutting. The author really managed to make me feel that things could have as easily gone this way as the way they did. Walton is an excellent writer: I found it hard to put the book down. Her style feels breezy and effortless in a way that takes an enormous amount of work to achieve. The main characters feel real, and the split narrative (alternated first and third person chapters) works in a way that such things often do not.

The only reason I'm rating this book four stars instead of five is the somewhat "to be continued" ending. Luckily, the second book is at my library (filed under literary fiction).

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## Bettie? says

Who killed Cock Robin?  
I, said the Sparrow

Description: *One summer weekend in 1949 — but not our 1949 — the well-connected "Farthing set", a group of upper-crust English families, enjoy a country retreat. Lucy is a minor daughter in one of those families; her parents were both leading figures in the group that overthrew Churchill and negotiated peace with Herr Hitler eight years before.*

*Despite her parents' evident disapproval, Lucy is married — happily — to a London Jew. It was therefore quite a surprise to Lucy when she and her husband David found themselves invited to the retreat. It's even more startling when, on the retreat's first night, a major politician of the Farthing set is found gruesomely murdered, with abundant signs that the killing was ritualistic.*

*It quickly becomes clear to Lucy that she and David were brought to the retreat in order to pin the murder on him. Major political machinations are at stake, including an initiative in Parliament, supported by the Farthing set, to limit the right to vote to university graduates.*

*But whoever's behind the murder, and the frame-up, didn't reckon on the principal investigator from Scotland Yard being a man with very private reasons for sympathizing with outcasts... and looking beyond the obvious.*

*As the trap slowly shuts on Lucy and David, they begin to see a way out — a way fraught with peril in a darkening world.*

Opening: **It started when David came in from the lawn absolutely furious.**

We are dropped into Farthing Set HQ, which is a microcosm of pre WWII fascist and sleazy Berlin (think Isherwood/Cabaret). The squeeze is on for Jews and gypsies, and the blacks and the reds had better watch out. It is this background shiver that ups the ante on this, which is ostensibly an Up-At-The-Big-House mystery.

Love the way that it is through David's lips we hear "It can't happen here."

On the minus side, I never once forgot that I was reading the book, turning the pages, so it didn't pull me in enough to exhort that I lived it. The writing was too pedestrian for that.

Great storyline exposing the need to always fight fascism wherever it is found, even if it is just one cell, it proliferates like the plague. Looking forward to the next, which is wending its way to my postbox as we speak.

(did I just do a good impression of the feedback sandwich! bwhahahaha)

3.5\* Farthing

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## Hirondelle says

The cover blurb "if Le Carré scares you, try Jo Walton" makes more sense after one reads the book. Though instead of "scares you" I would put it "if Le Carré depresses you and you like it, then you will like this". It is

the same sort of effect, and while I admire the ambition, the comparison does not flatter Farthing, who does not stand on strong foundations.

The plot is described accurately by the blurb above. The same cover compares this to *Fatherland* and *The Plot Against America* - I had read neither, this is my first alternate history fascists-won-ww2 book ( not counting *Swastika Night* *Swastika Night*, which I guess does not count, being set centuries and centuries in an alternate future), so I would give Farthing the advantage that the idea is fresh to me.

But I have many problems with everything else. The mystery plot, nominally the focus of the novel, is wrapped up rather fast and ridiculously ( hearsay by old Lady Thirski and servants blurbing like computer game clues) and we must assume that some of the plotters (all, except Daddy) are totally evil and remorseless (only Daddy has a hint of conscience, not that it matters). Worse almost, to my mind, is the betrayal of the mystery genre, in that clues dropped through the narrative come to nothing, mean nothing, have not their correct context explained. We know from the start Mummy was involved, since she was in the corridors at 6 am dressed and imperturbable, but we find no good reason for her to be there at all! What does Angela melodramatically reciting the poem and being embarrassed later mean? Surely Daphne's grief was real, and oh the wasted potential there, what would she do when she finds out, or not, about the plot. But we get nothing on that, just some extremely fast and contrived explanation of what was supposed to have happened (not that it makes much sense. I mean really a bad shot not trying to hit, manages to hit by accident two people with presumably just two shots?). The mystery plot gets short changed and steam rolled in the way for a depressing alternate history ending and a tragic LeCarré-ish ending. But the writing, universe, plotting is not rigorous, serious enough for me to take it seriously.

A lot of the character interaction seems a bit unlikely or heavy handed. I think it statistically unlikely that almost all the main characters are gay or bisexual, up to it being almost a joke ( seriously the tea thing seems to be the new oysters or snails. Or perhaps more correctly maybe the China tea is a signal of anti-fascist leanings and general "modern" tolerance). Characters seem almost stereotypical, the aristocrats, the faithful old servants, the rabid antisemitic housekeeper coming out of nothing. Even the jewish husband is too perfect, inventing micro-financing all by himself. Our characters get an escape and small revenge (the diamond) in ways which seem rather random and lucky - of course the one character to which we had had several random references before would turn out to be involved in a secret railway scheme and be able to send them to safety. Of course she would. And while I liked Lucy's chapters and narration, her instant knowledge of conception suspends my belief quite badly.

And then there are the details. Some of them conceivably could have happened in a parallel universe though unlikely : couturiers introducing makeup lines much earlier, or Twinings inventing Lady Grey Tea many decades early. Others seem just sloppy or lazy: for example: titles. I do not understand how Thirskie could be a baronet with a living legitimate nephew son of an older brother. Surely the nephew would have had the title, perhaps even the estates! Sloppy - and more instances around when things are not quite right.

Lots of ambition but floppy and fuzzy around the corners.

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## Siria says

This is such a great read: an old-fashioned country house mystery novel set within an alternate history premise: what if Hess' mission to the UK had succeeded, and Britain and the Reich had made peace in 1941? It's told from the alternating viewpoints of Lucy Eversley Kahn, the daughter of a conservative viscount who's married a Jewish man in spite of the disapproval of her family, and of Inspector Carmichael, the policeman assigned to investigate the murder of the leading politician Sir James Thirkie at the Eversley

family's country estate.

It's very atmospheric, and well set up. Walton excels at carrying through the consequences of her set up--there's no pulling of punches here. I really liked Lucy, who had a strong vein of common-sense lying beneath a rather feather-brained appearance; though she narrates an equal amount of the book with Carmichael, I think she's far more clearly the main character, and the better sketched out. Many of the secondary characters are neat sketches of the kind of unreflective, privileged members of the upper classes that you can meet even nowadays in English society. There's a satisfyingly Byzantine level of intermarriage and interrelationships between them all, though the fact that the majority of the main characters in the novel appeared to be homosexual/bisexual/have little problem with homosexuality did strain credulity a little.

Walton alludes with great subtlety to the changes which have occurred in the time-line from 1941 onwards--the references to an isolationist America under President Lindbergh, for example--but there were times when I felt as if she needed to sketch out more clearly how the time-line had moved from A to B. How is the murder of one politician the equivalent of the destruction of a national symbol such as the Reichstag Fire? How does an anti-Semitic, anti-Bolshevik, anti-Other political movement gain such a foothold so quickly without any indication of an accompanying ideological programme? How did the Second World War become commonly known as the 'Jewish War'? I'm not hugely up on modern history, but as far as I'm aware, knowledge of what was going on in concentration camps didn't really seep through to England until after the end of the war; things would have to have occurred very differently, to have been spun very differently, I think, for such a name to gain common parlance, and we don't see how that occurred.

For a book which was so good in evoking a period feel in other respects, I was really surprised to see that it messed up on something so basic as forms of address and descent of titles: surely Sir James Thirkie's nephew should have inherited the baronetcy before him, if Sir James were the younger son; the younger sons of earls are addressed as 'the Honourable' as a courtesy, not as 'Lord.' The Irish police force is also referred to as the Gardaí, not the Garda (which is singular), though I'm more willing to let that slide because, well, it's not something people who're not Irish tend to get right.

These do seem like a lot of quibbles, but really they are the elements I saw which took a good book and kept it from being really fantastic. There's a sequel, *Ha'penny*, which I shall have to keep an eye out for, and which I hope improves on the promise shown here.

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## Margaret says

Jo Walton is very good at taking something familiar and putting an unfamiliar, intriguing spin on it. Previously, she's done this with King Arthur (*The King's Peace* and *The King's Name*), Irish mythology (*The Prize in the Game*), and Victorian society as written about by Anthony Trollope (*Tooth and Claw*). In *Farthing*, she takes the traditional English country mystery, adds in alternate history, and comes up with something new and brilliant.

Lucy Kahn has come to her parents' country house, *Farthing*, for the weekend, bringing her new husband, David. Their marriage caused a scandal, because David is Jewish, while Lucy is of the British upper class, and Lucy is hoping that the stay with her parents will bring about a reconciliation. Instead, it brings violent death, when one of the other houseguests, who was instrumental in bringing about the 1941 peace with Hitler and Germany, is murdered, under circumstances that seem to implicate David. Soon, Inspector Carmichael of Scotland Yard enters the scene, and he and Lucy follow separate but parallel investigative tracks which lead to shocking conclusions.

The point-of-view alternates between Lucy's first person and Carmichael's third person, both splendidly done. I particularly liked Lucy, who's not quite as scatterbrained as she might initially appear, and who has a marvelous style of speaking and system of allusions (I loved her terms for sexual orientation). Both she and Carmichael are outsiders to some extent, Lucy because she's chosen to marry a Jew, Carmichael because he's a policeman (and for other reasons), and thus both are excellent viewpoints characters, looking from the outside in at different angles.

Walton slowly slips in bits and pieces of the alternate history, of which the salient fact, as mentioned above, is England's peace with Hitler, engineered by a group of conservative politicians called "the Farthing Set". Eventually, a clearer picture of this alternate history emerges, of what's already happened, and what might be going to happen. The resonances with today's political scene are chilling, and the book's ending is very unsettling.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

Farthing by Jo Walton is a murder mystery, set in an alternate historical England after "the Farthing Set" brokered a truce with fascism/Hitler rather than trying to win the war. The book has alternating chapters between Lucy (an aristocratic daughter married to the Jewish man being set up to take the fall for the crime in a very anti Jewish Britain) and the inspector.

The murder mystery is really the focus here, and Walton doesn't keep her quirky self entirely out of it, which I found made it a pleasure to read. And since I had listened to *Among Others* in audio, I was hearing the words in her voice. There is commentary on societal expectations (for beauty, for brains) that I feel are her own thoughts, some pretty significant thoughts on weak vs. strong tea (this felt multilayered and targeted, not quite sure I got it!) and I was pleased/surprised to see a number of characters who were non heterosexual in this time period.

And yet strange to read it on "Independence Day" in 2018. I feel the author is asking the reader to consider the consequences of allowing fascist behavior to continue whether that's along our border or inside it. Is it enough to push it off? Is it enough if it doesn't effect you specifically because you are rich enough/ the right race or religion/ from the right family? There are policies being considered in this alternate UK where you can only attend an institute of higher education if you attended a certain type of school as a teen, but we know from David Kahn's experience that he was already not allowed to attend private school as a Jewish Brit. He attended school in France. There are all these little pieces that by themselves seem innocuous, especially if you are the person unaffected, but seen as a whole they start to intentionally omit, push out, reject, deny.... it just felt pretty familiar.

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### **Jon says**

I feel mostly dissatisfied after reading *Farthing*, especially after hearing all the hype. As a mystery, it proved unchallenging. As alternate history, it intrigued me, but left me wanting more depth, more worldbuilding. I could have done without the addition of another second class citizen group, besides the already persecuted Jews.

The writing style reminded me of Agatha Christie (but not as well done) and Dorothy Sayers (again, not quite as well done). I would have preferred a narrative told from either first person or third person, but not both alternating.

## Sherwood Smith says

Walton has a knack for taking a specific story (such as the utterly splendid *Tooth and Claw* that uses Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* and crosses it with dragons, getting a sum greater than both parts) or a storyline (like *Arthuriana*) and crossing it orthogonally so that both are transformed into something altogether different. And yet one can see traces of each source. Being a visual being, I can only compare it to the color prism we used as kids, when we laid the yellow glass circle over the edge of the blue to make green—with the edges of the yellow and blue still showing. Better, perhaps, a palimpsest: one sees traces of old underlying the new, so you get a third effect.

Anyway, she takes the form of the English country house murder mystery, with all its emphasis on rank and manners, and crosses it with an Alternate History. So we open with all the implied tensions between the genteel manners of people of privilege—their emphasis on being civilized—with a body lying in a bedroom, one of their own done to death by violence. Meanwhile we discover that this England's 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 POVs. There is the first person account of Lucy Kahn, daughter of the ultra-conservative Farthing Set (named after their country house) who dared to marry a Jew. 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. The alternate chapters are third person from the POV 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 is the chief suspect. The alternating storyline builds with inexorable (and inescapable) tension as the stakes grow exponentially. Does the mystery get solved? Oh yes, but I can guarantee you are not prepared for the double-echo sonic boom of the ending.

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## Lubinka Dimitrova says

I've been reading up on my sci-fi awards list, and this one was one of my priorities. To be honest, it didn't exactly feel a lot like science fiction, and the alternate history setting, while quite allegorical, did not strike me as absolutely needed and/or overly world shattering - what is described to have happened in Britain is pretty much what happened everywhere else up until Hitler's downfall, and I didn't feel any particular compassion for the Polish cook who saw her "loyal" clients throw stones to her restaurant's windows, when being a Jew became a crime in Poland. People are like that everywhere, have always been like that. Will always be like that. Nor was the murder mystery extremely well plotted. But the book was actually very captivating, some of the characters grew on me (many didn't), and the language was exquisite. Compared to Michael Chabon's *Yiddish Policemen's Union* which was excruciatingly verbose, this is a true gem. I read it in two days, and I utterly enjoyed it. I'm glad I didn't read any of the reviews before I started it. Sometimes having expectations, either good or bad, can ruin a book, and I believe that for me personally this is one of these cases.

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## Lyn says

My initial thoughts on reading Farthing by Jo Walton was: why do an alternate history? It's been done before, and in a lot of ways, what can this quiet, minimalist Welsh author do for this side street sub-genre of the speculative fiction highway?

Phillip K. Dick wrote *The Man in the High Castle*, published in 1962, where the Axis had won, but here, there has been a stalemate between England and Nazi Germany. Hitler has turned east, and after a peace accord has been signed, he turns on the Russian Bolsheviks and has left Great Britain, and a President Charles Lindbergh led, increasingly isolationist US and Imperialist Japan is in Shanghai.

What is science fiction or fantasy? PKD said of the difference "Fantasy involves that which general opinion regards as impossible; science fiction involves that which general opinion regards as possible under the right circumstances" and so in that regard, and under Dick's definition, Farthing is most definitely science fiction since military and political historians have opined that Hitler making this decision, to fight on only one front, was very much possible... an alternate history.

Anti-Semitism.

There are no Jews allowed in the US and the people in England have anti Jewish sentiment, just as "on the Continent". At it's heart, Farthing is a murder mystery about an odd assassination in an English country estate, a member of the ruling party, the same group that had orchestrated the pact with Hitler and a Jewish man is being implicated in a ridiculously thin charade. Reminiscent of Sinclair Lewis' 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*. Walton has shown that it can happen in Great Britain as Jewish citizens enjoy a perilous position, better than those in Europe, but not wholly free either.

Homosexuality.

Interestingly, this is a central theme of the novel. It seems that most characters have some homosexual tendencies. Walton's characters make a fun terminological distinction between Roman – straight; Macedonian – both, and Athenian – homosexual (reminiscent of The Kinsey scale, also called the Heterosexual–Homosexual Rating Scale) and laws making illegal homosexual acts as a way to control people.

Courage.

Farthing is a statement on the English character, "keeping a stiff upper lip and all that" and "keeping the sides up" both as a compliment and an indictment. Walton spends time and makes observation and comment upon royalty and class distinctions. The author also demonstrates how the rule of law and the importance of having one system that is the same for rich and poor is imperative in one of her more cautionary aspects of this story.

This also reminds me of the scientific experiment where the test subject thinks he is conducting a question and answer session and an actor plays the part of the testee. When the testee answers incorrectly, the testor is told to press a button that he is told will deliver an electric shock to the actor playing the testee. Even when the test subject is told that the electric shock is approaching lethal levels and when the actor is pretending to writhe in pain, the experiment still revealed that a high percentage of people continued to shock the other person. The reason being simply that they were told to do this.

Walton makes the realistic observation that bad things can happen in good places, that even good people, courageous people in ordinary situations can fall short when in extraordinary hardship.

Finally, Walton owes a literary debt to George Orwell. Subtle, understated allusions to 1984 are prevalent and are shown contextually correct to her story.

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### Jaylia3 says

Deftly blended, this combination of an alternate world history with an English country house mystery opens in 1949, but it's not exactly the 1949 or England we know. Eight years earlier a group of conservative, anti-semitic politicians known as the "Farthing set" made peace with Nazi Germany, securing Britain's borders after most of continental Europe had fallen to Hitler. The Germans continue to fight the Soviets, the American president is isolationist Charles Lindbergh, and the Jews left in Europe are living a nightmare.

Against this background, the aristocratic, politically powerful Farthing set comes together for a country weekend. The daughter of one of the couples, Lucy Kahn, is deeply in love and happily married to David, a Jewish man, so she's surprised that her parents have invited them to join this gathering at her old family home. If it was up to her they'd skip it, she doesn't like this group and they see her as a race traitor, but David thinks the invitation is a gesture of reconciliation so they go. But when they wake up the first morning they discover that a powerful politician has been murdered in his bed, and it quickly becomes clear that whoever did this is trying to frame David.

The story alternates between two very different voices. Lucy's chapters chat to readers in the first person, while the point of view of Inspector Carmichael, sent by Scotland Yard to investigate the crime, is told through the third person. Carmichael is a principled, thoughtful man who has secrets of his own--he's a homosexual. Though he's working diligently to uncover the truth, he's being pressured by his superiors to just arrest David and close the case.

Jo Walton's versatility amazes me. The first books I read by her involved a simulation of Plato's Republic, set up by the goddess Athena on the ancient island of Atlantis, but this is obviously a very different book, and she's written it from two highly contrasting points of view. Tightly plotted, the tension builds quickly and continuously in Farthing, so by the time I was 80% in my heart was pounding and the book was impossible for me to put down. It's the first book in a trilogy that I look forward to continuing once my adrenaline comes back down to normal levels.

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### Barbara says

Farthing: a small historical British coin.

Farthings: A group of villages which are home to a privileged group of politically connected people, called "The Farthing Set".

The main thrust of this novel takes place at a weekend retreat of "The Farthing Set", people who are politically well-connected and all with the "proper pedigrees". The time is designated as 1949, which can be somewhat confusing, because this group was allegedly instrumental in a Peace Treaty with Hitler in 1940, but this is after all, *a novel*. During this gathering a murder occurs and the intricate tale begins to unwind. Rather than dwell on the plot here, I think it is important to observe the depths of unrelenting anti-semitism and homophobia that is present.

Coincidentally, as I was reading this book, The New Republic (September 23, 2010), published a review of another publication, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England*, by Jonathan Freedland. This illuminating article succinctly describes the history of antisemitism in England and the social and political implications. He states that England is the key to antisemitism itself- they were the first nation to cause an *enduring*, national expulsion of an entire population of Jewish people in history.

"And the subject at hand- English antisemitism- often operates in the nebulous, subtle, implicit register..."

Freedland further comments in a quotation from this book, "... the mentality of modern English antisemitism,' to the slippery, subcutaneous prejudices and assumptions, the slights and the snubs, that have informed centuries of English social life"

Walton has captured this climate with clarity and painful realism. The Farthing Set, who are intent upon maintaining appearances, propriety and dignity; belie their stances with statements and actions of coldness, disdain and complete antipathy toward both Jews and homosexual individuals.

Initially Farthing appeared to be a light, pleasant mystery, but one can view, as the narration progresses, that there is something far more odious occurring here. This is a compelling, complex novel.

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## Dorian says

Thoughts on Jo Walton's Farthing and its sequel Ha'Penny:

Really, these are the most delightful, most exciting, most troubling, most resonant books I've read in a long time. Yes, they're genre fiction, which means they'll be dismissed by some. And what a dreadful shame that would be--I wish these books were talked about as much as some of the things that pass for "literary fiction" these days.

Even at the level of genre, they're interesting: mystery/thriller much inspired by 20s & 30s Golden Age English Detective Fiction, speculative/historical fiction (especially of the "counterfactual" sort--to wit Roth's *Plot Against America*, Deighton's *SS-GB*), as well as English fiction more generally of the 30s and 40s (Bowen, Green, Greene, etc), the sort that Sarah Waters's recent novel *The Night Watch* nourished itself so fruitfully on.

Lest that helter-skelter list make it sound like some dreadful pastiche--fear not! The books are above all elegant and assured.

These are the first two books in a trilogy, which is set in an imagined 1949 in which, almost a decade into a peace made with Nazi Germany, England is ruled by a law-and-order junta who have manufactured political unrest, complete with fear-mongering against Jews, Communists, queers, and other ostensible "terrorist" types. (Sound familiar?)

Each book alternates between a (different) first-person female voice and a third person voice centered around an inspector at Scotland Yard. (So they're very interesting in terms of narrative technique as well.)

At the level of politics, sexuality, aesthetics, religion, and culture these books couldn't be more interesting. I

stayed up until 2 finishing Ha'Penny, absolutely riveted, but also gutted that I'd have to wait until next summer to find out what happens.

May these books find the widest possible audience.

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### **Marijan says**

Zašto petica? Knjiga je napisana s puno detalja, truda, istraživanja. Imaš osjećaj da si stvarno glavnom liku u glavi i na trenutke zaboraviš da čitaš knjigu. A povijesna podloga mi je puno uvjerljivija nego recimo Deightonov SS-GB (isto odlična knjiga). osim jednog malog blesavog detalja koji me grebao kao biologa/medicinara, ostalo je, moram reći, izvrsno. dakle 4.5 zaokruženo na 5. jedva čekam nastavak.

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### **Chris says**

The book and style are compelling in this alternate world where England made peace with Hitler. Luce and her husband David face a rather horrible situation when he is implicated in a murder at her family estate.

I found Luce's voice to be real, and I liked the switching viewpoints. If you've seen the BBC mysteries set around the time, it is very much like that (the televised mysteries, not the actual books).

I did have some problems, however. While I believe that Luce and David were in love, I really don't understand why it had to be revealed that David had been Luce's brother's lover as well. (Apparently everyone but Luce and her father are homosexual or bisexual). It just felt, well stupid. It would've been interesting if there had been a discussion about how they were each trying to recapture the relationship they each had with the brother, Hugh, who died in the Battle of Britain. But this isn't done at all. Honestly, the big reveal about Carmichael doesn't really seem that big of a deal after everything else.

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### **Carol. says**

Alas, another case of the right reader, wrong book. I went into Farthing with rather high expectations, I confess. I saw Walton has won a couple of awards for other works--including the World Fantasy Award--and this one was nominated for a Nebula and Locus, among others. When this series got several mentions on The Incomparable (produced by 5by5), a podcast series devoted to all things geek sci-fi, I became tempted to try it. When the book arrived from the library, I was surprised to discover it was more alt-history than either fantasy or sci-fi. *Well, I thought, I can manage. I rather love the gentle English mysteries, and I'm a huge fan of Connie Willis' To Say Nothing of the Dog.* Within pages, it referenced Three Men in a Boat, another English tale that Willis references. *Okay. Might kind of familiar.* Little did I realize I was not in for a charming body-in-the-library English romp but more an exploration of the Third Reich and England if history had gone another way.

It begins with the the gentle tones of a Dorothy Sayers mystery, narrated by a daffy Wooster-like aristocratic lead, Lucy. She's perplexedly trying to do up her hair at the same time she comforts her charming Jewish husband that the slight he just endured wasn't personally meant. Of course, she's soothing him; she understands it was meant, as Jewish people aren't considered equal with the upper-crust crowd. The book begins to take on more ominous tones; not only are we dealing with the general foibles of the gentry

(dressing for dinner? Fixing hair over feelings?), but underlying class and racial divides as well. *Hmm. Still as some potential to explore the situation, only in a multi-culti kind of way. Okay, that's cool.*

Then the body is found; not only is a guest at the house party murdered, but his body is desecrated with a Jewish star, used on the Continent to identify Jews. The guests are suspicious of David, especially as the man killed is the one who brokered the peace between the governments of Britain and the Third Reich. But suspecting David seems obvious, and several herrings are deployed our way by his ridiculous widow and her sister--coincidentally, the victim's lover. Our heroine narrates these details in her charmingly silly way, protective of her husband, disgusted at the widow, but being careful that her thought "train didn't leave the station before I have a chance to stop it."

The viewpoint begins to alternate with that of a gay Scotland Yard Inspector. It starts to become clear that being gay is not acceptable, much like being Jewish, so the Inspector is largely closeted. Homosexuality and bisexuality becomes a mirror for the Jewish issue; a disenfranchised identity that is shared by many, however hypocritically. (There's a strange sub-bit here where Lucy shows her charming daffiness by sharing the terms she and her brother used for gay/bi/straight, including 'Athenean'). His own experiences lend him certain sympathies with David. I had hopes that the murderer would be successfully uncovered, as the Inspector showed definite signs of brains. His efforts to solve the case are troubled by the obligatory second-strike, only this time it was Bolsheviks. Inspector Carmichael struggles to reconcile these incongruous leads, but catches a break or two though determined detective work.

Suddenly, the storyline goes someplace darker, dropping the countryside romp for an exploration on politics, society and ethics. The last half of the book weren't about the murder as much as they were about politics. Lucy is no longer charming and daffy; she's impotent and waking to ugly realities. David is as well, as his natural tendency towards showing a positive example fails him. While I felt Walton avoided overt diatribes, politics around Hitler and Stalin are rarely subtle, and were used in overbearing fashion here. Frankly, I felt it also lacked creativity. Germany did a fine stand-in as the ultimate villain, but by the end, Britain wasn't far behind. The issues of sexuality seem a forced metaphor for the ways in which the ruling class spouts a party line but doesn't follow it. However, it seemed generally a crutch to explain relationships, intention and morality.

Overall, it left a bitter taste in my mouth for so many reasons--the disappointing story, anything involving the Third Reich, a tacked-on ending, and an interesting plot gone so wrong. It just isn't a congruous narrative; it wants to be both meat and meringue, and so succeeds at neither.

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