

**Investigating different aspects of solidarity:
Brook Farm in Adele Fasick's historical mystery
*A Death in Utopia***

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Abstract

The eponymous utopia in *A Death in Utopia* (2014) by Adele M. Fasick stands for The Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, a famous intentional community set up by George and Sophia Ripley in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, in 1841. But for economic solidarity and the solidarity of ideas, Brook Farm would have never come into existence. The following article shows that Fasick's idea of inscribing the fictional investigation of a criminal conundrum into the life of Brook Farm has proved to be successful as far as "magnifying" the issue of solidarity is concerned. During her investigation Charlotte Edgerton, a Brook Farm member and an amateur sleuth, reveals not only the tragic circumstances concerning the crime but also the ideals and daily routines of the intentional community, a facet most probably intended by the author who has already explored the history of Brook Farm on a scholarly basis.

Key words

utopia, Brook Farm, intentional community, solidarity, historical mystery

**Solidarność pod lupą detektywa amatora:
Brook Farm w kryminale historycznym Adele Fasick
pt. *A Death in Utopia***

Abstrakt

Tytułowa utopia w kryminale historycznym *A Death in Utopia* (2014) autorstwa Adele M. Fasick odnosi się do słynnej wspólnoty, znanej pod nazwą Brook Farm, założonej przez George'a i Sophię Ripley'ów w West Roxbury w stanie Massachusetts w 1841 roku. Bez ducha solidarnościowego, obecnego nie tylko w aspekcie ideowym, ale również ekonomicznym, utworzenie wspólnotowego gospodarstwa zainspirowanego myślą transcendentalistów nie byłoby możliwe. W celu przekazania jak największej liczby informacji dotyczących historii początkowego okresu istnienia Brook Farm, Fasick spleta intrygę kryminalną z prezentacją codziennego życia wspólnoty, ich lęków o przyszłość wspólnego przedsięwzięcia, ale przede wszystkim wiary w możliwość zreformowania świata. Niniejszy artykuł omawia różne aspekty solidarności, uwypuklone podczas amatorskiego śledztwa prowadzonego przez Charlotte Edgerton, nauczycielkę i członkinię Brook Farm.

Słowa kluczowe

utopia, Brook Farm, wspólnota, solidarność, kryminał historyczny

Regardless of differences in terms of their organization or in the way they attempt to achieve their goals, all intentional communities share one characteristic, i.e. the solidarity of their members. Not used per se, the notion of solidarity undeniably permeates Sargent's (2010) concise definition of the phenomena often referred to as intentional communities, practical utopias, communes, or utopian experiments. Nothing else but solidarity is the lifeblood of "a group of [people] [...] who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed purpose" (Sargent 2010: 6). It is the solidarity of ideas frequently combined with economic

solidarity that enables intentional communities to put their visions of a better world into practice.

A Death in Utopia (2014) by Adele Fasick¹ is a historical mystery novel set in The Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, established by the former Unitarian minister George Ripley and his wife, Sophia, in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. The fictional events described by Fasick, i.e. a mysterious death of a famous Bostonian minister visiting Brook Farm and the criminal investigation that follows take place during the second year of Ripley's endeavour, when the initial firm belief in the success of the community is being systematically weakened by poor crops and daunting financial problems. The narrative moves between two main focalisers: a Brook Farm member, Charlotte Edgerton, and an outsider, Daniel Gallagher, who is an Irish immigrant. Thus, the reader may not only observe the life of the agricultural cooperative Brook Farm from the perspective of its member but also get to understand the impression it made on people who were not familiar with the community's revolutionary ideas. The two young characters, whose ultimate goals differ considerably, unite their forces to discover the truth behind Winslow Hopewell's premature death.

Charlotte, a teacher in Brook Farm primary school, believes that the community will not only persevere but also set an example for other people to follow and eventually revolutionize the entire country, enhancing the idea of equality and cooperation for the benefit of all people. She is perfectly content to lead a communal life in which the chores of everyday existence are

¹ Adele Fasick, professor emerita of Library and Information Science who worked at the University of Toronto and San Jose State University. In 1992/93 Fasick was president of the Association for Library and Science Information Education (ALISE), a non-profit organization promoting research and excellence in the field of library and information science education. Prior to trying her hand at writing cozies Fasick published *An Uncommon Woman* (2012), a biography of Margaret Fuller, a famous Bostonian writer and journalist and one of the initiators of the Brook Farm experiment. Fasick's *A Death in Utopia* is the first novel in the Charlotte Edgerton mystery series. For more information concerning Adele Fasick and her writing, see her blog entitled "Teacups and Tyrants".

evenly shared. She wants to believe that her decision to join Ripley's experiment provides her with a place where she can "[feel] safe among friends" (Fasick 2014: 29).

Daniel Gallagher's ambitions are quite different: it is not safety he craves but affluence, coming as an award for excellence in journalism, which he hopes to develop over the course of time. The shocking news of Hopewell's mysterious death does not leave any scar on his visions of a better world. On the contrary, it fills him with the hope that his long-term dream of becoming a journalist may come true. Daniel decided to leave Ireland and come to the United States of America in order to make a better life for himself. He focuses his mind on obtaining a position in a newspaper and earning enough money to "bring his mothers and sisters over to a new country. How surprised they'd be when they saw him in a suit and wearing a cravat – a respected newspaper man" (Fasick 2014: 56). He has a premonition that writing an article on the reverend's death, whose circumstances are more than dubious, will help him to convince Mr. Cabot, the owner of the Bostonian *Transcript*, to employ him. "This is my chance', Daniel explained eagerly. 'No one will ever give me a newspaper job unless I prove I can find a spectacular story and write it up faster than anyone else'" (Fasick 2014: 32).

Winslow Hopewell is found dead in the vicinity of Brook Farm very early in the morning. "He [has] a big cut in his forehead and the blood [has] oozed down onto his eyes" (Fasick 2014: 27). The wound looks suspicious as if Hopewell got the fatal blow with a heavy and sharp object. All Brook Farm members are shocked, since nothing of the kind has ever happened to any of them or to the people who paid visits to their community, just as the deceased did. While they are reluctant to blame anybody, one of the Brook Farm neighbours, Mr. Platt, remembers that he saw some tramp "sneaking in his barn early this morning" (Fasick 2014: 30). It quickly turns out that this is the very same man from whom Daniel Gallagher learned the story of the calamitous incident. Daniel is

more than sure that Mr. Platt is not only wrong but also accuses the penniless Irish tramp on the basis of his prejudices against immigrants.

“I am going to find out the truth”, [Daniel] answered, frowning. “The man Mr. Platt saw must have been the fellow I met in Boston – Rory O’Connor his name was. He didn’t look or talk like a killer. He’s poor and ignorant. They may lock him up before he knows what’s happening to him. [...]”. (Fasick 2014: 32)

Although initially Charlotte worries that the articles in newspapers may discredit her community, she decides to get involved in investigating Hopewell’s homicide in order to help the poor man whom, like Daniel, she cannot believe to be the culprit. She regards it as unfair to accuse a person of committing such a hideous crime only because he is in poverty and looks shabby. Besides, she suspects that Mr. Platt, who is highly critical of the Brook Farmers’ lifestyle, may be equally disapproving of immigrants, treating them as a burden to his country. In this way the endeavour to reveal the mystery of Winslow Hopewell’s homicide ceases to be “a stroke of luck” (Fasick 2014: 21) for Daniel and a tragic event that may incriminate her community for Charlotte but becomes a common goal for both amateur sleuths. Solidarity with the man whom also the sheriff is quick to find guilty galvanizes Daniel and Charlotte into action.

Following the tracks of the two novices in sleuthing, the reader of *A Death in Utopia* gains the impression that Fasick deliberately impedes and decelerates the progress of their investigation in order to reflect the slow pace of life in nineteenth-century America. Neither Charlotte nor Daniel can afford to devote their entire time to solving the criminal conundrum since above all they have to make their living. Apart from having classes with primary school children, Charlotte is obliged to help with the housework; Daniel copies documents for the sheriff and struggles hard to be able to pay for the room

he rents and, most importantly, not to end up working in the docks like most Irish immigrants.

Charlotte and Daniel keep writing letters to inform each other about any discovery they have made or any new ideas concerning the methods of investigation. Meetings on an everyday basis are out of the question, since the distance from Boston, where Daniel resides, to Brook Farm is about 9 miles (14 kilometers), and it has to be covered either on foot or, if they are lucky (or have some spare money), in a horse cart. Since winter is approaching, the struggle of the two amateur detectives is also affected by the weather. All the obstacles that Fasick puts to the foreground may exasperate avid readers of mysteries, who are prepared to follow or anticipate the reasoning of the sleuth rather than watch him treading on a muddy road from Boston to West Roxbury, or the other way round. However, Fasick's idea to adjust the pace of the investigation to the pace of life in the first half of the 19th century allows the reader to explore more thoroughly the problems of the multinational country as well as the daily life of Brook Farm, with a special focus on different aspects of solidarity. Thus, once the readers adapt to the slow pace of life presented in the novel, so natural for Daniel and Charlotte, they are able to appreciate the vivid pictures of 19th century America that Fasick has in stock.

The way Charlotte perceives the Brook Farmers' system of education – undoubtedly, their greatest achievement – is congruent with the opinions of the former students of Brook Farm schools or those who visited them out of sheer curiosity.

Orestes Browson, though he had ideological differences with Brook Farm, called its school “the best school I ever saw” [...]. For the youngest children, a teacher took two or three, and work with them for an hour or so then let them play. They never had to sit still and do nothing and so suffered none of the “bad physical or moral effects of confinement”. As a result, they learned more than in “ordinary schools” and did not become “troublesome” to others. (Kesten 1993: 135)

Charlotte, an innovative and dedicated teacher, fosters students' interest in literature, music and science. She frequently takes her restless pupils out to let them learn through observation and experiment. Aesop's fables and carefully chosen songs and ballads are meant not only to entertain the children but also to "teach [them] the ethics of human relationships" (Kesten 1993: 136). In short, neither the curriculum nor the teaching methods applied in the schooling system of Brook Farm resemble a "conventional school where [Charlotte] would endlessly teach children to memorize Bible verses and pious maxims" (Fasick 2014: 3).

In *A Death in Utopia* frequent encounters and conversations with historical figures, e.g. George and Sophia Ripley, Charles Dana, Lydia Maria Child, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Elisabeth Peabody, add authenticity not only to the fictional account of the communal life but also to the criminal investigation presented from the perspective of literary characters.

The visit of Reverend Winslow Hopewell, the victim, is nothing extraordinary, since many celebrities from Boston come to Brook Farm to learn more about Ripley's experiment. Although few people decide to join the community for good, they are still eager to experience the communal life for a week or so.

Brook Farm was from its earliest days always something of a Mecca for the hordes of friends, well-wishers, and the merely curious who showed up [...] invariably expecting a welcome reception and perhaps a cup of tea as well. No other antebellum American community – and eighty-four were in existence, at one moment or another, during the 1840s – attracted so many visitors. (Delano 2004: 52)

Some of the visitors promise financial support, yet, unfortunately, not too many keep their word. It appears that talking about solidarity and common goals very rarely inspires people to sacrifice their particular interests in order to alter the world they are, at least in theory, dissatisfied with. The words below

uttered by one of the Brook Farmers sound like an appeal which is doomed to remain unanswered.

“We certainly need people to join us”, Fanny muttered. “Too many people are leaving and outsiders who say they support us just slither away without doing a thing. Why don’t they understand that the kind of community we are building is going to change the whole country?” (Fasick 2014: 17)

Nathaniel Hawthorne was among those famous people who decided not only to invest in Ripley’s experiment but also to live and work in Brook Farm. Although he was a founding member of the community, he managed to endure staying there only for about six months in the first year of the existence of Brook Farm. In his study entitled *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia*, Sterling F. Delano states that Hawthorne’s reasons for coming to West Roxbury were more pragmatic than idealistic. “[He expected] to have time and quietude to concentrate on his fiction, and he hoped that the new colony would provide a home for him and Sofia [Peabody] once they were married” (Delano 2004: 55). However, it quickly turns out that the physical labour is so strenuous and time-consuming that Hawthorne feels deprived of any energy to get down to writing, which remains his ultimate goal. “He was especially disheartened by [the task of spreading around the farm] the mounds of manure – which Ripley kept cheerfully referring to as the “gold mine” [...]” (Delano 2004: 56). It appears that although initially enthusiastic about physical work and almost mesmerized by Ripley’s zeal to achieve success, also in financial terms, Hawthorne very quickly ceases to believe that “in the utopian economy, waste does have to turn to gold in a more literal, less ironic way” (Francis 2010: 85). Ten years after leaving Brook Farm, Hawthorne writes *The Blithedale Romance*, which is inspired by his stay with the community. In his introduction to *The Blithedale Romance*, Arlin Turner (1958: 14) states that

[Hawthorne] wrote about ideas, usually ideas with a moral tincture and with bearing on human conduct and human character. The inclusive idea of *The Blithedale Romance* is brotherhood; and what the author had observed at Brook Farm, including his own activities and thoughts and feelings, simply furnished the paraphernalia for handling and displaying that idea.

The events described in *A Death in Utopia* take place when Hawthorne is no longer a Brook Farm member, and so Fasick does not include him into the “cast” of the historical figures who people the pages of her novel. However, she does not omit to refer to the disillusion with the famous persona the community must have experienced, once he resolved not only to abandon their common dream but also to sue them for the money he had invested. In her letter to Sophia Ripley, Fanny Grey comments on Hawthorne’s lack of solidarity with other members of the group, who used to be so proud to have him in their ranks².

[Nathaniel Hawthorne] said he needed solitude to work at his art and to build a home for the woman he hoped to marry. It was sad to see him go, but when he compounded that treachery by suing dear Mr. Ripley and the Community to get back the money he had invested in buying shares, I believe the action was not only insulting but almost criminal. (Fasick 2014: 212)

Fasick alludes to the mutual disappointment experienced by Hawthorne and the community, yet regardless of the problematic financial matters, invariably analyzed by scholars writing on Hawthorne and Brook Farm, it is undeniable that by writing *The Blithedale Romance*, he contributed to the everlasting fame of Brook Farm, since his book has a well-established position among the classics of American literature.

² Delano mentions that Sophia Ripley described Hawthorne as “our prince – prince in everything” and a man “to reverence [and] admire” (Delano 2004: 51).

The constant struggle for financial stability does not mean that the community is oblivious to the problems the whole country is haunted by. They invite numerous influential people who give speeches on ideas which, like the abolition of slavery, are considered not only revolutionary but also potentially dangerous. On the evening preceding Reverend Hopewell's homicide, Brook Farm is visited by Lydia Maria Child, a writer and activist fighting for the equality of all people, regardless of the colour of their skin.

Her book advocating the immediate freeing of slaves in the Southern states was so explosive the Boston Athenaeum took away her library privileges. She was exactly the type of speaker Brook Farmers prided themselves on inviting to visit their community. Scaring the local farmers with visions of radical social changes was part of their plan to change the world. (Fasick 2014: 7)

While listening to Lydia Maria Child, condemning the law "by which marriage between persons of different color is pronounced illegal" (Fasick 2014: 9), Charlotte gauges various reactions of people attending the meeting with the writer. Students from the Brook Farm boarding school are enthusiastic about the anti-slavery movement and immediately shower George Ripley with questions such as: "What can we do here at Brook Farm?" or "Why don't we have any members who are former slaves?" (Fasick 2014: 10). Unlike the sympathetic students a group of farmers, neighbours of the community, are appalled by Child's radical ideas because they firmly believe that "People like to live with others of their kind", and that "Mixing the races together brings nothing but trouble" (Fasick 2014: 12).

Most of the "true" farmers living in the vicinity of Brook Farm are hidebound about all revolutionary changes, considering them either illogical or unhealthy. Their attitude towards Ripley's experiment of communal living is a blend of bias and a sense of superiority, which does not mean that they put the old saying: "good fences make good neighbours", into practice.

On the contrary, knowing that the Brook Farmers' knowledge of cultivating land or husbandry of livestock is very limited, not to say non-existent, many locals do their best to help. In some cases, solidarity between neighbours, who share nothing but problems, such as another year of poor crops, appears to be stronger and more reliable than common views and ideals which create a bond only for a short period of animated discussion.

“Not farmers indeed!” Mr. Platt [the local farmer] exploded. “Do you know that no one on the place will slaughter the pig for themselves, though they're happy enough to eat pork? They don't even like to wring the neck of the chicken. Humph! My ten-year-old boy can do that much!” [...] “Everyone should milk their cows in the morning and then go off and write a book for the rest of the day they say. That's nonsense!” [...]

“Why do you help the Brook Farmers then?”

“They are neighbours. Can't let them starve. Besides, they pay me for the use of my wagon and tools. Or they used to. Now they are short of money [...]”. (Fasick 2014: 56-57)

Despite their firm conviction that Ripley's weird dream about “a life that would balance intellectual efforts with manual labour” (Fasick 2014: 2) is doomed to failure, the local farmers eagerly come to listen to famous people invited to Brook Farm. One of the guests, whose speech is presented at great length in the novel, is Margaret Fuller. She comes to Brook Farm four days after the mysterious death of Reverend Hopewell, and right after the only suspect – an Irish tramp, initially locked up by the sheriff – has been released from prison. The man is proved innocent by Charlotte and Daniel, who evidence that he could not have committed the crime. As it turns out during the meeting, the sheriff is not the only one inclined to put all the blame on the Irish tramp seen in the vicinity of Brook Farm. When Margaret Fuller, befriended with Hopewell, starts her talk pondering over the tragic event and asking “What could have brought such evil into our world?”, she unintentionally

ignites an explosion of venomous remarks about Irish immigrants. “It’s all the outsiders we’re letting into the neighbourhood”, interrupted the [local] farmer. “It was one of those Irish tramps that killed the reverend. [...] They’re lazy, shiftless people who would rather lie than tell the honest truth” (Fasick 2014: 59). Margaret Fuller’s reaction does not leave any doubts that her fight for equality of all people is not limited to advocating women’s rights – she can equally forcefully speak for anybody subjected to social injustice.

“If only the Irish were welcomed here, not to work merely, but to find intelligent sympathy as they struggle patiently and ardently for the education of their children! No sympathy could be better deserved, no efforts better timed. [...] You are short-sighted; you do not look to the future; [...]” (Fasick 2014: 60)

Fuller’s tirade against the discrimination of the Irish not only silences farmers, who seem inclined to seek the cause of their problems in immigrants coming to the United States in search of a better future, but also encourages those who employ Irish servants to teach them “to read and write and to act like Americans” (Fasick 2014: 60).

In *A Death in Utopia*, the spirit of solidarity among the Brook Farm members affects each phase of the classical detective formula. Charlotte, in her attempts to follow in Auguste Dupin’s footsteps, summons up his investigative methods described in Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, and returns to the crime scene in the hope of “[discovering] something if she looked hard enough at the place Winslow Hopewell has been found” (Fasick 2014: 33). However, unlike the famous detective created by Poe, Charlotte has strong bonds with the people, on whose land the murder was committed. Therefore, on account of her firm belief in the revolutionary, yet totally peaceful mission of the community she belongs to, Charlotte mistakenly excludes the Brook Farm members from the range of suspects. This decision has far-reaching consequences, not only for the development of Charlotte and Daniel’s investiga-

tion, but also for the way Brook Farm is portrayed throughout the narrative. In *A Death in Utopia*, the members of the community are presented as realizing their common dream of “[t]heir new way of life [which] could satisfy all human needs through moderate, dignified work, and could allow everyone to enjoy the fruits of brotherhood and peace” (Kesten 1993: 5).

The importance of brotherhood is not only taught to students of the Brook Farm school but also put into practice by the residents, working in the field and sharing different domestic chores. For Charlotte, like for many female members of Brook Farm, the communal life where everybody is equally respected, regardless of their sex, religion or social background, “sound[s] like heaven on earth” (Fasick 2014: 211). In the first half of the nineteenth-century male-dominated world, women were not considered fully-fledged citizens and, therefore, most females were totally dependent on the good will of their fathers, husbands or other male relatives. While Charlotte perceives Brook Farm as a kind of shelter “from the tumult of life in England” (Fasick 2014: 29), Fanny Grey sees it as “the dearest dream of her life” and feels “honored to be able to invest in the Community and to be a part of it” (Fasick 2014: 211). Before joining Brook Farm, Fanny felt underappreciated and exploited. Treated like a servant by her father and brothers, she was found no longer useful after her father’s death. Abandoned by her male siblings who started their own families, she plunges herself into Ripley’s experiment. Although Fanny is only a secondary character, she, unlike Charlotte, is fully aware of the precarious financial condition of the community. Having learnt that Reverend Hopewell withdrew his support for the community, Fanny decides to confront him.

I am afraid that my anger overwhelmed me then. I could think of nothing except that he had told me he was giving us no money at all. This at a time when so many others had disappointed us. [...] Before I thought about it I had raised the hoe and struck out at him. [...] A red gash appeared on his forehead and then he fell. (Fasick 2014: 214)

It may seem that Fanny kills Hopewell out of solidarity with the group, whose future is put in jeopardy by the victim's decision not to invest in Brook Farm. However, the murder she commits should rather be classified as an act of despair or a crime of passion, since it is neither planned nor intended. Unable to convince the potential benefactor to change his mind, and well aware that her dream world is at the point of collapsing, Fanny gets carried away with intense emotions and, in consequence, kills Hopewell. Having realized that Charlotte and Daniel have finally discovered her dark secret, she escapes from Brook Farm, hoping to put all her efforts into another challenging project, i.e. "rescuing runaway Africans trying to get to Canada" (Fasick 2014: 214-215). Although Fanny becomes a murderer, she is never perceived by the community as a villain. On the contrary, her tragic fate evokes empathy in Brook Farm inhabitants. A couple of days later they find both Fanny and "a black African woman clutching a baby in her arms" dead (Fasick 2014: 229); they lost their way during a heavy snow storm and drowned in the Cow Island Pond in the vicinity of Brook Farm.

The final verdict was that it was "death by misadventure" for Fanny and for Lily Lawrence and her baby. The judge said he saw no reason for changing the verdict on Winslow Hopewell's death. That too remained "death by misadventure". That was really what it was. (Fasick 2014: 230)

Quite surprisingly, In Fasick's novel, both the perpetrator and the victim evoke understanding and compassion in those who knew them – the community, who unite in their grief at the two missing members. However, unlike in traditional detective novels, in Fasick's historical mystery, the narrative reconstruction of the criminal events neither "restores the disrupted social order [nor] reaffirms the validity of the system of norms" (Hühn 1987: 452). The tragic events the community has gone through do not designate its strength, on the contrary, they herald the eventual collapse of the utopian world, whose func-

tioning, according to egalitarian principles, has failed to withstand the harsh economic reality.

In his study *Utopian Episodes. Daily Life in Experimental Colonies Dedicated to Changing the World*, Seymour R. Kesten (1993: 7) voices his doubts concerning the cognitive aspect of numerous analyses, whose focus on the economic issues of intentional communities hinders a thorough understanding of the lives of people who had enough courage not to conform to the order of the world they happened to live in. Kesten believes that the only means of understanding “the utopian episodes” is their visualization through a thorough examination of different documents and letters left by the members of the communes as well as by their friends and foes. By providing a fictionalized account of everyday life at Brook Farm, wrapped up in the form of a mystery with a captivating, for paradoxical, title³, Fasick not only answers Kesten’s call but also makes a wider audience acquainted with the history of Brook Farm.

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³ Utopia is routinely associated with birth and rejuvenation rather than death.

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