

Can Cogento Save the Day?

Tom Flynn



Cogento, by Thü, translated from German by Lena Blos and Thü; English editing and proofreading by Camille De Kok (Baar, Switzerland: Ecliptic Planetary Publishing, 2019, ISBN 978-3-033-07501-6). 493 pp. Hardcover, \$28.00. Also available in e-book formats for all devices.

Macrae, an every-person figure stuck in a job with dim prospects and a bullying supervisor. One day, Macrae realizes he's acquired a superpower: he can tell anyone to do—or believe—something face-to-face, and for a little more than a day that person will follow Macrae's direction despite all obstacles. It's like being Ben Kenobi ("These aren't the droids you're looking for") but with *only* the Jedi mind trick: no lightsaber, no Force.

After some false starts, Macrae enters seclusion and adopts his new identity, Cogento. (Cogency, thought, wisdom: the associations are obvious.) He surrounds himself with the best and brightest advisors, including prominent atheists: a thinly disguised Sam Harris—and Richard Dawkins, who actually appears as a significant character in the novel. Cogento resolves to use his power to compel humankind to stop fighting wars, stop depending on religion, get serious about climate change, and establish a benevolent world government. And—this is utopian fiction, after all—he *pulls it all off* with the help of his advisors and Teresa, a fiery Latina character who appears to be the only human naturally immune to his power.

This is a young adult novel.

Moreover, it's a young adult novel originally written in German and translated and edited by a small committee. (Thü's not just an author; he's the center of an organization: even his lawyer rates a credit line on the copyright page.) Not surprisingly, some of the expository writing gets kludgy and didactic. Here's Cogento reflecting on a briefing another character had given him on past failures to establish a workable world government:

I remembered that Nisha had explained why the world community had not been able to solve fundamental problems such as poverty, hunger, exploitation and environmental pollution. That this would only be possible if the same rules applied everywhere and the same level of wages were also paid universally. She saw this as the task of OneWorld [Cogento's über-project]. A *world federalism* would emerge, which could finally enforce human rights worldwide and solve some of the world's biggest problems.

Yes, it's leaden prose, but it introduces a big idea: Thü's utopian solution is world government, sometimes called *cosmocrazy*. (I wrote about the world-federalist dream in my October/November 2019 editorial

One thing's for sure: you've never read anything quite like *Cogento*. Author Thü (a.k.a. Thomas Hürlimann) is a computer journalist, graphic designer, and all-around polymath, more prominent in Europe than the United States. He is desperately concerned about the human future—who's not, these days?—and hopes to set young people on fire to build a better, more survivable future. He's opted to do it with a hefty work of utopian, humanistic superhero fiction.

Of course, every superhero needs an alter ego. *Cogento's* is Vaughan


"Cosmocracy, We Hardly Knew Ye.") Forty odd pages later, here's the Sam Harris character commenting as he walks into the hall of the U.N. General Assembly: "I am amazed that an international community with so many good intentions and efforts has been able to build this huge structure and the whole organization and yet allows individuals' egoism to continue to prevent consensus on the most important issues."

I'm reminded of what Harrison Ford told George Lucas about some of the preposterous dialogue he had to deliver in the original *Star Wars* film: "You can't say that stuff. You can only type it."

But here's the thing about *Cogento*. Occasional clumsiness aside, the narrative moves like a rocket. The pacing is tight. The timing is deft. "Richard Dawkins" the character sounds like the real Richard Dawkins. Most refreshing of all, the narrative presents atheism and humanism not as embattled minority viewpoints but as obviously true, utterly mainstream, and essential if the future for which humans hope is to be achieved.

But the acid test for fiction is more emotive. And yes, this grizzled old editor found himself genuinely caring for the characters. I flipped each page wondering with cliffhanger intensity what would happen next.

Cogento sucked me in despite myself.

Will young adults—*Thü's* target audience—respond the same way, or will they be repelled by the narrative's utopian artifice? Will young readers come away from *Cogento* roused to fix what's wrong with the world or with their ardor dampened because humanity's problems seem so intractable that only a hero with an impossible psychological superpower could put a dent in them? Is a long-form novel the best way to reach young digital natives? I don't know, but I'd very much like to see the experiment tried. If you have one or more young adults in your life, consider giving a gift of *Cogento*. 

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Tom Flynn: Champion for Freethought

[Andrea Szalanski](#)

From: [Volume 32, No. 1](#)
[December 2021 / January 2022](#)



Thomas W. Flynn died suddenly August 23, 2021. Those who knew him personally and professionally were shocked and saddened. We had looked forward to many more years of his contributions, even though at the time of his death at age sixty-six he had accomplished much more than most people.

Flynn was a scholar and a showman, a historian and an activist, a writer on issues important to secular humanism and the human race, and an author of science-fiction novels. He was an editor of books, magazines, and newsletters; a creator of documentaries and promotional videos as well as letters appealing for donations and subscriptions; an effective manager of organizations and projects. He was witty and knowledgeable in interactions from casual conversations to formal lectures—and he was the king of puns.

Getting the recipe for the making of any remarkable person would be quite an achievement. As it is, we can only tell his or her story in a look back. As with many other noteworthy individuals, Flynn's life could have turned out much differently.

Tom Flynn was born in 1955 in Erie, Pennsylvania, into a strict Catholic household. He was the only child of Richard and Sally Ann Flynn, who were only children themselves. One of Flynn's grandfathers was a banker, and Flynn's father held a master's degree from St. Louis University and taught high-school social studies and economics for thirty-five years.