



Written by [James Heiser](#) on December 6, 2014

A Review of McDevitt's "Coming Home"

What is it like to live in a "golden age"? It is not unusual for students of philosophy and history to daydream about what it would have been like to have lived during the 'glory days' of Athens or of the Roman Republic. Certainly the early years of our own American Republic draw forth a certain wistful contemplation when considering our "present discontents."

The nostalgic pursuit of the "golden age" is by no means a modern development. In *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance*, Harry Levin documents the extent to which the great writers, philosophers, and artists of the Renaissance were motivated by a desire to return to heights of the "golden age" of Classical Antiquity; as Levin quotes André Malraux, "The great music of Europe is the song of Paradise Lost." The ancient civilizations, in turn, looked even earlier for their own golden ages. In Levin's words:



Some sort of halcyon stage, when men lived on intimate terms with their gods, usually heralded a regression into a more troublesome and more recognizable era. Such a myth of the foreworld, sometimes involving a more or less parallel sequence of four or five stages, is to be found among the Egyptians, the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Zoroastrians, the Aztecs, and the other adherents of the most venerable creeds.... [A] plenitude of examples, as abundant as the golden age itself, exists to prove its universality.

What would it be like to live in a "golden age"? Jack McDevitt's latest novel, *Coming Home*, is built on the premise that we are presently living in an age which the human beings of distant future eons will reminisce upon as their own "golden age." It is a future in which items surviving from the 20th and 21st century Space Age will be revered with an adoration once bestowed upon religious icons and when the attempt to recall the details of a forgotten past which forms our present absorbs the lives and fortunes of some of the finest minds of those future generations.

Coming Home is Jack McDevitt's 21st novel and it is the seventh installment in one of his ongoing series of books. McDevitt's previous books have proven his standing as one of the most gifted, and thoughtful, writers of science fiction in our generation. *Coming Home* is a fine addition to McDevitt's earlier volumes, even as the author returns to themes which are common to his overall work.

McDevitt is an author seemingly obsessed with the transitory character of human learning, artistic attainment, and historical memory; *sic transit gloria mundi* — "Thus passes the glory of the world" — could be printed as the subtitle for almost all of McDevitt's books. Time and again, readers are reminded of the transitory character of our own time; as past ages have been lost to the memory of man, so this age — with its attainments and troubles — will soon be forgotten. In the hands of a less capable writer, such subject material would quickly become overwhelming. However, McDevitt



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approaches the theme with humor and a spirit which is willing to accept the transitory character of human experience.

The main characters in *Coming Home* are Alex Benedict, an antiquities dealer, and Chase Kolpath, Benedict's pilot and personal assistant. Benedict and Kolpath are in the business of selling history, and it is a line of work which meets with cold disdain and even antipathy from archaeologists and professional historians in 11,273 A.D. just as surely as it is likely to encounter in 2014. (The mentality expressed by the words "That belongs in a museum" appears to be something which will not be passing away any time in the near future.)

In *Coming Home*, McDevitt's characters pursue the long-lost remnants of their generation's most revered antiquity — beginning with the lunar missions of the Apollo program. There is an element of reflection which is reminiscent of our own generation's reflections on the maritime expeditions of the Renaissance era. At one point, Kolpath reflects on the significance of the "golden age":

Now we're spread out across several hundred worlds, and we've left our footprints on countless others. I wondered whether, in those ancient times, when they made those first flights to the Moon, if they'd ever dreamed of going to the stars. They knew by then how far the closest stars were, so it must have seemed impossible. The first off-world flights had required three days to get to the Moon. Incredible. The Moon was only a quarter million miles away. You could almost have walked it. They'd have needed over a year to get to Mars.

I couldn't help wondering why they would even have bothered. There was nothing on Mars. And the rest of the solar system looked sterile. If they'd tried to go to the nearest star, Proxima Centauri, at those velocities, it would have taken fifty thousand years.

What would have happened if they'd just given up? They'd come close. But they'd stayed with it. Manned flights had eventually headed out for Mars and then moved to Europa and beyond. They'd lost people along the way. But the vehicles had gotten better, and Maureen Caskill, in the twenty-fifth century, had figured out how to break the rules, to get past light speed. And after that, the stars had opened up.

"Makes you proud," I said.

Alex didn't ask for an explanation. "It's why we need to hang on to our history. It tells us who we are."

McDevitt has carefully shaped the personalities of Benedict and Kolpath over the course of the novels; each story is a blend of science fiction and mystery, with Kolpath as the narrator of their adventures. Kolpath is not exactly playing the role of 'Watson' over against Benedict's 'Holmes' — Kolpath seems far too often to be caught somewhere between grudging admiration and open embarrassment over her employer's antics. The balance between humor and poignancy which McDevitt maintains is exemplified by the reflection of his characters' encounter with a statue of Thomas Jefferson:

We were standing in front of the statue of a man in the main entrance hall. It had been recovered from Lake Washington, but its identity was lost.

The museum has pictures of athletes in various types of uniforms, some wearing helmets, some outsized gloves, some carrying long sticks. People still play soccer, and we know a little about the other sports, but they're long gone. Nobody's even sure when they died out. He stared up at the statue. A phrase was engraved across the ceiling which is associated with him: *I have sworn upon*



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the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.

I'm not sure who he was, but I suspect I'd have liked the guy.

McDevitt's novels are a caution against taking ourselves too seriously, even as they encourage readers to rejoice in that which they have been given. Much of what exists in every age will be lost in the ages that follow, but those men and women who live in each age find their purpose in the tasks which are set before them.

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