

The End of Our World: Apocalypse Fiction

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2017

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of English

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**Abstract**

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This essay discusses the history of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction using critical theory, a close examination of relevant novels and short stories, and personal anecdotes. It concludes that post-apocalyptic literature can be seen as comforting rather than hellish, since it provides an “after” for an cataclysmic event, no matter how dismal. The world does not end; it continues, just in a different form.

## introduction

With the imminent digital wave swallowing up non-backlit pages by the storm, it's becoming much more expensive to engage in the timeless readerly practice of throwing a book across a room. You can still shatter a Kindle's screen like a glass spider web, to be sure—it's ultimately a more fragile container for its stories than classic paper, ink, and binding glue, which makes it less satisfying, I think, to harm. A physical, paper book seems responsible in that it can't change. All it's got is the immutable words inside it; a story on an e-reader can easily be deleted, replaced with something more satisfying in a few moments' time. It's less responsible, and don't-shoot-the-messenger mentality carries a little farther when staying the reader's frustrated hand.

When I take an informal survey on what causes those I love and respect to briefly reset to reptilian instincts when agitated by words on a page, there seem to be three major causes for reader-on-book crime: the unexpected plot, overblown hype leading to punctured expectations, and—most interestingly, at least to me—bleakness. The unexpected plot is easily recognized: J.K. Rowling's is-he-good-is-he-bad Snape killing wizard headmaster Dumbledore, George R. R. Martin's Red Wedding bloodbath, in which three main characters are slaughtered in the span of a few paragraphs are perhaps the most widespread popular examples. It's purely a readerly response, where expectations of who will be the hero of the story and who will prevail are slashed open with stabs and killing spells, and characters we love are reduced to nothingness. It angers, that the gods responsible for their worlds would let such bad things happen to good people. The second cause, punctured expectations, occurs in less of a direct text-reader relationship. Instead, because of a book being described as transformative, emotionally

resonant, or one of the best books of the current year, a reader sets a high—sometimes unfairly unreachable—bar for a book. It's different than going in blind, picking a book up off the shelf because its cover art or synopsis intrigues you; it was supposed to be life-changing, damn it, so what were those pretentious art critics looking at when they gave it all these awards?

Finally, the cause that intrigues me the most: a bleak, sometimes abrupt, ending. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* was cited as an example, as was Faulker's *As I Lay Dying*—both novels that end with the futures of their characters uncertain, with unhappiness and conflict almost assured in the unwritten aftermath. It is this bleakness, this anger at the horror and unfairness and distress of the world, that I'm interested in, that I've entrenched myself in without even knowingly doing so. One need only to take a cursory glance at what I've written, even before studying writing in an academic sense, to figure that out. Lie everything face-up on an anthropological log. *Of course*, you would say. *During confession times in Catholic grade school, you passed the time thumbing through the Book of Revelation. How far a jump from there is The Hunger Games, and how far from that is The Road?*<sup>1</sup> The end of the world—and what comes after—has always fascinated me, and it's clear from history that I'm in a long line of good company.

The notion of an apocalypse is ancient and oft-reimagined. The epic of Gilgamesh, one of the earliest known works of written literature, closes with a flood revelation, an explanation for the cruelty of the gods' mass extinction of their subjects. Judeo-Christian writings remember Noah and his two-by-two animals, while now they still wait patiently for Armageddon; Hinduism's Manu builds a similar boat to Noah and

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<sup>1</sup> The first time I became conscious of being a more-than-average talented writer was in seventh grade, when I got an award for a citywide Halloween story contest. I wrote about

saves his chosen subjects as well. Doomsday prophecies made according to astrological alignments pop up every so often; Stephen Hawking warns of rogue AI's inevitable uprising and other scientists of the eventual disorder of entropy tearing apart our DNA peptide by peptide.<sup>2</sup> Human beings, in these instances, are wicked, imperfect things and must have their deeds and bodies wiped clean through a cataclysmic event in order to transcend base impurities. They are, in that sense, beyond repair—the only way to improve is to destroy and start anew with Humanity 2.0. In my modern conception, as I type this in a word processing program, I can't help but be reminded of how I treat my personal technology. Roughly every two years I buy a new cell phone; every five I buy a new laptop. Restoring them to useful conditions to make them last longer is cost- and time-prohibitive; the possibility of restoring them to factory condition practically nonexistent. We, like our technology, are planned to be obsolescent at a certain stage: the parts aren't durable, so it just makes sense, after a certain amount of wear and tear, to upgrade in order to start anew.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years—and here I'm talking 2008 and on—apocalypse and post-apocalypse fiction has surged through popular culture with renewed fury, particularly in young adult literature and its visual adaptations. It's not a newly created genre by any

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<sup>2</sup> James Lovegrove's "The World of the End of the World: Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction" outlines several other religious and historical traditions of apocalypse, including Norse mythology's Ragnarök and Islam's Yawm al-Qiyamah, where all, regardless of religion, will answer for their potential lack of morality (97). It's been a common theme since recorded history, and, I'm sure, probably before then.

<sup>3</sup> This works, in the very least, in the predestined religious sense, as humanity is believed to have been made with flawed parts.

means,<sup>4</sup> but the proliferation and the major entertainment studio investment, I think, is at its most relevant since literary reactions to the looming annihilation of the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> It's obvious that, while the genre may be wearing out its welcome in the popular sphere due to oversaturation,<sup>6</sup> that it did not experience resurgence without a reason—or several dozen. What I want to do is cut out a tiny sample of apocalyptic literature—Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, some George Saunders, some *Cloud Atlas*, among others—and try and get a sense of why this genre has continued to stick around and become massive fodder for both literary and entertainment purposes. No genre exists in a vacuum; it is always informed by those pillars of influence who have come before, psychological, social, cultural, and historical.

What are the particularly *new* constituents of daily life that have brought about this recent surge in relevance? It would be helpful, I think, to start with history—the roots of the genre, beyond the flood stories. It's one factor of many, but the first I'll look at here, in a giant petri dish of cause and effect.

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<sup>4</sup> I first read Stephen King's *The Stand* at age twelve, just another blip in my parents' hands-off approach to literature, regardless of age-appropriate subjects. As far as I can remember, it's the first overtly apocalyptic novel I read.

<sup>5</sup> The Hunger Games series, a four-movie, three-book teenage survival story in a post-apocalyptic United States, is at the time of writing the 15<sup>th</sup>-highest grossing film franchise of all time, just behind the much-longer running James Bond, X-Men, and Batman universes, among others. Other adaptations have spawned from the Hunger Games' success, the Divergent and Maze Runner and Red Queen series, to name a few. In fact, the chronologically final in that list, *The Red Queen*, was sold at auction with a movie deal attached, on the heels of these previous hundreds-of-million-dollars-in-profit films and book deals.

<sup>6</sup> The fourth and final *Divergent* movie, for example, is rumored to be made-for-TV instead of a large blockbuster, likely due in part to audience fatigue with the genre translating into falling ticket sales. So ends the golden age of blockbuster teenage apocalypses, with a televised whimper.

## the apocalypse genre: tropes and origins

So, the first petri-dish ingredient: Why is apocalyptic fiction a genre? To answer that, we need to look outward a little at the whole concept of genre before zooming back in to the particulars of this one. On a large scale, looking at the idea of genre as a label, you can find a way range of writerly criticisms on why genres—here meaning a set of tropes often recurring together—exist. There’s the economic answer: because publishers need a way to categorize books in order to conveniently sell more of them.<sup>7</sup> If you like one mythical creature romance book, why not try another, shelved right next door? Another: imitation is the sincerest form of flattery; if you read a book you like, and write what you like to read, you’ll probably end up creating stories similar to what you’re reading. Possibly the easiest, and most reader-intuitive, answer to why genres exist is that, through their plurality and general uniformity of tropes, they both fulfill and sneakily undermine expectations through genre repetition. The reader who picks up a mythical creature romance knows that a tender love scene with a dragon is not far away; what they’re interested in is how the characters get to that point, and under what conditions the expected events will occur.<sup>8</sup> Once enough dragon romances have been written, authors have to get creative to maintain readers’ attention and credit cards: this is where the playing with of tropes squeezes in nicely.

Literary fiction is not defined by its tropes, and that’s what separates it as a higher form of art. Writer-critic Michael Chabon succinctly sums up the genre-literary fiction divide, analyzing literary distaste for the genre label as such: “Entertainment has a bad name [... Genre fiction is] easily synthesized, mass-produced, individually wrapped. Its

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<sup>7</sup> Chabon, 20.

<sup>8</sup> It’s about the journey, not the destination, as the old motivational poster goes.

benefits do not endure, and so we come to mistrust them, or our taste for them” (13).

Chabon creates the assembly-line image—each story arriving with its blend of prepackaged ingredients, tropes recycled in unusual ways for dramatic effect—to portray how many critics see popular genres: a stale, momentary pleasure, which will soon be eclipsed by most tasteful and refined literary fiction once the writer or reader has outgrown its sugary pleasure. Genre is a Hershey’s Kiss. Literary fiction (or a Ghirardelli chocolate square) is character- or theme-propelled; plot, in the traditional cause-effect, what’s-going-to-happen manner, is for propelling genre.<sup>9</sup>

Yet there is plenty of apocalyptic literature that plays with various tropes—world-ending diseases, razed technological progress, scavengers hardened by the collapse of societal comforts—that’s also beloved by critics. This literature speaks on a profound, relatable level, while still being able to dazzle with sentence construction and, simply put, a satisfying story. It must not all be recycled tropes designed to pluck at the same three-note structure: world ends, turmoil is overcome, new world order takes place—or, if it is, they must be tapping into something quite deep in contemporary psyches. Where, then, did the post-apocalypse genre’s traditions first arise, when they weren’t traditions but rather innovations? Following that, when did the more modern evolution come back into vogue, and what’s changed since the first iterations?

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<sup>9</sup> As a teacher, I’m required to tell my students that they cannot use genre fiction to apply to creative writing tracks. I struggle with this; on one hand, it’s easy to write bad genre fiction, because the tropes come fast and plenty and scratch the readerly itch to be comforted with something familiar. On the other, it’s also easy to write bad literary fiction and then claim that the reader just didn’t get it because they weren’t paying close attention. Both have their challenges—and in that way I think they can help each other out, borrowing the best of each.

Over and over the two citations I found designated as the first mass-market post-apocalyptic fiction were either Daniel Defoe's<sup>10</sup> *Robinson Crusoe* or Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*.<sup>11</sup> According to Chabon, Villanova University's Heather Hicks, and theorist Jerry Lovegrove, tropes set up in these two novels—and continued to be seen in some form in apocalyptic literature today—include: ragged, lone survivors or small groups; a catastrophic, cataclysmic event, usually brought about by the forces of nature that humanity is unable to control (a plague in *The Last Man*, a violent shipwreck in *Crusoe*); obsessive cataloging of lists of survival items, speaking to our needs for classification and collection; a moral relativism on right and wrong in light of the catastrophe, where survival has become the ultimate goal rather than moral goodness or fulfillment; and the breakdown of social order and communication with the outside—indeed, the entire—world. Perhaps most vividly relevant now is the cutting off of communication, an urge that is likely more tempting than ever in our social media-saturated age, though it was not quite as socially unacceptable a change then as it would be now. It's also one of the less explicit tropes, but one a reader can unearth with just a little effort.

What's the use of these tropes, then, in various iterations of post-apocalyptic fiction<sup>12</sup>—what's the current endgame, you might say, of all these dirt-smudged people conceived in the 2000s trying to put together the remaining bits of society? According to Hicks, these contemporary authors, who owe their debts to Shelley and Defoe, are directing their questions to the remains of societal structures, both physical and cultural:

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<sup>11</sup> See Michael Chabon and Heather Hicks for *Robinson Crusoe*; see James Lovegrove for *The Last Man*.

<sup>12</sup> Hicks counts at least twelve subgenres of apocalyptic fiction (6), to which Lovegrove would add another—pastoral apocalypse, which he sees *The Road* falling under (100).

What should survive after the cataclysm, and why? (4) In other words, what features of what Hicks defines as modernity<sup>13</sup>—here meaning, among other bullet points, the growth of scientific consciousness and method; the idea that time and innovation marches orderly toward progress, a framework which post-modernism attempts to dismantle; an individualistic understanding of the self compared to a contractualist understanding of society; market-driven economy; and mass media—are worth preserving in the long run, if we are to survive as a species? (6). There's this impending sense in this literature that survival is not only an individualistic pursuit, but also a nation- or worldwide aim as well—as critic Jean-Marie Kauth puts it, what's more present than ever is “a general creeping unease about whether or not our society can sustain itself over the long haul” (283). Now, not only Robinson Crusoe is fighting to survive; instead it's the whole of humanity, as first seen in *The Last Man*. The entire world is interconnected, and this can be both our undoing and how we manage to save ourselves once everything is lost.<sup>14</sup>

This is especially interesting considering a statistical analysis of the origins of current popular apocalyptic fiction—the author, who conducted a statistical analysis of the popularity of apocalypse stories from pre-1800 to 2010, concluded that the majority of the works he surveyed were American “probably [because...] the science-fiction magazine, and the tradition of publishing science-fiction short stories, have largely been an American twentieth-century phenomenon” (Määttä 418). In this way the apocalypse tradition continues, handed down from generation to generation. It's not necessarily a

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<sup>13</sup> A term fickle difficult to define, but Hicks gives it a go.

<sup>14</sup> Often the regrouping of humanity, ostensibly with the promise of better things ahead, is what apocalyptic books end on. The son in *The Road* finds a new family unit, complete with dog; the survivors of *Station Eleven* found a functioning government and commerce system, centered in an old airport; George Saunders's “Escape from Spiderhead” narrator finds comfort in his connection with his mother and his fellow prisoners.

fully representative study, but the notion that oft-cited post-apocalyptic stories have something inherently American-leaning in them fascinates me. One possible answer is that they appeal to our individualism and the rugged notion of self-reliance once the safety net of society is gone. Only the competent survive the apocalypse; the truly exceptional thrive, at least relative to everyone else. Nevertheless, the scope of tragedy has widened from Robinson Crusoe's days.

This looking-outward is linked to certain historical pressures, as argued by theorist James Lovegrove; currently, our most pressing concerns are taking center stage. No longer are we too afraid of storms breaking apart our ships. Now, we're reorienting our apocalyptic focus on emerging technologies and the developing certainty of various natural cataclysms due to the unforeseen effects of these technologies. The result is the same—destruction of order once known—but the technological cause is more apparent than before. The technological cause-effect relationship isn't new—the Cold War produced its own breadth of nuclear annihilation literature, while the atomic bomb spawned dozens of giant, radiation-soaked monsters with rampage on their mind in Japan—but it's certainly more striking than ever, particularly when viewed through the global worry-lens of climate change and the global effort needed to combat contributions to it.

It's easy to connect the eco-conscious apocalypses of the 1960s—what Lovegrove calls pastoral apocalypses, where humanity is saved only by returning back to its more primitive, simplistic harmony with nature—to the hippie movement; likewise, he argues that current zombie apocalypses are a response not only to the fear of a giant mass of dumb consumers destroying us all, but also are based in the fear of overpopulation and

easy-to-spread pandemics (109). He doesn't specifically make the cause-effect connection between overpopulation and fear of pandemics, but it can't be said that people living stacked on top of one another isn't ripe territory for the quick spread of disease, especially in light of growing antibiotic resistance in bacteria. Jerry Määta, in analyzing his statistical table of apocalyptic literature, suggests that we "need these stories primarily in anticipation of and preparation for conflicts rather than during actual wars or emergencies, and occasionally as symbolic trauma treatment in the first years following a national or cultural crisis"—what, now, are we currently fearing or treating? (429) Is it simply diseases and natural disasters, as it once was and now shall be forever? By the end of all these words, I hope to have an addendum to this—something to add to the conversation, to figure out exactly what we're all reacting to with such fervor.

Before going into some well-regarded examples of apocalyptic fiction, I also want to draw a dividing line under the larger umbrella of science fiction, which I believe apocalyptic fiction falls under at least in part, and also define a little more about what apocalyptic fiction is not. Science fiction's aim, broadly speaking, is to extrapolate the wonders of scientific progress and innovations, usually with granular focus. If all literature asks questions, science fiction's generalized question would be "What will this technology or set of technologies look like in the future, given current (if hyperbolic) trends?" Science fiction gives us the wonders of science, in hoverboards and planet colonization, and both exalts its potential for betterment while warning us of mistakes—apocalypse fiction cautions us even further against darker outcomes of these technologies, one in which individual decisions translate to, at best, large-scale reconstruction, and at worse complete extinction.

the post-apocalypse novel: linguistic spattering

In the 1960s, writer-critic-activist-jack-of-all-trades Susan Sontag released *Against Interpretation*, which has been widely cited and criticized in the decades since. One essay in the collection, “The Imagination of Disaster,” seeks to answer what sways consumers to cataclysmic disasters. Though Sontag’s remarks directly concern film, I believe they apply to fiction, too; in both forms “one can participate in the fantasy of living through one’s own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself,” which results in a “peculiar type of beauty” (212). At once there’s something both repellently morbid and satisfyingly voyeuristic about apocalyptic fiction, in that we’re watching—and imagining participating in—the world burn down so that we can build it back up again, better than those who left it for us. It’s an odd, almost perverse version of fantastical empathy—living out these destructive desires in fiction, daydreaming that perhaps something could be made better if only one had the courage to destroy and rebuild.

Nearly a half-century later, not much has changed, theoretically: Lovegrove echoes a modernized give-and-take version Sontag’s sentiment when he writes, “For the reader, the appeal of this sub-genre is that it affords the cathartic thrill of experiencing and surviving the end of the world [...] For the author, it’s a chance to raise the stakes as high as they will possibly go” (98). For him, the appeal isn’t one-size-fits-all in that both the author and reader get to experience the paradoxical beauty of destruction, but rather the pleasure is provided for the reader by the careful craft of the author; conversely, the author gets to have some fun by of making readers turn quickly turn shake for characters

and entire worlds—perhaps an increasingly harder thing to do as I, at least, feel my empathy draining away with each tragedy on the 24-hour-news cycle. Watching an apocalypse is watching the destruction of one’s routine, a large-scale version of toppling desks and dramatically quitting work, wish fulfillment at its most grandiose to simply proclaim that what surrounds you isn’t good enough, and you’d just rather be done with it.

Of course, that’s not how to solve many problems, not really. But isn’t it nice to imagine a workplace or whole communities—cities who voted opposite your beliefs, countries with oppressive laws—simply reduced to nothing? It simplifies the problem by eliminating it, if only in our minds for a moment.

With that in mind, that there’s a certain pleasure in witnessing destruction—what is to be done after the ash settles down? First, characters—and readers, for that matter—take stock not only of what had been physically razed but also culturally. Take, for example, the linguistic extremes in four post-apocalyptic novels: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (referring here to the middlemost section “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Everythin’ After,” which finds itself in a nearly unrecognizable Hawaii), Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, where an engineered pharmaceutical pandemic has wiped out most of humanity, Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, where a flu has ravaged the United States, and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*—the only story whose apocalypse is left unnamed and unqualified other than a few short fragments of description, and whose physical and linguistic landscape is bleakest. Looking at these various examples, there seems to be a connection between their endings’ dispositions and linguistic deterioration. Stories with completely desiccated English find their worlds more unsalvageable than their easy-to-read counterparts—showing that, as the building blocks of culture disappear, it’s less

likely that the world will return to as it once was, much less a better version of itself. With these building blocks, too, go the identities so painstakingly clung to before the cataclysm.

To illustrate this, I'll start with the least dramatic linguistic shift. *Station Eleven's* plot is outwardly concerned with preserving recitations of Shakespeare's plays, but the characters speak in recognizable modern English, leaving the reader little difficulty to piece together speech. In content, the story seeks to preserve language, but shows no substantial loss or major evolution beyond English. Though one character has taken on a monolithic moniker—the Prophet—this serves largely as an *a-ha!* reveal moment when we learn his true name rather than any commentary on linguistic or identity deterioration. It does, of course, call to mind various religious figures, all of which have their own judgment day retelling.

Of greater interest is *Oryx and Crake*, whose three main characters—including Snowman, our viewpoint character—have also taken on nicknames rather than continue by their real names. It speaks to some sort of loss of identity, that the names they were given no longer matter after the apocalypse. Oryx's, indeed, has never even been given. Another interesting feature of the novel's language, which is echoed in George Saunders's work in the next section, is the corporatization of naming. Corporation names become more literal and simplistically spelled—RejoovenEsence, for example, is a bioengineering corporation that makes a supposed happy-pill called BlyssPlus—which serves not only to satirize corporate advertising conventions but also to signal to readers that they're in a barely-tweaked version of our world, where we're only a few odd spellings away from the danger of relying on pills and genius inventors for happiness.

*Cloud Atlas*'s Zachry also follows this pattern of spelling simplification: his name, first of all, eliminates the traditional but silent A in the middle. After the apocalypse, what's superfluous—like silent letters in spelling—and not immediately related to survival has been removed. Perhaps more striking on first glance is the language Mitchell invents—*betrayed* becomes *judased*, Gs are dropped from progressive verbs, *remembering* becomes *mem'ryin*.<sup>15</sup> Like the landscape, language has been slashed, simplified, and slurred—the M and R in *remembering* have cannibalized their nearby vowels, mirroring nicely the damaged landscape. After the apocalypse, Zachry simply cannot communicate in the same manner as those who came before him and must burn parts of the English language to the ground and build some of it from scratch.

*The Road* dials back on the spelling simplifications but reduces language in a different way—both by generic naming of its characters and reduction of what we might describe as necessary grammatical elements of modern English, like complete sentences. The main characters are simply known as the man and the boy, which gives the whole novel a fable-like gloss. Descriptions come in fragments rather than flowery sentences: the clipped, nongrammatical (yet often still beautiful) language is either a depressing catalog that serves not only to set the literal scene but also the hopeless tone of *memento mori* (for example, “The bones of dead creatures sprawled in the washes. Middens of anonymous trash. Farmhouses in the fields scoured of paint and the clapboards spooned and sprung from the wallstuds” [177]) or an elaboration on the description of objects (“[The stones were p]olished round and smooth as marbles or lozenges of stone veined

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<sup>15</sup> It's a linguistic wonder, but I can't help but think of the poor copyeditor, tears splashing onto the galley copy as she scribbles down a whole dictionary for Zachry and his comrades.

and stripes” [38]). Like the characters, we never get to see the sun: only the fragments and ash of what remains, an endless list of detritus from a leftover time.<sup>16</sup> This breakdown mirrors interestingly the elision of morality in the post-apocalyptic world inhabited by McCarthy’s poor characters; Jean-Marie Kauth cynically describes the fall of organized law as “society [having] reached a point where the sole qualifier for morality is not eating people” (294). Language, like the bounds of society normalcy, has denigrated—and much has returned to its base, eliminating the so-called doctrine of progress mentioned as a feature of modern life.

But will the landscape, like communication, always be so shorn down, its flourishes blunted and chipped away? Three of the novels say no, redemption might be not far away, and suggest a cyclical rebuilding of a society that hopefully may learn from what has come before it. *Station Eleven*’s protagonists head off in search of “another world just out of sight”—a city that has electricity, a luxury that’s been thought to be lost forever (333). Zachry’s children offer up the orison for the listener’s perusal, and there’s a definite sense that something has changed for the better since Zachry’s run in with Meronym; Snowman teeters on deciding whether to make the very first humans he’s seen since the pandemic “listen to him, they could hear his tale, he could hear theirs. They at least would understand something of what he’s been through” (Atwood 374). There’s a hinted at chance for redemption, or at least a rebuilding of communication lines between scattered, broken people. Lovegrove suggests that perhaps current end-of-the-world fiction like this suggests that “maybe we shouldn’t dread the end of civilization as much

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<sup>16</sup> Echoed also in the ending of Sloosha’s *Crossin’*, where the child of Zachry comments that the holographic projection machine (“orison”) “ain’t Smart you can use ‘cos it don’t kill Kona pirates nor fill empty guts,” but he finds himself drawn toward this remnant nonetheless.

as we do” (111). He likens these sorts of endings to a forest fire—the destruction is violent and undeniable, but it leaves room in its wake for new growth, with the possibility for something better than before to take the place of what was old and perhaps flawed.

*The Road*, though, is not one of those novels that leaves you with a slight uptick in happiness at its end. It’s unique among these novels in another way in that its apocalypse seems irreparable: after all two-hundred-something pages, after having been privy to so much suffering and violence befall the father-son duo, the father succumbs to his illness and the boy is taken in by a fairly sympathetic family. On the surface, this is all right. Maybe he’ll survive, and maybe he’ll even get to have a pet dog. While, for the moment, the boy may have found some measure of stability, McCarthy’s closing narration suggests something much bleaker: “On their [trouts’] backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (287). This is not a world in which things can be stacked back together into something better; it’s likely going to be a world in which everything continues to tumble farther down, despite this tiny moment of peace. This is Kauth’s aforementioned unease—this humanity could not sustain itself, for it was too flawed and broken to begin with.

Why, then, show these apocalypses? Why leave either a bittersweet or a totally darkened taste in the mouth of a reader? Kauth argues for an aversionary approach—showing the most brutal and horrific outcome can be a sort of call to action to enact change before it’s too late. She attacks the immortality complex she finds endemic, writing that “[h]umans think we are invulnerable, relying on institutions that seem massive and permanent, but in the end we are at mercy of flood, fire, plague, and

drought. We are dependent on dwindling energy sources” (286). For her, there’s a call to action here; change our non-sustainable ways before we make it all the way to *The Road*-like conditions. And that, I think, is at least part of what’s going on with emerging apocalyptic fiction—a warning to those who have the power to enact change to avert looming threats, whether they take the form of global climate change or AI run amok. Later in the same essay Kauth writes that apocalyptic young adult fiction has become so popular among both adults and children because not only because teenagers find their peers relatable but because “young people trigger guilt for what adults have done” (291). Perhaps, then, we’re supposed to see these stories as cautionary tales—as a global consequence of individuals having taken things just a little too far, with less foresight than necessary to fend off these horrific scenarios.

#### the post-apocalypse short story

As I kept reading, a question kept dogging my research: Why are there so many more apocalypses in novels than there are in short stories? A logical reason is it’s much easier to build an entire world and then bring it down in two hundred pages than it is in nine pages.

There is, definitely, one writer who bucks this trend tremendously: George Saunders, current Syracuse instructor and writer of several collections of stories, including *Tenth of December*, which spent 21 weeks on the LA Times bestseller list and an indeterminate number of weeks on its New York equivalent (LA Times). Somehow, Saunders has hit the every-writer’s-dream sweet spot, becoming a commercial success without offending critics’ sensibilities. One *New York Times* review described his stories

as recognizable for their “deadpan science fiction gloss”—how, then, is he able to get over this genre-gloss while still being a critical darling? (Cowles)

Part of the answer lies in his humor, I think, and his sincere attempt at emotion rather than postmodern ironic winking. For this argument, I’ll focus on one story in particular from *Tenth of December*: “Escape from Spiderhead.” The brief plot synopsis goes thus: our protagonist, Jeff, is convicted of a crime sometime in the near future, and Jeff is sentenced to pharmaceutical experimentation by drugs called Verbaluce and Darkenfloxx,<sup>17</sup> which cause insatiable romantic lust and abhorrent physical and mental pain, respectively. In a final act of defiance, Jeff chooses to kill himself using Darkenfloxx rather than administer it to a fellow human being, a woman with whom he had been having sex under the influence of Verbaluce. Obviously, this has hallmarks of a sci-fi story—mad scientists, experimentation, drugs as a cure-all—and also many of those of a post-apocalyptic story, though these are less foregrounded: Jeff is a criminal and is being punished via a super-cocktail of will-altering chemicals for his aberrance, indicating that something had vastly changed in the outside world if this is how society treats its prisoners. Morality, as in *The Road*, isn’t overly complicated. It’s not overtly apocalyptic in that we never get to see the outside world—Jeff, in fact, kills himself rather than makes a bid for freedom—but we can imagine that it’s not a lovely place to live.

What Saunders is amazing at, I think, is his ability to tap into the anxiety of us all in this modern age, particularly those who are able to live productive lives because of medication. He’s taken a semi-regular occurrence, taking medication to change one’s

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<sup>17</sup> A similar naming convention to Atwood’s corporations.

behavior, and hyperbolically amped it to the most drastic place he can think of—or the most “brutal” future, as Kauth would term it—in order to tap into and respond to contemporary anxieties about medicine, the dominant force mind-body connection, and experimentation for experimentation’s sake (283). Though all apocalyptic fiction responds to various outside pressures in some way, what dominates each story varies. For McCarthy, it is the irreparable ruination of the world by those who live in it; for Saunders, it’s a the clear miscarriage of justice, of destroying a being ostensibly in pursuit of some indefinable progress for its own sake.

The plot is human-focused rather than question-focused, but the two are not mutually exclusive. Through this story not only is he questioning medical ethics and the costs of scientific advancements but also what we’ll do in the future with our criminals—a topic of debate that’s nowhere near being settled, even in the present. And there is another apocalyptic rub: How can we control the progress of science, and how much anxiety about advancement, scientific or otherwise, should we have? What limits should we place, and who can we rely on to know if we’ve gone down a path we ought not to? It seems Saunders suggests that there will be individual resistance from unlikely sources, but that the world, as a whole, is not beyond saving. Again, his ending speaks to one of hopeful comfort in death rather than a bleak finality, as he narrator finds himself triumphant over his captors, and far more at peace than before: “I was happy, so happy, because for the first time in years, and forevermore, I had not killed, and never would” (81).

the root of all anxiety: why seattle's water is filled with zoloft

Seattle, where I live, is a city about to burst apart at the seams. There is, of course, the vast inequality between the tech industry and many others who live here. What seems less immediate, though are the natural threats to the Pacific Northwest. Not only is it seated near an overdue-to-erupt active volcano, but it also is seated in blast-range of tsunami damage, which would likely be caused by an earthquake along the Cascadian subduction zone—the San Andreas fault's lesser-known neighbor. It's something that I think about, sometimes, as I commute into school on clear days.

I can prepare a disaster relief kit, filling up a bin with antiseptic and cotton clothes and toothpaste. The good that will do in the event of one of these disasters is, I fear, fairly insignificant. As with all large-scale cataclysms, what, truly, can you do to prepare, especially for events so far outside your control? All we can do, I think, is anticipate and try to mitigate the damage, like post-apocalyptic fiction attempts to show via worst case scenario.

When I was a child, about seven or eight, I became aware that my heartbeat was something I could only semi-control. Some of my earliest memories—and I don't have that many from childhood—are of jumping frenetically on my parents' bed, because I wanted to feel my heart beating. Once, after a near-death experience when I was thirteen, I became so obsessed, so unfortunately attuned to minute fluctuations in heart rate, that I induced palpitations and spent the night in the ER. I was aware of that fact that I could die—that I had come very close to doing so—and I could not figure out what to do with that. It would take years for me to get on anti-anxiety medication and finally, if not leave the obsession behind, relegate it to the background. When I got to graduate school for

my MFA, the number of people who regularly took anti-anxiety or depression medications far outnumbered those who were not.<sup>18</sup> Though it's only a small sample size, I'd bet my tuition waiver a broader study would show something similar—that many more students than before are arriving on campuses while mitigating a constant sense of debilitating anxiety.<sup>19</sup>

Where's this unease coming from, and how does apocalyptic literature address—if not help—it? I was in fourth grade in September 11, 2001, just becoming conscious of being a person. I remember the unending sense that everything had changed, but I didn't quite know how. Everyone was tiptoeing around for a while, and it never really ended. America found itself embroiled in a long-lasting and bitter Middle Eastern conflict, where many began to rescind support that they had once readily given to go into a foreign place, eliminate the bad guys, and come back heroes. It was a deceptively simple narrative that we saw gradually crumble into a much more complicated beast. So, if we weren't so white-knight *good* anymore, what were we?

I laughed when a friend told me he'd fallen ill with the H1N1 flu years ago. Enough time had passed that I didn't feel insensitive; the tragedy of many dying all around the world, at that point, was far away. But the threat of something global and easily transferrable, via plane or air or food, still looms, especially as some scientific

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<sup>18</sup> Two of my fondest memories: the first, sitting in a rowboat in the dead of night with two of my new cohort and one asking, "Let's play the game of What Medicine Are You On?" and finding out we all took the same antidepressant; the second, a group of us sitting in a bar booth and everyone honestly participating in uniquely finishing the sentence "I'm going to die alone because..." Let it not be said that all MFA students are pretentious (just the ones who go on to get literature PhDs).

<sup>19</sup> The *New York Times* has even dubbed millennials as the "Antidepressant Generation," though the label may be more or less relevant with time.

advancements like antibiotics inadvertently ramp up viruses' lethality rates. We hear about death counts and public shooting sprees every night, thanks to 24-hour news coverage that suggests that you should be paying attention and scaring and outraged *all the time*. Then there's global climate change, which blames each person as somewhat responsible—and requires unity for remedying the atmosphere. Something must be done, all the scientists tell us, before it's too late. There's a call from post-apocalyptic novels to look deeper into the future, to try and see consequences beyond the short-term before they become irreversible—something that we're constantly struggling with still.

And what are we doing at the end of it all? What are the antibiotics, AI, coal plants, TSA agents, and research scientists all trying to do?

Critic Frank Kermode argues in his book *The Sense of an Ending* that we use novels to “try to make sense of our lives” (16). Because novels, like every human experience, must end, the structure inherent to literature helps us come to terms with our inevitable deaths. It's non-negotiable, at least at this point in our technological advancement. We will all die, one way or another, which is something I have been struggling with, both consciously and unconsciously, since realizing it was an inevitability. It's what made my heart palpitate all those years ago. Perhaps, then, with apocalyptic novels, we're not only trying to stave off the inevitable, but also being comforted not in what comes after, but rather in the simple fact that there is an after at all.

This is what I find comforting in a genre that doesn't typically have that adjective applied to it. Of course, there is the reveling aspect of apocalyptic fiction; who doesn't,

sometimes, smile while thinking of watching the whole world burn? But I think it goes beyond that.

And that realization leads to another question: There will be something after I die. So, what legacy will I leave behind? Post-apocalyptic fiction seeks in some ways to answer that, and to avoid the worst-case scenarios by imagining them prior to their happening, whether it's *1984*'s double-plus-good speech or *Station Eleven*'s world-razing plague. Perhaps we cannot prevent these events, like we cannot prevent Mt. Rainier from erupting in the near-geologic future—in that case, then, post-apocalyptic fiction seeks to answer: What's worth picking up and putting back together, once everything has come crashing down? The answer varies from author to author; *The Road* preserves nothing but familial loyalty, while "Escape from Spiderhead" preserves choices, even if they may seem futile to observers. *Station Eleven*'s tiny band of arts- and memories-focused survivors seem ludicrous to *Oryx and Crake*'s self-reliance in the face of unchecked scientific experimentation. As writers, I think, we're asking the same questions of our individual selves that society is asking itself as a whole: What will be left after we are gone?

I try and capture these questions in some way or another in my own writing, with varying levels of success. Sometimes I lead up to the catastrophe and drop away, but more often than not I take up where the characters find themselves post-catastrophe, putting themselves back together. But more than that I just want to suggest that after something cataclysmic, there is an after—even if it's unrecognizable from the before.

In his influential collection *The Art of Subtext*, Charles Baxter writes, "It's doubtful whether a lifetime of writing fiction has cured anyone of anything" (116). While

that might be true with self-help journal, I don't think it's at all true with collective fictional traditions. Maybe, then a lifetime of fiction writing won't cure one person—rather, it will cure humanity of its stains as a whole, if we care enough to let it act on us.

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