

# The World Turned Upside Down

## *Post-Apocalyptic Novels*

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I was a voracious reader when I was a child, happily and greedily reading anything I could get hold of. I started going to the local library on my own when I was quite young – eight or nine – and I vividly remember the thrill one day, a few years later, of not turning right into the children's section, but deciding to take a risk and go through the large double doors that gave entry to the adult library, a whole new world.

In that 1970s South London library, I ended up reading a whole variety of fiction, much of which I didn't quite understand at the time. But somewhere along the line, I picked up something that I'd now identify as post-apocalyptic fiction and I've been an avid reader of the genre ever since. The best novels in this genre engage meaningfully with important themes such as what it means to be human; the impact of technology; how to be hopeful in harrowing times; the necessity of building community; how to face catastrophic loss; etc. Despite sneering from some critics, and the seeming reluctance to be included in the canon by certain authors, there is much here that should rightly be labelled as literature and treated seriously.

But perhaps most importantly, post-apocalyptic fiction engages, in a whole variety of ways, with the notion of a sudden and dramatic rupture of 'business as usual' and how protagonists try to create a new society from the ruins of the old. While many of the imagined societies created often reflect the prejudices and mores of the author's time, the fact that an imminent end to 'normality' (along with the need to re-start society) was a distinct possibility was what was both terrifying and thrilling to me as a teenager.

Obviously there are many hundreds – possibly thousands – of novels that could come under the rubric ‘post-apocalyptic’, particularly where it bumps up against the boundary of dystopian fiction. So why have I chosen this particular sixty? The short answer is that it is partly a matter of my own personal taste. That’s why, for instance, there is only one of the ‘Mad Max’ type post-apocalyptic novel that gripped the field in the 1980s (and that’s *Damnation Alley* from 1969). It’s also why novels with zombies are automatically excluded. *I am Legend* gets its place by being a stone classic and, besides, the undead here are vampires not zombies (sorry, niche post-apocalyptic nit-picking there).

Alongside my own preferences, there is a desire to showcase how the field has developed historically. Hence the inclusion of what is regarded by many as the first modern apocalyptic novel, Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* from 1826 (fast approaching its bi-centenary).

Other very early novels including Richard Jefferies’ 1885 novel, *After London*, in which the protagonist explores a London that has become a ‘stagnant swamp’ after the earth tilted on its axis, and H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds*, written in part to give British readers an insight into the reality of colonial invasion – albeit that the invaders are defeated by a slice of luck. Jack London’s 1912 novel, *The Scarlet Plague*, is told in flash-back by a now very elderly university professor sitting in the ruins of his campus and describing to his disbelieving grandchildren the ‘wonders’ of capitalism (which the reader can clearly see are only for an elite few) before it all unravels in the face of a plague.

Other early novels also include examples of what we would now see as embryonic feminism. J.D. Beresford’s 1913 novel, *A World of Women*, is set after a plague kills off most of England’s male population. Whilst the surviving patriarch abandons his family to live a life of lechery, his wife and daughters set up a female commune based on, as one reviewer in *The Washington Post* put it, “communitarian principles, without the trammels of religion, class and female subservience”.

Some of the books I have chosen for the list have been dismissed, in Brian Aldiss’ infamous phrase, as ‘cosy catastrophes’. “The essence of cosy catastrophe,” argued Aldiss, “is that the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off.” Aldiss was having an unfair dig at John Wyndham and his highly successful novels, *The Day of The Triffids* (1951), and *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) – the later of which incidentally didn’t make my list. But even Aldiss admits that this definition does not fit Wyndham’s greatest novel, and one of my absolute favourites, *The Chrysalids* (1955).

Here, a Christian-fundamentalist religious community lives in the aftermath of nuclear war, with any sign of difference rooted out and destroyed as deviation from the norm. Amidst this setting a small group who can no longer conceal their difference flee for their lives. While *The Chrysalids* ends positively, thanks to technology-embracing liberal outsiders, a similar novel from the very same year, *The Long Tomorrow* (1955) by Leigh Brackett – also set post-nuclear war with young people fleeing intolerance and the rejection of reason – ends, and views technology, very differently. Both are absolute Cold War classics.

The other novel from that era that I cannot fail to highlight is George R Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949). This, in some more ways, fits the classification of 'cosy catastrophe' as despite the end of the world as they know it thanks to a pandemic, the (only hinted at because of the times) inter-racial couple at the heart of this novel live out a mostly American suburban existence for the first 20 year after the apocalypse. Nevertheless, as time goes by and the next generation grows to take over, the birth of a new and radically different, ecologically aware tribal society emerges. The influence of *Earth Abides* is obvious in many post-apocalyptic novels that were to follow.

The 1960s saw a number of writers use the post-apocalyptic genre to engage in experimental writing. Tom Disch's *The Genocides* (1965) is a convention-defying invasion story that sees a small number of survivors living amongst burrows in roots of monstrous vegetables. Anna Kavan's *Ice* (1967) is a surreal *tour de force* set in a post-nuclear world, while J.G. Ballard set a number of hypnotic – not to say psychedelic – novels in the aftermath of one type of apocalypse or other. While some are, shall we say, better than others, *The Drowned World* (1962) definitely makes my list.

Despite the historical spread of the list, 1970s novels, alongside those from the 1950s and 1960s, dominate, with almost half from those three decades. Was it a golden era as some claim or is it just that I was reading these in my formative years? Who knows, but I have re-read *Survivors* (1976) by Terry Nation based on the TV series (that I was not allowed to watch at the time) and in particular Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) again and again. Another favourite from the 1970s, Kate Wilhem's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sing*, in which a wealthy family turns to cloning in a failed attempt to ensure long-term survival as the world crumbles, was apparently written as a critique of communism – or at least communism as it was portrayed in 1970s America. What we as readers actually take from the books is, as always, entirely subjective.

The portrayal of women and black and Asian people in post-apocalyptic fiction has of course changed dramatically over time. Many of the novels

that made the list since the 1980s have been written by women and some by those from ethnic minorities. Octavia Butler's *Parable Of The Sower* (1988) and Meg Elison's *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* (2016) are particularly notable. I have tried without success to find examples of post-apocalyptic novels from the global South. Perhaps this is a telling insight into the luxury of those who can spend time imagining doom.

The cause of the apocalypse has also changed over time. Early catastrophes were often related to natural or celestial causes with meteors or plagues, for example, bringing life to an abrupt end. In the 1950s and 60s, technology and human-made disasters became the norm with nuclear or biological weapons bringing the conflagration. More recently, climate change and the consequences of attempting to address symptoms rather than causes has been the way in which many picture the end of life as we currently know it. And that brings us to the only series on the list: *The MaddAddam Trilogy* (I have omitted series as a rule, but rules, as always are there to be broken).

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013) bring together a likeable and abhorrent group of characters living before, during and after a human-made apocalypse. Atwood manages to make this visionary commentary on genetics, corporate capitalism and entrepreneurial man-babies scathing, hilarious and scary at the same time.

Whatever the cause of the apocalypse, these novels create a framework with which to re-imagine the world, to bring the principalities and powers crashing down and to re-start almost from scratch. Some have used the genre to reflect on contemporary society by having a protagonist look back to 'today' and its problems (*After London, Things We Didn't See Coming, The Children of Men*). Others use a post-apocalyptic world to examine relationships and/or gender (*Ice, Z for Zachary, A World of Women, Women's Country*) or the relationship between humans and the planet (*Earth Abides, Greener Than You Think, MaddAddam trilogy*). Others use it to let the imagination run free (*Ice, Borne, the Drowned World*). As we approach the genre's 200th anniversary, there is no sign of it fading away. Indeed, one of the most recently published books on the list, *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel in which, 20 years after a global pandemic, a troop of actors moves from community to community performing Shakespeare plays is both a classic of the genre and highly inventive. If I have whetted your appetite for this type of fiction and you are looking for somewhere to start, start here.