

### The Wrong Kind of Viral: Post-Apocalyptic Pandemics in Contemporary North American Fiction



Katrin Isabel Schmitt

Narratives of catastrophe are omnipresent. They range from the latest concerning headline about the COVID-19 outbreak to canonical movies such as Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). A prominent and iconic story of disaster is that of the apocalypse, which goes back to the Bible, especially to the Book of Revelation. While the term 'apocalypse' still evokes strong associations to the biblical narrative, in the twenty-first century, it is primarily used to refer to large-scale disasters or drastic changes of any kind. Consequently, the apocalypse has undergone a conceptual expansion. Now, it encompasses doom, downfall, and disaster, a "modern conflation" (DiTomasso 478) of the end of the world. Concerning literary renditions, the apocalyptic event has ceased to be an ultimate endpoint in contemporary narratives. Rather, as James Berger argues, in "nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains *after the end*" (5–6). As there are survivors and other remnants of former times in the post-apocalyptic world, the catastrophe is not only destructive, but also bears the potential for new beginnings and therefore signifies hope. In this regard, Mary Manjikian points out that it is not primarily the apocalypse as such that is at the center of post-apocalyptic stories. According to her they are rather "concerned with the consequences of the apocalyptic moment, the ways in which society's norms and values and social practices will be changed as a result" (64–5).

It is an inherent feature of apocalyptic representations that they are adapted to and influenced by the time of their creation. Accordingly, they pick up on prevailing individual and collective fears, and draw attention to potential threats and dangers within society. This is already disclosed in the Ancient Greek root, *apocalypsis*, which translates to 'revelation'. The spread and impact of COVID-19 poses an ongoing threat to the global community. Years before the spread of COVID, contemporary post-apocalyptic novels took up the theme of worldwide pandemics. Although these works follow the same genre conventions – a world-changing catastrophe, few survivors struggling to carry on, and destroyed urban spaces – they are also diverse in their structures and themes. In this paper, I focus on three particularly felicitous post-apocalyptic novels by North American writers that feature a deadly virus: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Dog Stars* (2012) by Peter Heller, and *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel. This comparative analysis allows to highlight how contemporary works approach apocalyptic pandemics, especially concerning new beginnings and the element of hope in the post-apocalyptic space.

*Oryx and Crake* features the protagonist Snowman, who is the (apparently) sole human survivor of a pandemic and shares the world with posthuman creatures called Crakers. *The Dog Stars* follows Hig, who has outlived a flu that killed almost everyone around him, and his struggles in a post-pandemic space. In the third example, *Station Eleven*, a deadly virus spreads in North America and eradicates most of humanity, apart from a few survivors like the actors

and musicians of the ‘Travelling Symphony.’ While all three novels present a pandemic setting, they vary in their representations of catastrophe and the changes caused by it. To compare them, I will analyze the respective pandemics as catalysts of change, to then describe the remains in the post-apocalyptic world. As a conclusion, my paper will highlight elements of the hope for new beginnings in post-apocalyptic literature, mirrored most prominently in the re-emergence of nature and communities. Based on these findings, I will discuss whether the respective pandemics in these novels are, in fact, the wrong kind of viral.

All three novels feature a pandemic that overthrows civilization and disrupts modern life. In *Station Eleven*, the “Georgia Flu” (Mandel 17) brings an end to the modern world. It has a short incubation period—“if you’re exposed, you’re sick in three or four hours and dead in a day or two”—and a “mortality rate at 99 percent” (20, 253). Throughout the novel, it remains unclear who is responsible for the emergence of the virus, thus giving it a sense of agency of its own. For example, the virus is characterized as so “efficient that there was almost no one left” (192). Similarly, in *The Dog Stars*, a “[m]utation of a superbug” (Heller 197), which supposedly originated in New Delhi, kills almost everyone. However, it turns out that the virus was fabricated in the national weapons lab in Livermore, California, and then spread in a plane crash, making a governmental institution responsible for the catastrophe. In contrast, in *Oryx and Crake*, the outbreak of a pandemic is intentionally caused by the scientist Crake with the objective of freeing the world from harmful and morally corrupt humanity to make room for the posthuman Crakers.

A comparison of the novels stresses that the representations of the viruses vary and hereby set different emphases. In *Station Eleven*, the origin of the flu is not revealed, which signifies a lingering anxiety concerning the unknown and the unpredictability of life. In *The Dog Stars*, the pandemic spreads due to the error of a governmental institution, which symbolizes fear of the misuse of political power and influence. Only *Oryx and Crake* portrays a virus that is purposefully created to sentence sinful humanity, thereby evoking Judgment Day in the Book of Revelation. While the biblical apocalypse leads to a better place, New Jerusalem, Crake’s approach is merely destructive—at least for humans.

It is striking that in both *Station Eleven* and *The Dog Stars* the pandemic is ascribed to foreign countries, namely to India and the Republic of Georgia, respectively. Hence, the characters in the novels perceive the viruses as a representation of the Other, something caused by an alien force. These perspectives are also reflected in the pandemics’ names: Georgia Flu and Africanized bird flu. There appears to be an inherent need to find a logical explanation for the catastrophe. If none is to be found, as the characters experience in the novels, people try to find a scapegoat—a scenario quite familiar after the year 2020 and the rhetoric of the ‘China Virus.’ The anxiety that powerful scientific knowledge might be abused is reflected in *Oryx and Crake*, as a scientist with a biocentric value system makes the conscious decision to eliminate humanity.

Although the novels’ pandemics differ in their causes, they share the representation of a clear-cut “divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through... life” (Mandel 20). Yet,

the apocalypse is not a conclusive end, as there are some survivors and physical remains of pre-pandemic modernity. August, one of the members of the Travelling Symphony in *Station Eleven*, remarks: “The world didn’t *end* . . . It’s still spinning” (Mandel 202). While the pandemics may not prove to be the end of the world, they significantly alter the world and demolish the achievements of civilization. Heather J. Hicks claims that post-apocalyptic fiction “interrogat[es] the category of modernity” as the apocalypse destroys “physical structures, social formations, and values of modern life” (2, 4). In this context, it is not the question of whether something remains that is relevant. What is significant is what persists, how the apocalypse transforms the remnants, and what emerges in the spaces almost completely void of humanity.

All three novels feature the destruction of infrastructure and social systems in the pandemic, which are virtually non-existent in the post-apocalyptic world. The breakdown of modernity is prominently depicted in ruined urban spaces as the pandemics lead to an “industrial wasteland” (Mandel 191), desolate cities, and collapsed buildings; worlds where it “won’t be long before all visible traces of human habitation will be gone” (Atwood 222), as proposed in *Oryx and Crake*. With the collapse of societal structures and depictions of ruins, the novels present the familiar “end of the world as we know it” (Hall 3). Previously held humanist values are shattered together with these structures. The few remaining people live in a “world that’s way past diplomacy” (Heller 203) and fight for their survival, regardless of the consequences for others. The apocalypse is not only an end on the physical level, it also demolishes the core concepts of human interaction and existence.

As human lives and structures disappear, nature can reclaim the spaces they once occupied. From a biocentric perspective, which according to Timothy Clark aims to “identify with all life or a whole ecosystem, without giving . . . privilege to just one species” (3), the novels under discussion reveal a sense of purpose in the ruins as they are re-naturalized. For example, *Station Eleven* describes “beauty in the decrepitude, sunlight catching in the flowers that had sprung up through the gravel of long-overgrown driveways.” This image of serenity is strongly contrasted by the remains of urban life, as houses contain “only trash from the old world” (Mandel 296). While the pandemic brings the damaging environmental impacts of humans abruptly to an end, the long-lasting effects of climate change brought on and precipitated by them are still visible. Although there might not be a clear future perspective for humanity, nature is recovering. In *Oryx and Crake*, the former urban structures are annihilated by the natural world as “the botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roofs” (221-2). Natural space conquers human constructions. To summarize, in all three novels, nature gains more space to flourish and regenerate than in the pre-apocalyptic world.

The pandemics are presented as a positive event from a biocentric perspective in which non-human life forms no longer suffer under a hierarchy shaped by human exceptionalism. The survivors in *Station Eleven* and *The Dog Stars* adjust to the situation and sometimes even enjoy peaceful pastoral moments. For Snowman in *Oryx and Crake*, in contrast, nature continuously poses a threat and he cannot accept a subordinate role within the new ecosystem. In addition to

the struggle for survival, the post-apocalyptic world also provides space for the formation of new human communities. Although most characters in these three novels start out as lonely survivors, almost all of them establish new social bonds and forms of familial ties. Eva Horn asserts that those who survive are “either communities that fight or nuclear families—communities, in any case, whose bonds are based on blood, the blood shared by kin or the blood shed by the enemy” (100). Within this framework, it is a central concern, whether the new collectives attempt to reproduce the past or if they are future-oriented.

A prime example is the newly formed community at Severn City Airport in *Station Eleven*. Shortly after the pandemic, the survivors are keen for their lives to go back to the way they were before, waiting for “the army coming in and announcing that it was all over, this whole flu thing cleared up and taken care of, everything back to normal again” (Mandel 179). However, as they start to realize that there is no way back, they accept their situation and find a new purpose in life. Starting out as individuals and small groups from all over the world who are stuck at an airport, the survivors soon begin to cooperate, developing shared survival strategies, and establishing new traditions, such as a topical bonfire every night. This new beginning is most strikingly manifested with the burgeoning of new life, as a woman at the airport giving birth to a baby is “the only good thing that had happened in that terrible first year” (233).

Similarly, *The Dog Stars* opens with Hig dreaming of returning to the past as well, sleeping outside so he can “pretend there’s a house somewhere else, with someone in it, someone to go back to” (Heller 30). His only close contact is Bangle, although the two form an efficient survival team rather than being friends. Nevertheless, they grow closer and add to their community by letting Cima and her father join them. As Hig and Cima become romantically involved, there are grounds for a new nuclear family, which Hig even considers to be his “patriotic duty to follow... through.” Although the novel ends before there is any potential offspring, the topic of new life is further evoked with Cima bringing a male and female lamb with her, “[l]ike the Ark” (250, 265). The reference to the biblical flood narrative underscores that, theoretically, it only takes two to repopulate a species. In *Oryx and Crake*, in comparison, Snowman roams the earth as a lonely last man, only encountering other survivors at the end of the novel, although it remains unclear whether he will approach them or not. He desperately yearns for what he has lost. His post-apocalyptic present is significantly shaped by nostalgic memories he cannot let go. Constantly on his own and longing for the past, Snowman is unable to develop a perspective for the future and is incapable of building a new existence in the post-pandemic space. However, a new, future-oriented community is introduced in the form of the posthuman Crakers, who are perfectly adapted to the harsh environmental conditions and have a harmonious relationship with nature. To ensure that this equilibrium is maintained, Crake removed all attributes he considered to be human flaws in his creation, making racism, hierarchy, and territorial behaviour impossible for Crakers. While there seems to be little hope for humanity, the Crakers prosper in the post-pandemic space.

New communities are established in different variants in these novels. In *Station Eleven*, there are several new collectives, for example a cult led by a prophet, who think “they were

saved from the Georgia Flu and survived the collapse because they're superior people and free from sin" (Mandel 115), and the Travelling Symphony. At first glance, these groups appear to be transformational and novel. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, the survivors spot a town "whose streets were lit up with electricity" (311), a sight that foreshadows the redevelopment of other structures of modern life. *The Dog Stars* presents a traditional nuclear family, thus reinstating former societal values. Consequently, these two novels contain the hope that former times can be reconstructed. Yet, this hope also contains the threat of cyclically repeating mistakes, potentially leading back to apocalyptic circumstances. In *Oryx and Crake*, in contrast, a unique and promising posthuman community is introduced. However, the Crakers, contrary to Crake's plans, start to mirror human behavior, such as symbolical thinking and the formation of hierarchical structures. There is consequently the risk that they will repeat human mistakes as well, which diminishes the utopian traits of their new beginning.

In sum, this comparative analysis has shown that the selected novels are representative for the range and depth of North American post-apocalyptic fiction as a negotiation of political, philosophical, and bioethical questions and values. Although the works considered here create a scenario in which viral pandemics are vastly destructive and cause the annihilation of social (infra-)structures and large percentages of humankind, there are also new beginnings. The surviving humans rebuild communities, which are adapted to the post-apocalyptic space while simultaneously replicating elements of pre-pandemic times. The element of hope is a double-edged sword, as there is an underlying threat that history might repeat itself for humanity. Nature, however, thrives in the post-apocalyptic spaces, stressing its intrinsic value outside the anthropocentric framework of human perception. In the end, pandemics are, from a biocentric perspective, the right kind of viral after all.

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**Katrin Isabel Schmitt** is a doctoral researcher in the field of Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Konstanz and holds a doctoral scholarship from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. She is currently working on her dissertation project titled “Beginning after the End: Narrative and Trauma in Twenty-First Century North American Post-Apocalyptic Fiction” under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Reingard M. Nischik and Prof. Dr. Silvia Mergenthal. Prior to that she successfully completed her state exam in German and English (teaching degree), including an Erasmus stay abroad at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Her focus on contemporary North American Literature is also reflected in her teaching at the University of Konstanz, namely in seminars such as “Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Fiction” and “North American Post-Apocalyptic Short Fiction” for graduate and undergraduate students. Further research interests of hers include Contemporary Literature, Speculative Fiction, and Environmental Humanities. Additionally to her research, Katrin Isabel Schmitt is employed as a startup officer specialising in marketing and communications at the University’s startup-initiative *Kilometer1*.