

# Apocalyptic Fiction

*Andrew Tate*

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# 1

## Introduction: Dreams of the ‘ruined’ future

‘I don’t believe in the future. I think we’re all doomed’, claims one of Douglas Coupland’s cheerfully mournful characters in *JPod* (2006).<sup>1</sup> This apocalyptic forecast may be rather glibly predicted, but similarly less than sanguine conjecture is far from rare in contemporary culture. Indeed, the prospect for the years to come, according to a copious body of twenty-first-century fiction, does not look particularly bright. Western civilization, according to such novels, appears to have abandoned its faith in a promised world of progress and continuing prosperity.

An ailing father and his young son walk south, heading towards the distant coast of a ruined, ash-coloured landscape, hoping to survive winter and escape the twin threats of starvation and gangs of cannibals. A pair of brothers journeys eastwards, also on foot, hoping to sail away from the same land, the country that ‘used to be America [...] the safest place on earth’ but which is now distinguished by deprivation; its people, perhaps a century or more into the future, are illiterate and have no memories of modern technology or the nation’s former status as a superpower, the culture of the deep past no more than the half rumour of folktale and song.<sup>2</sup> To the north, ‘Snowman’, a forlorn former advertising executive with a gift for storytelling (and manipulation), sits in a tree. The world into which he makes reluctant sorties is one of ‘dead houses, dead malls, dead labs, dead everything’.<sup>3</sup> This lonely man, continuously on the threshold of delirium, is convinced that he is the last human being; his arboreal dwelling is a makeshift refuge from porcine creatures that lurk on the ground; the ‘Pigoons’ were once genetically

modified as a source of spare organs, but, in a world after human domination, they run free and are more than a little peckish. A little further south and west, a troupe of actors and musicians walk around Lake Michigan performing Shakespeare to the ragtag settlements that represent what is left of humanity twenty years after a pandemic has destroyed most of the world's population. Somewhere in Appalachia, a sixteen-year-old woman is the latest 'tribute' in an annual televised fight-to-the-death contest of the nation's youth; meanwhile, in a city that was once known as Chicago, teenagers are forced to become members of factions determined by dominant character traits and subjected to brutal rites of passage; difference or 'divergence' is not tolerated. These characters and plots are not part of a single, exceptionally depressing literary universe. However, the critical and commercial success of such bleak scenarios, evoked, by turn, in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* (2007), Margaret Atwood's 'MaddAddam' sequence (2003–13), Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), Suzanne Collins's 'The Hunger Games' trilogy (2008–10) and Veronica Roth's 'Divergent' sequence (2011–13) are evidence that popular contemporary narrative is haunted by dreams of a future that is a place of ruin.

*Apocalyptic Fiction* explores these narratives alongside a number of other twenty-first-century novels by, among others, J. G. Ballard, Maggie Gee and Tom Perrotta, of what Patrick Parrinder has named the 'ruined' future.<sup>4</sup> The book identifies the dizzying variety of ways in which contemporary authors from Britain, America and Canada envision the decline and fall of civilization, the twilight of *Homo sapiens* and the possible death of all life on the planet. Whether the world will end with a bang, whimper, sigh of relief or, as for the protagonists of Edgar Wright's comic rites of passage movie, *The World's End* (2013), as a result of a really bad hangover seems to be a matter of perspective. End-of-the-world fiction is emphatically not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, apocalyptic stories are as old as narrative itself. The book treats twenty-first-century 'apocalyptic' fiction as an expansive family of genres with a complex genealogy. It does not attempt to give an exhaustive account of the different categories of 'end-of-the-world' fiction but focuses on some of the recurrent tropes, problems and hopes that preoccupy postmillennial novels of the end. This introductory chapter explores the contours and contexts of contemporary apocalyptic fiction, sets

up the parameters of each chapter and gives particular focus to novels not examined elsewhere in the book. It also explores two related questions. Is there a difference, other than scale and the number of deaths, between the phenomena of catastrophe and apocalypse? Why do so many writers in an ostensibly post-Christian era continually return to biblical eschatology to imagine a coming end?

Critical readings frequently emphasize two basic shapes for nightmarish, 'ruined future' fictions: the first, frequently referred to as dystopia, is a world dominated by technology and excessive consumerism that generates endless leisure for a decadent ruling elite and misery for a vast, starving underclass. This kind of society, covertly run by shady bureaucrats who work for corporations rather than for a democratically elected government, is rarely represented as a happy 'end of history', one in which all people (or at least those sensible enough to be rich and to live in the most prosperous nations) achieve material and emotional success; compassionate, enlightened human beings are, apparently, vanishingly rare in such narratives, and those who wish to prosper never ask difficult questions about who pays the price for prosperity. Veronica Hollinger, for example, suggests that the 'technoculture' that best describes twenty-first-century life in affluent, capitalist nations means that many people 'have come to experience the present as a kind of future at which we've inadvertently arrived, one of the many futures imagined by science fiction'. Hollinger explores the writing of William Gibson, godfather of cyberpunk, as a kind of prophetic literature and specifically identifies *Pattern Recognition* (2003) as a novel that represents both realism (its events take place in 2002) and Science Fiction (SF) because it is 'set in the endless endtimes of the future-present. It brilliantly conveys the phenomenology of a present infused with futurity, no longer like itself, no longer like the present.'<sup>5</sup> The catastrophe in such visions is frequently moral rather than literal: personal connection, justice and creativity are sacrificed in order to preserve a passive social order. The alternative vision is of a devastated earth in which this 'technofuture' has failed and life is simply a brutal struggle eked out by the survivors. In a review article for *n+1* published under the bald soubriquet 'The End' (2007), Chad Harbach compares the twin trajectories represented by what he names the 'heightened present' popularized by SF with 'post-catastrophe' narratives. The former,

he observes, in ‘combining and extrapolating extant technologies (an MP3 player ... in your brain!)’ to offer a critique of ‘their psychological and political effects’.

The post-catastrophe novel does the opposite [...] It liberates the violent potential of technology (and its enemy, nature) to create an altered world whose chief characteristic is a bewildering lack of technology. This in turn means a severely winnowed human population, and plenty of hardship and casual brutality. This future doesn’t intensify the present moment, it contradicts it: What would happen if we didn’t live in an overpopulated, technology-saturated world in which travel by foot is considered eccentric, tacos cost forty-nine cents, and the prerogative to commit violence – despite an amazing profusion of handheld weaponry – lies entirely with the state?<sup>6</sup>

Peter Boxall suggests that for novelists such as Atwood, McCarthy and Sarah Hall, whose twenty-first-century fictions have imagined apocalyptic or dystopian futures, ‘the recurrent urge to envisage violent historical change as a kind of universal death has, as its corollary, the image of the dying planet. The contemporary imagination is haunted by the prospect of planetary death, of irreversible environmental disaster.’<sup>7</sup>

The spectre of global catastrophe frequently haunts David Mitchell’s fiction: for example, one of the narrators of his debut novel, *Ghostwritten* (1999), is a murderous member of a doomsday cult who has poisoned a Tokyo subway train; two of the six stories in *Cloud Atlas* (2004), ‘An Orison of Sonmi-451’ and ‘Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After’ are set in two different phases of a ruined future that is caused by exploitation of nature. Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks* (2014) concludes in 2043, during a post-oil era popularly known as the ‘Endarkenment’. Civil order has not quite collapsed but the world stands on the brink of catastrophe as, for example, resources gradually deplete, radioactive pollution seeps around coastlines and military rule becomes a daily reality. Mitchell’s narrator, Holly Sykes, first introduced as a teenager, is now in her mid-seventies; she lives a simple life in rural Ireland and has experienced the loss of family and friends in a long and frequently strange life. Holly is a significant choice to articulate a stark environmental warning. She has witnessed much strangeness,



including profound malevolence and acts of self-sacrifice. She is figured as rational, decent and invested in the idea that the world should exist long after her time. Her muted melancholy is not, however, simply bereavement for the people she has lost:

It's everything: it's grief for the regions we deadlanded, the ice caps we melted, the Gulf Stream we redirected, the rivers we drained, the coasts we flooded, the lakes we choked with crap, the seas we killed, the species we drove to extinction, the pollinators we wiped out, the oil we squandered, the drugs we rendered impotent, the comforting liars we voted into office – all so we didn't have to change our cosy lifestyles. People talk about the Endarkenment like our ancestors talked about the Black Death, as if it's an act of God. But we summoned it, with every tank of oil we burnt our way through. My generation were diners stuffing ourselves senseless at the Restaurant of the Earth's Riches knowing – while denying – that we'd be doing a runner and leaving our grandchildren a tab that can never be paid.<sup>8</sup>

The nightmare of the 'Endarkenment' is envisioned decades in the future but it is clear that Mitchell, like other writers of our ruined future, is equally anxious about the present. We now live in an era of apparent continual catastrophe and the fundamental context for addressing twenty-first-century apocalyptic anxiety is the greatest threat to life on earth: anthropogenic climate change. Despite the occasional broadside from disbelieving voices in the denial camp, often from the political right, there is little serious doubt that a variety of human behaviours – and specifically the perpetual pollution of the planet by wasteful industry – is a root cause of climate change. 'The Earth is now warmer than it has been for over 90 per cent of its 4.6 billion year history', writes geophysicist Bill McGuire, 'and by the end of the twenty-first century our planet may see higher temperatures than at any time for the last 150,000 years'. The consequences of what McGuire calls 'a gigantic planetary trial' that kicked off with the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century are sobering.<sup>9</sup> Ice caps will melt, flooding coastal cities; ruined agriculture will perpetuate food shortages, starvation and the displacement of vast numbers of people. In *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015), the most meticulous study to date of the literary response to climate change, Adam Trexler notes that there is now a

‘considerable archive’ of such narratives, though critics have been slow to recognize a genre with a rich (and urgent) recent history. Trexler identifies Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) as the first novel to engage directly with greenhouse gas emissions, more than a decade before the vast wave of climate change novels was published.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Kim Stanley Robinson’s ‘Science in the Capital’ trilogy – *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2006) and *Sixty Days and Counting* (2007) – engages with hard science far more than the majority of writers discussed in this study. Robinson tests his narrative of Earth on the brink of catastrophe, and specifically of anthropogenic, accelerated climate change, via a scientist protagonist. This man of reason whose role is to enlighten and precipitate radical, perhaps salvific change in humanity’s behaviour is a contrast to the more ambiguous protagonists of Ian McEwan’s fiction. *Solar* (2010), for example, a tragic-comic climate change novel, follows a decade in the chaotic life of Michael Beard, once a Nobel Prize winner who has all but abandoned any commitment to research. Beard is the scientist as anti-hero; he is a cynical chancer who exploits the goodwill of his many former wives and lovers. Beard’s increasing weight and failure to deal with health crises (including an ominous lesion on his wrist) are slightly crude symbols of humanity’s failure to attend to the causes of incipient climate disaster. Although my study does not focus on climate fiction – or ‘clifi’ – since it is such a vast area in its own right, the parlous state of the planet is crucial to every novel discussed. Atwood’s ‘MaddAddam’ trilogy, the focus of Chapter Four, presents two ruined worlds: a post-collapse era in which humanity has been all but wiped out by a man-made pandemic and, in flashback, a near-future dystopian era in which the environment has already been poisoned, the climate altered and all living things treated as little more than a resource for greedy corporations. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* has been described by George Monbiot, the influential environmental campaigner, as ‘the most important environmental book ever written’.<sup>11</sup> This is an extraordinary claim, particularly since the novel does not seek to represent the origins of the parlous, denatured world in which a father and son attempt to survive.

Future fear is not limited to the capacious quantity of novels and short fiction that can be readily described as post-collapse narratives. ‘You never know when something disastrous might happen’, nervously quips one character in *Station Eleven*, shortly before

something disastrous, involving the near extinction of the human race, does indeed ‘happen’.<sup>12</sup> Another crucial context for apocalyptic fiction is the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent ‘Global War on Terror’. These events have been explored directly in a wide body of novels, including, for example, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Close and Incredibly Loud* (2005), Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* (2006), Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), but they also inform, more indirectly, the anxieties of much ostensibly future-orientated fiction. The politics of security and a foreboding sense that life in the West is rather more fragile than had been assumed is a subtext, for example, in Crace’s *The Pesthouse* and McCarthy’s *The Road*. Similarly, a distinctively post-9/11 focus on violence as spectacle is explored in Collins’s ‘The Hunger Games’ trilogy.<sup>13</sup> A number of interpretations of ‘post-apocalyptic’ narrative do not emphasize future forebodings but look to the recent past in which versions of the world have been destroyed many times over. In *After the End* (1999), James Berger claims that ‘the most dystopic visions of science fiction do no more than replicate the actual historical catastrophes of the twentieth century’.<sup>14</sup> The Holocaust and the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima, for Berger, are the retrospective horizon that shapes the contemporary imagination’s expectations of a bankrupt future. One of the problems with understanding speculative fiction primarily as future orientated, ‘dystopian’ speculations about what might occur somewhere down the line is that it can let us off the hook and evades contemporary political questions. Karl Hand, in his reading of ‘The Hunger Games’ trilogy, drawing on both Jeremy Rifkin’s concepts of ‘cultural capitalism’ and the Gospel of St Luke’s call to action, is not convinced by the view that the nightmare society is a phenomenon that lies somewhere in our future unless we mend our ways: “‘dystopia’ has already happened’, he claims.<sup>15</sup>

Much twenty-first-century fiction is characterized by a certain kind of *pre*-apocalyptic anxiety, narrated by figures who are unlikely to be avid readers of the book of Revelation but who nevertheless believe themselves to be living in the last days; such men and women fear that their societies exist on the brink, for better or worse, of an imminent, radical change. Although they live in worlds that have yet to collapse, their shared terror of approaching

disaster resonates with elements of the ‘cosy catastrophe’ subgenre of apocalyptic fiction as identified by Brian Aldiss in his history of SF, *The Billion Year Spree* (1973). This successful soubriquet, now widely deployed, originally signified narratives of a quiet, very English style of apocalypse in which global disaster is survived by a typically prosperous remnant that adapts, with reasonable aptitude and plenty of common sense, to the new conditions of a post-collapse world. For Aldiss, the ‘master of the cosy catastrophe’ is John Wyndham, author of SF disaster novels including *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) and *The Chrysalids* (1955). The ‘essence’ of the genre, in Aldiss’s very 1970s’ words, ‘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’.<sup>16</sup> Other examples might include Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) in which London, long submerged beneath floodwaters, has become a tropical lagoon; its protagonist, Kerans, manages to live in old-world style in an upper floor of the Ritz and, when not studying this surreal new Eden and/or fighting the heinous, white-suited Strangman, seduces a woman named Beatrice. The kind of characters who, as Aldiss puts it, ‘meet the crisis in the dining room’ are even rarer in twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic narratives. Indeed, McCarthy’s *The Road* is about as far from ‘cosy’ catastrophe as it is possible to imagine: in lieu of ‘a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking’, the anonymous man has lost his wife to suicide, takes shelter wherever he may avoid cannibals or their prey and, in a post-fuel future, has to make do with his ruined feet and a shopping trolley instead of a looted car.

Twenty-first-century descendants of the typical survivors of ‘cosy catastrophe’ might be found in contemporary fictions of middle-class life that are charged with an uncanny apocalyptic prescience; these protagonists frequently fear that an incipient disaster will undo their comfortable lives. For example, Nick Hornby’s *How to Be Good* (2001) – a tragicomic parable about the mundane realities of love and the difficulties of ethical living – ends with a thunderstorm that has lasted for days (‘the kind of rain that you’re supposed to get after a nuclear war’); for Katie Carr, Hornby’s narrator, these floods seem to portend a dark, diminished future that is the result of human failure: ‘We are drowning because we have abused our planet, kicked and starved it until it changed its nature and turned nasty. It feels like the end of the world.’<sup>17</sup> Similarly, David

Nicholls's *Us* (2014) – another ostensibly comic narrative about a disintegrating middle-class marriage – is haunted by apocalyptic dread; speculative pessimism versus a sanguine, Whigish faith in the future is used as an index of the growing estrangement between the novel's sparring couple. Nicholls's narrator, Douglas Petersen, is a fussy, methodical man in denial – he conducts a meticulously planned fight for a twenty-five-year relationship that his wife has already decided is doomed – but he is also full of foreboding. As a teenager of the 1980s, Douglas 'was especially haunted by the prospect of nuclear war' and remembers that those 'public information films intended to educate and reassure the populace' had the reverse impact and induced 'a frenzy of morbid fantasy' in which he would soon 'be hunting for mutant rats in the remains of Ipswich city centre'.<sup>18</sup>

Anxieties of the atomic age – familiar to anybody who grew up with the looming threat of destruction during the Cold War – have not so much evaporated, but have instead been replaced by fears about the state of the world that his own teenage son will inherit. *Us* traces the final summer of a failing relationship but it is also an exploration of another long-standing phenomenon in crisis: Douglas is afraid that the middle classes, in the ascendant since the nineteenth century, are 'doomed' by the accelerated logic of consumer capitalism. Douglas's apocalyptic prospect – a vision of a world in which there is a 'battle for finite resources of food, water, gas and oil [...] where car bomb explosions, typhoons and freak hailstorms are so commonplace as to barely be remarked upon' – is scarcely irrational or particularly out of kilter with widely acknowledged environmental forecasts (*Us*, pp. 331–2). Catastrophe, he suggests, will only be cosy for 'the privileged 1 per cent of businessmen, celebrities and entrepreneurs'. Connie, a nonconformist who yearns for the liberated years of her youth, mocks these millennial presentiments as a '*Mad Max*-like vision of the future' (*Us*, p. 332). To be clear, Douglas is neither a political activist nor a man on the threshold of a religious awakening: he is less concerned with the future of the planet than he is with the continuation of his own comfortable reality – he sees his son's face in a vicious future landscape because he is dimly conscious of his own mortality. Douglas's biography is one of everyday compromise and a product of the subtleties of economic coercion: he gave up his vocation in biological research for a more lucrative life as a manager in commercially

driven science. This muted sacrifice of value – exchanging the purity of life itself for short-term material security – may signify Douglas’s unconscious guilt in failing to resist the dystopian near-future that he dreads.

We might imagine a particularly awkward meeting between Douglas and Dr Paul O’Rourke, the Boston-born narrator of Joshua Ferris’s *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (2014). These characters – who coincidentally appeared in novels published in the same year – might meet on one of their tours of Europe. Paul – Red Sox fan, dentist, atheist and insomniac – is less enthused by the aesthetic and religious legacies of the continent than his British contemporary. He recalls a holiday with his erstwhile girlfriend (also, coincidentally, named Connie) who he observes ‘took Europe far too seriously’ and with whom he visited numerous churches (‘simply a place to be bored in’).<sup>19</sup> Paul confesses that he perpetually lies awake, anticipating the end of the world, imagining his ‘last night on earth, when all options, and not just one night’s options, expired’.

Inside my head, where I lived, wars were breaking out, valleys flooding, forests catching fire, oceans breaching the land, and storms dragging it all to the bottom of the sea, with only a few days or weeks remaining before the entire world and everything sweet and surprising we’d done with it went dark against the vast backdrop of the universe (*TRA*, pp. 42–3).

Are Douglas, Katie and Paul characters who find themselves in the wrong genre? How would they fare in the brutal world of McCarthy’s *The Road* or alongside the God’s Gardeners in Atwood’s ‘MaddAddam’ trilogy? This trinity are all people who occupy the middle – they are middle class, middle aged – of a mildly privileged world that they all suspect is unstable and unsustainable.

Other twenty-first-century literary protagonists who suffer from such postmillennial forebodings have not always benefited from the same advantages as Douglas and his peers. In Dave Eggers’s *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (2014), a novel constructed entirely from dialogue, Thomas, a confused and dangerous thirty-something, kidnaps a group of men and women, including an astronaut and a former senator, takes them

to an abandoned military base and seeks answers for his disillusioned generation. He confesses to experiencing 'fairly apocalyptic thoughts' and shares a recurring waking dream in which he becomes an avenging angel, an agent of everyday Armageddon:

I'll be walking down some crowded street and I'll start boiling inside and I picture myself parting all these people like Moses with the Red Sea. You know, the people disappear, the buildings dissolve and when I'm done there's all this empty space, and it's quieter, and there aren't all these people and all their dirty thoughts and idiotic talking and opinions. And that vision actually gives me peace. When I picture the landscape bare, free of all human noise and filth, I can relax.<sup>20</sup>

This is a fantasy of vengeful power by an impotent individual; apocalypse as violent 'cleansing' rather than as revelation; peace achieved by mass destruction. Thomas borrows the Exodus narrative to justify his own sense of marginalization, but misses the context of oppression and the movement towards liberty. He experiences the odd sense of longing for a cause that appears in an era without a common enemy and he is nostalgic for war: 'Everyone I know would have turned out better, if we'd been part of some universal struggle, some cause greater than ourselves'.<sup>21</sup> Thomas's state of mind and conduct are extreme, but his grievance regarding a generational lack of direction echoes aspects of post-youth narratives such as Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991).

The quasi-religious register of his destructive anger is also symptomatic of a widespread perception of biblical eschatology as a cinematic montage of cataclysm and retribution. Visions of the end of the world are integral to many world religions: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Hinduism, for example, all have distinctive forms of eschatology. The polytheistic religions of the ancient Greeks include stories in which the gods, for a variety of reasons, punish human beings by sending floods or fire. However, in the West, Judeo-Christianity continues to give shape to narratives of catastrophe and particularly those fictions of destruction that seem to portend the end-of-the-world-as-you-know-it.

Apocalypse is widely understood in the shared, popular imagination as a kind of class synonym for spectacular destruction,

death on a vast scale and the collapse of all that a society might hold dear (families, cars, the comforts of home). Yet this misses the *primary* valence of the term – derived from the Greek term *apocalypsis* – that signifies revelation, the uncovering of what was previously hidden. Indeed, the Revelation of St John, the last book of the Christian scriptures, begins with this Greek term ‘suggesting a disclosure or unveiling’.<sup>22</sup> Biblical apocalyptic is not simply a Christian phenomenon but, as Michael Wheeler, addressing Victorian forms of eschatology, argues, it is ‘a tradition coming down from early Judaism’ as well as part of the gospels, ‘in which [...] the end-time and the inauguration of a new world order, is held in tension with wisdom teaching, which assumes that the world will continue’. The apocalyptic, because of its most popular late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century screen manifestations and Cold War associations with the threat of nuclear annihilation, ‘has come to mean simply the disastrous end of things’.<sup>23</sup> The theologian Tom Wright, for example, argues that there is a vast difference between popular understandings of the world-to-come and Christian eschatology.<sup>24</sup>

The Revelation to John is undoubtedly full of violent imagery but it is not necessarily a book that glories in gratuitous bloodletting. In a reading of Christian eschatology compared with contemporary ‘climate apocalypse’, Michael Northcott argues that in John’s vision there ‘is no schadenfreude, no rejoicing in the tribulations that bring down the powerful from their thrones at the end’, but rather ‘John’s aim is to encourage the persecuted and powerless Christians whom Rome threatened to overwhelm under the Emperor Nero, that, provided they remain faithful in loving God and neighbour, the cataclysm will see them vindicated in the end’.<sup>25</sup> This interpretation emphasizes the advent of ‘messianic time’ and a new era of justice and mercy that will replace the corruption and oppression of the earth and its people. As Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland observe in their indispensable reception history of Revelation, ‘the Apocalypse, no less than the rest of the Bible, hardly offers an unambiguous message’ and it is a book that ‘has served many agendas, those of revolutionaries and radicals as well as those of quietists and supporters of the status quo’.<sup>26</sup> A number of thinkers who are neither Christian nor primarily associated with professional theology have turned to biblical idioms and ideas. Slavoj Žižek, combative Marxist–Lacanian, for example, whose work displays a recurrent



fascination with (Saint) Paul has written a book titled *Living in the End Times* (2010). Similarly, Giorgio Agamben takes up the question of messianic time, a concept central to Walter Benjamin's project, in *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (2005) in his reading of Paul's letter.

Rival views of the Revelation of St John not only divide theologians and Christian communities but are also interpreted in strikingly different ways by contemporary writers. In an autobiographical introduction to the last book of the Bible, Will Self, iconoclastic novelist and cultural commentator, describes the Revelation of St John as 'a sick text' and the King James Version, in particular, as 'a guignol of tedium, a portentous horror film'.<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Norris, by contrast, believes that the book of Revelation 'has suffered from bad interpretation' and that the narrative itself, far from 'cruel', 'boldly asserts that our cruelties and injustices will not have the last word'.<sup>28</sup>

Even in an era of relative ignorance of the Bible and its specific teachings, a version of the apocalyptic imagination relies on a variety of biblical tropes. The late 1990s witnessed a return to millennial anxiety in both popular culture and philosophy. 'Endism', observed James Annesley in 1996, 'casts a familiar shadow'.<sup>29</sup> The foreboding epithet for what he glossed as the 'cult of the end' is borrowed from a *New York Times Magazine* article on Francis Fukuyama, who famously argued that history itself was heading for its conclusion with the advent of liberal capitalism.<sup>30</sup> Disaster movies were big business for Hollywood in the 1990s, including a popular iteration of the day of judgement story in which a worryingly large asteroid is headed towards humanity in both *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* (1998); a similar form of absurd cosmic justice, in the shape of a rogue planet, also hurtles towards Earth with unseemly haste in Lars Von Trier's more oblique existentialist drama, *Melancholia* (2011).

Catastrophe on a global scale remains a curiously popular form of screen entertainment. Nations fall, nature is spoiled and the human race might be on the brink of breathing its last after any number of extinction-level events. Such narratives not only seem strange visual companions to popcorn and ice cream, but also are highly marketable. The ways in which we might arrive at this frequently foretold 'ruined future', a future that counter-intuitively often resembles our deep past, are disorientating in

their diversity. Twenty-first-century screenwriters have become particularly inventive when envisaging the end of the world that we know, but certain forms of catastrophe are particularly popular: pandemics that spread so fast only a tiny remnant of human beings survive; such plagues are, with alarming regularity, accompanied by the return of the dead as zombie hordes; alien invasion, frequently repelled, on screen at least, by Tom Cruise; sentient technology that develops a homicidal antipathy for its human creators; and ecological folly, variously resulting in a new ice age, terminal drought or a global deluge to rival the flood survived by those invited on board Noah's ark. The not-too-subtle subtext of many of these end-of-the-world visions seems to be: we only learn when it's absolutely too late.

Armageddon is also the stuff of television comedy – *The Last Man on Earth* (2015-) and *You, Me and the Apocalypse* (2015) – and Saturday evening family entertainment. In the revived version of the BBC's time travelling drama, *Dr Who* (1963, 2005), the first trip on which the eponymous itinerant Time Lord takes his new companion, Rose Tyler, is to a space station in the year five billion to witness the death of planet Earth, a conclusion hastened by the expanding sun. The Doctor, ostensibly very fond of human beings, appears insouciant about this ending. In the same episode, the mysterious character reveals that he is the last of his species as his own world was destroyed after a long war. He is an exile with a guilty secret, regarded as a hero by many whom he encounters but, he believes, also the person responsible for the annihilation of his people.

This fascination with an anticipated end is not, however, necessarily exclusively a product of either pre- or postmillennial presentiments. Frank Kermode in *The Sense of Ending* (1967), a groundbreaking study of literature's affinities with the apocalyptic tradition and temporality, uses the term 'end-determined fictions'.<sup>31</sup> This might apply to a range of narratives that depend on revelation and resolution, from Virgil and Dante to popular contemporary genres such as detective stories. Paul Fiddes revisits Kermode's theory of temporality in *The Promised End* (2000) and explores the peculiar resistance to closure of postmodern fiction in relation to the eschatological four 'last things' of orthodox Christianity: 'the final advent of the Lord of the cosmos, the last judgement, heaven and hell'.<sup>32</sup> Much late modern thought and art no longer recognizes

the transcendental significance of these theological categories. However, contemporary literature displays a continual fascination with the imaginative possibilities of biblical ways of addressing the end. Indeed, for Fiddes 'eschatology [is] the basic mood' not just of theology but also of 'literary creation'.<sup>33</sup>

As Greg Garrard observes, the idiom of eschatology 'escaped the discipline of theology long before the twentieth century'. Garrard cites the 'secular, often politically revolutionary' appropriations of 'apocalyptic rhetoric' by a variety of figures associated with the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the highly esoteric image-texts of William Blake.<sup>34</sup> This wayward visionary used his wildly reimagined biblical images against the official arbiters of revelation: church authorities and the publicly pious are mocked, their theologies inverted and defamiliarized as part of a prophetic critique of social conformity and the tyranny of wealth.

Nineteenth-century literature and culture frequently explore ethical and aesthetic questions via an eschatological lens. Thomas Carlyle's 'Signs of the Times' (1829), in which the sermonic writer famously characterized his historical moment as 'the Age of Machinery in every outward and inward sense of the word' is a prophetic essay that challenges both materialism and superstition.<sup>35</sup> The title is an allusion to Jesus's warning to the religious authorities that tempted him into giving a sign:

He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times? (Matthew 16. 2–3).

Carlyle was responding, in part, to Millenarian thinkers of his day who anticipated the imminent return of Christ to earth. The essayist's allusion to Jesus's austere advice is likely to have been recognized by believers and sceptics in a culture that prized biblical literacy. The aura of eschatological thinking was also deployed in more explicitly devotional ways: for example, William Holman Hunt's painting of Jesus, *The Light of the World* (1851–3), eventually seen by millions of spectators around the world, interprets Revelation 3. 20 ('Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any

man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me’); the poet Christina Rossetti, fervent in her commitment to Anglo-Catholicism and, coincidentally one of the models for Hunt’s Christ, also wrote a commentary on Revelation, *The Face of the Deep* (1892). The final words of Charlotte Brontë’s spiritually ambiguous *Jane Eyre* (1848), spoken by St John Rivers, include the words of messianic expectation from the penultimate verse of the Christian Bible: ‘Surely I come quickly [...] Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus’ (Revelation 22. 20). Perhaps the most successful work of British religious art of the nineteenth century is John Martin’s eschatological sequence *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851–3). During an era in which Evangelical spirituality was extraordinarily influential in popular culture, vast numbers of spectators gathered to see these canvases depicting the four last things. In later years Martin’s reputation declined and, as John Wolfe notes, the paintings were sold in the 1930s for ‘the derisory sum of seven pounds’.<sup>36</sup> However, the debatable process of secularization coupled with a more questioning, critical approach to scripture did not bring an end to the fascination with biblical versions of the end. Iterations of Christian apocalyptic, for example, inform the ‘scientific romances’ of H. G. Wells, especially *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1897–8), both of which are concerned with end-of-the-world scenarios.

The tradition of displaced eschatology, argues Garrard, also animated Modernism, in particular the environmentally inflected writing of D. H. Lawrence.<sup>37</sup> The author was simultaneously fascinated and repelled by the book of Revelation, a text that he knew intimately as part of a rigorous (if resented) training in daily Bible reading during his nonconformist childhood. Lawrence had long abandoned orthodox Christianity, but was not, in the conventional sense, an atheist. He had a fierce sense of spiritual awe for the universe that he, privately at least, was prepared to name ‘Almighty God’.<sup>38</sup> There are apocalyptic echoes throughout Lawrence’s work: for example, *Dies Irae*, signifying ‘day of wrath’, was a working title for *Women in Love* (1920), a novel that is charged with a sense of catastrophe, both imminent and immanent. These biblical reworkings coalesce in Lawrence’s last completed work, *Apocalypse* (1929–30), a posthumously published, idiosyncratic mediation on the strange influence of the Revelation of St John (‘Perhaps the most detestable of all these books of the Bible, taken superficially’). He

disliked its allegorical poetry ('distasteful because of its complete unnaturalness') but recognized its appeal for downtrodden people and observes that 'the huge denunciation of kings and Rulers [...] is entirely sympathetic to a Tuesday evening congregation of colliers and colliers' wives'.<sup>39</sup> For Lawrence, the Revelation – a 'rather repulsive work' – is the product of 'a second-rate mind' that 'appeals intensely to second-rate minds in every country and every century'.<sup>40</sup> The essay is marked by contempt for the Christian antipathy for strength and power; Lawrence, like Nietzsche, reads the celebration of love, duty and mutual dependence as envy. He contrasts the alternative visions of Jesus with that of John of Patmos as two radically different forms of Christianity: 'The former would "save" the world – the latter will never be satisfied till it has destroyed the world'.<sup>41</sup> Lawrence's view is, by turns, humanitarian and rational but also deeply elitist and condescending. However, his argument that the book of Revelation – 'strange as it is, unintelligible as it is' – has been an enormous 'source of inspiration to the vast mass of Christian minds' is oddly prophetic of the vast influence of Millennialism in early twenty-first-century culture, a text that may have more popular appeal than Jesus's teaching across the four authorized gospels.<sup>42</sup>

From one perspective there is no great difference between the eschatology that was preached two millennia ago and twenty-first-century popular narratives of the end, despite the apparent move from faith in God to trust in humanity. 'The early Christian belief in an End-Time that would bring about a new type of human life', contends John Gray, 'was transmitted via the medieval millenarians to become secular utopianism and, in another incarnation, the belief in progress'. For Gray, the confidence of some modern secularists that their world view is free from the taint of religion is a delusion. The evidence, he suggests, is witnessed in the results of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and in the city of Fallujah, 'razed by rival fundamentalists', the 'age of utopias' came to an end.<sup>43</sup>

'Politics has always been a feature of Christian millenarianism, and fundamentalist belief surely feeds nontheological perceptions', claims Lee Quinby, in her 'anti-apocalyptic' critique of Western genealogy.<sup>44</sup> This is particularly the case in the United States, where the influence of certain strands of fundamentalist Christianity has been significant in the last century. In *American Apocalypse* (2014), a history of the Evangelical influence in the modern United

States, Matthew Avery Sutton notes that ‘radical evangelicals initially worked to resurrect and refashion early church millennialism, which they applied to the modern world in creative ways.’<sup>45</sup> The rise of this tradition from its origins on the fringes of mainline Protestantism to an enormously powerful movement is, he argues, a result of a constellation of factors including social unrest in the United States and two world wars: finally, a series of global crises culminating in the devastation of the atomic bombs dropped by America on Japanese cities meant that ‘fundamentalist doomsayers no longer seemed so outrageous’.<sup>46</sup> In Avery Sutton’s terms, ‘a politics of apocalypse’ have emerged.<sup>47</sup> These ideas, he indicates, have been sustained from the Cold War to the twenty-first-century ‘War on Terror’ since apocalypticism constructs ‘an absolutist, uncompromising, good-versus evil faith’.<sup>48</sup> This kind of theology offers the comfort of a fixed moral compass in a world marked by simultaneously overlapping and competing interests.

Stephen King’s *Under the Dome* (2009) is a SF narrative that both satirizes the excesses of a fundamentalist culture and resonates with post-9/11 anxieties about security and authoritarian government. At 11.44 a.m. on 21 October in an unnamed year, Chester’s Mill, a small town in the state of Maine, is suddenly and inexplicably separated from the rest of the world by an invisible barrier that renders it a virtual prison for its few thousand inhabitants. The narrative is post-apocalyptic in a triple sense: first, it echoes the popular understanding of apocalypse as a destructive, violent ending to an era or social order; second, it narrates the impact of a transformative event and finally, it echoes the primary Christian signification of the apocalyptic as revelation. This last mode, derived from biblical eschatology, continues to exert a significant influence on the shape of texts that might otherwise be read as ‘secular’ or even atheist in orientation. In King’s text, the final, extraterrestrial explanation of the mystery of the dome’s advent is subordinated to revelations about the corruption of the town’s political and religious leaders. Chester’s Mill is dominated by a manipulative individual named Big Jim, a wealthy and publicly pious second-hand car dealer who also secretly runs an industrial-scale narcotics manufacturing business. He uses biblical rhetoric to coerce his God-fearing fellow citizens into obedience and exploits the panic generated by events to persecute those who oppose him and to ensure his own political power. End-of-the-world-as-we-know-it stories are a kind

of cultural leveller, connecting complex neo-modernist writing and pulp fiction. King is a mainstream, commercially popular writer whose fiction taps into zeitgeist anxieties regarding national security, environmental destruction and the decline of democratic institutions. By contrast, Margaret Atwood and Jim Crace, for example, are more likely to be studied on university courses and to receive esteemed literary awards. Yet all three are fascinated by the human capacity for self-destruction on a grand scale. Each of these writers use the trope of a surviving remnant, groups whose social diversity, conflict and fragile cooperation engage with disquiet about the project of liberal capitalism. They also, consciously or otherwise, echo visionary ideas of biblical prophecy regarding the finite nature of human power.

In some instances, contemporary end-of-the-world fiction deploys biblical allusions that are simultaneously precise and oblique. The sparseness and linguistic restraint of McCarthy's *The Road*, a novel discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, reads like a particularly distressing parable of loss. Even the form of the narrative seems to bear witness to semantic deterioration – punctuation evaporates, conversation is stark and repetitious – but the narrative still teems with biblical allusion. In one flashback sequence, the most significant female character – mother to the boy, wife to the man – urges her stoic husband to abandon hope by telling him to ‘Curse God and die’, a very precise allusion to the Book of Job, the only words spoken by the nameless wife of the righteous man of Uz (Job 2. 9).<sup>49</sup> McCarthy also draws on a distinctively Trinitarian, relational language: the most significant bond is between the father and the son, but the third person of this trinity might be the reason for their continued journey towards the coast – their existence is not simply a matter of survival but because they are ‘carrying the fire’ – a recurrent promise in the narrative (*TR*, p. 87). The father sometimes makes brutal decisions that might forfeit his ethical integrity, much to the disappointment of his son, but he also ‘knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke’ (*TR*, p. 3). Divinity is invoked in a number of ways including the perhaps blasphemous invocation of ‘Christ’ and ‘God’ in desperate situations, as near hopeless prayers for deliverance (*TR*, pp. 116–7). They also encounter a roadside mystic, an elderly man who resembles ‘a starved and threadbare buddha’ who claims, ‘There is no God and we are his prophets’ (*TR*

pp. 179, 181). However, his assumed name, Ely, is a contraction of the biblical prophet Elijah and he is treated as a kind of negative seer who, unlike others, did not 'believe in' the future. The novel has been read from a variety of opposing theological perspectives; some critics read it as a contemporary Christian allegory whilst others suggest that it represents a nihilist critique of belief. Hannah Stark, for example, emphasizes affinities between the novel and the Revelation of St John.<sup>50</sup>

The legacies of Christian apocalyptic thought are vital, in different ways, to the majority of novels explored in this study. Chapters Two and Three, however, focus on the ways in which specific biblical narratives of the end have been interpreted in contemporary fiction. Chapter Two explores rewritings of the first biblical apocalypse, the story of the flood narrated in Genesis 6–9, in which God, angered by the propensity of his creation for sin, brings destruction upon the earth. David Maine and Maggie Gee both published novels under the title *The Flood* in 2004. Their interpretations of the deluge, however, differ in setting: Gee's narrative is set in a kind of looking-glass, semi-submerged contemporary Britain in which manipulative, smarmy politicians vie with fundamentalist preachers; Maine, by contrast, returns to the text of Genesis, drawing on the English translation (1914) of the Douay Bible (1609), and reimagines Noah's story (named Noe, in this version) in a form that gives individual voice to the patriarch's wife, sons and daughters-in-law. The novel is far from deferential to its source material, but it represents both belief and the experience of suffering with rare nuance.

Not all post-apocalyptic landscapes inflected by biblical narrative resemble the scarred, parched, denatured, colour-drained terrain of McCarthy's *The Road* or the 'drowned worlds' of Maggie Gee or David Maine. Occasionally, twenty-first-century catastrophe narratives look uncannily like the world we already know; disturbing events, in some novels, take place on a global scale without the mass destruction of the environment. The apocalypse, in such stories, comes like a 'thief in the night' and simultaneously changes both nothing and everything (1 Thessalonians 5. 2).<sup>51</sup> Tom Perrotta's *The Leftovers* (2011), the focus of Chapter Three, imagines a world that has experienced a 'Rapture-like' event known as 'the Sudden Departure' in which millions of people across the world have, in the blink of an eye, disappeared without trace. The novel is a sceptical



treatment of a theological concept, based on a literal reading of 1 Thessalonians 4. 17 that the faithful will be gathered up into the air to meet with the returning Christ. This belief, popular among certain influential fundamentalist strands of Protestantism, is part of a complex set of creeds related to the Second Coming and the condition of the world. The chapter places Perrotta's representation of grief and religious extremism in the wider context of 'Rapture' culture in the contemporary United States. Perrotta, like Maine and Gee, is theologically ambiguous about the source of suffering in his apocalyptic narratives. Is the universe simply indifferent to the human desire for order and mercy?

The persistence of spirituality, and in particular, of religious narratives, in a world after God and, indeed, after humanity is crucial to Chapter Four. Its subject, Margaret Atwood's 'MaddAddam' trilogy, is set in a world in which members of a remnant of mankind, including an initially solitary storyteller, remember the destruction of the world that they knew. These survivors, as grief-stricken as Perrotta's 'leftover' souls, encounter a peaceable, unworldly community who are not quite human. The 'Children of Crake' are keen to know about their creator, the geneticist who carefully and coldly brought about the end of the world. Atwood's sequence of novels, published across a decade, is characteristically genre bending, synthesizing elements of, for example, classical mythology, biblical allusion, Gothic horror and Modernist invention in her satirical form of speculative fiction. The chapter will pay particular attention to Atwood's complex critique of the relationship between art and religion.

Chapter Five turns to questions of mobility and agency. Post-apocalyptic terrain is typically not densely populated, but its cracked black-top roads, free from fast-moving traffic, are positively busy with ambulatory figures: itinerants, drifters and nomads who pace these ruined environments. The chapter focuses on McCarthy's *The Road* and Crace's *The Pesthouse* and addresses the relationship between post-catastrophe walkers, the 'promised lands' that they may seek and the wider relationship between apocalyptic presentiments and the mysteriously countercultural deed of taking a hike. What kind of destination do they hope to reach and is there any 'end', in a conventional sense, to their wanderings at the end of the world?

Chapter Six examines the apocalyptic turn in Young Adult (YA) fiction. Two tough, smart young women wander the ruins of the

land that used to be America; one, an ingenious hunter with an instinct for survival, named Katniss Everdeen, hides out in a city situated somewhere in the Rocky Mountains, known only as the Capitol, the wealthy metropolis that reigns over the 12 Districts of Panem; the other, Tris Prior, stigmatized for her complex, nonconformist identity, survives in a post-apocalyptic Chicago. Elsewhere, a similarly defiant, problem-solving but amnesiac teenager named Thomas wakes up in a subterranean prison structured like a maze. These characters share much in common but never meet because they are the central protagonists of separate twenty-first-century dystopian, post-catastrophe narratives. Katniss, the rebellious but conflicted narrator of Suzanne Collins's 'The Hunger Games' sequence, Tris of Veronica Roth's 'Divergent' and Thomas, the central protagonist of James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* might become great allies or sworn enemies with their shared contempt for authority. They are all, however, also extraordinarily marketable. The chapter explores the representation of apocalyptic rites of passage in relation to debates about surveillance, commerce and the politics of rebellion.

The conclusion focuses on Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), a novel that both parodies aspects of our catastrophe-fixed times and celebrates the beauty of the present, flawed world. The Travelling Symphony, a group of touring musicians and actors, walks across a largely deserted landscape performing Shakespeare to the disparate, tiny settlements that now constitute civilization. What makes survival worthwhile? How will human achievements be remembered, if at all? Contemporary apocalyptic fiction tracks the contradictory desires for self-destruction and survival that haunt human beings. The end of the world is, oddly, a rich beginning for narrative.

## 2

# ‘God rains over everything’: Two floods

When narrating catastrophe, twenty-first-century journalists frequently deploy a rather anomalous choice of soubriquet: even in a relatively secularized, liberal news culture, the whole gamut of disasters including flood, famine, plague, war, earthquakes and tsunami are frequently described as ‘biblical’. This deceptively simple term, however, is one that radically divides communities: believers who regard the Bible as a continued source of revelation and sceptical thinkers who appreciate the historical and aesthetic legacy of scripture. Newspapers that have no specific religious alignment continue to draw on this sacred idiom: following the floods that submerged large parts of New Orleans in 2005, one report in the British paper *The Guardian* reflected that ‘Hurricane Katrina was billed as a biblical storm [...] and it prompted an exodus of biblical proportions’.<sup>1</sup> The motif, in an era of relative biblical ignorance, has global mobility, a phrase ready to apply to all disasters: ‘Japan counts death toll after biblical scenes of destruction’, stated *The Guardian* in March 2011; ‘Texas explosion: Biblical scene of destruction on Waco’s doorstep’, proclaimed a similar headline in *The Independent* newspaper in April 2013.<sup>2</sup> The adjective is a cheap way of conferring meaning on everyday horror, an ironic assertion of scale in a world divided between those nations where death and destruction are aestheticized as elements of popular entertainment and others, for whose citizens such desolation has become a daily reality. The epithet ‘scenes of biblical destruction’ has mutated into a journalistic cliché, one that generates an instantly recognized iconography of suffering, and which is also successful at promoting sentiment. Such