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## Twenty-First Century Fear: Modern Anxiety as Expressed through Post-Apocalyptic Literature

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Twenty-First Century Fear: Modern Anxiety as Expressed through Post-Apocalyptic Literature

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## Abstract

The recent popularity of post-apocalyptic literature has led to the development of two informal schools of thought. The first, supported by scholars and artists such as Anne Washburn and Frank Gaskill, is that post-apocalyptic literature serves as wish fulfillment. Reading impossible stories allows us to explore scenarios that may never happen, which satisfies a basic desire for adventure. The second school of thought, supported by Brian McDonald and Nirmala Nataraj, is that post-apocalyptic literature draws on reality; writing and reading these stories helps us to cope with actual catastrophes, which reveals a relationship between art and fear. McDonald adds that, due to Aristotle's theory of artistic mimesis, real events are distorted when they are sublimated into fiction.

This study approached the split between wish fulfillment and coping mechanism as a strict binary, but analyzing *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead, and *The Leftovers* by Tom Perrotta shows that this binary does not hold: these four novels bear different aspects of each theory, preventing them from being truly designated as one or the other. A reconciliation between these binary theories is as follows: post-apocalyptic literature is based on reality but taken to new extremes due to artistic mimesis; the extreme distortion of reality allows the writer and reader to explore impossible scenarios, while remaining grounded in actual events. The distortion of reality into art

allows that art to serve other purposes, such as being cautionary or instructional. This conclusion relies on the original suggestion that art in novels is a meditation on the role of art in our world; by looking at art in novels, it is possible to derive how the author believes art functions in the present day, thereby determining the purpose they intended their novel to serve.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, post-apocalyptic literature seems to have exponentially gained popularity. When comparing literature to modern society, the connection is easy to see: We fear police brutality, so we popularize stories of fictional government abuse. We fear nuclear war, so we read about the aftermath of a potential nuclear apocalypse. We fear contagion and mass extinction, so we study imagined zombie plagues. The connection between fear and art is evident, but the questions of “why” and “how” are more obscure. Why has this genre expanded in the twenty-first century? How are our fears expressed through literature? Why do we respond to catastrophes by representing them in fiction? This research began as an effort to explain the modern popularity of post-apocalyptic literature. It has since evolved into an argument that the apocalypse in twenty-first century literature serves as an expression of fear in anticipation of and in response to modern catastrophic events. This subject is important because a direct connection between art and contemporary fear supports the value of interpreting literature within the social and historical context in which it was produced.

This project focuses closely on Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, Tom Perrotta’s *The Leftovers*, and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*. These novels can all be traced back to cataclysmic events or to common fears: In *Station Eleven*, a mutant strain of swine flu decimates global populations, causing cultural regression as international communication collapses; the novel was published in 2014, and may have been

inspired by the 2009 swine flu epidemic. While the apocalyptic event in *The Road*, published in 2006, is never named, all signs point to a nuclear winter; since the Cold War, fear of nuclear fallout has seeped into every facet of society, from anti-war movements to energy policy (Ropeik, par. 2). *Zone One*, published in 2011, takes place in New York City, immediately suggesting a relationship to 9/11; the government's ultimately inadequate response to a zombie plague is reminiscent of Hurricane Katrina, which was only so devastating because municipal infrastructure failed at a critical moment. Lastly, *The Leftovers*, in which a random selection of people simply disappear, was published in 2011, months after the forecasted Rapture; Perrotta's novel also contains several fringe religious groups, possibly inspired by the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) (King, par. 4).

These books were all New York Times bestsellers, which means that the fear expressed in the text does not belong solely to the author. These anxieties resonated with a larger audience. However, it's important to acknowledge that sales metrics such as the New York Times Book Review are historically biased against female authors and authors of color (Gay, par. 9). By choosing primary texts based on the texts' perceived success, this study may have overlooked other, more viable works.

The volume and popularity of post-apocalyptic literature has increased sharply in the twenty-first century, giving rise to a new field of literary analysis. Scholars disagree on why we turn towards post-apocalyptic literature; because the debate is still new, researchers have not been grouped into formal schools of thought. Two prevalent trends are as follows: either the apocalypse serves as a form of wish fulfillment; or we have already experienced a major disaster, and literary apocalypses are a coping mechanism.

In his essay “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Zombie Apocalypse,” psychologist Frank Gaskill questions why viewers tune in to popular television show “The Walking Dead.” He comes to the conclusion that the audience is drawn to the show’s black-and-white nature, because zombies “offer something tangible we can kill (10).” Due to globalization and the prevalence of technology, humanity is inundated with information, which causes increased anxiety. Imagining the apocalypse allows people to create scenarios in which they fight a specific enemy, rather than battling abstract evils. Fundamentally, we long for a simpler time. We wish for a post-apocalyptic world, so that we can live without modern pressures.

Playwright Anne Washburn agrees that post-apocalyptic literature reveals our true desires, but she doesn't believe that we crave simplicity (Nataraj, “Survival,” 12). Washburn argues that we crave adventure, which the modern world lacks. Disastrous situations are interesting because we haven't lived them yet, which means that we can't predict what will happen. We are not bound by reality; we are free to imagine even the most absurd stories, which satisfies our desire for exploration (Nataraj, “Survival,” 12).

On the other hand, scholars like Brian McDonald and Nirmala Nataraj believe that post-apocalyptic literature is generated in response to catastrophic events. We do not wish for a post-apocalyptic world — we already live in one. Artists explore the apocalypse in their work in order to unpack traumatic experiences, and readers consume these works for the same reason. In “After Armageddon: Apocalyptic Fiction through the Ages,” Nataraj writes that “depictions of the end of the world are usually just as dependent on destabilizing actual events as they are on fantastical ones” (29). By this token, twenty-first century depictions of the apocalypse and its aftermath are just as firmly rooted in fact as they are in fiction. In “The Final Word on Entertainment: Mimetic and Monstrous Art in ‘The Hunger Games,’” McDonald expresses a similar idea, although he

uses Aristotle's theory of artistic mimesis. Based on Aristotle's statement that art exaggerates society's minor distortions, McDonald argues that literature expresses society's current flaws on a much larger scale. For example, *The Hunger Games*, in which twenty-four children fight to the death on live television, is mimetic of current media exploitation. McDonald and Aristotle's logic can apply to this study's primary texts as well — the social ills expressed in modern literature are already present, although they may be less harmful in reality than in fiction (McDonald, 9). The sublimation of reality into fiction allows writers and readers to cope with their experiences.

Despite the research done so far, scholars and artists such as Gaskill, Washburn, Nataraj, and McDonald have not yet compared the function of art in a post-apocalyptic world to the function of art in our daily lives, perhaps due to a lack of scholarly interest in such a comparison. Just as modern people pursue art for entertainment, so do characters in *Station Eleven*, *The Leftovers* and *Zone One* (Stromberg, par. 7). In fact, our ability to shape our thoughts and feelings through fiction is a product of our humanity (Stromberg, par. 6). Despite this, characters in *The Road* are not nearly as focused on preserving artistic expression. They have narrowed their focus to keeping humanity alive. This research relies on the original suggestion that art in novels is a meditation on the role of art in our world; by looking at art in novels, it is possible to derive how the author believes art functions in the present day, thereby determining the purpose they intended their novel to serve. This analysis could further reveal what purpose Mandel, McCarthy, Perrotta, and Whitehead believe that post-apocalyptic literature serves — whether that be wish fulfillment, coping mechanism, or a purpose that defies this presupposed binary.

In summary, this survey aims to explore what role art plays in the representation of and response to large-scale contemporary catastrophe. Researchers in the field disagree on the

purpose of post-apocalyptic literature; as we've seen, some argue that it is wish fulfillment, while others argue that we are already living in a post-apocalyptic world and use art to cope with our circumstances. Neither of these beliefs is inherently correct, as they are both useful when analyzing post-apocalyptic literature, and will both reappear throughout this study. This survey aims to contextualize novels by reading them in light of historical events surrounding their creation and publication. It also intends to compare the function of art within the novels to the function of art in the present day, thereby surmising how the authors expected their work to function in the world. Lastly, this research plans to discover how post-apocalyptic literature, a product of modern society, has influenced the very culture that created it.

### **Station Eleven**

Mandel's *Station Eleven* takes place twenty years after the Georgia Flu, a mutated swine flu virus, drastically decreases the world's population in an epidemic known as the Collapse. The novel focuses on the Traveling Symphony, a band of actors and musicians that perform Shakespeare throughout the Great Lakes region. Mandel explores how art, preserved after the collapse of global infrastructure, binds people together through space and time. The most notable example of this is Miranda's *Doctor Eleven* comics, which tell another story embedded in the novel's overall plot: A thousand years in the future, an alien civilization has taken over Earth. Dr. Eleven and a cadre of rebels steal a space station — Station Eleven — and escape through a wormhole. Station Eleven was designed to resemble a planet, complete with an artificial sky that doesn't require the light of a star; however, in the war for Earth, Station Eleven's artificial sky was damaged, leaving its inhabitants in perpetual twilight. Fifteen years have passed, and rebellion is beginning in the Undersea, a civilization under Station Eleven's vast oceans. The rebels are tired of living in darkness and wish to return to Earth.

Miranda began to create the *Doctor Eleven* comics towards the end of her relationship with the abusive Pablo, whom she left for Arthur; she developed the concept while in limbo between two men, but the plot came together while she was married to Arthur. The alien civilization that takes over Earth represents Pablo as he grows increasingly violent, and Miranda, as Dr. Eleven, chooses to flee to Station Eleven. Arthur is her space station — he offers safety, but something about their relationship is fundamentally broken, so she must live in perpetual twilight. He becomes increasingly famous and Miranda realizes that they were never meant to be together. However, just as Dr. Eleven is conflicted about returning to Earth, Miranda is conflicted about returning to her old life. Dr. Eleven is the side of Miranda that wishes to stay with Arthur; the rebels of the Undersea represent the part of her that wants to leave. While the reader never learns how the *Doctor Eleven* series ends, it seems as though Dr. Eleven is overpowered by the rebels and Station Eleven returns to Earth: Miranda leaves Arthur and returns to her old life, thereby departing from her own Station Eleven; in her art, she starts to favor the Undersea over Dr. Eleven, who has “begun to annoy her” (213).

The visual component of Miranda’s art also reflects her experience while married to Arthur. This appears when Arthur reads the finished *Doctor Eleven* comics and realizes that a scene set in the Undersea “remind[s] [him] of somewhere he’d been, but he couldn’t place it” (321). The room in question is the restaurant where Miranda met Arthur for their first date. Clark comes to a similar realization: when Kirsten lends him one of the comics at the novel’s end, he recognizes a dinner party that he attended years before the collapse, the night Miranda realized that Arthur was having an affair with Elizabeth. He notices that “on the page, only Miranda is missing, her chair taken by Dr. Eleven” (332). At the dinner party, Miranda realized that she would never belong in Arthur’s glamorous life, and felt as if she was “marooned on a strange

planet” (92). She is Dr. Eleven: as Dr. Eleven is conflicted about his conviction to leave Earth behind, Miranda is unsure if she should stay in Hollywood with her unfaithful husband. Miranda even goes so far as to clone her Pomeranian, Luli, into Dr. Eleven’s canine companion. She turns her life into art in order to cope with her failing relationships.

Because the *Doctor Eleven* comics reflect Miranda’s life, characters who read them and relate to them are really relating to Miranda’s experience. For example, take the quote: “I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth” (105). When Dr. Eleven thinks this, he’s looking out over the damaged Station Eleven. When Miranda writes it, the aforementioned dinner party has just ended, and she’s realized that her marriage has crumbled. When Kirsten reads it, she thinks of how dangerous the world has become in her lifetime, and wishes she could return to her pre-Collapse home. The character, creator, and reader experience parallel emotions, and are brought together through time and space by art.

Mandel’s characters’ interpretations of the *Doctor Eleven* series reflect Mandel’s possible intentions for her own art. By reading her story and relating to her characters, readers are inserting themselves into situations that she has experienced, just as Kirsten inserts herself into Miranda’s life by reading the comics. This aligns with McDonald’s interpretation of Aristotle’s artistic mimesis, that art is an exaggerated replica of life, which suggests that Mandel believes that the apocalypse (or something like it) has already occurred. Of course, the reader cannot expect to know or understand Mandel’s exact experiences by reading her novel: in the process of mimesis, events are distorted and emotions are heightened.

The belief that Mandel’s art was meant to be read in a post-apocalyptic world is supported by the fact that the Traveling Symphony exclusively performs Shakespeare, because their post-Collapse audience can readily empathize with his work. As Dieter says, “Shakespeare

... lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so [does] the Traveling Symphony;” he believes that the Symphony has nothing to say that Shakespeare himself has not already thought of (288). Modern adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in which the text or staging are changed offer commentary on the time period in which they are produced; the Symphony performs Shakespeare’s unmodified text, because they do not need to comment on any subject that he has not already touched upon (PBS, par. 13). The Symphony’s audience also “prefers Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings,” which is likely because of how relatable they find Shakespeare’s plays (38). The Symphony’s repertoire is commentary on how Mandel may want her art to be perceived: she expects her audience to relate to her characters out of similar experience. In order to empathize with her fictional scenarios, we must have already experienced some great cultural trauma, the survivors of which have reacted similarly to the survivors of Mandel’s Collapse. Although this event clearly wasn’t as catastrophic as the Georgia Flu, it enables readers to see their own reality reflected in Mandel’s work, which helps them to cope.

A further suggestion that Mandel intends for her work to be read in a post-apocalyptic world is that, on the night of the Collapse, Miranda sketches to “calm herself” (226). Mandel’s character finds comfort in creativity, and Mandel has already shown us that characters are representative of their creator, so it’s not far-fetched to believe that Mandel wrote *Station Eleven* to make sense of catastrophe, be it personal or large-scale. This suggests that artists use post-apocalyptic literature to cope with instability in their lives. As mentioned earlier, Nataraj argues that catastrophes in literature are inherently related to “actual destabilizing events” (Nataraj, “After Armageddon,” 29). One such destabilizing event is obvious: the 2009 swine flu pandemic. Mandel’s devastating Georgia Flu is a mutated swine flu virus; her novel is an exploration of what could have happened had the 2009 pandemic spread much more rapidly.

On the contrary, Mandel's text also argues that literary apocalypses serve as wish fulfillment. Like Gaskell's experience of simple living while shut in due to a snowstorm, characters post-Collapse are forced to live without their digital presences. Yes, their world is dangerous, but they are in touch with their true selves, their undiluted personalities. At the time of the Collapse, Clark works as a corporate coach, offering pointers to help high-functioning business magnates develop social skills. He realizes that he's a "sleepwalker" in a world of "corporate ... ghosts" and "iPhone zombies" (163, 160). He and his colleagues are successful, but deeply unhappy. After the Collapse, Clark sheds his false corporate shell. He reinvents himself, devoting his time to curating the Museum of Civilization (249). He even begins to appreciate small miracles that he took for granted in his old life, like air travel. The brutality of the Collapse gave him a chance to start over.

Mandel's portrayal of post-Collapse relationships isn't idealistic — she explicitly states that the Traveling Symphony suffers the same problems as "every group of people ... since before the Collapse, undoubtedly since the beginning of recorded history" (46). It's likely that settlers of the Severn City Airport, including Clark, struggle with the same interpersonal issues. However, the drama within these communities is simplified by their interdependency; in order to survive, they must learn to live with each other. If Mandel's text is read as wish fulfillment, it is because the reader wishes for simpler, more meaningful relationships, such as those that Gaskell experienced during his snowstorm.

In conclusion, Mandel's novel suggests that art inserts the reader into the creator's emotional experience. By that token, *Station Eleven* is a means for readers to experience a fraction of Mandel's life. She exaggerates the negative sides of modern life, including the effects of any apocalypse we may have faced, which is true to McDonald's musings on artistic mimesis.

The idea that we are living post-apocalyptically is also supported by Nataraj's theory that catastrophes in novels are based on catastrophes in real life; instability caused by an actual event, likely the 2009 swine flu pandemic, inspired *Station Eleven*. However, *Station Eleven* can also be read as an argument that the apocalypse serves as wish fulfillment, because post-Collapse people live simpler lives without "avatars" (32). Mandel is careful to point out that, with the collapse of globalization "almost everything [is lost], but there is still such beauty" (57). Perhaps Mandel — and her readers — use art to cope with some past catastrophe, or perhaps they long for the simplicity of Shakespeare performed by candlelight.

### **The Road**

*The Road* tells the story of a man (the Man) and his son (the Boy) as they travel through a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Forests are constantly burning, the sun is blocked out by dust, and ash rains from the sky — presumably, the Man and Boy live in a nuclear winter. The Man is ill and knows that he won't survive another winter, so they journey south to warmer weather. On their way they find a cellar in which a band of cannibals store their captured victims while they eat them limb-by-limb. Further south, they flee from a group of fellow travelers, one of whom is pregnant; they later find a newborn baby roasting over a fire. As they continue to travel, the Man is shot in the leg with an arrow. His illness has rapidly progressed and he suffers great blood loss from the wound, which is a fatal combination. Once he dies, the Boy finds a family on the road and begins to travel with them.

Casey Jergenson, a McCarthy scholar, argues that the rise of post-apocalyptic literature indicates that the apocalypse is soon to come: since 9/11, Westerners have felt that a "world-altering cataclysm is ... imminent," and post-apocalyptic narratives indicate "society's awareness of its vulnerabilities" (Jergenson, 118). This fear is expressed in Western cultural

output and given form in novels such as *The Road*. Rather than writing to explore impossible situations with childlike fascination, as Washburn suggests, Jergenson believes that the apocalypse allows us to “engage with the possibility of a cataclysmic future” (118). In making this distinction, Jergenson argues that exploration is not conducted for play, as Washburn suggests, but out of necessity. Art allows us to safely view the distant consequences of our current actions, which changes our approach to the future. By this token, Jergenson implies that *The Road* was written to model the effects of nuclear annihilation, thereby filling readers with anti-bomb sentiment. *The Road* is neither wish fulfillment nor comfort; it is a cautionary tale.

Jergenson’s interpretation of *The Road* as a cautionary tale relies on McCarthy’s cataclysm being man-made and therefore preventable. However, the apocalyptic event is never named, and the reader is only given a brief description: “A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (McCarthy, 52). Perhaps this is not a nuclear strike, but a rogue asteroid hitting Earth, in which case the apocalypse is independent of human agency. There is no way to caution against this scenario, because there is nothing humanity could do to stop it. Depending on whether the cataclysm is believed to have human origins, Jergenson’s interpretation may not apply. However, Jergenson’s opinion is still valuable to this study: interpreting McCarthy’s novel as a cautionary tale breaks up the presupposed binary between wish fulfillment and coping mechanism, thereby offering another avenue for analysis of twenty-first century literature.

In keeping with Jergenson’s analysis, *The Road* does not fit within the dichotomy of wish fulfillment and post-apocalyptic comfort no matter the origins of its catastrophe. McCarthy doesn’t show his characters using art as comfort, which makes it unlikely that he intended for his novel to serve that purpose; in fact, art seems to inspire the Boy more towards angst than towards hope. Based on Leslie Elizabeth Kreiner’s definition of art, which is drawn from Aristotle,

Tolstoy, and Webster, this study defines art as: intentional creative manifestation of the human experience, intended to illuminate life's universal qualities (Kreiner, 9). By that definition, the only instances of art embedded in McCarthy's novel are "stories of courage and justice" that the Man tells the Boy (McCarthy, 41). These stories aren't further described to the reader, but they don't seem to offer much comfort: the Boy finds that "true" stories are seldom "happy," but he expects stories to embody both of those qualities (268). The same is true of McCarthy's novel — it is both fictional and depressing, offering no comfort to the reader. If we truly are living in a post-apocalyptic world, and art within *The Road* reflects how McCarthy wanted his novel to be received, then McCarthy's art was not intended to provide solace.

It is possible that McCarthy's exploration of the apocalypse serves as wish fulfillment, enabling readers to play out a new scenario without pressures from modern technology. However, a major facet of Gaskell's story of quasi-apocalyptic living is that he was forced to connect to his neighbors; technology and globalization had eclipsed his personal identity, but relating directly to others taught him valuable lessons (Gaskell, 10). Gaskell is stripped of his "technological existence," allowing him to fulfill his "innate desire for intimate social connectivity" (10). This is not true for McCarthy's characters. Even without technology, they are unable to interact with anyone but each other, because their fellow travelers are potentially dangerous cannibals. The Man even erases his own identity, trying to pass as a "common migratory killer" (185). McCarthy's novel seems to contradict Gaskell's anecdote entirely.

Despite this, Gaskell's sentiment that post-apocalyptic literature offers "clear and present danger" is reflected in *The Road* (10). Gaskell claims that readers clamor for post-apocalyptic literature because they seek a simplified dichotomy between good and evil, and this polarity is overwhelmingly present in *The Road*. The Boy and the Man are "good guys;" everyone else is

the enemy (McCarthy, 129). In this sense, perhaps McCarthy's novel does serve as wish fulfillment for its audience.

When compared to Mandel's depiction of how art is preserved after the Collapse, McCarthy's novel makes an interesting argument about the role of art after the apocalypse. After the Collapse, Kirsten traveled for about seven years before joining the Traveling Symphony. When remembering her early years on the road, she notes that life is "much less dangerous than it used to be" (Mandel, 114). When the world was consumed by violence, Kirsten had to focus on survival, because she was too unsafe to focus on art. *The Road* takes place within that time period; less than a decade has passed since the apocalypse, and the "bloodcults" — violent factions of cannibals — have not yet "consumed each other" (McCarthy, 16). After the violence has settled and the world is safe for "good guys" like the Man and Boy, perhaps McCarthy's characters can focus on preserving artistic expression (McCarthy, 129). The world has "soften[ed]" in Kirsten's lifetime, and the Boy can expect his world to soften too (Mandel, 133). Mandel shows that art offers stability — performing with the Symphony saves her characters from the uncertainty of life on the road — while McCarthy reveals that art also depends on preexisting stability. By excluding art from his novel, McCarthy reminds the reader of their privilege: art is a luxury, and we only have the time or means to record our stories because our lives are relatively safe. McCarthy's post-apocalyptic literature reminds us to appreciate our own security.

### **Zone One**

*Zone One* takes place in post-zombie apocalypse New York. The Marines have already killed all ambulatory zombies. Now all that remain are "stragglers," zombies that freeze in place once the virus enters their bloodstream. Teams of "sweepers" travel Manhattan — the

eponymous Zone One — in search of stragglers, which they then kill and incinerate. Their ultimate goal is to rid Manhattan of zombies so that the city can be resettled by survivors. “Mark Spitz,” the novel’s protagonist, is part of the Omega sweeper team. The story follows his struggles over the course of one weekend. Whitehead also interrupts the narrative with flashbacks of Mark Spitz’s life before he joined the Omega team, including the story of how he got his nickname. At the novel’s end, the wall marking the boundary of Zone One collapses, releasing countless zombies into the city and nullifying all of the sweepers’ work. Mark Spitz wanders out into streets filled with the dead, leaving the reader unsure of his fate.

At first glance, Whitehead plays into Gaskill’s theory that zombies are a personification of evil. Survivors lose their prior social bonds, becoming only a “single Us, reviling a single Them” (288). Zombies are a generic enemy, easily imagined as whatever antagonist people want to see. The beings that sweepers destroy are “their own creations,” allowing them to go to war against whatever entity they wish; however, zombies are a single force in the battle for humanity (266). Each warrior projects their own enemy onto their target, but the targets are all the same. This allows characters to find individuality within their tedious and taxing missions.

Gaskill’s theory is also revealed in Whitehead’s characters’ relationships with technology. Before *Last Night*, which marks the beginning of the plague, digital information is too prevalent, allowing human beings to be “paraphrased into numbers” (21). Modern technology not only eliminates individuality, it also detracts from natural wonders. Gary, a natural triplet, finds that multiple births have been “cheapened by ... IVF” (50). While the regression of medical technology may lead to increased morality rates, it also makes survival seem more miraculous. This is comparable to Clark’s transformation in *Station Eleven*: in a simplified post-apocalyptic world, he is forced to recognize wonders such as air travel. Lastly,

digital systems of organization are lost, and one is “free to choose a fresh affiliation from the rubble platforms” (86). Like Clark, survivors can transform themselves without complications from contradicting information.

The plague may also serve as wish fulfillment because it is an equalizer. When the apocalypse hit, all prior advantages were lost. Everyone had to learn to survive, and they all did “the same things during the miseries” (108). Their stories of Last Night, which survivors share to deepen in-group bonds, are “all the same: They came, we died, I started running” (138). Because everyone is equal when faced by a horde of zombies, there is no room for bigotry, stereotypes, or prejudice. All that matters is the single enemy, which forces survivors to find unity.

*Zone One* is just as contradictory of Gaskell’s theory as it is affirming. The narrator describes a post-apocalyptic world in which survivors turn to each other for comfort, but Mark Spitz feels increasingly alienated. He finds that, because he’s so focused on surviving, he misses “a time when something higher than dumb instinct directed his actions” (199). Mark Spitz wants to have conversations about something other than the dead; he mourns relationships he could have had with women who are now zombies. He misses “the dead he’d never lose himself in, be surprised by, disappointed in” (199). Mark Spitz is lonely, and his only options for interaction are his teammates, who are nothing like him. Furthermore, in Mark’s early days on the road, he finds that other survivors are more dangerous than zombies. He notes that the dead were “predictable,” unlike the living (137). Mark craves interpersonal relationships, but he can never be sure of who to trust. The apocalypse has not provided him with a friendly, egalitarian alternative to modern life.

Furthermore, Mark Spitz notices that survivor groups are unstable and impermanent. Someone is bound to lose their mind or make a fatal mistake, which is why he advises the reader

to stay aware, because “it always comes tumbling down” (154). Even when Mark believes he has found security, he is prepared to flee. Mark has encountered so much loss in this new world that he isn’t even surprised when distant encampments, founded by the reconstruction, fall to zombies; he notes that “the refuge had done what all refuges do eventually: It failed” (239).

Another point of contradiction is the plague allowing survivors to be themselves, without input from their digital presences. The apocalypse does allow survivors to be their true selves, but they don’t turn out to be honorable people: they are revealed as the “creatures they had always been,” which turn out to be “secret murderers, dormant rapists, and latent fascists” (245). Nothing stops survivors from becoming their worst selves, expressing impulses that polite society has forced them to repress. The plague allows people to reveal themselves, but this turns out to be for the worst, as everyone’s ugliest traits surface. Individuality is also expressed through Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder (PASD), a disorder with such a broad spectrum of symptoms that it applies to nearly every survivor. Everyone expresses the disorder differently, but this individuality cannot be said to be good, as it indicates failing mental health. For example, Mark often hallucinates that ash is falling from the sky; this makes him unique, but it is a negative effect of a series of traumatic experiences. Whitehead suggests that the apocalypse allows survivors to express their individuality, but that their individuality only makes things worse.

At first glance, forces such as social control and bigotry seem to have been eliminated in the face of the universal enemy. However, further analysis reveals that prejudice has either survived the apocalypse, or returned in its aftermath. When describing the new government’s rise, Mark Spitz notes that systems “outlive their creators and unlike plagues do not require individual hosts” (201). Therefore, the mess of the post-apocalypse world is re-organized into a

bureaucracy with a strict hierarchy. Government isn't the only survivor of the apocalypse. Mark believes that, "if they could bring back paperwork ... they could certainly reanimate prejudice" (288). The old world is returning, with all of its flaws, and nothing can be done to stop it.

In "Don't Believe Your Eyes," Soren Forsberg analyzes *Zone One* through a distinctly racial lens, comparing PASD to the collective trauma experienced by African-Americans due to generations of slavery and violence. PASD, which is pronounced to sound like "past," suggests that "loss of knowledge about one's past [is] an injury" (Forsberg, 137). Whitehead, a representative of a group that has experienced collective trauma due to the loss of their past, analyzes survivors experiencing the same psychological damage. This makes *Zone One* seem like a novel written (and meant to be read as) a coping mechanism: Whitehead uses the zombie apocalypse to explore circumstances that have already happened. His novel, while fantastic, is grounded in the reality of race in America.

Forsberg also argues that post-apocalyptic racism is itself a zombie, distinguished by a "lack of imagination" (Forsberg, 135). Zombies are anti-characters, one-dimensional enemies without a personal narrative; prejudice works in the same way. Stereotypes are uniform and, by definition, don't require any complexity of thought. These bland and hurtful axioms are exemplified in the story of how Mark Spitz got his nickname: his refusal to jump off a bridge into a river confirmed his companions' belief that "black people can't swim" (287). Mark had never even heard of his namesake, the Olympic swimmer Mark Spitz, so he accepted the nickname without realizing that he was being taunted.

On another note, Forsberg states that Whitehead's central question is: "how do you mentally process a world in which all familiar frames of reference have been rendered meaningless" (Forsberg, 133)? This is where *Zone One* becomes instructional. Like Jergenson's

theory of post-apocalyptic literature as cautionary tales, Whitehead offers the reader an answer to a question that they may never have asked: how do we cope with the interregnum? When Mark Spitz refers to the interregnum, he speaks of the interlude between two ordered systems. The old world has fallen, and the new world has not yet risen. The frames of reference that helped Mark to understand the old world no longer apply. According to Mark, “The world wasn’t ending: it had ended and now they were in the new place. They could not recognize it because they had never seen it before” (321). The apocalypse is over, but the aftermath is ambiguous and hard to identify. Having processed these words, readers may now know how to recognize an interregnum in their own lives; they may use Mark Spitz’s example to identify when the disaster has ended and the reconstruction has begun. Cautionary tales advise readers on how to avoid the apocalypse; Whitehead’s novel is instructional in that it provides its reader with frames of reference that they can use to process a rapidly changing world, assuming that the inevitable apocalypse has already occurred.

Reading *Zone One* in support of the argument that literary apocalypses are based on actual destabilizing events is supported by the numerous references to Hurricane Katrina. To start, the dead are described in terms of weather, even “among wanderers who had never met” (221). The time before the plague is known as the “time before the flood” (81). When the plague first begins to spread, wealthy urbanites flee, while their poorer neighbors tend to stay, hoping to wait out the disaster. This leads to several groups traveling to their roofs, where they attempt to “wave down angels for a lift,” although at this point the military cannot come and save them (164). Mark Spitz reenacts this scenario as one of his brief refuges falls apart: he stands on the roof, surrounded by “floodwaters” (228). In this moment, he questions why this group of people chose to settle among such a high population of zombies, just as outsiders have questioned why

New Orleans citizens built their homes so close to the levy: “Why do these yokels build a house there when they know it’s a flood zone, why do they keep rebuilding?” (228). The answer is that “this disaster is [their] home” (228).

The comparisons to Hurricane Katrina become overwhelming in the novel’s final scenes: a flood of zombies causes the wall to fail at a critical moment, allowing the “ocean” to overtake the streets (302). Zombies “splash” down the avenues, “submerg[ing]” the city’s defenses (314). Federal infrastructure falls apart under the strain of a storm, costing countless lives and evoking images from the 2005 hurricane. This implies that post-apocalyptic literature is based on actual events in order to cope with real catastrophe.

For the same reason as in *The Road*, art is obsolete in Mark Spitz’s new world. Writers are busy working towards survival, “pouring jugs of kerosene on the heaps of the dead,” and simply have no time for creativity (51). During a short-term friendship with a former video game developer, Mark realizes that art, when it returns, will be based on reality and used as a coping mechanism, providing survivors with a “healthy outlet for aggression” (222). This plays into McCarthy’s argument that the creation of art depends on the artist’s stability; it also relates to Mandel’s argument that once art has been created, it offers stability for the consumer. These axioms are equally true, which reveals that art and cultural stability have a cyclical relationship with each other.

Mark also mentions that he used to watch horror movies with his father, imagining how he would outlast the films’ characters. However, once he experiences the apocalypse, he realizes that the “real movie start[s] after the first one end[s]” (166). The more important narrative begins after the apocalypse, when the work of cleaning up and regaining normalcy commences. Mark’s survival was always certain, but survival was never the issue; what matters is the process of

returning to the status quo. This is why Whitehead centers his novel in the aftermath, not in the apocalypse itself.

Taking all of these theories into consideration, *Zone One* disrupts the coping mechanism/wish fulfillment binary. The story is grounded in reality, but it's taken to a new extreme for the purpose of artistic exploration. When real events are distorted and magnified into artistic spaces, they are distanced from reality; however, that reality cannot be ignored, because actual destabilizing events served as inspiration. As Nataraj argues, actual events inspire post-apocalyptic literature, which suggests that post-apocalyptic literature helps us to cope; as Washburn argues, post-apocalyptic literature fulfills our desire to explore. Whitehead's novel serves as a way to cope with real events, such as Hurricane Katrina; adding zombies makes these events so fantastic that *Zone One* also serves as wish fulfillment.

Forsberg's analysis adds an additional element to this interpretation: the circumstances of *Zone One* may not have been based in reality, but characters' emotional responses draw on a history of collective trauma. This suggests that the content of the narrative is not the only deciding factor in how novels are interpreted; emotions must be looked at just as closely, as emotional trends may link fiction to reality. Lastly, Whitehead's novel shows that post-apocalyptic literature can instruct the reader, thereby arming them against future situations.

### **The Leftovers**

*The Leftovers* takes place three years after a Rapture-like event, known as the Sudden Departure, in which a random selection of people disappear. Perrotta focuses on one family in the small town of Mapleton as they struggle to cope with losing members of their community. Their journey brings them into contact with several radical religious groups. Tom Garvey, Kevin and Laurie Garvey's oldest child, drops out of college to join Holy Wayne and the Healing Hug

Movement. Once Wayne's ranch is raided by police, Tom travels with Christine, Wayne's fourth wife, whose unborn child is expected to save the world. By the novel's end, Wayne is exposed as a sexual predator, and Tom moves on to join the Barefoot People.

Laurie Garvey leaves her family to join the Guilty Remnant (G.R.), Mapleton's homegrown cult. Members of the G.R., known as Watchers, take a vow of silence and travel Mapleton in same-sex pairs. They are seen as a nuisance, because they stalk townspeople and remind them of who they lost in the Sudden Departure. The G.R. eventually becomes sinister, as Watchers are instructed to murder their partners. These murders are pinned on an anonymous killer, and dead Watchers are turned into martyrs.

The thesis of *The Leftovers*, as summarized by Kevin Garvey, is: "It didn't matter what happened in the world — genocidal wars, natural disasters, unspeakable crimes, whatever — eventually people got tired of brooding about it" (297). Perrotta's novel is based on the assumption that we move on from disaster, no matter how severe it may be. The tendency to move on is shown at the highest levels of government: the President encourages bereaved students such as Tom to return to college as part of the "Jump-Start America" initiative (55). *The Leftovers*, like other novels addressed in this study, explores how we return to normalcy. Perrotta does not write about catastrophe; he writes about coping with the aftermath.

If read as satire, Perrotta is criticizing the transience of grief and the lengths people will go to rationalize tragedy. For example, Reverend Jamison uncovers unsavory stories about departed individuals in order to prove that the Sudden Departure was not the Rapture; he handles his disappointment by denying that the catastrophe was a loss, because sinners were taken alongside saints. Reverend Jamison becomes a "pariah," devoting all of his time to researching his newsletter, "October 14th Was Not the Rapture!!!" (108, 16). He breaks social norms by

speaking ill of the dead, which emotionally distresses grieving families as terrible secrets about their loved ones come to light. His loneliness and desperation are just as disturbing as they are comical: many of Mapleton's citizens seem willing to accept that the Rapture has not occurred, but Reverend Jamison refuses to give up on his mission.

*The Leftovers* is not wish fulfillment in Gaskell's sense, because there aren't any "bad guys to hate" (51). The apocalyptic event is amorphous and unidentifiable. Furthermore, modern technology remains uninterrupted, so problems of digital presence are not addressed. On the other hand, the Sudden Departure (and various responses to it) seem to fulfill a wish for belonging. While on the road, Tom and Christine disguise themselves as Barefoot People in order to avoid being recognized. Tom finds that being a "fake Barefoot Person" is the only "real identity" he has (261). This religious and philosophical movement provides him with the acceptance that he was unable to find in Mapleton or at his university. He is so drawn to the Barefoot lifestyle that the novel ends with him seeking a Barefoot solstice party, because "they were his people now, and that was where he belonged" (352). If not for the Sudden Departure, Tom would never have found this acceptance.

Desire for belonging is also shown in the ritualized mourning that citizens participate in at the Canteen, one of Mapleton's popular bars. Like Whitehead's Last Night stories, mourning becomes formulaic: "You talked about the person, you drank a toast, and then you moved on" (54). This common way of mourning forges stronger relationships between survivors, because loss is something that they all have in common. Unlike other novels analyzed in this study, the Sudden Departure leads to an "outbreak of manic socializing" (85). Humans are not the enemy; they are salvation from loneliness and grief.

Another way that the Sudden Departure strengthens in-group bonds is in the case of the Guilty Remnant, which Laurie is unable to understand until she is a part of it. From the outside, this group seems like a bunch of “fanatics” (6). Once she has assimilated to their culture, Laurie finds the G.R. to be full of “beautiful tradition[s]” (332). Even Kevin Garvey, the most mundane member of the Garvey family, finds his own ritual of coping in city council meetings, which are “a bit like church” (231). Like most of Perrotta’s characters, he relies on predictability to remind him that he is “more than the sum of what [has] been taken from [him]” (338). Loss is universal, and it has leveled Mapleton’s social playing field, allowing new relationships and customs to spring up in unlikely places.

While the Sudden Departure isn’t inspired by reality, responses to it may have been. Perrotta’s fringe religious groups seem similar to modern cults, which raises the possibility that *The Leftovers* was written as a coping mechanism. Like Whitehead, Perrotta may have used fictitious circumstances to explore realistic outcomes. Before delving into Mapleton’s religious factions, Perrotta notes that religion is an “afterthought” for most townspeople (19). This reminds the reader that, like the true stories that they evoke, the religious groups explored within the novel exist on the fringes of the society.

The Barefoot People, a benign group based in the California Bay Area, are best described as neo-hippies. They never wear shoes (although flip-flops are allowed in the snow), forego showering, and believe that “the only sin is misery” (170). Therefore, they glorify their creator by enjoying themselves. They also mark their foreheads with bullseyes, so that the creator will “recognize [them]” (171). Their philosophy carries echoes of 1960s liberal counterculture.

Perrotta also notes that non-radical Christians absorb the Sudden Departure into their own theology, showing that religion is fluid in the face of disaster. This is evident when Henning, a

soldier that Tom meets on his travels, tells him that a war is destined to “break out in the Middle East,” as “foretold in the Book of Revelation” (169). Religious responses to the Sudden Departure, while uncommon, are not limited to radical groups.

The Guilty Remnant’s theology is unclear throughout the novel. They do not attempt to become a church, as “organized religion [has] failed,” so they have “nothing to gain by turning into a new one” (198). After losing his wife to this cult, Kevin calls them a “spontaneous ... reaction to an unprecedented tragedy” (22). He initially takes them for a “harmless Rapture cult” who want only to “grieve and meditate in peace until the Second Coming” (22). However, the G.R. rapidly becomes a political force in Mapleton: they are a “disciplined organization with a taste for civil disobedience;” they occupy elementary schools in impromptu sit-ins and interrupt town pastimes such as high school football games (22). Laurie notes that, if the G.R. had a single mission, it would be resisting the “so-called Return to Normalcy” (207). They are a foil to Kevin’s theory that normalcy is inevitable, and they’re willing to go to incredible lengths to resist moving on.

The G.R. uses martyrdom to gain sympathy and attention. This begins with the “martyrdom of Phil Crowther” in a botched police raid, caused by the G.R.’s refusal to comply with “court orders and foreclosure notices” (126, 23). Laurie, who was not yet a Watcher at the time of the raid, believes that the police used “Gestapo tactics” when they “entered the compound in the middle of the night, armed with search warrants and battering rams” (126). Kevin, on the other hand, sees the failed raid as the culmination of a “series of confrontations,” exacerbated by Watchers’ throwing rocks at the police (23). The G.R. may be just as guilty as the Mapleton Police Department, but they use the event to victimize themselves and gain sympathy

from the town. The G.R. eventually gets their way, as they are allowed to live in defiance of city ordinances in exchange for small tax payments.

Unintentional martyrdom helps the G.R. make social and political gains, and this positive reinforcement leads to a philosophy of intentional martyrdom: Watchers are assigned to shoot their partners and leave the bodies to be found by Mapleton's residents. This creates the perception that a murderer is on the loose in Mapleton, which puts citizens on high alert and disrupts their newfound normalcy. The G.R.'s aim is to resist the status quo, and they are willing to turn to violence in order to do so. Laurie is so thoroughly indoctrinated into the G.R.'s logic that she sees nothing wrong with the expectation that she will murder her fellow Watcher; instead, she memorizes mantras such as "Don't hesitate ... the martyr's exit should be swift and painless" and "Squeeze the trigger. Imagine a flash of golden light transporting the martyr directly to heaven" (343, 344). Kevin even speculates that the G.R. might be "secretly pleased to have a homicidal maniac turning their members into martyrs," because this gives them control of Mapleton's narrative (297). This horrifying turn of events may be based on the cult of the Christian martyrs, in which those who are killed for following Jesus are venerated after their deaths. It may also be based on notorious cult murder-suicides of the modern era, such as the Jonestown Massacre or the Heaven's Gate millenarians.

Perrotta's final fringe religious group is the Healing Hug Movement, headed by Holy Wayne. When Tom first meets Wayne, he is known only as Mr. Gilcrest. He is a grieving father with a gift for taking people's sorrow just by hugging them. He describes himself as a "sponge for pain," and when Tom hugs him he finds it to be true: he "remember[s] what it feels like to be [himself]" (68, 70). Wayne's fame soon goes to his head, and the Healing Hug Movement transforms from a grassroots movement to a bona fide cult. Once Wayne begins "referr[ing] to

Jesus as his brother,” it’s clear that his newfound fame has changed him. He becomes the “Bruce Springsteen of cult leaders” and tasks Tom with recruiting his young wives (64).

Outsiders see Holy Wayne for what he is from the start — “a sketchy self-appointed ‘healing prophet’” — but Tom buys into his Cult of Personality for the majority of the novel (5). What’s worse is that Christine, who is sixteen and pregnant with Wayne’s child, believes in him until the moment that he confesses to criminal activity. She misses life on Wayne’s compound, known simply as “the Ranch;” she condemns Wayne’s sixth wife, a fourteen year old whose testimony leads to his arrest, as “Judas” (77, 48).

Christine’s unborn baby’s maleness is an “article of faith,” as Wayne believes that this child will replace the son he lost in the Sudden Departure (301). Christine keeps believing in Wayne, waiting for the day when the whole world will see that he’s a “good man,” up until she gives birth to a baby girl (303). Shortly after the birth, Wayne pleads guilty, revealing in a statement that he “wanted to be a holy man, but [he] turned into a monster” (308).

The clearest link to modern events is the Yearning for Zion Ranch, which was the domain of Warren Jeffs, a child predator believed to be a prophet within the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. An anonymous sixteen-year-old girl, who was “spiritually married” to a much older man, alerted local authorities to her living situation; this led the FBI to raid the Ranch in 2008 and arrest Warren Jeffs (West, par. 6). The fall of the YFZ Ranch bears heavy similarities to Wayne’s Ranch, inhabited by his so-called “spiritual brides,” including the whistleblower that causes his arrest (Perrotta, 75).

The most notable instance of art in Perrotta’s novel is Nora Durst’s nightly ritual of watching *SpongeBob*. Nora lost both of her children in the Sudden Departure, and watching their favorite show keeps their memory alive. She watches the episodes as if she were her young son,

seeing them “through his eyes” (101). This does not seem to indicate how Perrotta wants the reader to interpret his novel; instead, Perrotta’s use of art within *The Leftovers* shows that mundane artistic expression can take on religious significance when connected to loss. Nora’s ritual is an argument for the healing qualities of art.

Despite most clearly embodying the premise of this study — that post-apocalyptic literature focuses on moving on from disaster — *The Leftovers* is an outlier. On the surface, society appears unchanged; familiar institutions such as banks, schools, and governments still stand. Without any social collapse, *The Leftovers* does not serve as wish fulfillment in Gaskill’s sense; however, the Sudden Departure’s aftermath enables survivors to find belonging, which is a desire that the old world couldn’t actualize. The novel’s connections to actual events suggest that it could be read as a coping mechanism. These events are distorted so that, like *Zone One*, *The Leftovers* is best read as art based on an extremely exaggerated version of reality; this gives Perrotta and his readers room to explore impossible circumstances, while acknowledging the echoes of reality in Perrotta’s work.

## **Conclusion**

The recent popularity of post-apocalyptic literature has led to the development of two informal schools of thought. The first, supported by scholars and artists such as Anne Washburn and Frank Gaskill, is that post-apocalyptic literature serves as wish fulfillment. Reading impossible stories allows us to explore scenarios that may never happen in real life, which satisfies a basic desire for adventure. The second school of thought, supported by Brian McDonald and Nirmala Nataraj, is that post-apocalyptic literature draws on reality; writing and reading these stories helps us to cope with actual destabilizing events, which reveals a

relationship between art and fear. McDonald adds that, due to Aristotle's theory of artistic mimesis, real events are distorted when they are sublimated into fiction.

This study approached the split between wish fulfillment and coping mechanism as a strict binary, but analyzing literature shows that this binary does not hold: the texts reviewed herein bear different aspects of each theory, which prevents them from being designated as one or the other. A reconciliation between these binary theories is as follows: post-apocalyptic literature is based on reality but taken to new extremes due to artistic mimesis; the extreme distortion of reality allows the writer and reader to explore impossible scenarios, while remaining grounded in actual events. The distortion of reality into art allows that art to serve the other purposes discussed in this study, such as caution or instruction.

The results of this survey are relevant because a strong correlation between literary trends and cultural events supports the value of interpreting literature in specific social and cultural contexts. This correlation offers further insight into the connections between literature and culture: they mirror each other. As Jason Heller says in "Does Post-Apocalyptic Literature Have A (Non-Dystopian) Future?" post-apocalyptic literature is "cathartic and cautionary;" expressing our fears through literature helps us to deal with them, and it also reminds us to value our present circumstances (Heller, par. 11). The relationship between art and fear is evident in *Station Eleven*, which explores fear of illness; *The Road*, which analyzes fear of nuclear annihilation; *Zone One*, which touches on fear of losing agency due to zombification; and *The Leftovers*, which focuses on coping with anxiety caused by a sudden tragedy. Due to the often cyclical nature of literary trends, and because post-apocalyptic literature serves a valuable cultural purpose, "the post-apocalyptic flood in literature doesn't seem to be receding" (Heller, par. 10).

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