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Apocalypse Always

by **Walter Kirn**

As a teenager in the Mormon Church, I was led to believe I might live to see the world end — the fallen world of sin and imperfection, that is, which would be replaced by one more glorious. This sparkling, exalted epoch would emerge from the ashes of a vast calamity and be centered, so prophecy told us, in Missouri. Faithful Mormons from around the globe would be called to set forth — on foot, if necessary — for Independence, not far from Kansas City, there to erect a great temple of the Lord on a lot that had been designated for this function in 1831. I didn't know what to think. Nuclear war I could picture, or so I thought, but the Missouri angle made me laugh. Even more heretical was my lack of enthusiasm for the whole prospect of a heaven on earth, wherever it might be headquartered. A never-ending Sunday morning of harmony, hygiene, birdsong, and good posture struck me as overpoweringly dull.

Far more stirring and plausible were the gloomy futures described in the books I read in high school English, particularly George Orwell's *1984* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Their heroes were not deities but average people — a bureaucrat, a fireman — who one day grew fed up with the conformity, the hypocrisy, the cant; turned against the system; and went underground as hunted fugitives. Their predicament felt much like the one I faced as a dreamy adolescent in a drab public school that was oppressed by petty rules and given to

grandiose notions of its own worth, which it celebrated with assemblies and pep rallies.

The fears explored in these classic novels hadn't occurred to me before I read the books, yet even once I'd thought about them some, I wasn't as troubled as I sensed I was supposed to be. Bradbury's book-burning anti-intellectuals were no more alarming than my gruff neighbors in our rural Minnesota county. Orwell's enveloping surveillance state didn't particularly scare me; I lived in a small farmhouse where conversations penetrated walls and flushing toilets went off like bombs. Even *1984*'s infernal amnesia machine, the "memory hole" that swallowed up contraband documents and artifacts, didn't disturb me all that much. My family had moved a lot when I was little, and I was used to mementos disappearing. To Orwell, memory equaled sanity, but to my Midwestern family, when it came time to pack the U-Haul, the past was a luxury we couldn't afford. We could barely fit the sofa.

My dystopian reading tailed off as I grew older. Books about misfits trampled by ruthless overlords who sent them off to be brainwashed in soundproof rooms represented a rite of passage that I'd successfully completed. My political suspicions had been raised, my distrust of unbridled power cemented, my ear for bombast tuned. Occasionally an advancement in technology or a story in the news would trigger discussion of a certain title for its "uncanny prescience," but so far there was no Big Brother, no *Brave New World*-style lab-bred drone class, no *Handmaid's Tale*-like caste of female slaves, and no *Lord of the Flies*-worthy outbreak of juvenile savagery. Yet the genre flourished, yielding examples such as P. D. James's *The Children of Men* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. By the mid-Nineties, when the best of the

new dystopian novels appeared — David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* — books and films about nightmare worlds to come were almost as common as romantic comedies. They tended to be equally predictable. The people were cowed, the leaders sinister, the language hollow, the libraries locked or empty or on fire. The writers attracted to the genre truly looked out for their own, affirming the importance of their vocation in a way that sculptors and dancers can’t. If we go, if literature goes, these authors insisted, everything and everyone goes with it.

Yet here we still were, with a new millennium looming. Maybe the books had worked, either as warnings or as spells. The urgent way our teachers pushed them on us betrayed an element of magical thinking beyond the realm of simple education. If you worry enough about something, it might not happen. If you dream it, maybe it won’t come.

Watching and reading the news last year, I found myself annoyed when Trump’s dark portrayals of America were elevated to the level of literature. DONALD TRUMP WILL LOSE, proclaimed a typical headline in *The Week*, BUT HIS DARKLY DYSTOPIAN VISION OF AMERICA MIGHT WIN. Gutted Rust Belt cities, crumbling roads, and rampant opioid abuse were profoundly depressing phenomena, but to call them dystopian seemed imprecise (and gave Trump too much credit as a thinker). First off, the problems were obvious, not subtle, requiring no special vision to discern. Second, they were morbidly mundane. Hopelessness, disrepair, and addiction are terrible, but they’re terrible in the naturalistic fashion of Upton Sinclair and Émile Zola, not in the speculative manner of Aldous Huxley and Margaret Atwood. They’re blights that result from neglect, not overreach; from insolvency, not inhumanity. Proper

dystopias aren't merely hells, after all — they're hells of a specific kind. They're ventured paradises gone awry, reformist fantasies run aground.

A recent reading binge confirmed for me that the present is not the future we were warned about. Where is the regimentation, for example? In the classic dystopias, which concern themselves with the lack of freedom and not with surplus freedom run amok (the current and unforeseen predicament of many), society is superbly well organized, resembling a kind of hive or factory. People are sorted, classified, and ranked, their individuality suppressed through goon squads, potent narcotics, or breeding programs. Quite often, they wear uniforms, and express themselves, or fail to, in ritual utterance and gestures. In *Brave New World*, where God has been supplanted by a mythologized version of Henry Ford, the test-tube humans are programmed like computers, through eerie mantras absorbed while they're asleep. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, scripture turns the cogs. I look around now and see, instead of clockwork, an orgy of trivial self-expression whose uniformity is accidental, as with Facebook status updates. Huxley catches something of this mood in his Soma-drunk world of sanctioned promiscuity and mandatory fun, but the antics are still encouraged from on high and scripted by chromosomal manipulations.

What did strike me as potentially dystopian was the restored America of Trump's rhetoric — beautifully walled, unstintingly policed, relentlessly industrious, and purged of elitist pretensions and arty nonsense. Now *there* was a book, quite possibly. Though maybe such books had outlived their usefulness, if literature can be said to have a use in any pragmatic sense. The great dystopian tropes and themes, not to mention the specific predictions of the genre's best-known titles, felt oddly

irrelevant to the new scheme of things — even as sales of the canonical dystopian novels soared, and there appeared a TV version of *The Handmaid's Tale* and a Broadway adaptation of *1984*. When Edward Snowden came forward a few years ago, it occurred to me that all the snoops snatching our data for the NSA under the cover of institutional darkness and constitutional confusion had likely read Orwell in their teens or twenties. That just one of them seemed to have taken his words to heart seemed like a fluke, not a triumph of the pen.

High mid-twentieth-century dystopian fiction, with its focus on bureaucracy, coercion, propaganda, and depersonalization, overstates both the prowess of the hierarchs and the submissiveness of the masses, whom it still thinks of as the masses. It does not contemplate Trump-style charlatanism at the top, or a narcissistic populace that prizes attention over privacy. The threats to individualism are paramount; the scourge of surplus individualism, with everyone playing his own dunce king and slurping up resources until he bursts, goes unexplored. The counterpoint to life as an automaton or a beaten-down gray lump is a life of supposed naturalness and passion that is still being lived in the outlands; on a wilderness “reservation” in *Brave New World*, beyond an encircling wall in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, off in the countryside in *The Handmaid's Tale*. People just want to be free, but aren’t, or, as in Huxley, they think they are but aren’t. Those who refuse to relinquish their wild humanity — Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, say, merry sadist and all-around recalcitrant — are spiritually murdered through harsh reeducation therapies. It’s all very chilling, but it’s a fear gone by, the prospect of a secular inquisition that visits scientific violence on the antisocial and the odd.

A second major dystopian model emerged with the dawning of the nuclear age. The old concern, dehumanization, gave way to a new fear: atavism. Feral became the new robotic, and eerie wastelands replaced constricting cities. *Lord of the Flies* set the pattern, which endures — see Claire Vaye Watkins's 2015 novel *Gold Fame Citrus*, in which climate-change-driven drought stands in for nuclear annihilation. What makes this novel properly dystopian, not merely postapocalyptic, is its setting — southern California, a paradise turned upside down, its former promise of freedom in the sun and its ethic of self-expression and mystic seeking living on in warped, malignant forms. Should real life ever deteriorate to the level depicted in the book, no one will be in any shape — or any mood — to hail it as prophetic. But that's true of most dystopian novels; they posit worlds where literature is either obsolete or banned, impotent or prohibited. And their forecasts for these worlds, though interesting, are usually wrong when the hour in question arrives. Of course, prediction is neither their main concern nor their key pleasure. They are up to something else, a more mysterious project that enchants us both when we're young and the future is a mystery and when we're old and it's a memory.

Such novels purport to disturb us, but what they really do is objectify possible negative futures such that we feel superior to and safe from them. This X factor of dystopian fiction is missing from historical novels, which I've never much enjoyed. (Just as I'd rather meet a Roman emperor than an actor playing one, I'd rather read a genuinely old book than a new book about the old days.) It is also missing in standard science fiction, in which an imaginary future (or, as in the Star Wars films, a legendary past located somewhere far off in the cosmos) is made to feel involving, contemporary. Dystopian stories, on the other hand,

alienate the reader, inviting us to observe but not participate; they feel, that is, a little like case studies, not like engrossing adventures that sweep us away. Our consciousness of the present, the here and now, is heightened rather than suppressed, since the fears that they make manifest — the fears they isolate and concentrate and convert into prolonged anxiety dreams — are necessarily the fears of the moment in which they were written. The Reagan-era backlash against feminism that Atwood worried into *The Handmaid's Tale* may not have played out in the manner of the novel, yet it will long remain suspended there, perennially possible and permanently dreadful. The year 1984 has come and gone, as has the Stalinist system that inspired it, but it persists somehow — as a road not taken, a bullet dodged.

A sense of control over our destiny. That's what dystopian fiction, with its sinister visions and dire mirages, stirs in us, and that's what makes it perversely reassuring: the feeling it gives, or the convincing illusion, of standing upstream of history and fate as they rush away from us and over a falls, vanishing for a spell, then reappearing, only to flow away into the fog again. Dystopias both elongate time, by showing us what will happen if trends continue, and shatter it, blow holes in it, by positing catastrophic discontinuities such as plague and drought and war. But notice: We always come through. We always survive. Our tossed-about raft always bobs up from the rapids, a thoroughly comforting spectacle.

I ndeed, despite its superficial pessimism, dystopian fiction easily lends itself to a sentimental belief in the saving power of awakened consciousness. No wonder the genre has become a best-selling staple of Y.A. publishing and fodder for summer movie franchises: Its story lines

capture perfectly the plight of the adolescent psyche as it begins to chafe against authority. One of those book-film combos from a few years ago was called *Divergent*. They may as well all be called *Divergent*. These fables' main goal, after all, is to affirm a sense of heroic individualism in bookish teens who feel like misfits.

Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, published in 1993, is a dystopian novel for young readers that has amassed an enormous, devoted following, its appeal apparently undiminished by a so-so movie version. The book is thoroughly generic, miniaturizing and condensing the major preoccupations of its predecessors. As is so often the case, society is strictly managed by distant committees with antiseptic tastes; they value stability above all else. The people are busy, stupid bees, devoid of feeling, memory, and culture. Where the great books have gone is left unstated; they seem to have been collected and deposited, along with everything else that makes us human, in the consciousness of a single man, the Giver, an immensely lonely, Christ-like figure who's taken all suffering upon himself. Now it is time to pass this burden along — to a twelve-year-old boy named Jonas. But can he bear the strain?

Jonas, like Orwell's Winston Smith, Huxley's Savage, Bradbury's fireman, and Atwood's Offred, is a surrogate for the reader — and something more. He's a surrogate for readers in general, for all those who seek wisdom and meaning for their own sake, regardless of their social utility. In Jonas beats the dreamy, artistic heart common to almost all dystopian stories, whose dreary, dispiriting backdrops function like the wilderness settings of classic westerns. In westerns, civilization is far away, but the knightlike hero carries it in his breast, or in his holster. In dystopia, civilization has been perverted, perhaps incinerated too, but it

endures in the Jonas figure's appetite for learning and illumination. And he is not alone. For while dystopian stories tend to end with martyrdom — through banishment, brainwashing, or death — all is not lost, since the reader will carry on. The reader, who was the hero all along in this most romantic of literary genres, which romanticizes literature itself.