Post-Apocalypse Now

I t's curious that post-apocalyptic fantasies are such a popular fictional form. What is the allure of the end of civilization as we know it, and how did our interest in it emerge? Writers have speculated about the end of the world for a long time. In fact, we can trace much of our contemporary vocabulary and imagery about the apocalypse back to the Bible's "The Revelation to John." Over the past 50 years, however, we've seen a particularly vigorous upsurge in the production of post-apocalyptic works.

In this edition of Biblio Tech, we will look at an example of the post-apocalyptic genre, David Brin's 1985 novel *The Postman* and the 1997 Kevin Costner movie that it inspired.

Dystopia

Although the cyberpunk genre, which I mentioned in my last column, focuses on dystopic futures, post-apocalyptic fantasies also tend to present their own dystopias. The difference is the path between the present and the future. In cyberpunk novels, dystopia typically occurs incrementally, smoothly, and continuously. In post-apocalyptic fantasies, however, the future arrives suddenly, cataclysmically, and discontinuously.

For the purposes of this discussion of post-apocalyptic stories, we will exclude the terminal tales, in which the world or the universe and all life in it come to an end, since that really eliminates any further discussion. In addition, we will exclude religious works. For our purposes, post-apocalyptic means that some cataclysmic transforming event upsets the order of things. These stories are typically structured with preambles that establish some linkage to the normal present as we know it, follow with the cataclysm, and finish with a post-apocalyptic world in which characters deal in one way or another with the change.

Why should we, who benefit so much both materially and spiritually from membership in a complex civilization, be so attracted to stories about the end of it? Was the flood of such stories unleashed by the atomic bomb's arrival in 1945? Certainly the volume published since the 1940s seems remarkable.

These stories clearly fascinate us. The numbers of them written, sold, and still in print are testimony to this fact. But do they entrance us as a snake entrances a bird? Or perhaps we like these stories because we chafe at the strictures and disciplines our complex social system imposes on us. Perhaps we think that we would be better people or create better societies if we got a chance to start over.

Anarchy

Alternatively, perhaps we want to believe that we would survive without the support of the rich framework that lets—nay, requires—all of us be specialists. In 1651, Thomas Hobbes wrote a rebuttal to this fantasy in *Leviathan*, discussing the state of anarchy resulting from the failure of the common power that underpins social order:

> "In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the Earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Is there a single magical ingredient that makes society tick, or is society really just the sum of a lot of often-incomprehensible complexity? Some stories—for instance, David Brin's *The Postman*—explore the notion that the magic ingredient connecting people to each other is prosaic infrastructure. Or maybe it's a mystical belief in community. Or perhaps these two are mirror images of each other.

Some years ago, a news report in the US caught national attention by describing a particular street in an inner-city neighborhood that was so dangerous that mail carriers for the US Postal Service were afraid to venture there. Residents had to travel to a distant post office to collect their mail. Consider the horror of this sit-

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Influential books

Most of the books described in this installment were recently reissued. The publication dates in this list reflect this and are not the books' original year of publication.

- D. Brin, *The Postman*, Bantam Books, 1990.
- E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops and Other Stories*, R. Mengham, ed., Andre Deutsch, 1998.
- T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Viking Press, 1982.
- L. Niven and J. Pournelle, *Lucifer's Hammer*, Fawcett Books, 1983.

uation—can you think of any service more innocuous, harmless, or inclusive than mail delivery? Can a neighborhood that doesn't receive mail truly be considered part of the American community?

We learned subsequently that what had driven out the Postal Service was violent drug dealers. The dealers used the residential mailboxes in the entry foyers of neighborhood apartment houses as drops and terrorized residents and letter carriers to keep them away. Fortunately, society ultimately retaliated, reclaiming the mailboxes and rededicating them to their boring but essential function as social glue.

The need to reassert the dominance of civil society, no matter how prosaic, was recognized by civic leaders such as New York's mayor Rudy Giuliani as central to any campaign to address headline issues like crime, violence, and drug abuse. Our societies are complex, with rich fabrics of interdependencies, fabrics that we ignore at our peril. Edward Lorentz's articulation of the "butterfly effect" in 1972 as part of the exposition of chaos theory might have struck most of us as incredible, but in the case of the infrastructure of civil society, we have learned that letting enough figurative butterflies die can lead to catastrophic consequences.

Mourning and restoring the lost society

The Postman touched a nerve when it reached bookstores in 1985. Although it was never a bestseller, it es-

tablished a solid presence and remains in print 18 years later. Among apocalyptic fiction, it stands out in its embrace of the lost civilization and its rejection of the apocalyptic fantasy that "starting over" would make a significant difference in how we treat each other. Efforts such as Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Lucifer's Hammer*, a story about a world devastated by a meteor strike, also value the destroyed society, but they do so almost accidentally.

In *The Postman*, Brin establishes the character of Gordon Krantz, a drifter in a devastated world. The destruction's cause is left deliberately vague—a combination of war, disease, pollution, nuclear winter, and human depravity. Brin implies that no single component would have been sufficient on its own to bring about the disaster, but in combination, accentuated by the centrifugal efforts of a survivalist movement called Holnism, civilization ultimately succumbed.

Gordon drifts west from Idaho in search of a fantasy town, somewhere on the Oregon coast, in which civilization supposedly hasn't fallen as far. Bandits ambush and rob him, and in desperation, he chances on the ruins of a postal service Jeep. The Jeep provides shelter and its deceased occupant provides clothes and boots to replace those taken by the bandits. Dressed in the mail carrier's outfit and carrying some of the years old mail left in his pouch for future entertainment, Gordon heads west. In Pine View, the first town he visits after finding the Jeep, Gordon is mis-

taken for a postman, but he earns his keep during his short stay with his standard stock in trade: entertaining the town's citizens with dramatic productions based on remembered fragments of Shakespeare. He accepts letters thrust on him by the residents of Pine View before he leaves without realizing yet the power that he's awoken in the people there.

When the matriarch of Pine View takes her leave of him at the western edge of town, she asks him, "You aren't *really* a postman, are you?" He replies, half-cynically, "If I bring back some letters, you'll know for sure."

In Oakridge (the next town), in an effort to overcome a cold reception, he recalls the previous mistaken identity and brashly claims to be a postal carrier for the "Restored United States." The mayor rejects this grandiose claim, but Gordon manages to bypass him by impulsively pulling a handful of mail out of his pouch and reading out names. Before too long, and fortunately for the story, he names a living resident of the town, and the longing for contact quickly overwhelms the mayor's suspicious skepticism. This imposture gets him shelter and food. When he leaves, he takes more mail with him.

Within a short while, Gordon has polished his con and mastered an arrogant address appropriate to the highest federal official in the territory. His fame by now is preceding him, so he no longer has to worry about rejection at the town gates. He has begun to deputize local postmen to keep up the fiction, only they don't realize that they're participating in a fraud; they take it seriously. He has them swear an oath based on the inscription on the New York General Post Office building:

> "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

(Contrary to popular belief, the United States Postal Service has no official motto, but several postal buildings contain inscriptions, the most familiar of which is the one you just read. This specific inscription was supplied by William Mitchell Kendall of the firm of McKim, Mead & White, the architects who designed the New York General Post Office. Kendall said the sentence appears in the works of Herodotus and describes the expedition of the Greeks against the Persians under Cyrus, about 500 BC. The Persians operated a system of mounted postal couriers, and the sentence describes the fidelity with which their work was done. George H. Palmer of Harvard University supplied the translation, which he considered the most poetical of about seven translations from the Greek; see www.usps. c o m / h i s t o r y / h i s 8 . h t m # INSIGNIA for more information.)

What follows is a virtuous circle in which success breeds success. As Gordon's con progresses, he begins to realize that it's not a con: it's real, and the postal service that he's bootstrapped out of nothing has taken off. He begins to use it as a platform to correct despotic behavior in the towns he passes through, undermining tyrannies offhandedly, almost casually.

This, essentially, is the first third of the book. The remaining two thirds explore other, less interesting themes. The story might have been better as a novelette or novella, omitting the deceased artificial intelligence, the genetically engineered supermen, and the sublimated Lysistrata corps.

In 1997, Kevin Costner's movie "The Postman" came out. Although recognizably a child of the book, the movie never achieved commercial success. David Brin notes in his Web site(www.kithrup. com/brin/postmanmoviearticle. html) that although the screenplay abandons the last two thirds of the book, the movie gets lost in its attempt to make the backstory hang together, frittering away precious time in the effort. Despite that, the film has several emotionally powerful moments that make it worth more than a footnote.

Many engineers spend their careers building or sustaining infrastructure—the very foundations of society and civilization as we know it. The work can be satisfying, although most of that satisfaction is quiet. Our nontechnical friends and relatives never seem to get excited about the infrastructure that sustains them. The wonders of the water systems, the power systems, the telecommunications systems, and other such marvels are unsung and often unremarked. We work on them, making our contributions with scant complaint at the injustice that causes the beneficiaries to remain largely oblivious. It's a treat, therefore, to occasionally see that sometimes, somewhere, someone notices.

On a cold and rainy night recently, my wife looked out the window at the storm and remarked that it was a very good night to be dry and warm inside. It's these actual reminders, along with the fictional ones that we've considered today, that help us properly value the benefits we've received from all of the engineers, builders, plant operators, policemen, firemen, and postmen who make it possible for us to get heat by turning a dial, light by flipping a switch, hear a friend's voice by picking up a telephone, and receive a drawing from a child by opening a mailbox. ☐

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