Eight Novels to Prepare You for the End of Civilization [1]

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Feature by Tim Weed

A Listicle for Lighting up Dark Times

No one knows exactly what's going to happen in the coming months and years, but I don't think it's a stretch to predict the continuing popularity of novels in the age of Trump. For a novelist like myself that's a welcome prospect, a spot of chipper news amid all the bad.

Novels act like beacons in stormy weather. Even when they promise an escape from the daily onslaught, novels light a path forward in ways nonfiction can't. They allow readers to live out life's worst-case scenarios from within the safety of their own imaginations so that when something terrible actually happens—a personal tragedy, a natural catastrophe, a deadly plague—it's not a complete surprise. As a reader, I'm an easy mark for dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction, and I'm often struck by the unique way such novels deliver not only practical strategies for surviving the unthinkable but *emotional* strategies, too—which ultimately may be more important. It's hard to overstate the solace good fiction can provide even in the darkest of times.

So, if you're stocking the shelves of your survival shelter, don't forget to throw in a few gripping novels. Here are eight that strike me as especially pertinent right now.

1. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

The backdrop for this epic quest story, originally published in 1954, is the imminent fall of an enlightened civilization. Throughout the three-part saga, Tolkien's characters journey through a world that is, slowly but surely, being consumed by a dark tide of violence and evil. Sound familiar?

Yet, Frodo and his friends encounter outposts of the besieged civilization along the way. The Shire, Rivendell, Lothlorien—these places are like islands of light, where kindness, virtue, and the humane spirit of the doomed civilization live on. Despite the overall mood of gloom, there's an undertone of hope in *The Lord of the Rings*, a recurring leitmotif that demonstrates how the good may persist in a world increasingly dominated by the bad.

> There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach.

2. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

You want dark? This post-apocalyptic 2006 novel's got dark. Reading it for the first time is like entering a horrifying, claustrophobic tunnel: You can't stop, you can't get out, and you can't turn back. Fortunately, in addition to being perhaps the most existentially bleak novel ever written, *The Road* is also among the most beautifully poetic. Yes, humanity is on the Road to planetary extinction. But the surprisingly cheerful moral is that while it may be too late for the characters in McCarthy's world, it's not too late for us. We can still choose a different Road and hold on to the magnificent world evoked by the last paragraph of the novel:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

3. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

This 1985 novel presents readers with a different kind of dystopia: a nightmare theocracy run by Bible-quoting misogynists in which women's bodies are no longer under their own control and reproductive slavery has become the norm. Of course, one could dedicate an entire list to trenchant dystopian novels (beginning with *1984*, a recent bestseller for obvious reasons), but *The Handmaid's Tale* is an especially good choice because it points to the possibility that democratic society may end not in chaos, but in forms of oppression already evident in our politics and culture.

> That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on.

4. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

A government run by the wealthy for their own benefit. Deep income inequality and chronic social unrest. A dysfunctional health-care system in which those who can't afford the fees for private doctors are shunted off to inadequate medical facilities or simply left to die. Widespread protests put down by an increasingly brutal law-and-order government. Does any of this sound uncomfortably prophetic?

Welcome to the dystopian world of Urras. In Le Guin's prescient 1974 novel, a resistance forms, but instead of trying to change their own society, the rebels flee to a new world—Annares—where they attempt to set up a communitarian/anarchist utopia. That doesn't work out so well, either. This is a good book to keep on the bedside table as you contemplate what kind of new society might be constructed if the current one proves unworkable.

> It was easy to share when there was enough, even barely enough, to go round. But when there was not enough? Then force entered in; might making right; power, and its tool, violence, and its most devoted ally, the averted eye.

5. William Golding's *The Inheritors*

Sometimes to understand the end of a civilization, you have to go back to the very beginning. In this vivid 1955 novel of the Upper Paleolithic by the author of the classic *Lord of the Flies*, a band of sympathetic Neanderthals is overcome by a newly arrived group of brutally intelligent *Homo sapiens*. It's a haunting story, one that raises questions about events that might have occurred during the rise of our species. In the process, it provides disquieting hints about what the future may hold.

> There was no animal on the mountain or the plain, no lithe and able creature of the bushes or forest that had the subtlety and imagination to invent games like these, nor the leisure and incessant wakefulness to play them. They hunted down pleasure as the wolves will follow and run down horses; they seemed to follow the tracks of the invisible prey, to listen, head tilted, faces concentrated and withdrawn in the pale light for the first steps of its secret approach. They sported with their pleasure when they had it fast, as a fox will play with the fat bird she has caught, postponing the death because she has the will to put off and enjoy twice over the pleasure of eating.

6. Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

This is a harrowing but in the end strikingly optimistic 2014 post-apocalypse novel written from the perspective of a band of Shakespeare players on tour amid the ruins of central Canada and the upper Midwest. With admirable clarity, Mandel shows how it might happen—how quickly our complex society could fall apart. She also demonstrates how humanity might live on in the face of anarchy and evil. *Mad Max* and other familiar scenarios aside, brutal lawlessness and sociopathic violence aren't mandatory human behaviors in a post-apocalyptic world. Love, community, and creative expression might endure, despite the terror and hardship that's bound to come with the end of civilization as we know it.

> You walk into a room and flip a switch and the room fills with light. You leave your garbage in bags on the curbside, and a truck comes and transports it to some invisible place. When you're in danger, you call for the police. Hot water pours from faucets. Lift a receiver or press a button on a telephone, and you can speak to anyone. All the information in the world is on the Internet, and the Internet is all around you, drifting through the air like pollen on a summer breeze. There is money, slips of paper that can be traded for anything: houses, boats, perfect teeth. There are dentists. She tried to imagine this life playing out somewhere at the present moment. Some parallel Kristen in an air-conditioned room, waking from an unsettling dream of walking through an empty landscape.

7. Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars*

Another "cheerful" take on the end of civilization. Like *Station Eleven*, Heller's 2012 novel *The Dog Stars* tells the story of a few survivors hanging on after a plague wipes out the majority of the North American population. The setting—the mostly deserted ruins of Denver and the Colorado Front Range—is skillfully drawn, with a nice mix of familiar and speculative elements that keeps readers fully immersed. Heller's novel delivers plenty of practical detail about surviving a post-civilization world, including pro tips about living in abandoned airports, hunting, fishing, keeping pets, flying small airplanes, and fighting off predatory fellow humans. Ultimately, though, this is an optimistic novel with a love story at its heart. Reading it will give you hope that the end might not be 100 percent bad.

> It caught me sometimes: that this was okay. Just this. That simple beauty was still bearable barely, and that if I lived moment to moment, garden to stove to the simple act of flying, I could have peace.

8. Richard Adams's *Watership Down*

Yes, this 1970s novel is about bunnies. But these are relatable bunnies, badass bunnies, bunnies facing the imminent destruction of the only civilization they've ever known, who decide to follow a prophetic message to seek a new and better home. In the process, they have to confront powerful fascist bullies, escape the jaws of hungry predators, and overcome seemingly invincible obstacles like a flooded river and a cemetery full of rats. With the help of a few unlikely allies, the rabbits of *Watership Down* find a way to form a new civilization, one dedicated to equality, community, and mutual respect. At a difficult moment in history, this novel offers us the precious gift of hope, as exemplified by Lord

Frith (the sun) and the mythic words he tells El-ahrairah, the Prince Rabbit:

> All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you, digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people shall never be destroyed.

Publishing Information

- *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien (Allen & Unwin, 1954-1955).
- *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (Knopf, 2006).
- *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (McClelland & Stewart, 1985).
- *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin (Harper & Row, 1974).
- *The Inheritors* by William Golding (Faber & Faber, 1955).
- *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel (Penguin Random House, 2014).
- *The Dog Stars* by Peter Heller (Knopf, 2012).
- *Watership Down* by Richard Adams (Rex Collings Ltd, 1972).

Art Information

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one of Bank Street College of Education's Best Books of the Year, and his short fiction collection, A Field Guide to Murder & Fly Fishing *[6],* will be out in 2017.

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