

EMBERS IN THE ASHES: APOCALYPTIC HORROR
AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

by

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Dedication and Acknowledgments

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Pulvis et umbra sumus (We are but dust and shadow).

— Horace

Abstract

A thesis submitted alongside a published work of fiction for the qualification of PhD (by Publication) at the University of Huddersfield. The essay reflects upon the conception, development and revision of *One* (2009), a novel of apocalyptic fiction. The peculiar creative process attendant to this sub-genre is explored with reference to various external global socio-political forces. Comparisons with analogous texts are made, and an assessment offered as to where *One* stands both as a unique document and as a supplement to a deep-rooted tradition of literature.

Introduction

This thesis is a reflective and critical interpretation of my novel *One* (Williams, 2009). Though the subject of apocalyptic fiction has been extensively examined, the thesis evidences a significant contribution to original research via the unique circumstances by which my novel was conceived, and extrapolates on the peculiar way in which the novel expands upon the sub-genre in its treatment of familial angst in the current global climate of fear and uncertainty. It explores the creative process and how the novel came to fruition through various iterations. Furthermore, it addresses the difficulties inherent in creating a necessarily bleak piece of work – a novel that tests the limits of what can be done in horror fiction with an innovative, transgressive approach – while also reconciling the commercial imperatives found within genre fiction. Furthermore, it explores the positioning of *One* in the canon of apocalyptic literature, demonstrating how the novel can be aligned with novels of its stripe as well as highlighting the ways in which it differs from them. To these ends, the thesis considers the influence of authors Cormac McCarthy and J.G. Ballard, exploring similarities and distinctions between my work and their well-established contributions to the genre of apocalyptic fiction.

The Genesis of *One* and the Novel in Context

One is set in a near-future United Kingdom that has been beset by a cataclysmic extinction level event (ELE). The novel centres on Richard Jane, a veteran saturation diver contracted to make repairs to an oil rig situated in the North Sea, off the coast of Aberdeen. While he is on the sea bed, three-hundred feet below the surface, the Earth is devastated by a Gamma Ray Blast (GRB). When Jane returns to the platform he finds everyone dead, and he must somehow get back to shore and travel south to London in order to discover whether his estranged wife Cherry and their son, Stanley, have survived.

A month after Zachary David Stanley (my third son) was born, I sent an email to my then editor, Adam Nevill, at Virgin Books:

It's 5am on a Sunday morning... I've just had an image pop into my head. Pretty girl with a large dog standing on the outskirts of London. Tattooed. Branded. A scarf wrapped loosely around her throat and mouth. She's eight or nine years old. Eyes so pale as to carry almost no pigment.

C. Williams (personal communication, February 10, 2008)

My first novel with Virgin, *The Unblemished* (2006), was to be published in paperback in the April of 2008; they wanted a follow-up to be released a year later and had asked for some proposals. I'd always wanted to write a horror novel concerning the end of the world. Zachary's arrival, along with my recent reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), forced my hand.

There were other factors at play in the conception of the novel. The last decade of the twentieth century (in which I moved to London) and the first decade of the twenty-first were periods of itineracy for me. I moved house around twenty times, and that included a phase in which I owned my own flat for four years. My fiction during these years was affected by this failure to put down roots, and a growing disaffection with the city: its pollution, its threat of random violence, the cost of living, the relentless pace at which life had to be lived. Everything I wrote seemed to be a valentine to and a rejection of the city. The author Iain Sinclair has since recognised this disaffection in an interview with Sebastian Groes (2005: 75-76) in which he was asked whether London's writers – who traditionally have carved the capital up but kept 'some kind of coherence' – can 'hold the capital together'. Sinclair responded:

New practitioners, such as Conrad Williams, might feel that the place to move is, literally, underground: back into science fiction, subterranean and subversive imaginings. A city of hungry viruses in which the author is a damaged and unreliable participant, of no special account in the telling of the tale.

This was subsequent to the publication of my novel *London Revenant* (2004), a book dealing with the idea of a splinter group of human beings who live underground. It could be argued that much of horror fiction (and cinema) plays with variants of this idea, from the explicit – *Cabal* (1988) by Clive Barker, *The Descent* (1999) by Jeff Long and the film *The Descent* (2005, unrelated to Long's novel), – to the suggestive: *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis, *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z Danielewski, and the film *Jacob's Ladder* (1990). One reason for this continuing interest in these underground novels (both literal and figurative) is that they chime with the audience's problems accommodating events experienced on the surface in the real world. Everyday life can be harrowing, so a liminal version of it is gives us a way to assimilate those travails.

Although with *One* I knew I wanted to write about a father and his son and that it would be set in the UK, before I even knew by what catastrophe the planet would be destroyed, my initial

considerations incorporated this vision (outlined in the above email) of a young girl who would be instrumental to the story. Her appearance had been informed to some degree by the novel I was reading at the time: Michael Crichton's debut, *The Andromeda Strain* (1969). In another email to my editor, I explained how I wanted something that piqued my interest in that novel to underpin the narrative in *One*:

I've almost finished Michael Crichton's first novel 'The Andromeda Strain'. It's not bad. Certainly doesn't read like a book 40 years old. One thing he writes about which caught my eye: 'environmental forces causing mutagenic effect on organisms'. Which is what I would like the crux of my novel to be about... The horror of the self being twisted into new patterns.

C. Williams (personal communication, March 26, 2008)

I was looking to add another strand to the post-apocalyptic warp and weft. As much as I liked the idea of Richard Jane yomping from Aberdeen to London in order to establish if his son was still alive, I felt I needed something else; the novel might have felt a little flimsy otherwise. The initial image I had of the girl wearing a face scarf (what might she be concealing from the world?) connected to the jolt I'd had while reading Crichton's novel. At the time of writing these emails, the novel was already in progress. As with most long projects, I find the ideas for the latter stages evolve and become more fixed the deeper I get into the novel. Nothing is set in stone, although an outline (see appendix (i)) was created for the publisher as part of my contractual obligations. On May 6 I delivered a second chapter, even though I was still working on an outline and integrating new ideas continually:

I like the idea of... a missing link people who have, ironically, been reawakened by the ELE's mutagenic impact (or maybe they are a tribe hidden in a nuclear bunker from the cold war who were forgotten - a hand-picked people meant to form the basis for a post-apocalyptic world). There are glimpses of them over the weeks and months during which humans are suffering under the [Skinners]. Perhaps overwhelmed and larded, the women used for inter-species breeding. Slavery. Jane becomes a secret intermediary, part of a resistance, building a relationship with the girl he glimpsed on his journey south. They have been changing. They're scared, mute... Species war at the end, with us in the middle of it all... Maybe the girl is hauled off somewhere in the wilds and Jane must rescue her. He must not fail her as he did his son.

C. Williams (personal communication, May 7, 2008)

I recognised though, as did my editor, the danger in overloading the novel with more than one alien species (the predatory alien interlopers and this new, mutagenic by-blow):

Wow – this really is going into strange territory. But very exciting. I think the ideas are all cool, but try and hit the right tone and balance of clear story to description/ideas from the beginning to avoid congestion and overloading the reader.

A. Nevill (personal communication, May 7, 2008)

The temptation was too great. Sometimes, as a writer, you have to go with what your gut is telling you. I knew I could have fun with all of these weird and wonderful gene pools, as long as I played by the genre rules and always remembered to keep the readers' reception in mind. The book as it stood, with that main spine of the father and the search for his son, might not have been received well considering that there was no way I could allow Stanley to have survived the ELE. It didn't sit happily with me, this idea of a happy ending. I was very much drawn to the ugly thought of Jane clinging to hope many years down the line, as the survivors find a kind of security albeit in a world much changed and shadowed by ever-present threat. As Kafka pointed out (and he might well have been writing about horror novels when he did so), 'the task of accomplishing the negative remains imposed upon us; the positive is already given.' (Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente*, qtd. In Dowden, 1995: 64). Horror fiction is precisely this, an undermining of the status quo. The challenge as a writer of horror fiction is to present a version of stability and then rip the heart out of it with some iniquitous visitation, whether it be a zombie horde, a disease, a serial killer or, in the case of my novel, an ELE.

But what kind of ELE could trigger such a stochastic genetic anomaly? I was determined from the start not to travel the well-worn paths of plague or nuclear annihilation (although radiation would surely serve me with the means to play around with human DNA and any concomitant evolutionary switchbacks), but it seemed apt, given that we are all created from stardust, that my apocalypse ought to originate in the heavens. I had read something about gamma-ray bursts (GRB), and was attracted to them not only because of their relative novelty value in terms of fictional mass destruction, but also because of the attendant redolence of cosmic terror and awe, that which is beyond our comprehension, even as we experience it first hand. Awe is important to the horror genre, as writer Ramsey Campbell maintains: '...the field is capable of much more, and frequently succeeds – as satire or as comedy (however black), as social comment, as psychological enquiry, and perhaps best of all when it aspires to the awesome, the sense of something larger than can be directly shown.' (Campbell, 2008)

What is called 'the sublime', as argued by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik – the 'arousing [of] a strange mixture of awe, dread and pleasure in the spectator' (2014: 58) – inhabits the same territory. It is this strange mixture that I hoped to foment in my own work. Working the alchemy of repulsion and lyricality was one way, I felt, of sugaring the bitter pill of a necessarily unpleasant horror novel. I believed I had to write well in order for such a book to earn the right to be read. Michel Houellebecq, no stranger to controversial, hard-hitting fiction, shares this view: '...the more monstrous and inconceivable the events and entities described, the more precise and clinical the description. A scalpel is needed to dissect the unnameable.' (2008: 79) Such a decortication of horror is one of the craft elements that make it appealing to me as a writer. I contacted Dr Christoph Winkler, a project scientist at the European Space Agency (ESA) who oversees the Integral mission, ESA's International Gamma-Ray Astrophysics Laboratory. The program is designed to keep tabs on the violent events occurring in the galaxy. Though I was prepared to play fast and loose with the science – the chances

of Earth being in the exact firing line of a collapsing star appear to be minimal – the odds were good enough for me. I asked Dr Winkler whether GRBs could have a mutagenic effect on organisms and he replied in the positive:

Yes, you could expect radiation dose effects to organic structures like any ionising strong radiation (overexposed X-ray radiation, ultraviolet radiation) leading to massive genetic effects in organism, cancer risk etc.
C. Winkler (personal communication, April 4, 2008)

I also sought to strike a balance between the banal and the numinous. The everyday and that sense of cosmic otherness. The story had to be rooted in humanity; people needed to make a connection. I needed, as Horner and Zlosnik suggest, to ‘articulate common fears and nightmares’ (2014: 67). And I felt I was covering a lot of the ‘fear bases’ with this idea. Centrally, I was working on that fear of not knowing and deep-seated familial angst. But later in the novel there is also the fear of monsters or predators, and the primal phobia we host of being perceived as meat. Additionally there was the fear of loneliness and mistrust, and their potentially attendant bedfellows, depression and insanity. As in my previous novel, *The Unblemished*, there is a fear of mimicry. *The Unblemished* concerns a splinter group of predatory homo sapiens driven from London during the great fire of 1666 returning now to exact revenge. They have evolved to look like us in order to achieve lethal proximity.

I have some form in the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, though I had never written an overt end-of-the-world novel before, despite it being the kind of book that a lot of writers of horror fiction get around to at some point in their careers; the post-apocalyptic novel is on a lot of horror writers’ bucket lists, even though reader appetite for these stories comes and goes. Since literary heavyweight McCarthy’s Pulitzer Prize-winning contribution, other writers not normally associated with genre fiction – Jim Crace with *The Pesthouse* (2007), Liz Jensen’s *The Rapture* (2009) and Julie Myerson with *Then* (2011), to name but three – have raised their hands to obliterate us all. It’s a difficult sub-genre to avoid. There’s something grimly delicious about tearing up the Earth’s ur-blueprint, whether it be in genre terms within the realms of the possible or the plausible, or otherwise. As Katerina Bantinaki observes, ‘...the enjoyment that audiences derive from horror seems to be bound up with the emotional responses that it elicits, as audiences’ own reports indicate.’ (2012: 384)

London Revenant, an urban fantasy novel, features a first-person character who is dislocated from society, if not fully deracinated. He is a narcoleptic and the fugues he suffers lead him to suspect that he might not be who he thinks he is. He discovers an underground tribe intent on finding a lost subterranean city, the discovery of which leads to the destruction of the capital. The follow-up to that was a horror novel called *The Unblemished* which dealt with monsters banished from London during the Great Fire of 1666, returning to exact revenge in the present day. These two proto-apocalypse works proved to be a rehearsal for *One*. In each of these three books, I had to balance the need to

deliver the vision I had for each project – invariably a grim, uncompromising one – with the commercial imperative of a reader-friendly narrative. I knew *One* would have to be unremittingly grim. I was going to have to drag my protagonist through the mill in order to highlight the shining spirit of love; that fearless, unconditional love that comes from being a parent. Sophie Fuggle understands that primal need: ‘The annihilation of the entire planet serves as a backdrop for the real story, the survival of the family unit. As thousands of casualties stack up, the plight of the central characters becomes our sole focus.’ (2014: 38)

Judging by some of the reviews I received for the book – positive and negative – it seems my intention to write a novel that was bleak and unflinching was largely successful. Dr David McWilliam, Lecturer in English Literature and Film Studies at Keele University, said of *One*:

Whereas there is often a sense of distance between the reader and the devastated world of the protagonist in post-apocalyptic narratives, Williams grabs you by the hair and forces you to stare at the more grisly elements of this mortally wounded world. As a result, *One* packs an enormous emotional punch. (*Strange Horizons*, 2009)

Genre: Definitions and Boundaries

The genre of horror fiction, including the sub-genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, is volatile and inconsistent. It seems to thrive in those periods of history when the chips are down; witness John Wyndham’s upwards trajectory in the UK’s post-war years of struggle for economic parity with the rest of Europe, or the rise of practitioners during the late Cold War such as Stephen King (*Salem’s Lot* - 1975, *The Stand* – 1978), Robert R McCammon (*Swan Song* – 1987), Clive Barker (*The Damnation Game* – 1985) and Alan Moore (*Watchmen* – 1986/87). Critic and editor Douglas E. Winter (who has published both King and Barker in his seminal anthology *Prime Evil* (1988), observes: ‘[horror] is a progressive form of fiction, one that evolves to meet the fears and anxieties of its times.’ (Winter, 1998)

But one would suspect the opposite to be true. If real life is becoming more horrific than anything the professional scaremongers can summon to the page, how can horror fiction compete? I think part of the answer lies in its nihilistic nature.

The genre has always been seen as something of a rogue beast: leery, contrary, and, like the countless bogeyman reincarnations, impossible to kill, though it has suffered many dips in popularity over the years. In the same breath, despite its unpredictability, it provides a strange kind of comfort. We can empathise. Here are characters who look like us, act like us, work like us and have families like ours. We can feel a measure of relief that the plight of the protagonist makes our own travails more manageable. The way those characters tackle any given difficulty might provide us with some schematic by which we can plot out our coping mechanisms in the future (this is taken to extreme

lengths in some circles, such as the numerous zombie apocalypse preparation videos to be found on YouTube).

Ultimately, however bad things get on the page, unlike in real life, we can close the book and put the story away. We have some control over these horrors. Katerina Bantinaki (2012: 383-392) suggests that our responses to such fiction might actually go far beyond mere comfort, instead likening our reactions to being akin to the frisson of passionate love:

...the physical manifestations of horror emotions are not all painful. The adrenalin [sic] rush, the skin conductance, the increased heartbeat may be divergences from the normal physical state of equilibrium, but they are not, literally, pains. In certain contexts, these signs of arousal are not even unpleasant and... might even be enjoyed, as for instance when they occur in the sight of the person with whom one is madly in love or when they occur during play. (2012: 386)

This is interesting because the uncomfortable truth for any horror writer is that we rely on people's appetite for darkness – that impulse that causes us to slow down and gawp at the wreckage following a crash on the motorway – in order to line our pockets. There is gold in terror. The skill of the successful horror writer makes itself apparent in the way such crude stimuli are finessed. The gratuitous, somewhat scopophilic delivery is clumsy and easily detectable. Less so the acts of the subtle practitioner, who recognises value in tension and suspense, more so than gore and superficial shock.

To engage a reader to the extent that (s)he continues reading even though the subject matter is repellent is the holy grail for horror writers. There is also something to be said for the delicious feeling of being unable to continue, but wanting to go on anyway. The 'human larder' scene in *The Road* is one such example where this reader had to put the book down once the true purpose of the basement was revealed. Finding that narrative spell broken usually comes as a result of some clumsy authorial intrusion: a sudden realisation that you are involved in a construct; a continuity error; an unnecessarily florid sentence. But in this instance, it was a case of cherishing that moment of pure terror – an apocalypse or revelation in itself – wanting to draw it out and savour the shock before willingly returning.

Kafka made concrete his awareness of this fact in a letter, dated 27th January, 1904, to Oskar Pollak:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us. That is my belief. (1977: 16)

Writing horror fiction is a way of dealing with my neuroses and phobias. There's a hope that if I'm getting dark fiction on to the page, there's less of it fermenting in my head. To some extent this is true; writing fiction is a therapeutic practice. I tend to think that I did not decide to become a writer of dark material, but that the content chose me. I'm drawn to the idea (a cliché, admittedly) of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. And I'm a rubbernecker: I can't not look if there's something grim to be witnessed. It is much to do with wishing to create a cache of descriptive experiences to draw from, but also due to a morbid curiosity, a fascination with the skull beneath the skin. This has become more acute since I became a father – unconditional love is its own horror story – and my list of phobias has increased, including the fear of random violence. Being so receptive to atrocity is not something I enjoy, but Susan Feagin suggests that such phenomena elicit positive outcomes:

...it is possible to come to enjoy the feeling components of fear and disgust, and to seek them out as ends in themselves, rather than to find them unpleasant. One comes to enjoy certain aspects of the experience – the adrenalin [sic] rush, the tingles and the queasiness. Children often enjoy feelings produced by fairground rides such as roller coasters and tilt-a-whirls which adults often do not enjoy. (1992: 81)

Today's hunter-gatherer must also incorporate other responsibilities of parenthood into the timetable. A three-week trek to bring home Mastodon steaks from the Tundra is no longer deemed sufficient. Though fathers over time have been seen to assume varying roles in the family – for example: forbidding patriarch, moral compass, breadwinner, nurturant – 'researchers, theorists, and practitioners no longer cling to the simplistic belief that fathers fill an undimensional and universal role in their families and in their children's eyes' (Lamb, 2004: 3) .

It is broadly accepted that if the family unit is broken up for any length of time, there can be serious psychological ramifications. Michael Rutter says as much in his study on the psychological effects of parent-child separation: 'The importance of the family as a formative influence on a child's personality growth needs no arguing. Particularly in early childhood, it is the matrix within which the child develops, the area where his strongest emotional ties are formed and the background against which his most intense personal life is enacted' (Rutter, 1971: 233). Such truths compound the misery and desperation Jane feels when he realises the link to his son has been broken and not only by the distancing resulting from his marital failure.

"You're pulling us down," she told him. "I don't want to be a part of a family that has a corner of its triangle missing."
 "I'm not missing. I'm working," he reasoned. "Who paid for that leather jacket you love so much? Who bought us the extension to our house? Who bought the Audi you've christened Mungo?"
 "It's my house. Dad bought it for me."
 "It became ours when we married, Cherry. We share everything. That's what marriage is all about. Read the small print."

“Marriage.” She spat the word as if it were something spoiled she had put in her mouth. “This is no marriage. This is me skivvying at home while you swan off for a piss-up with your Aberdeen cronies.” (Williams, 2008: 25)

Jane struggles to cope with these expectations, and he resents Cherry for resorting to unfair clichés. He wants to be with his family but his work won’t allow it. He believes he is doing the right thing, but he is a veteran in the saturation diving industry. He ought to have hung up his fins and snorkel some time previously. I don’t make it explicit, but his hubris – he is well-liked and respected, highly thought of in his field – and his marital unhappiness combine to keep him in this dangerous (but well-paid) work. Not being with Stanley for large swathes of time is acutely painful for him, but he feels he is doing the right thing for his son. He also fears for what the future might hold should he retire. After a life of travel, responsibility and adrenaline, what kind of job could possibly compete? How might his psyche impact on the family dynamic then? In many ways he is the architect of his own fate. He could have compromised; he didn’t have to be so far away. His decisions and actions will reverberate down the decades, regret turning to cold, sour bile, filling him up completely.

Stanley, though not present in my novel, is as much a crutch to Jane as McCarthy’s boy is to his father. But reliance on Stanley comes at a cost: ‘It was as if, resorting to his son – every day, every hour, every other minute – was diminishing him. He was using Stanley up, like a pencil. There was nothing but a stub left, it seemed.’ (Williams, 2008: 267)

Though I could not present Stanley – necessarily absent – in the same light, I could project the same problem on to his surrogate, Aidan. It is Aidan’s tragedy that he is not Stanley, and he allows himself to die because of it. Aidan stops taking the tablets that inhibit the aggressive interior tissue digestion caused by the alien spores. Jane’s inability, or reluctance, to see in Aidan the chance for redemption, to rebuild those familial foundations that were lost, condemns Aidan. All Jane sees is a poor substitute for Stanley.

As I write, it is two-and-a-half minutes to midnight on the Doomsday Clock, the ‘globally-recognised arbiter of the planet’s health and safety’ (Mecklin, 2017). It is the closest the clock has been to midnight since 1953 when the Soviet Union detonated its first hydrogen bomb and ushered in a forty-year Cold War. Allied with the intensification of IS activity in the west, sabre-rattling in the Korean peninsula and instability in the Middle East, this makes for a febrile era. The turkey cocks in America, Russia and Asia currently remind one of toddlers playing with matches. Other contributing factors to this include the undermining of the Earth’s physical integrity, again at the hands of short-termist politicians. The planet is being picked at like a Sunday lunch carcass. Peter Boxall, in his examination of Don DeLillo’s novels – replete as they are with references to the Cold War and global terrorism – concedes that a tipping point has been reached.

DeLillo's novels have angled themselves towards and against the millennial apocalypse. But from the very first moments of *Underworld* there is a sense that the deferral of the apocalyptic moment is over. (2004: 177)

It is a motif endorsed by Maciej Maslowski, who similarly observes in DeLillo's work a gravitating of sorts which leads to a manifest punctuation point in history: 'DeLillo's oeuvre... may be read as a project aimed at mapping the historical movement towards the millennial moment of ultimate denouement (2011: 245). DeLillo himself, in his novel *Falling Man*, concerning a survivor of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, emphasises this line drawn through history: 'These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after' (2007: 138). There is horror everywhere, creeping and seemingly ineluctable: climate change is leading to the steady erosion of the ice caps. Smog grips Beijing in an uncanny lethal mist. Deforestation in Brazil has caused loss of habitat and extinction for many species. The Great Pacific garbage patch is creating an artificial island of pelagic plastics and synthetic slurry. The plunder of fossil fuels, and the invidious pursuit of hard-to-reach pockets of gas via fracking, precipitates the contamination of water, and increased air pollution. There's a sense of collective doom; you chip away at any foundation for long enough and it will all come crashing down. Children will be paying the debts we run up. As a father, I'm petrified. As a horror writer, I make a lot of notes.

This common anxiety over the unchecked pillaging of our planet, and other increasing concerns (random acts of terror-related violence; violent crime in general) tends to find a release valve in horror fiction and films. There are many reasons for this, chief among them a contract of expectation that readers enter into with the purveyors of this kind of work. Horror fiction provides a 'reassuring' check against the random, unpleasant events that can punctuate and puncture our daily lives. Even the most original fiction will cleave to a formula we all recognise (at the most basic, the 'beginning-middle-end' structure that is as nested into our DNA as the compulsion to breathe). So there is a reassurance in horror fiction that is missing from the arbitrary life. We can align ourselves with a hopefully sympathetic protagonist, we can luxuriate in the gradual revelation of a monster (or a monstrous act), we can enjoy the shivers up the spine and the increasing heart rate in the knowledge that the pay-off will give us some sort of positive resolution. The monster will be defeated, or banished, the protagonist will be victorious and enjoy his or her day in the sun. It could simply be a primal trigger. We crave that adrenaline rush, the race memory fight-or-flight mode that gave us a chance when we were fleeing through the forests wearing loincloths and brandishing spears, trying to outrun the Smilodon.

Cosimo Urbano was writing about horror films when he theorised the reasons behind putting ourselves through these punishing experiences but his words are applicable to all horror media: 'One submits to the horror experience in order to get rid of the monster(s). The pains and discomfort experienced during the [reading of the books] is considered something necessary and inevitable in order to achieve the (presumably pleasurable) final victory' (2004: 30). I can appreciate this angle of

attack, but I'm not sure I totally agree with it, especially in the context of post-apocalyptic fiction. Such a stance quite often occurs within horror fiction, as well as from those commenting upon it. Professor Van Helsing in *Dracula* (1897) urged on his charges, telling them they 'have to pass through the bitter water before we reach the sweet'. But sometimes bitter water is all there is. Sometimes there is no 'final victory' (Stoker: 155).

Consider the ending of *The Road*. Yes, there is a future of sorts for the boy, but it can still only exist on a day-to-day basis. He has been adopted by a new family – 'good guys' who 'carry the flame' – but McCarthy does not offer any kind of positive outcome. They are safe for now. Their health is relatively good; they have weapons and ammunition. The reader knows, however (as do the characters, though it remains unspoken), that the food will run out, the bullets will be used up, and hunger, sickness or violence will visit them before long. Hope becomes relative.

More persuasive, I believe, and certainly the kind of ethos I work towards, especially when working in the realm of short stories, is exposed in the argument put forward by Tony Magistrale and Michael A. Morrison:

...that much of what occurs in horror art is symbolic; that is, its deepest meanings exist on a subtextual level. Beneath its veneers of tormented maidens, madmen, monsters, and the other archetypes of the genre, horror consistently reminds us of human vulnerability. (1996: 2)

I believe the short story, bizarrely, allows greater licence to assess the psychological ramifications of such visceral material. The form invites forensic analysis and introspection in a way that the novel (especially one populated by a large number of characters) does not. It is a viewpoint shared by the late Joel Lane, a prolific writer of supernatural short stories:

Though the novel is commercially a more successful vehicle for writing in the horror genre than the short story, it is rarely as effective. This may be largely because the emotional investment required of both author and reader is difficult to sustain for long. Most modern horror novels have an episodic structure, like a series of short stories strung together. To be effective as a coherent whole, a horror novel has to contain the working out of an idea which is frightening in its totality and not just in its component elements: in other words, it has to be more than just a story in which frightening things happen. (1986: 35)

The crucial difference between writing short stories and writing novels involves scope and focus. Short stories tend to demand a more singular viewpoint, but can cope better with the subtleties of suggestion and ambiguity. Despite their brevity, I feel you can layer a short story with deeper meaning and greater mystery than that of a novel. But a short story will, usually, deal in minimums everywhere else: one character, one idea, one direction, one outcome. As a result, they can evince a mood of melancholy and perhaps even carry a tang of the essential solitary nature of human beings.

Frank O'Connor's opinion on the difference, in his study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, adopts a similar tack:

Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo... As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel – an intense awareness of human loneliness... The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilised society, of man as an animal who lives in a community – but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent. (1962: 19)

A novel (especially one rooted in genre) will necessarily contain at least two major narrative strands, often more, and could spawn a number of different outcomes for the main protagonists. Though some are rigorously plotted and meticulously structured, it is rare to find a novel that does not carry some excess timber, or one whose pace flags occasionally. Novels of genre are less likely these days to match the excesses of the 1980s when manuscripts the size of breezeblocks landed on editors' desks. It doesn't necessarily follow any more that epic themes need to be represented by epic word counts. The short, sharp shock of leaner novels is coming back into vogue and these books are not losing any impact for it. Novels such as Stephen Gregory's *The Cormorant* (1986), Alison Moore's *The Lighthouse* (2012) and, of course, *The Road*, are able to sustain unusual narrative deliveries and a short story sensitivity in the way that longer novels, with an arguably more constricting requirement in terms of plot and control, can not. I certainly conceived of *One* as a novel depicting epic themes, but possessing the sensibilities of a short story, particularly in relation to Richard Jane's limited priorities and propensity for self-examination.

John Wyndham, whose genre novels existed at a time before the word count excesses of the 1980s, enjoyed a spike in popularity during the depression following the Second World War, when rationing dragged on for nearly a decade after fighting ceased and Great Britain found itself in hock to the Americans. As the Iron Curtain came down and an atmosphere of suspicion thickened – exacerbated by the arms race – Wyndham's novels were seen as the perfect antidote to contemporary fears and paranoia and also provided a fantastic escape from what it meant to survive a conventional war while total annihilation lay in wait. In their introduction to *It Came from the Fifties!*, editors Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy and Bernice Murphy recognise the symbolism inherent in Wyndham's work: 'The catastrophic visions of the novels of John Wyndham, notably *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), *The Chrysalids* (1955), and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), are distinctive versions of the Cold War anxieties which permeate so much post-war culture.' (2011: 13)

Wyndham's novels captured the sense of nuclear war as this unknown, unknowable threat, something so large it is beyond comprehension. Death from above: there is something cosmic to it; it carries that flavour of awe, or the sublime. These missiles do not even make contact with the Earth.

They detonate high above it, igniting and benighting the sky. This atmosphere of barely-suppressed panic during the post-Second World War period found traction all the way through to the 1980s, when the threat of nuclear war, though tempered after the Cuban missile crisis, was reignited by the proliferation of nuclear weapons during Ronald Reagan's presidency. Horror's boom years in the 1970s and 1980s stepped in time with this burgeoning threat. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik discern that united and uniting faculty of menace, peculiar to the political and cultural flux of the time: '...it is perhaps no coincidence that apocalyptic fictions, the Gothic, and trauma theory have flourished since 1980 for they all play to our collective sense that we are now a beleaguered, threatened and endangered species.' (2014: 66)

Wyndham's novels, unlike Ballard's (whose novels are pitched firmly in science fiction territory), balance on a fulcrum between science fiction (although he apparently preferred the term 'logical fantasy') and horror. When I was writing *One*, and when I realised that the inciting incident in the novel was the gamma ray blast, I knew that the book might suffer because of a perceived lack of identity. Is *One* a science fiction novel with horror elements or is it a horror novel garnished with science fiction signifiers? The marketing departments at the various publishing houses would suggest it does. Genre fiction tends to suffer from this penchant for pigeonholing its content. I consider myself a writer first and foremost, though I've been labelled an author from both the crime and horror fields in the past. I'm proud of my work in both of those genres, but I wouldn't want to define myself to a point where I limit my potential reach. In this way, genre writers are both liberated and stultified. *The Road* is arguably a horror novel, it embraces the common horror tropes (the supernatural suggested in the early appearance, albeit in dreams, of the creature with the 'alabaster bones' (McCarthy, 2007: 4); the cannibal hordes; the 'haunted' house containing a cellar filled with abominations) but the novel also confronts philosophical questions regarding filial relationships, hunger, humanity, human existence and God. It is a deadly serious book. It elicits horror in the reader. Ultimately, no matter how interesting the argument, the label doesn't matter. A good story finds its own audience. What mattered to me was the presence of a novel that used sophisticated, subtle narrative techniques to deliver a story with devastating emotional punch.

Literary Influences: Cormac McCarthy and JG Ballard

The year before I started writing *One*, I read Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. His book casts a long shadow over my work (and the work of anybody who has recently dipped a toe into the poisoned, unpotable waters of apocalyptic fiction). I was deeply affected by the novel, both viscerally and artistically. Reading it was an intensely emotional experience. I have striven to write lyrically about atrocity throughout my career; it's what I might consider one of my 'calling cards'. Here was a kindred spirit, albeit operating at a much more rarefied level, who cared as much about the craft of writing as the story being delivered by it. What he did in *The Road* was to write a very simple love

story in language that is archaic, obscure, almost Biblical, a language that is being lost; in a way, a language that is as much from another world as the character of the father.

I realised that I wanted to write a version of *The Road* set in the UK; I felt we deserved it, given that so many end-of-the-world scenarios are played out in the United States. And as brilliant as McCarthy's novel is, I felt a frustration regarding that geographical bent. America is so vast that there's no sense of a running out of space. There isn't the claustrophobia that one might experience in an island setting. Though it's evident that the country has been shattered, there is always hope that somewhere in that landmass stretching from Alert, Canada to Ushuaia, Argentina (almost 9,500 miles as the crow flies), mankind might have survived. In the UK, where the distances between the most extreme points is a measly 600 miles, such a proposition is hugely unlikely.

I also wanted to write from the perspective (albeit third person) of a character who is there at the moment of destruction as opposed to someone we meet who has learned to cope with how things pan out later. My decision to write about a father and his son was taken out of my hands to some extent – I always meant *One* to be a Valentine to my sons – but it was also meant as an homage to *The Road*. I later discovered that *The Road* was written by McCarthy for his own boy, John, to whom his novel is dedicated. Initially, I felt a little insecure about attempting a book concerning similar themes, and offering glimpses of hell in a lyrical style, so soon after *The Road* had been published, but I was vindicated by McCarthy's own words, uttered during an interview with the *New York Times*' Richard Woodward: 'The ugly fact is books are made out of books... The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written.' (1992)

The end of the world in Cormac McCarthy's novel comes in the shape of two sentences: 'The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions.' (McCarthy, 2007: 52) We are not given any clue as to what the ELE is. One would think, given the extent of the devastation, that it was a nuclear war, but neither the man nor the boy suffer any long-term effects from radiation. A collision with a meteor, then? But this would not explain the ongoing earthquakes that occur a decade later. My own guess when I first read the book was the explosion of a supervolcano lying dormant for millions of years. This would be the cause of enough ejecta to create a nuclear winter and also destabilise the mantle to such a degree that earthquakes would continue long after the event. In a *Wall Street Journal* interview with McCarthy, it is clear that this inciting event was not that important to him:

A lot of people ask me. I don't have an opinion. At the Santa Fe Institute I'm with scientists of all disciplines, and some of them in geology said it looked like a meteor to them. But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do? The last time the caldera in Yellowstone blew, the entire North American continent was under about a foot of ash. People who've gone diving in Yellowstone Lake say that there is a bulge in the floor that is now about 100 feet high and the whole thing is just sort of pulsing.

From different people you get different answers, but it could go in another three to four thousand years or it could go on Thursday. No one knows. (Jurgensen, 2009)

I wanted the same kind of mystery to surround the ELE in *One*. The critical moment is similarly understated and ambiguous: ‘There was a strange sensation of increased pressure, as if a gust of wind had suddenly barrelled into them, and then the soft hiss of the headset died, the heat from the circulating water began to rapidly dissipate.’ (Williams, 2008: 5)

Having researched many different possibilities beyond the usual suspects, I decided upon GRBs, but realised very quickly that I could not say as much in the narrative. My protagonist had to be protected from the blast, which meant that he had to be either deep underground or underwater, and that led to another long avenue of research into the life of a saturation diver. Even if he had witnessed the event (an act that would surely have resulted in his death), he would not have been able to surmise that he was privy to the death of a star. Writing in the third-person limited point of view precipitated a simple rule: if Jane didn’t know what happened then neither could the reader. Another benefit of having the Hollywood impact ‘off screen’ was that the human story was not overshadowed. I could have written the novel in first person and still preserved that lack of knowledge or understanding about the event, but I felt it necessary to exert more control over the narrative, and not risk the compulsion to overload a first-person viewpoint with too much hand-wringing regarding Jane’s search for Stanley.

Because of McCarthy’s fearless attack, I could be as punishing as I needed to be. But what makes *One* different to *The Road* is its extra layering of grief: in my book, Richard Jane cannot protect his son, Stanley, because they were separated at the time of devastation. This minor discrepancy leavens *The Road*. And though that doesn’t mean it suddenly enjoys the levity of an episode of *The Waltons*, it does allow its love story to exist in the present, with an immediacy and a relatable pang. In *One*, the father is crippled by both doubt and hope. What he would give to be entering the cannibal’s lair in McCarthy’s novel with Stanley in tow. What a treat! Instead, Jane’s dreams are filled with the terror of ‘what if?’. The horror of not knowing conquers all.

That said, my novel suffers somewhat for this physical deficit. Aidan’s presence serves to highlight the reserves of need Jane carries for his real son. Their relationship is unfulfilling and reticent; you get the feeling that Jane is reluctant to show any physical affection towards Aidan for fear of erasing the muscle memory of his hugs with Stanley. What makes *The Road* such an emotionally engaging experience is the relationship between the man and the boy. We see first-hand the ebb and flow of their moods, how they conflict and conflate. Their conversations are immediate, as are their moments of intimacy and the sudden shocks of animosity. When they happen upon a freezing waterfall and decide to take an impromptu dip, the man helps the boy negotiate the water. They share an important bonding episode; one of many: ‘The boy was standing in the pool to his waist, holding his shoulders and hopping up and down. The man went back and got him. He held him

and floated him about, the boy gasping and chopping at the water. You're doing good, the man said. You're doing good.' (McCarthy, 2007: 39)

Jane's involvement with his son is echoic, proximate, reabsorbed through Jane's poring over an old letter, or a memory. There is heartache at Stanley's absence, and heartache over his illusory sense of nearness. To compound the agony for Jane, one of his reminiscences about Stanley concerns death. His son asks him what it means:

"It means you stop breathing, your heart stops beating. Your brain stops thinking. And it's like that for ever. You never come back from it."
Stanley had digested this, his eyes wide and fixed on the middle distance as they were whenever he thought hard about things, and said: "Will I die?"
"Everyone dies, mate."
"Oh," Stanley said, and his eyes turned glassy with tears. "Will you die?"
Jane nodded.
"Before me?"
Jane had almost said *I hope so* but thought that would confuse him. "Yes, Stan."
"Oh, Dad. I don't want to die. I don't want you to die." (Williams, 2008: 57)

The boy in *The Road*, who is born to this shattered world and has known no different, is fundamentally stronger than the man, who is in many ways an alien, struggling to cope with the sea change, struggling to protect his son from harm. McCarthy doesn't externalise the man's private thoughts regarding this: 'Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed.' (McCarthy, 2006: 153)

Joe Penhall, however, in his screenplay adaptation, makes it explicit when the man – watched by the boy as he wields alchemy: pouring himself a glass of whisky and lighting a cigarette – says: 'You think I come from another world, don't you?' (2014: 64) In many ways, of course, he does. Does the boy suffer a loss of innocence? Given his introduction to this lawless, violent world, innocence for the child never existed, although McCarthy alludes to some erosion of the unblemished soul of an infant. In an eerie foreshadowing of the novel's final paragraph, the man sees signs in his son's face of 'something... gone that could not be put right again.' (McCarthy, 2006: 136)

The post-apocalyptic fiction I had read is either positioned some considerable time after the event, when people have adapted to their new habitat and circumstances (eg. Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954), JG Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980)), or seems to hold back from offering the naked horrors associated with the end times; the 'cosy catastrophes' of John Wyndham, for example (Aldiss, 1973: 294). I wanted to write about the inciting event and its immediate aftermath as well as what has happened ten years down the line. I didn't want to allude to the grim realities of the affairs that precipitated the end of society. I wanted to give full vent to the horror impulse, to plumb the depths without losing grip on my literary sensibilities.

In this respect, I feel I was writing for myself first, rather than my audience. I wanted to have fun, to play God and to destroy the world and most of the people living there. To dodge the ELE was to pull my punches and I'd already decided this was not a novel that would do that. Richard Jane's character is displayed in the opening chapters, when he is stranded on the ocean floor and has to act quickly and decisively in order to survive. It sets the tone for what is to follow and persuades the reader to believe in him and his actions.

Riddley Walker works because you have this sense of thousands of years of cultural development, a clawing back of what it means to be human, albeit as a faint analogue of what went before. The ELE is not the point of Russell Hoban's book, whereas for me, it was. In that moment of megadeath, Stanley, like his father, has a possibility of survival. I wanted him to be alive – in Richard Jane's head at least – at the very start of the book in order to make what comes later that much more poignant. There is art in bleakness, I was convinced, having read McCarthy and, to a lesser extent, Scott Smith's apocalypse-in-microcosm, *The Ruins* (2006) the final paragraph of which has to be one of bleakest endings to a novel I have ever read. It was my intention to depict in *One* an entropic slowing down of life, a horizon filled with hopelessness, a vacuum rushing in to fill the gaps. I was encouraged by Michel Houellebecq's words, in his biography of H.P. Lovecraft:

The universe is nothing but a furtive arrangement of elementary particles. A figure in transition towards chaos. That is what will finally prevail. The human race will disappear. Other races in turn will appear and disappear. The skies will be glacial and empty, traversed by the feeble light of half-dead stars. These too will disappear. And human actions are as free and as stripped of meaning as the unfettered movement of the elementary particles. Good, evil, morality, sentiments? Pure "Victorian fictions". All that exists is egotism. Cold, intact, and radiant. (2008: 32)

I was likewise drawn to Ballard, whose English settings chimed with the claustrophobia I wanted to create in my own work, and who shares similar views on the ideas of entropy in his confrontations with the 'terrifying void of a patently meaningless universe' (Ash, 1977: 130). What else can Richard Jane do, after the white heat of his initial hunt? Although, after ten years, his hunger for the search has not been assuaged, he has necessarily slowed, distracted and occupied by the efforts to rebuild some sort of societal structure, and from the exhaustion caused by rationed food and poor nutrition. Though he would never acknowledge it, Jane is succumbing to the entropy that claims us all, whether short or long term. He realises that what is at risk here is not just the fortune of a little boy (or, by the novel's second half, a young man) but his own destiny. He knows full well that his acquiescence regarding Stanley's fate will be his own death sentence. His universe will be meaningless.

Ballard was attuned too to the constricting effects of our small island's confines, but he also layers on extra sensations of smothering: the claustrophobic spaces of the tanks and battened-down panic rooms in *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), his first novel, which he eventually disowned; the strangling prehistoric plant life in the baked London lagoon in *The Drowned World* (1962); the

inescapable urban arena in the shadow of the Westway in *Concrete Island* (1974); the barricaded battlezone of the skyscraper in *High Rise* (1975). According to Christopher Daley, '[Ballard's] disaster fiction sits concurrently inside and outside the genre, as his work exposes what [Roger] Luckhurst describes as "the space between frames"' (2014: 135).

So Ballard offers us a glimpse of the psychological glue that binds his narrative set pieces together. We see into the peculiar mindsets of his characters in a way many writers of fantastic fiction do not. These spaces between frames are comprised of hard decisions, cold conclusions, distancing pivots of reason. The thoughts of bastards and bitches, perhaps. Cruel and calculated and painfully real, the kind of fiction we find it difficult to absorb, perhaps because they are consonant with the everyday machinations of our own social intercourse. Ballard is, after all, a one-off, a writer who is mischievous, contrary and confrontational, someone who glories in the discomfort of human interaction, sentiments echoed by Samuel Francis, who identifies in Ballard 'a literary maverick, an imaginative radical, a transgressive, subversive writer unafraid to violate taboos and to voice unspoken truths about the state of modern humanity' (2011: 7).

Ballard's studies of his flawed characters – driven men and women glimpsed in the mirrors of the pages of his novels – help to instigate a sense of other-worldliness, even though his locations are as known as a Chelsea skyscraper or a triangle of land near the Paddington Basin. His characters operate independently of the urban landscapes in which he has located them, yet they are all shaped and influenced by those overbearing arrangements of stone, brick, smoke and cellulose. They are the cities they populate, even though the claustrophobia and pressure of such places threaten to suffocate them, and serve to highlight the excesses they experience, and their inherent predilection for self-destruction.

Though not conventionally post-apocalyptic, Ballard's trilogy of urban horror novels – *Crash* (1973), *The Concrete Island* and *High Rise* – nevertheless co-exist within a Venn diagram consisting of socio-political pressures, rampant urbanisation and violence, all ingredients that can be found in stories concerning the end of the world. His stance on what he is trying to achieve in fiction also takes its cue from the archetypal 'last man' scenario. As Ballard himself points out, in Peter Brigg's assessment of his life and work: '[It is] all about one person, all about one man coming to terms with various forms of isolation' (Brigg, 1985: 37).

One was certainly informed by Ballard, if not directly then in the coldness of his characters, the harshness of his urban backdrops (the New Brutalism apparent in *High Rise*, for example, transmogrified into the dissolving, unsteady angles of a rotting London in *One*), but also in the post-traumatic stress disorder suffered by Jane, and his descent into madness on the heels of his refusal to accept the truth about his son. Christopher Daley is mindful of the subtle influence one's surroundings can have upon the psyche as the protagonist Kerans hallucinates in the punishing tropical heat. He is not just investigating the waterlogged environs, but also his own 'emerging psychological territories.' (2014: 136)

Ballard's work concentrates on the breakdown of society but also the consequential mental stress. His stories are as much explorations of psychological failure to adapt as anything else. Keeping on top of the reactions of my characters in the face of such shocking scenarios, being able to render believable dialogue, reactions and behaviour among characters who have been exposed to unbearable physical and mental stresses, was one of the greatest challenges facing me. The only way I could do that, apart from reading about PTSD and the like, was to tap into my own dark places.

One: The Ending of the Novel

I felt it was important to show how Jane's love for his boy becomes an obsession, toxic to any others who have grown close to him. He has become reckless in his pursuit, his acts bordering on the supererogatory. A sliver of the ice that the Skinners possess lives in Jane, hardened after a decade of hope, horror and survival. To some degree, he understands the impulse behind this widespread animosity, and it informs his attitude in this new world: 'Jane lifted the skull to his face and breathed in the air that was trapped in the fossae of its nasal cavities. He thought he caught a flavour of what it meant to be wild, untrammelled. A killing machine, something designed solely for the purpose of death.' (Williams, 2008: 92)

Rational thinking is no longer a part of Jane's arsenal. In the end, Jane's love, instead of sustaining him as it did at the start of his ordeal, threatens to strip him bare. In extremis, on a beach of horrors likely to unhinge anybody's sanity, his circumspection and sedulousness (what point Stanley's survival if his father should walk into a Skinner trap?) – the very things that have kept him alive – are destroyed by his desperation to believe that the tiger's rotting hide is Stanley's striped pyjamas.

He slithered down the shingle into the dip and leant close to the hole. He could see nothing in there but the pure black of childhood nightmares. But then there was a flurry of movement. The grimy striped swatch of his pyjamas shifting back and forth beyond the edge of the hole, settling now, his back to Jane. The whimpering continued. Cold, afraid, alone for so long. (Williams, 2008: 360)

Jane's condition now – exhausted, famished, at the very end of his tether – is so advanced that he would welcome death if only it was Stanley-shaped. However, when Jane's demise finally arrives, it is only Stanley-coloured, as his nemesis, the tiger, arrives with his failing coat of rotting blue stripes.

The end of *One* was difficult to write as I wanted to sidestep what I saw as the formulaic conclusion to this kind of fiction. Usually there is some glimmer of hope, a suggestion that human beings will overcome this catastrophe and find a new way forward. In the face of overwhelming destruction, there is the chance of happiness. The child savages at the end of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) are taken in hand by a responsible adult – the naval officer – ready to restore order after their 'fun and games'. Maitland, in Ballard's *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), on the verge of being crushed to

death under a tower riven by supernatural gales is miraculously spared as the weather finally calms. The boy in *The Road* loses his father to sickness, but is rescued by a family who similarly ‘carry the fire’. I wanted to offer that glimmer – the chance of escape on the raft – and then take it away.

The ending is downbeat in terms of the conventionally human element: the escape raft is doomed, Jane dies (although in death he believes he can finally be reunited with his son) and it is only the new breed, the mysterious evolutionary splinter group, who can look to any kind of future. I wanted too to dodge the ‘rescue-closure’ that Horner and Zlosnik allude to. It is tantalisingly within reach, but I couldn’t kowtow to convention or expectation, not in this sub-genre, not if I was being true to myself.

I was taking a risk, because prior to the downbeat events that unfold at the very end of the novel, I had taken the reader into extremely dark territory with the sequence involving the baby farms on the beach. I admit to a feeling of pride that I was able to shock my editor – a horror writer in his own right, and well-versed in the traditions of the field:

The female caviar farm is the most gruesome thing ever written, by the way, and we’ll both go to prison for it – but it’d be worth it.
A. Nevill (personal communication, November 21, 2008)

If I were to follow convention, that trough ought to have been rewarded by the peak of optimism: the raft maintaining buoyancy and drifting off to the Continent to establish that life was in fine fettle. But I opted for a double-dip depression: I couldn’t accept that an annihilated world taken over by predatory species could offer anything other than a congeries of torment.

The farms created by the Skinners are food banks. It is to emphasise the idea that humankind, when stripped of all the things that make us who we are – clothes, families, empathy, love – is reduced to the thing that certain creatures identified in us when we were crawling from the primordial ocean: meat.

Stephen Clark might well have been talking about the Skinners when he wrote: ‘...it is the genocidal enemy of humankind that will, in the end, be dominant. Either there is no significance at all in human life, or else ‘significance’ shrinks down to particular human moments, having no lasting influence on anything beyond.’ (Ed. Seed, 2016: 36)

My own feeling is that the attempt to introduce this new species didn’t work out as well as it might, for the same reason that I was unable to explicitly relay what had caused the ELE. Jane is no astronomer. Similarly, what he knows about evolution and DNA you could probably write on the plastic of a diver’s face mask, with space left over. If Jane is unaware, then the reader must be unaware. Any other set of circumstances means authorial intrusion and crippling exposition. Though I could not clarify the truth about the splinter species, I could offer glimpses of Jane’s intuition. These

considerations of his are meant to be clues seeded for the reader. Ambiguous they might be, but ambiguity ought to work well in a novel where any certainty is at a premium.

I loathe any kind of exposition in a novel, so I feel the only way to deliver information is via character and description, hoping that the reader possesses the tools to winkle out meaning. This following passage was as categorical as I felt I could be regarding the nature of that splinter species, and the girl's *raison d'être*:

She was a sudden stillpoint in the current. She raised her hand and he saw now what it was about her that had itched at his mind for so long. The alien meld of her hand against his; the misted imprint of her fingers on the motorhome window. He understood the significance of the drawing he had seen, of the six-fingered hand enclosing the stick figure within. He thought of protection and assistance. Of species intertwined, interweaved, interdependent. Of mutualist relationships. Of pilot fish and sharks. Of the jaws of the fates. (Williams, 2008: 353)

In contrast, Cormac McCarthy's novel contains a tart clarity despite the text being peppered with archaic, obsolete and complex vocabulary. The novel is about survival and hope, faith and love. There are no supernatural entities (apart from that initial translucent dream remnant) muddying the waters and demanding that curse of genre fiction: exposition. The final, achingly beautiful paragraph of *The Road* sees McCarthy hammer home the point about life: its transitory nature, its fleetingness, its fragility. It stresses the utter contempt all short-termists exhibit in a world where only long-term projections can offer any kind of hope for the frangible systems supporting our survival:

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. (McCarthy, 2007: 286)

The simple patterns on the skin of the fish become signifiers of the everyday miracle of life, that which we take for granted and treat so cheaply. But despite the pain in that last paragraph, it might be argued that it is hopeful too, for although the human race has largely wrecked its beautiful home, the Earth has by no means finished with its game of life. Horner and Zlosnik make an important distinction when they note that 'Nature is literally transcendent in that it will evolve through such destruction; humanity, however, might well be destroyed.' (Eds. Germanà & Mousoutzanis, 2014: 68). As 'all things were older than man', there is the intimation that life will probably return, although not necessarily in the same form. The Earth has seen a number of ELEs over its 4.5 billion year span so far, and life has evolved from the wreckage every time, a truth observed by David Seed: 'Again

and again destruction functions as a prelude to restoration.’ (2016: 8), and Stephen R.L. Clark: ‘Every real entity must have an end – but it, or something very like it, comes again.’ (Ed. Seed, 2016: 31).

The idea that the end of the world is in fact an underscore to one particular epoch, and that the extinction level event can also be seen as the catalyst for a new beginning means that the death of the world is also the moment of its rebirth; if you will, a Creation Level Event, a truth not lost on James Berger: ‘Very few apocalyptic representations end with the End. There is always some remainder, some post-apocalyptic debris or the transformation into paradise.’ (1999: 34)

He appreciates that we can observe the cyclical nature of apocalypse in any exposed geological strata, and recognise in those thin black shadows – the ancient, compacted ash of an ‘impact winter’ – the drawing of a line that, though devastating, was never likely to be permanent. There was always something before, and there is always something after. There might not be those polished trout wimpling in the glens any more but that hum of mystery continues, and will find a new manifestation, even though there are likely be many more extinction level events before the sun expands to perform its ultimate destructive act upon the Earth. There is plenty of time for life to find a way, long after we have become dust and shadow.

Conclusion

The central aim of this thesis has been to position my novel, *One*, within the context of the horror genre and, specifically, the sub-genre of apocalypse and post-apocalypse fiction. In order to do so, it was important to acknowledge the ambition I had for the novel when I began amassing notes, ideas and characters. It was my hope that I might write the most terrifying story I could muster, in a language that was both lyrical and attractive, almost in tribute to the love of words I have nurtured throughout my life, and which might disappear, or become bastardised over time (as happens in *Riddley Walker*).

I also wanted to address my reasoning with regards to why I wrote the novel the way I did. The genre I was committing to has a rich heritage; I knew that whatever I tried to do would have been done before. Indeed, one of the reasons I wanted to write *One* was because I was drawn by the challenge of writing something beautiful and ghastly in the way that Cormac McCarthy had done with *The Road*. I loved the idea of a novel that could be gripping and repellent in the same moment. I wanted *One* to rub shoulders with the post-apocalyptic novels I admired, and yet, at the same time, I craved something different. I felt I had to explore the limits of what was palatable in order to do so, with the only self-censoring restriction being that of gratuitousness. *One* is a post-apocalyptic novel set in the UK. So far, so Wyndham. However, at no point did I ever consider applying the soft focus or shifting the point of view away from the worst I could imagine. There is a scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Frenzy* (1972) in which the camera, on the brink of witnessing a sadistic murder, pulls away from the scene of the crime, retreating down the stairs and into the street. It is too much for the camera’s eye and, by extension the audience, to acknowledge. I couldn’t indulge such subtleties; in a

world brutally exposed by the gamma ray blast, all things have to be visible. My visual rubric, to some degree, was the TV drama *Threads* (1984), a ‘film which comes closest to representing the full horror of nuclear war and its aftermath, as well as the catastrophic impact that the event would have on human culture’ (Perrine, 1998: 237). I believe I broadly succeeded in crafting a vision that was hellish, while freighting the characters with hope and the prose with some degree of leavening description.

Crucially, the novel, alongside the analysis set out in this thesis, provides a unique slice of metaphorical commentary on the contemporary forms of familial angst experienced in these early years of the twenty-first century, when terrorism has mutated from attacks on mainly military and political targets, to the random ambushing of the general public. The fear I feel for my children, growing up in such an environment, has found its way on to the page. Yes, the destruction of the planet in *One* was down to a natural disaster, a bad luck scenario in which the skin of Earth was torn away by the death of a star. But the resultant chaos caused by the Skinners – the corpses reanimated by the mysterious fertiliser blown in on the cosmic winds created by the gamma ray blast – is meant to stand for the arbitrary and unpredictable everyday threat.

Death comes from the stars and wears a mask of undigested skin, but it also drives a car at speed along the Westminster Bridge, or plants a nail bomb in the foyer of a concert hall, where children have come to see their idol.

W. Warren Wagar argues that such end-of-the-world stories are a way of dealing with mortality in the face of devastation, and provide some measure of comfort in a situation where the protagonists are up against seemingly insurmountable odds: ‘The last man, of one of a handful of last men, is a figure of immeasurable power and importance.’ (Seed: 5) Over the course of writing this thesis, it has become clear, congruent with this kind of attitude from writers such as Wagar, that I have come to see Richard Jane as a character who acts both as a buffer between life and death, and also a preparation for its inevitability. He is an everyman, thrust into an impossible situation. The way he acts, I now acknowledge, is the way I believe most of us would act, or at least hope to act, if we were cast in such a thankless role.

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APPENDICES

These appendices are designed to illustrate how my initial ideas went through a number of iterations during the pitching process, firstly when I was looking for a commission and then in greater detail when the outline had to be developed to assist the plans being drawn up by marketing and publicity departments.

(i) Informal pitch for contracted second novel, delivered to Adam Nevill at Virgin Books, February 10, 2008.

I've just had an image pop into my head. Pretty girl with a large dog standing on the outskirts of London. Tattooed. Branded. A scarf wrapped loosely around her throat and mouth. She's eight or nine years old. Eyes so pale as to carry almost no pigment. She's been following Richard Jane since he passed through St Albans, although he's had the feeling of being watched for a long time. Little gifts... offerings being left for him. It's bait, but he doesn't know it yet. Survivors in caves/mines etc, have been harvested by her brethren. Stored food, not for them, but for something they've got planned. The sound of howling. She always melts away into the scenery when he tries to make contact. She's too afraid. She stops as he hits the north circular. She won't come any further. He's dead on his feet. He's lost so much weight his clothes hang off him like flayed skin. He's not even sure he's actually seeing this. He takes one last look back and she half raises her hand, as if to wave goodbye. And she smiles at him. And his breath catches in his throat. The scarf falls away and she has a mouth filled with thick canines. Her jaw is disfigured by the armoury she's carrying. She turned around and raises her arms to the molten sky...

End of Part One...

Part Two:

Ten years on. London ransacked. No law or order. Gangs of very bad. Pockets of resistance. Think 'Escape from New York', but nastier. Food getting scarce. People leaving. Refugee lines out of the city. The place is like a field of crops after the locusts have descended. And now that the survivors are on their knees, a series of savage attacks are taking place in the city. People are turning up dead in the morning, little more than a pile of gnawed bones, blood-drenched clothes, hair and inedible gobbets of offal. That girl from a decade before is part of a strain reanimated by the gamma ray burst. Living with wolves in the caves over millennia before humans evolved. But they're weak. They've been

mating with wolves. Their genes are able to mutate to accept animal sperm. They have a high tolerance of foreign bodies. Selective immune system. But not enough time for natural selection.

Or maybe some vital ingredient has rained down from space... cellular or something.... my initial idea was some kind of membrane that has floated through space for billions of years and it's like carnivorous clingfilm, cellophaning itself all over your head and dissolving what's wrapped up. But a novel about killer clingfilm?

So over the years they've built up an army of malformed but powerful wolfy mutants. Who have been fattened up on the survivors they found. These survivors have been fed, over the years, on underground roots in deep level farms. And also on their own old and sick. The wolfy boys are sent in to scarf down as much as they want, but when they're sated, they've been ordered to bring some hot, living meat back to the dinner table. The only chance the Londoners have is in the fact that they're blind. Lots of creeping around in the dark. A room filled with ravenous wolves ranging heads back and to, trying to pick up the scent of the people hiding, keeping still. Some escape by the skin of the teeth. Some moments when a person cries out, or twitches and it's enough for the wolves to detect them. Bloodbath. But Jane is eventually captured, along with the woman he's shackled up with. Herded off to the suburbs and the caves. And a girl who spends a fortune on dental floss who's still got the hots for him after ten years. From there on in, it's back to Jane's intense fight to survive, a mirror of the lonely battle he waged right at the start of the book. It's back to just him. One man on his own.

So there's the teeth motif. A new angle on the underground. We have our developed animals. There are monsters. Some really unpleasant stuff going on, with walk-in human pantries and lines of manacled fresh meat being shuffled back to the biggest subterranean fast-food restaurant on the planet. It's epic in scope, but also personal - that long first half where Jane must keep going in order to try to find his wife and child, only to get to London and discover it's pointless, but he's got his second chance and starts to build again, and then a horde of slithering, bent-spined jaws on legs turn up with a dinner order.

(ii) Formal outline, delivered to Adam Nevill at Virgin Books, May 13, 2008

ONE

Conrad Williams

***SATELLITE PICKS UP ECHO OF THE DEATH OF A STAR, 4.5BN YEARS
AGO***

September 4, 2009, NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Md.

The Swift satellite, NASA's Burst Alert Telescope, has detected a gamma ray burst that has broken all records for distant visible objects in the night sky.

One of Swift's project leaders, Damien Medlock, explains. 'Gamma ray bursts occur when a massive star runs out of nuclear juice,' he said. 'The core of these enormous objects give way, forming black holes but, at the same time, emitting bursts of energy that hurtle through space at a speed approaching that of light. These bursts heat the gas that exist in nearby interstellar clouds, creating incredibly bright haloes which can be visible to the human eye. This burst is the biggest we've seen. We calculate that it must have occurred around 4.5 billion years ago, or, to put it another way, at about the same time that our planet came into existence.'

The burst, officially known as GRB 090904A, was located in the Lamia nebula. The brilliant afterglow has been measured at between 2 and 3 in the logarithmic magnitude scale.

Although is too early to say why GRB 090904A was so bright, scientists have already begun to speculate. One of Swift's science team members, Lewis Cahill of Boston University in Commonwealth Avenue, MA, suggests that it might be because its energy was concentrated in a thin jet that happened to be pointed towards the Earth. 'At some point in the future, we're going to be unlucky enough to be in the path of something even closer. And when that happens, it's goodbye us.'

Part One: PRESS/PULSE

RICHARD JANE is a saturation diver on an oil rig 150 miles off the north-east coast of Scotland when a gamma ray blast hits Earth. Everybody on the platform is killed. He manages to pilot a lifeboat back to the mainland through high winds, acid rain and a seemingly endless blockade of dead sea life.

He fetches up on the shore near Berwick-Upon-Tweed, some 100 miles south of Aberdeen, where his company is based. The sand on the beach has been superheated into a span of twisted black glass. He finds countless bodies piled up in the streets, terribly burnt, having apparently haemorrhaged to death. There are no survivors that he can see. Everything is covered in a strange, shimmering dust that glitters in spectral colours. Even the sea is coated with a film of iridescence. The sky is a ceaseless swirl of chemical colours.

All of the cars are burnt out. All of the boats in the harbour have been reduced to splinters. The landscape is littered with corpses: human and animal, pulverised by some monumental event. What was green is now a wasteland of brown: shattered, cauterised. Everything fresh has been fouled. None of the bodies cry out for help. Everything is still. It becomes clear, very quickly, that he has survived an Extinction Level Event.

With nowhere else to turn, Jane decides to make his way south to London, 300 miles away, where he hopes to find his estranged wife, CHERRY and five-year-old son STANLEY. There is no other way: Jane must walk. He travels by coastal paths, along buckled rail tracks, the great black

ribbons of motorways, melted and reformed into weird rollercoasters. He eats wherever he finds food: canned goods in service stations and supermarkets, bottled water.

Jane is haunted at night by the sounds of screeching. He believes he is falling prey to radiation poisoning. He starts to see things: figures flitting in the shadows. He hears weird noises and tremors moving through the ground under his feet. He wakes up one morning to find that someone has left him a sign, an owl's skull, boiled clean and placed on the corner of his bed. A scorpion dance ensues; Jane tries to draw the other out so that he might find out more about who has survived and what it was they managed to avoid. But they do not reveal themselves fully. A strange relationship begins between Jane and a young girl, the leaver of these gifts. She seems to be wearing feathers. She seems to have tiny, polished bones stitched into the flesh of her face. Her nails are shaped into talons. There are glimpses and rumours and murmurs. He leaves a gift for her – a brightly-coloured karabiner from his rucksack – which is gone by the next morning. He feels he is making a connection with her.

He stumbles upon some survivors. A man and a woman, bloodied and filthy, wandering dazed across land outside a lead mine in Allendale, Northumberland. After Jane and the couple overcome their excitement about – and suspicious of – each other, the man, CHRIS OAKES, tells Jane that they are Australians, travelling around the UK, and had been exploring tunnels around the mine with his girlfriend, JESSICA HYNES, when an enormous blast of heat caused them to stop in their tracks. They had hurried out, fearing that the tunnel was on fire, or there had been an explosion in the mine.

They swap intelligence: precious little, although Jane, fearing that radiation is destroying his mind, does not tell the couple of the signs he has witnessed. The couple agree to accompany Jane south, having found nobody alive in the nearby villages.

Jane awakes from uneasy sleep in the night to find the couple have disappeared. He comes upon them – or what remains of them – at dawn. They have been skinned, their shells hang over barbed wire fences, fluttering in the wind. Now Jane fears that the girl must belong to a cannibalistic tribe, but can't understand why he has not been killed yet. Another thing he can't understand is why the number of bodies on the road are lessening, the further he travels. None of the bodies outside he has seen so far have decayed, yet the ones indoors have all begun to putrefy. Perhaps the dead were mummified by the intense heat... Some of them writhe, no doubt being consumed within by rats or maggots. But something is not right and it gnaws constantly at him. Something he has missed. Something he must work out, fast.

The girl and her people are incapable of speech, unable, or unwilling to communicate with him. Sometimes they travel behind him as faithfully as well-loved dogs. Sometimes they disappear for days at a time. But they always seek him out, noses as keen as seasoned trackers. His relationship with the girl develops, despite her barbaric crimes: there is almost tenderness; there is almost love. She takes to wearing a red silk scarf across her mouth. She leaves him cryptic messages. A picture of a boy and a man holding hands framed by another hand with six fingers.

Jane reaches the capital and plunges into the tube network. Here he comes across more survivors. A few here to begin with, but as he gravitates towards the centre of the city, and the deep Northern Line, the abandoned stations, secret bunkers and lift shafts, he finds them in their hundreds.

The first part closes with epiphanies. The bodies he believed had been devoured by rats have been consumed by something else, something delivered by the cosmic storm that accompanied the gamma ray burst. The dust he saw on the bodies was a preservative to keep the meat fresh. What eats it is unable to digest skin. He understands that it is this unknown creature that has been taking his survivors, not the girl and her people. And then Jane realises that he has not been killed because he has been unwittingly leading his pursuers to a place where there are more survivors. London's underground system is the biggest pantry in the UK.

Part Two: LAZARUS TAXON

TEN YEARS LATER...

London is a warzone.

The ozone layer has stabilised, although global temperatures have soared. Secret gardens where people desperately try to grow food are oases in a city ravaged by disease; the skeletons of six million dead Londoners still litter the streets, mummified, partially consumed. Dogs and rats have multiplied and are getting braver now the carrion has disappeared. The Skinners, as they have come to be known, are creatures born of interstellar seed, drifting dormant for billennia, waiting for the right conditions. Skinners consume their prey from the inside, but are incapable of digesting epidermis. They grow to fill the cured, patchwork skins of their victims, like a hermit crab in a shell. They are not fast, but there are many of them, and they work as a pack to bring down their victims. Now they are marauding through the capital trying to find survivors. Male survivors are food. The females and children are taken away for slavery and reproduction.

Jane is part of a resistance unit, dodging the patrols. He is trying to knit together this fractured community and spread the word of a safe place, a secret man-made island known as The Raft off the coast near Dungeness that might or might not exist. Gossip has reached them. Travellers talking of submarines and safe passage. Faded broadcasts on home made crystal radios offer hope. He spends no more than one night in any one place across the capital. He is scarred from near misses with Skinners, and fights with rival factions. Dog bites. Gunshot wounds. He dreams constantly of Stanley, and the girl with the red mask, who he has not seen since he left her behind on the outskirts of the city. He is racked with guilt at his unwitting betrayal of the survivors, and the discovery that Stanley did not survive the ELE.

Now it is time for an exodus. A concerted effort by those who have evaded the Skinners for a decade to escape London and seek a new life on The Raft. Jane is in charge of coordinating the migration, and must lead a dangerous mission to four hot spots across the capital where survivors are waiting for news and instructions. But he realises he is in a race against time for another reason. He believes he is dying. His teeth are beginning to fall out. But he finds it odd that there are no other symptoms of radiation sickness: no hair loss, no skin damage, no nausea. Despite fearing the worst, he keeps up his scrupulous routine: cleaning himself thoroughly at the end of every day. He ensures he has copious supplies of sunblock and that there are no tears in his clothing. He frequently replaces the air filter in his bicycle mask. The routine keeps his mind from the inevitability of his own death, or madness.

During the dash across London, Jane is shocked to see a woman wearing a red scarf across her face. He tries to track her down, much to the chagrin of his colleagues, but loses her in an abandoned factory in Vauxhall. He wonders if he was mistaken, but she leaves him the karabiner he once gave her, now chipped and rusted, and he realises she is the girl from ten years previously. She has also left him a warning, written in a tortuous hand. GO NOW.

He rejoins his friends and they complete their mission, but at dawn, when everyone is expected to mobilise, something unexpected occurs. Word filters through the spy network that the Skinners are under attack. The raptor worshippers Jane glimpsed on his way down to London have risen up and are laying waste to the city's captors. Under cover of this attack, the resistance move out, heading south to the coast. A climactic battle on the machine-strewn beaches of Dungeness sees the girl hauled off into the wilds by the Skinners and Jane's desperate attempt to rescue her, to succeed where he failed with his son.

The book ends with Jane realising that he and this forgotten breed are really no different. Both are mutating. Both are growing a third set of carnivorous teeth. He turns his back on the city and heads into the countryside, to an uncertain future. He notices the girl has six fingers on her left hand. He recognises the symbol she once left for him. A picture that represented protection: he cared for his little boy; she and her people will care for him.