

**Portland State University**  
**PDXScholar**

---

Urban Studies and Planning Faculty Publications  
and Presentations

Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and  
Planning

---

1-1-2006

## The Light on the Horizon: Imagining the Death of American Cities

Carl Abbott  
*Portland State University*

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: [http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp\\_fac](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp_fac)

 Part of the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

---

### Citation Details

Abbott, Carl, "The Light on the Horizon: Imagining the Death of American Cities" (2006). *Urban Studies and Planning Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 54.

[http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp\\_fac/54](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/usp_fac/54)

This Post-Print is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Urban Studies and Planning Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

**The Light on the Horizon:  
Imagining the Death of American Cities\***

Carl Abbott

School of Urban Studies and Planning

Portland State University

Portland, Oregon, USA

“The Light on the Horizon: Imagining the Death of American Cities,” *Journal of Urban History*, 32 (January 2006)

## Abstract

Cities in the United States have never known the direct effects of total war. Lacking this bitter experience, Americans have had to imagine the impacts of catastrophic warfare on their urban centers. This paper examines fictional depictions of future warfare as it has been imagined to affect U.S. cities, particularly since 1945. It draws on films, short stories, and novels from the “thriller,” “future war,” and science fiction genres to explore common assumptions and underlying attitudes about cities and city life. It finds that cities are conspicuous by their absence from such stories of future war and its impacts. Cities most often disappear offstage in a burst of light on the horizon, allowing the plot to follow the survivors in small towns and rural settings. This pattern is similar in depictions of the immediate days after the atomic bombing (or the arrival of a surrogate disaster such as a stray meteor or a plague) and in stories set in a deep future decades or centuries after the Big Blowup. Indeed, cities are often depicted dangerous even in their death throes and after, supporting the conclusion that these narratives express the strong fear of cities and preference for middle landscapes that has long marked American culture. Some of the key texts include Philip Wylie, Tomorrow; Pat Frank, Alas, Babylon; Stephen King, The Stand; Walter Miller, Jr., A Canticle for Leibowitz; Leigh Brackett, The Long Tomorrow; Harlan Ellison, “A Boy and His Dog;” and the movies “Testament” and “The Day After.”

**The Light on the Horizon:  
Imagining the Death of American Cities\***

Americans have to *imagine* it. We are a nation with no direct experience of the devastation that modern warfare can wreak on cities. The British incendiary raid on Washington, DC in 1814—the closest that the independent United States has come to invasion, occupation, and destruction of a city by a foreign power—is scarcely noticeable in such company as the capture of Nanking or the siege of Leningrad. The experience of the Civil War is no more helpful, for the fires that burned parts of occupied Atlanta, Columbia, and Richmond were orders of magnitude less fearsome than those in firebombed Hamburg or Tokyo. No battle has ever raged for months through the streets and factories of Pittsburgh as it did through Stalingrad. No army of millions has rolled into Chicago like the Soviets into Berlin. Nuclear weapons detonated directly over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the closest that nuclear explosions have come to an American city are carefully monitored tests seventy-five miles from Las Vegas.

With this thankfully thin history to describe and analyze, Americans have only been able to *imagine* their cities as battlegrounds and killing fields.

This examines fiction, both in literature and on film, where Americans have tried to think about the consequences of total war on their nation and cities. Stories, novels, and screenplays, of course, are only one of the forms in which we can think about the consequences of unconditional war. Military planners, civil defense officials, and scientists project war-related scenarios of attack and counterattack. Social scientists and journalists use such projections for their own purposes—to explore the political limits of nuclear war, for example, or to warn of its

folly.<sup>1</sup> In turn, writers of fiction can utilize these analyses as the “factual” basis for their own work. I focus on these latter writers for convenience, as a way to define a specific question within a larger topic, but also because fiction offers the freest scope for the imagination and the greatest opportunities for unvoiced assumptions to emerge from careful reading.

The discussion draws on the work of a number of scholars who have done much of the hard work of describing and categorizing the fictions of future war and apocalypse. The essential starting place is I. E. Clarke, Voices Prophesying War, which chronicles and analyses the development of “future war” stories as a distinct fictional type from the eighteenth century to contemporary science fiction. Clarke’s European orientation is supplemented by Bruce Franklin, War Stars: The Superweapon in the American Imagination, which explores American versions of future war over the course of a century and a half and provides a context for the fascination of some leaders with “Star Wars” space weapons. Other scholars have looked more specifically at fictional reactions to atomic weapons and the encompassing Cold War. Paul Briens, Nuclear Holocaust: Atomic War in Fiction is a careful summary and description of major and minor works and themes. Paul Boyer placed early post-atomic writing in the context of American culture in By the Bomb’s Early Light. More recently, British scholar David Seed has critically analyzed nuclear disaster stories along with fictional treatments of other aspects of the Cold War in American Science Fiction and the Cold War, now probably the best starting point along with Clarke. All of these works share interest in the ways in which changing alignments of nations and new technologies of destruction are incorporated into fiction wars.<sup>2</sup>

Warren Wagar and David Ketterer have approached some of the same works and writers with a different question. They are less concerned about mapping catastrophe fiction against political, social, and technological change than with posing big questions of culture and philosophy. Wagar’s Terminal Visions explores western eschatological thought through many centuries, incorporating analysis of future war fiction and science fiction in this larger frame of

intellectual history. As a scholar of literature, Ketterer has examined science fiction as a form of apocalyptic narrative, arguing that the essence of science fiction is to portray the undermining of old systems, assumptions, and worlds and the creation of new systems or worlds in their place. His particular interest is the transformative character and results of the big change rather than the mechanisms (war, alien contact, extraterrestrial migration) that bring it about.<sup>3</sup>

What I hope to add to these studies is attention to place as well as time. The literature of disaster and apocalypse is inherently structured by the arrow of time—the contrasts of before and after, cataclysm and rebirth. Within this inclusive framework, my concern is the role that cities play in American depictions of apocalyptic warfare. How have we imagined cities as the great war looms? Where are cities in the struggle for survival? Do cities help or hinder as remnant communities claw back to civilization? The essay makes no claims to completeness, for there are hundreds and hundreds of post-holocaust stories, novels, and movies, but it does try to examine influential examples and to identify dominant themes and approaches.<sup>4</sup>

In these imagined futures, cities are most conspicuous by their absence. American writers are much more interested in envisioning the impacts of total war on small towns and rural enclaves than on cities. They prefer to extrapolate a postwar world of empty spaces and tribal communities to a future of reconstructed cities. When cities do appear in post-apocalyptic fictions, they are dangerous and deadly far more often than desirable, bearing the burden of old times rather than the hopes of the future.

One reason for this treatment is a basic problem of narrative structure. If nuclear war is likely to destroy cities, it will also destroy any characters living in those cities and thus short-circuit the story. After the bomb, there won't be any city people to write about, only the refugees and the country people beyond the circles of death. Since Virgil wrote the story of Aeneas,

fictions about the effects of total war have often been tales of survivors—their ways of coping, their wanderings, their efforts to start anew.

The second reason for writing *around* cities rather than about them is the deeply embedded American preference for the middle landscape.<sup>5</sup> For more than two centuries, American culture has emphasized the value of non-urban people and places, of yeoman farmers, frontiersmen, and country towns. Even today, when 80 percent of Americans dwell in metropolitan regions, opinion polls show that we picture the small town as the most attractive place to live. American thinkers from Ralph Waldo Emerson to the present have recognized the economic and intellectual benefits of cities, but most of their fellow citizens would prefer to enjoy those benefits while living on a rural farmette or along a small town's leafy Elm Street. Novelists and film makers can tap these feelings (which, of course, may be their own) by setting postwar stories outside the city: in suburbs beyond the blast zone, in rural enclaves, in desert hideaways, in the sheltering forest or across the broad prairies.

Because my interest is to surface shared assumptions about the role of cities the American past and future, I limit the discussion that follows, with small exceptions, to American writers and film makers who have addressed the possibility of catastrophic destruction of their own—American—cities. In addition, I center my attention on the decades since 1945 as the first era in which Americans have truly feared the devastation of total war. The next section provides a short background on versions of future war from the dreadnought decades when the anticipated threats were naval bombardment and invasion. There follow sections about initial efforts to incorporate atomic weapons into fiction, about stories of short-term survival, about the use of substitute disasters as stand-ins for H-bombs, and about stories set decades and centuries after the big blow-up.

## **Ancestral Voices.**

We can cover the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries quickly. From the 1870s through the 1920s, Americans followed the trans-Atlantic lead when they considered the death of cities. The establishment of the German Empire through an unsettling succession of quick wars between 1864 and 1871 triggered a spate of imaginary war stories in which Europeans tried to rethink the dynamics of the Great Power system. The great popularity of George Tomkyns Chesney's The Battle of Dorking (1871), describing a German assault on England, introduced dozens of imagined war scenarios. Germany, France, Britain, and the other nations of the unstable European alliance system attacked each other's fleets, marched on each other's cities, and defended themselves in short, heroic contests—all between the covers of books and magazines.

Americans in these years were imitators who produced relatively few books about future wars, in part because they had trouble figuring out plausible enemies. Park Benjamin's story "The End of New York" (1881), which pictured a Spanish bombardment of New York and American rescue by the Chilean navy, was scarcely credible, but Spain was back again in 1897 in J. H. Palmer's The Invasion of New York: Or, How Hawaii was Annexed. Here Japan attacks San Francisco while a Spanish armada assaults New York, but the tide turns when shore defenses destroy the Spaniards and the American Pacific fleet crushes the Japanese, takes the battle to the Home Islands, and assures American annexation of Hawai'i. Given a history of warfare and a century of diplomatic tension, a threatening and jealous Britain was a bit more likely. In Samuel R. Reed, The War of 1886, Between the United States and Britain (1882) and Henry Grattan Donnelly, The Stricken Nation (1890), the British fleet wallops New York and other eastern cities. Samuel Barton's The Battle of the Swash and the Capture of Canada (1888) looks back from the supposed vantage of 1930. The perfidious British assail New York from the sea, reducing lower Manhattan to rubble and collapsing the proud new Brooklyn Bridge into the East River . . . but then a swarm of secret torpedo boats sink the British fleet, Britain cedes Canada and Jamaica to the U.S., and Russia seizes India from the weakened empire. Germany, as the rising



European power, might have been a logical choice for imagined enemy, but it was far removed from most Americans' concerns. It took outsider H. G. Wells in The War in the Air (1907) to posit a really nasty German air attack on New York, and Germany supplanted the UK as a favorite fictional foe only after the Rape of Belgium. Cleveland Moffat's The Conquest of America: A Romance of Disaster and Victory (1916) is a good wartime example with the standard elements: naval bombardment of coastal defenses, an airship that bombs the city of Baltimore, an invasion force that lands on Long Island, the hapless Brooklyn Bridge reduced to rubble, and secret aerial torpedoes to crush the German fleet (invented with the help of Thomas Edison).<sup>6</sup>

The threat of Asian hordes, a secondary worry for members of European state system, seemed more likely from North American shores. Yellow peril futures drew on the American interest in dominating the Pacific basin and played off deeply embedded anti-Asian prejudice. The subgenre started with Pierton W. Dooner, The Last Days of the Republic (1880), in which the enemy are hordes of Chinese laborers who have infiltrated the nation in order to rise up and wrest control from the white race. By the time Japan had won stunning victories over China (1894-95) and Russia (1904-05), that other island empire seemed more dangerous even than Britain. Homer Lea in The Valor of Ignorance (1909) offered a detailed scenario for Japanese conquest of Hawai'i, Seattle, Santa Monica, and other west coast cities, even suggesting where the invaders would place their guns in San Francisco Bay to command the Golden Gate and level San Francisco.<sup>7</sup> John Ulrich Giesy in, All for His Country (1915) has Mexico distracting the U.S. army, Japan bombing New York, and Japanese domestic servants rising up in California . . . but wait! a *double* superweapon consisting of aero-destroyers carrying magnetic bombs obliterates the Japanese fleet in Chesapeake Bay (Chesapeake Bay?!?) and forces surrender. By 1921, when Peter Kyne published Pride of Palomar, Mexicans were in good graces again; Bolsheviks in Siberia were now the distraction from the Japanese threat to California. A few years later, Buck Rogers started his adventures on the comic pages by fighting twenty-third century Asian

overlords.<sup>8</sup> Eighty-two years after Dooner's book, science fiction writer Philip K. Dick managed to invert the whole yellow peril myth (and Battle of Dorking genre) in one of the best of all alternative reality novels. In The Man in the High Castle (1962) he imagined a world after German and Japanese victory. World War II finally ended in 1947, its results inevitable after the British defeat at Cairo and the German capture of the Middle East. Now, in 1962, Germans control the eastern United States and Japan directs a puppet government for the Pacific Coast, with the Rocky Mountains states as a small, independent enclave. We see no ruined cities. The Germans apparently inflicted significant conventional damage on the Atlantic coast, but they have been energetically rebuilding New York and Baltimore and reconstructing the economy in a sort of Speer Plan for the defeated people, and ambitious young Americans are flocking to New York. San Francisco apparently fell without becoming a battlefield. It remains undamaged, while the culturally sensitive Japanese try to mitigate the worst impacts of German racism. They cherish the peacefulness that they have brought to the Pacific Coast ("completely different from-back there"). They treasure artifacts from prewar America like Colt revolvers and see a Mickey Mouse watch as "most authentic of dying old U.S. culture, a rare retained artifact carrying flavor of bygone halcyon day."

### **After the Bomb**

With the coming of atomic weapons, the situation changed. After all, it was *our* bomb, at least for the first few years. Americans were not only inventors who brought atomic weapons to the world, but also literary innovators who developed many of the tropes of post-atomic fiction. And after Nagasaki, war itself obviously had to be rethought. It had to be re-conceptualized by the professionals in war colleges and general staff offices. It also had to be re-imagined for popular consumption. From the 1870s to 1940, it had been European writers who tried to envision the devastating impacts of new technologies such as airships, airplanes, and poison gas. After 1940, things changed. The United States assumed leadership in the development of military

technologies such as radar and nuclear weapons during World War II, and U.S. writers now felt the compulsion to imagine the effects of the new technologies of mass destruction.

Editors of mass circulation magazines made sure to cover each round of atomic tests in Nevada and the Pacific, and they introduced their readers to “nonfiction” scenarios of nuclear war. The specifics were new, but the genre was familiar from the imagined invasions and fleet engagements of earlier decades. In November 19, 1945, Life magazine ran a nine-page spread on “The 36-Hour War.” Illustrations and text summarized the latest future-war thinking from the Pentagon, including intercontinental ballistic missiles and anti-missile defenses that hold U.S. losses to only thirteen cities and 40 million people. Colliers, one of Life’s major competitors, published its summary of “The War We Do Not Want: Principal Events of World War III” on October 27, 1951. The war begins with Russian intervention in Yugoslavia, proceeds with atomic bombing of Detroit, New York, and Washington, and ends as UN tank armies push eastward through Poland and Ukraine to achieve the success that eluded Hitler.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned earlier, the continuing efforts to develop realistic projections of nuclear wars and terrorism by military planners, civil defense authorities, and think tanks have provided background for fictional portrayals. At the same time, however, the literary genre of post-disaster fiction has taken on a life of its own with later novelists and screenwriters framing their stories as extensions and reactions to earlier fiction.

Writers of fiction rather than forecasts have faced a greater problem, however. The atomic age presents a huge challenge when you’re writing stories and novels about war and cities. If nuclear weapons can destroy an entire metropolis in an instant, there’s no *story*. When everyone perishes in a flash of nuclear energy, their deaths abruptly cancel opportunities for plot complications, character development, and sympathetic identification of readers with hero and heroine. Nor can the outcome of the story emerge, in proper Aristotlean fashion, from the strengths and weaknesses of the protagonists themselves. A novelist or scriptwriter can lead up to

the crack of doom with the interlocking stories of ordinary citizens, but if she's writing about ground zero, she can't finish off the story with the standard adventure fiction technique of watching the same people cope with the aftermath. For example, the film Miracle Mile (1988) asks what an ordinary resident of Los Angeles might do if he gets a tip, via an intercepted phone call, that nuclear war is scheduled to break out in 70 minutes. Well, he'd try to find the girl of his dreams whom he met only that day, struggle to survive rising lawlessness and panic, hope that the phone call was a hoax, and sink into the La Brea tar pits in his lover's arms as the bomb explodes.

It is no surprise that few novelists and screen writers have taken up the challenge of actually writing about The Day itself from the perspective of ground zero. By and large, depiction of the immediate effects of atomic attack was left to civil defense pamphlets and news reports about weapons tests. In addition to the problem of sustaining a storyline in which the characters must, realistically, be eliminated suddenly and simultaneously, it also was difficult for any fiction writer to match John Hersey's harrowing factual reporting in Hiroshima (1946).<sup>10</sup> One partial exception was Philip Wylie, Tomorrow (1954), a thinly plotted but quick moving novel that described the impact of a 100-kiloton fission bomb on the twin Middle Western cities of River City and Green Prairie. The book is 268 pages of lead-up to the moment of detonation, 20 pages vividly detailing the effects of heat and blast, 60 pages describing the secondary firestorm, radiation, mob panic, rescue operations, and the slow or faster deaths of the seriously injured, and finally 25 pages showing survivors picking up the pieces two years later. Like most disaster fictions, it introduces a dozen or so characters, follows their quotidian lives up to the moment that the "plutonium fist" strikes the city, and then describes their death or traces their survival. Another partial exception is Whitley Strieber and James Kunetka, Warday, and the Journey Onwards (1984), which posits a U.S. five years after a limited nuclear exchange. The book takes the form of a documentary report of a journey across North America that inventories the destruction and as well as recovery efforts.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the options for fictionalizing nuclear conflict move away from the actual face of war. One possibility is to write about political intrigue, concentrating on the tensions and decisions leading up to war, as in the novels Fail Safe (1962) and Seven Days in May (1962).<sup>12</sup> The reader is placed in presidential offices, command posts, Air Force ready rooms, and underground bunkers, not down in the streets with ordinary citizens. For Americans, the fiction became almost too real with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and then nearly unupportable after the bitter satire of Dr. Strangelove (1963).

A second option draws on the conventions of suspense fiction. Cities can be background actors in find-the-bomb-before-its-too-late stories. The film Port of Hell (1955) focused on intrepid security staff who have only twelve hours to prevent a smuggled Chinese bomb from exploding on a freighter in Los Angeles harbor. Sean Connery and Roger Moore have saved the world from nuclear blackmail quite a few times. The tall and lovely Nicole Kidman spends some frantic moments in midtown Manhattan in The Peacemaker (1997), playing a physicist who helps track down a suicide bomber who plans to destroy the United Nations with a nuclear warhead stolen from Russia. New York traffic and sidewalk crowds to add to the tension. However, the fact that the bomb is atomic rather than conventional does not change the dramatic structure of the story itself. The contests of wit, courage, and quick action that drive suspense fiction are the same whether the threat to be averted is blackmail with a stolen nuclear weapon, the planned assassination of Charles De Gaulle, a bomb planted in a city bus, bio-terrorism, or any other source of danger.<sup>13</sup>

A third and most popular approach to fictionalizing nuclear war is to write post-war stories about survivors. These stories can begin with the run-up to war, but the characters have to be physically distant from ground zero to outlast the seconds of destruction and come through into a postwar world where they can *do* things—interesting, challenging, heroic, painful, and

sometimes clever things. They can be craven or brave, self-serving or self-sacrificing; they can reveal the sinful nature of human beings or their inherent goodness. These are, in broad terms, apocalyptic stories of ends and beginnings. Like the last book of the Bible, they contain both the destruction of an old order and the creation of new things.<sup>14</sup>

The following sections look at these post-war stories in more detail. Some are stories of the immediate days and months after the blowup, others talk about atomic war by substituting “natural” disasters, and still others take a longer view that looks generations and centuries into the future.<sup>15</sup> In each case, I’m keeping watch for the depiction and role of cities in the aftertime.

### **The Days After**

Even in stories set in the immediate aftermath of nuclear exchange, the targeted cities are off stage. They appear not as complex interweavings of people, institutions, and physical structures, but as heartstopping bursts of light on the horizon. Folks in an outlying community or district see the flash and hear their radios go dead, but they are too far away to be immediately impacted. As survivors, they have to pick up the pieces, often in the knowledge that their coping may prove to be in vain. Cities are, in effect, the villains. They share partial blame for the nuclear war itself by their very existence as tempting targets. In the days and weeks after the attack, they continue to be the source of danger from dispersing radiation, creeping epidemics, and hungry, half-mad refugees.<sup>16</sup>

In 1950, when nuclear weapons were still fission bombs that devastated only a few dozen square miles, Judith Merrill’s Shadow on the Hearth focused on a suburban Westchester County housewife and her daughters as they try to deal with the aftermath of an attack on New York City. As the mother waits for her husband to make it home, she is sometimes timid and irrational, but she slowly gains confidence and recognizes the strength of her older teenage daughter. The novel deals realistically with issues of food, water, and fallout. It also makes the neighborhood a

political battleground between authoritarian civil defense workers and postwar progressives represented by the high school science teacher and local doctor. The ending is reasonably upbeat.<sup>17</sup>

Ray Bradbury's short story "There Will Come Soft Rains," also appearing in 1950, was an elegy rather than a survival story. The time is 2026, the setting an automated house in suburban California, the only one left (inexplicably) standing after the nuclear war. Off in the distance are the glowing ruins of the city. Here, however, the house still functions. The household robots and automated systems cook breakfast, wash the dishes, dispose of uneaten food, sweep the carpets, water the garden, set out cocktails, and control the lights. The residents of the house are remembered by their menu preferences, their taste in poetry, and the west facade of the house, which was "black, save for five places. Here the silhouette in paint of a man mowing a lawn. Here, as in a photograph, a woman bent to pick flowers. Still further over, their images burned on wood in one titanic instant, a small boy, hands flung into the air higher up, the image of a thrown ball, and opposite him a girl, hand raised to catch a ball which never came down. The five spots of paint—the man, the woman, the children, the ball—remained. The rest was a thin charcoaled layer." The end comes when a crashing tree branch sparks a kitchen fire that consumes the house down to a single wall, from which the last automated voice repeats: "Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is . . . ." <sup>18</sup>

The development of fusion weapons in the mid-1950s, with hundreds of times the power of the first atomic bombs, along with increasing awareness of the dangers of radioactive fallout, forced the stories further away from cities. By 1959, Helen Clarkson (Helen McCloy) set The Last Day: A Novel of the Day After Tomorrow on the coast of Maine. Some of the survivors initially welcome a return to a simpler existence, but the author will have none of that. Children begin to succumb to radiation poisoning, then the rest of the townspeople. Vacationer Bill Corbett dies in the arms of his wife Lois, who a few days later lies down to die on the shore. With its

careful attention to the details of death at a distance, the novel is a sort of Physicians for Social Responsibility information tract in fictional form. With its tone of regret and resignation, it echoes the elegy of “Soft Rains.”<sup>19</sup>

In the same year, 1959, Pat Frank’s best-selling Alas, Babylon focused on a small town beyond the circle of blast and fire. In Fort Repose, deep in the Florida countryside, residents can see the flash from the nuclear bombing of Miami, Tampa, and Jacksonville but are saved from radioactive fallout by favorable winds. The bomb that obliterates Orlando also takes out the electric power supply: “Thus the lights went out, and in that moment civilization in Fort Repose retreated a hundred years.”<sup>20</sup> This is a Florida of 4 million people rather than today’s 17 million, with Walt Disney World yet unbuilt, leaving elbow room to regain some of the survival skills of nineteenth century farmers. Because they are still close to the land—fishermen, recreational hunters, farmers—the people of Fort Repose do a pretty good job of imitating their great grandparents. With strong leadership from former military officers, they organize a barter economy and fight off a relatively tame set of highwaymen who are actually crooks from Las Vegas (!) stranded in Florida. Civil society frays around the edges, but holds. After a year the survivors are reconnected with a fiercely damaged but victorious United States.

Meanwhile, cities have been the victims of their own excesses. The people of Fort Repose hear the list of destroyed cities: “The voice went on, ticking off Mobile and Birmingham, New Orleans and Lake Charles. It moved into Texas, obliterating Fort Worth and Dallas . . . and Abilene, Houston, and Corpus Christi. . . . The voice moved up to Oak Ridge, in Tennessee, and then spoke of Chicago, and everything around Chicago in northern Indiana, and crept up the western shore of Lake Michigan to Milwaukee, and Milwaukee’s suburbs. Inexorably, it uttered the names of Kansas City, Wichita, and Topeka.”<sup>21</sup> They are sorry about the deaths of tens of millions, often bitterly sorry, but they are also pleased that they have themselves remained true to rural America. They realize that the nation should never have become so centralized and



dependent on cities and the economic efficiencies that they offer, and that the postwar world may actually be a healthier place.

This is a theme picked up in the subgenre of “end time prophecy” and “rapture” novels that dramatize the beliefs of pre-millennialist Christian fundamentalism. A number of often popular novels since the 1960s have fictionalized Biblical Armageddon as it might arrive next week or next year. It turns out that cities, being particularly hospitable to the Anti-Christ, are likely to collapse into chaos before the very final end, giving more virtuous country folk one more lesson about the consequences of right and wrong choices.<sup>22</sup>

Alas, Babylon has an upbeat ending (as do rapture novels from their own peculiar point of view) but not the films The Day After or Testament. Both movies appeared in 1983, at the height of tension in the Second Cold War. Made for television and heavily publicized, The Day After had one of the largest U.S. viewing audiences to date, estimated at 100 million. It is set in Lawrence, Kansas, a pleasant university town that is literally at the center of the United. The movie starts with the local reactions to rapidly escalating international tension, shows American missiles surging skyward into the blue Kansas sky, zeroes in on the panic that suddenly grips the community, graphically depicts the destructive impact of two warheads hitting Kansas City in a four-minute sequence (the equivalent of the twenty pages in Tomorrow), traces unavailing efforts to cope with the disaster, and follows its characters into death by starvation and sickness.<sup>23</sup>

Testament is set in a northern California suburb of the San Francisco Bay metropolis. The movie opens with an emergency newscast that East Coast cities have been hit with nuclear weapons, followed quickly by a great flash from another, closer bomb. The situation is similar to that of Alas, Babylon, centering on an isolated community that is thrown on its own devices. No one knows how the war came out. No one knows if basic services will ever be restored. Again like Pat Frank’s novel, the story centers on a morally strong character who tries to maintain order

amid the fear of chaos. Housewife Carol Wetherly struggles valiantly to keep her family together and to fight off the growing disorder. But systems begin to break down—children stop going to school, adults quit showing up for work, canned food runs short. There is no successful recapture of frontier skills, no rescue by the U.S. Air Force—only radiation working its inexorable death.

### **Substitute bombs**

A problem of fusion bombs and their modern delivery systems, from a writer's point of view, is that they compress space and time in a truly post-modern way. The enemy's targeting decisions are unknowable to the victims, and therefore arbitrary. The nuclear warhead comes from nowhere we can see (from above via an ICBM) and arrives nearly instantly. When earlier writers imagined *pre*-nuclear wars, they could realistically take time for anticipation and preparations, detail the advance of the Germans or Martians, describe defensive efforts, retreats, the rallying of the defenders, and finally the secret superweapon or lowly microbe to set things right again. All of this fascinating military point and counterpoint disappears in a nuclear exchange, where the war is over in minutes.

If the thermonuclear warhead is translated into a natural catastrophe, however, there *is* room for a plot. The problem may be triggered by human error or folly, or it may simply happen. Disaster can build as slowly or rapidly as the author wishes. We therefore have all manner of earthquakes, ice ages, tidal waves and rising oceans, mutated ants and ravenous plants, plagues, superstorms, meteors, an itinerant planet that eats the moon and perturbs the tides, and monsters awakened from the deep by nuclear explosions. Plus we've had more than a century to worry about extraterrestrial invaders, from the War of the Worlds (1898) to recent special-effects films like Independence Day (1996). In every case, the story can follow the classic suspense-adventure plot. The threat appears, expands, overcomes initial efforts to fight back, may be fended off, reappears, overwhelms, destroys everyone or leaves a remnant to rebuild. If the threat is Godzilla, King of Monsters, it can even reappear in sequels.<sup>24</sup>

Although some of these depictions of deadly futures have emerged directly from worries about human impacts on the natural environment, it is clear that most of them are indeed surrogate war stories.<sup>25</sup> The doomsday story appeared long before atomic warfare. Warren Wagar has accumulated many early twentieth century examples of survivors clawing back toward civilization after earthquakes, encounters with watery nebulae, rampant epidemics, and the like. A notable American example is Jack London's 1912 novella *The Scarlet Plague*, in which a survivor in the year 2073 recounts how the plague of 2013 swept from city to city and city to countryside, killing eight billion and leaving remnant tribes to roam the ruins of San Francisco.<sup>26</sup> However, the possibility of atomic warfare gave new life to old tales about scarlet plagues and purple rain.<sup>27</sup> Simply compare a depiction of Manhattan as victim of a meteor, taken from Willy Ley's *The Conquest of Space* (1949), with visual renderings of the impact of atomic weapons—it's the same disaster, no matter its origins.<sup>28</sup>

If you hear that one of these disasters is coming, LEAVE TOWN! Cities are vulnerable. They're custom-made for spreading disease. Let the forces of social order and discipline weaken, and country folk will presumably go on behaving like solid citizens, but urbanites will turn into a mob. Ever since Thomas Jefferson was frightened by the Parisian turmoil of the French Revolution, Americans have seen an urban mob around every historical bend. With the New York draft riots and the Paris Commune looming just behind, social reformer Charles Loring Brace in the 1870s wrote about *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872). "Let but Law lift its hand from them for a season," he wrote ". . . and if the opportunity offered, we should see an explosion from this class which might leave this city in ashes and blood." Ignatius Donnelly in *Caesar's Column* (1890) imagined internal civil war between a corrupt oligarchy and brutalized workers, who rise up as the Brotherhood of Destruction and institute a reign of terror in New York (Caesar's column is a pyramid of skulls built by the mad rebel leader). Nathaniel West imagined the consumption of Los Angeles by fire and riot in *The Day of the Locust* (1939).<sup>29</sup>

Survival from plague, storm, and meteor is to be found outside the city in distant refuges with a vague—or not so vague—Hitlerian tinge. British writers tend to send their survivors to northern Scotland (where it is hard enough for sheep to survive, let alone soft city refugees). Americans like the open spaces of the West. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle in Lucifer's Hammer (1977), for example, posit a straying asteroid. After blast, tsunami, and fire have done their work, the story dissolves into a confrontation between well-prepared, thoughtful (and white) survivors who barricade themselves in the California mountains and a crazed horde of cannibals who have coalesced from the dregs of Los Angeles and Oakland. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, False Dawn (1978) follows two refugees from the disease-raddled towns of northern California to refuge in the Sierra Nevada south of Lake Tahoe.<sup>30</sup>

A more sophisticated treatment of city and refuge is found in The Stand (1978). In this very hefty 823-page horror-suspense novel, Stephen King sends a brave band of surviving Americans westward to do battle with evil. Accidental release of a continually mutating influenza from a biological warfare laboratory kills the vast majority of Americans. A small remnant come together from scattered points in the South and the Northeast (the escape from Manhattan through a Lincoln Tunnel clogged with corpse-filled cars is a deeply vivid scene). The adventurers (pilgrims, knights errant) work their way westward from Maine to a first rendezvous point at a Nebraska farm, and then to the middle landscape of Boulder, Colorado. Here they pause to work with thousands of other survivors to rebuild a Free Zone, reconstitute civil society, and get the electricity working. Like true pioneers, the people of the Free Zone have been tested and strengthened by their westward trek.

Beyond the oasis of recovery at the foot of the Rockies the powers of darkness are rearing their own empire from Idaho to Arizona to California. At the center of chaos is the devil incarnated as Randall Flagg. At home in the empty deserts of the Great Basin, he is “a tall man

with no age . . . [and] a face to make waterglasses shatter in the hands of tired truckstop waitresses . . . . He was known, well known, along the highways in hiding that are traveled by the poor and the mad, by the professional revolutionaries and by those who have been taught to hate so well that their hate shows on their faces . . . and they are unwelcome except by others like them.” Las Vegas, seemingly the most artificial of cities, is the capital of the new regime. For some of Flagg’s followers, it is simply the place where order can be restored and rigorously enforced. For the most fanatical, it is “Cibola, Fabled City, Seven-in-One.”<sup>31</sup>

The strongest of the Free Zone settlers take up the burden of traveling over the crest of the mountains and across the desert to confront physical evil with spiritual strength. The showdown comes in the heart of Vegas in front of the MGM Grand Hotel. In the end, the snake of evil devours itself when the most crazed of Flagg’s followers appears with a live atomic bomb that Flagg accidentally detonates. The handful of Boulderites who have confronted Flagg become a sacrifice as the entire city vanishes in blast and fire, leaving the people of Boulder free to set their own course—which involves hiving off new settlements before the town grows dangerously into a city again.

### **The Long Tomorrow**

In the long tomorrow, decades and centuries after the Flame Deluge, the great central valley of North America will nourish a horse culture of nomads, raiders, and empire-builders who blend the power of Genghis Khan with the fierce independence of plains Indians. Market agriculture will have revived in the river valleys, although not at a scale to support real cities. Guardians of knowledge will live quietly in the hills and deserts. And in the far distance will loom the dangerous, haunted shells of ancient cities.

Walter Miller, Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), one of the best loved works of science fiction, extrapolates a future North America in which Benedictine monks of Leibowitz

Abbey, following the example of the Blessed Martyr Isaac Leibowitz, preserve learning from before the Flame Deluge by booklegging, memorizing, and copying any surviving fragment of twentieth century writing. Many centuries into *that* future, the world that Saint Leibowitz tried to reconstitute through the preservation of learning has spawned nasty barbarian clans on the grassy plains, whose territory separates agricultural kingdoms such as the Empire of Denver, the Laredan Nation along the Rio Grande, and the Mississippi Republic. Along the Red River where Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma once met is the town of Texarkana. It supports an ambitious and wily ruler, but it is small and modest enough to be supplied by pack animals and built as a disorderly maze of streets from the rubble of a larger, ancient city.<sup>32</sup>

Leigh Brackett codifies the nonurban future in The Long Tomorrow (1955). Eighty years after the War, the United States has adopted a new constitutional amendment: “No city, no town, no community of more than one thousand people or two hundred buildings to the square mile shall be built or permitted to exist anywhere in the United States of America.” Technology has reverted to level of the early 1800s, although dottering grandmothers recall the wonders of the mid-twentieth century, to the disgust of their children who have had to make a new life in the constricted present. The surviving nation is a set of small farming settlements and trading towns linked by annual trading fairs and steamboats. It is a “wide and cityless land, the green, slow, comfortable agrarian land in which only a few old folk could remember the awesome cities that had dominated the world before the Destruction.” Now the traders bring stories of “the little shipping settlement and fishing hamlets along the Atlantic, the lumber camps of the Appalachians, these endless New Mennonite farm lands of the Midwest, the Southern hunters and hill farmers, the great rivers westward with their barges and boats, the plains beyond and the horsemen and ranches and herds of wild cattle.”<sup>33</sup>

Counterposed to the nomads and farmers are islands of survivors who try keep learning alive. In The Long Tomorrow, the people of Bartorstown tend a surviving research laboratory and

supercomputer that are concealed behind the facade of a Colorado mining town. Andre Norton in Starman's Son imagined a community of Starmen who tend the sparks of knowledge in mountain-locked Eyrie. The monks of the desert abbey in A Canticle for Leibowitz hide themselves away in the wilderness—probably somewhere in New Mexico—to preserve fragments of learning. Like bucolic Boulder, all of these places are versions of a middle landscape, a compromise that preserves the intellectual heritage of the cities without being in or of cities.

Indeed, somewhere *out there* is often a wildcard—long-ruined cities that may be sources of danger, troves of knowledge, or—most likely—some of each. The young protagonists in the low budget 1971 film Glen and Randa leave their rural enclave of survivors to search out “Metropolis,” which Glen knows from comic books. Their journey takes them past relics of the former world—a motel that they ransack for canned goods, the carcass of an automobile strangely deposited in a tree. Randa dies in childbirth but Glen carries on the search.

Glen may be happy that he doesn't reach Metropolis, for American writers imagine the cities of the various long tomorrows in ways that reflect our persistent American ambiguity about the merits of cities and city life. We have long know that cities are engines of prosperity as efficient centers of exchange. We also know that the juxtaposition of different people and activities nurtures creative thought—that ideas come out of Athens and not Boeotia, from Florence and not an Apennine village, from New York and Chicago rather than Gopher Prairie. Nevertheless, we fear cities as settings that corrupt youth, cater to sin, give birth to the mob, and undermine a political system designed for independent farmers. Throughout post-holocaust stories, cities play these contradictory roles: They are mythical places of knowledge and repositories of learning and valuable artifacts, but they are also dangerous. They may still be radioactive. They may be filled with mutants and monsters. Even their knowledge itself may be dangerous, an idea which goes as far back as Nathaniel Hawthorne's story “The New Adam and Eve.” Here God abruptly ends all human life and repopulates the world that is left with a new first

couple, who wander through the empty streets of Boston. They marvel over a church, prison, a court of justice, a mansion house, a bank, and finally “the rich library of Harvard University.” Eve this time persuades Adam to come away from this new Tree of Knowledge before he tastes of “perversions and sophistries, and false wisdom . . . the narrow truth . . . all the wrong principles and worse practice, the pernicious examples and mistaken rules of life . . . all the sad experience, which it took mankind so many ages to accumulate, and from which they never drew a moral for their future guidance.”<sup>34</sup>

Andre Norton’s Star Man’s Son: 2250 A.D. (1952) brings together these themes.<sup>35</sup> North America after nuclear holocaust is inhabited by scattered tribes. There are the proud, horse-mounted, nomadic Plainsmen, dark skinned farmers moving up from the south, and the Starmen whose mission is to explore abandoned places and add to knowledge. The latter are the descendants of technicians and scientists who had been preparing a voyage to the stars. Now they seek out scraps of info:

“Many times around the evening fires had the men of the Eyrie [the starmen] discussed the plains below and the strange world which had felt the force of the Great Blow-up and been turned into an alien, poisonous trap for any human not knowing its ways. Why, in the past twenty years even the Star Men had mapped only four cities, and one them was ‘blue’ and so forbidden.”<sup>36</sup>

Fors is the son of a starman and a plainswoman. Born a mutant, with white hair and night-sight, he is frozen out of chance to become a Starman himself. He therefore takes off on an adventure of exploration, with a semi-sentient wildcat as companion. He meets one of the southerners and has various adventures before proving himself and being accepted back into the clan. In the course of the adventure, he finds a city: “In the morning sun far ahead he saw battered towers rising into the sky. This was one of the cities, the great cities of huge sky-reaching towers!



. . . His city—all his. . . an untouched storehouse waiting to be looted for the benefit of the Eyrie. . . Libraries—those were what one was to look for—and shops, especially those which had stores of hardware or paper . . . Hospital supplies were best of all.”<sup>37</sup>

The city seems largely intact, perhaps the victim of disease after the nuclear war. It holds ruined buildings and a museum that has not yet been ransacked. But lurking in the shadows and cellars are the subhuman and cruel Beast Things. In one explanation, they are offspring of city dwellers and invading soldiers caught in radiation, creating children so mutated as no longer to be human. In another, they are the result of failed experiments to combine human and rat genetic material. “Whichever theory was true, the Beast Things, though they aroused revulsion and instinctive hatred among the humans, were also victims of the Old Ones’ tragic mistake, as shattered in their lives as the cities had been.”<sup>38</sup> Conflict escalates when the Beast Things stir out of the cities where they have long lived and harry the people on the plains. The Plainsmen and Southerners begin to war against each other, but Fors helps them unite against Beast Things, wins acceptance among his own people, and begins to plan his next exploring trip to urban outfitters.

Even when physically normal, humans who have reinhabited cities are likely to be impure of heart. They are susceptible to recatching the urban disease of domination and empire building and doing the wrong things all over again. Kim Stanley Robinson in The Wild Shore (1984) extrapolates a future in the neutron bombing of the United States has left a scattering of farming and fishing villages along the southern California coast, connected to near neighbors by occasional trading fairs. Trouble comes up the coast from San Diego, where a petty dictator has consolidated power in the ruins of Mission Valley. His agents offer a tempting deal—connection to a larger political unit by a railroad that is slowly pushing northward in return for a modicum of taxes. When the villagers of San Onofre travel south to see for themselves, they find a society that is already corrupted by power and embarked on the seductive path of industrialization. There are

not yet dark, satanic mills on the San Diego mesas, but the villagers can see them coming and want nothing to do with the emerging empire.<sup>39</sup>

Aldous Huxley—we'll make him an honorary American from his many sun-drenched decades in California—also sees the seeds of re-corruption in the post war city. The bitter satire of Ape and Essence (1948) is set in the year 2108, after bombs and plague have devastated the northern hemisphere. Explorers from New Zealand discover a remnant Los Angeles whose inhabitants worship Belial, the Lord of the Flies. The degraded AngeleZos worship their false gods in the great spaces of the Los Angeles Coliseum (built for the 1936 Olympic Games) and sacrifice mutant children. Huxley is engaged in a romantic philosophical critique of the idea of progress, not in careful extrapolation of a possible future, but it is telling that he imagines the city where he was living so comfortably as the rallying point of evil.<sup>40</sup>

And then there is underground Topeka in Harlan Ellison's 1969 story "A Boy and His Dog." In 2034, after perhaps several wars, the surface of North America is the province of roverpacks, gangs of violent young men who live and loot among the ruins. Below the surface are "downunders," entire underground cities that have reproduced a nostalgic image of the early twentieth century town as understood by "Southern Baptists, Fundamentalists, lawanorder goofs, real middle-class squares." Vic is a solo who roams the surface with his sentient dog Blood. Quilla June Holmes is a luscious young woman from deep Topeka who has been sent to the surface to lure a potent male below to improve the gene pool. She succeeds, leading Vic to her city of 22,680 dull, middle class Americans. Topeka is built in a buried tube 20 miles across, but it looks just like a small town with "neat little houses, and curvy little streets, and trimmed lawns, and a business section and everything else a Topeka would have. Except a sun, except birds, except clouds, except rain, except snow . . . except freedom." In quick sequence, Vic recognizes the iron hand of social regimentation, realizes his mistake, escapes from the ruthless city with Quilla June, and finds an injured and hungry Blood waiting for him as the top of the entrance

shaft. When Quilla demands that Vic choose between caring for a woman and caring for Blood, he decides that what's needed is fresh meat: after all, "a boy loves his dog."<sup>41</sup>

### **Dying Offstage**

"A boy loves his dog" is a great tag line for a sick story. It is also a good metaphor for the way that cities figure in American catastrophe fiction. Americans still believe that they are the young, self-reliant people of an adolescent nation. For young America, freedom to roam the wide continent, even with all its dangers, is preferable to anything associated with the constricted life of a carefully preserved Topeka. In the American calendar of horrors, getting stuck in New York City is especially fearsome—remember The Stand while you screen videos of Soylent Green (1973), where 40 million people crowd into Manhattan, and Escape from New York (1981), where the city is an anarchic prison colony. We love the wild and the half-wild more than the settled community, the frontiersman more than the New England town builder, Blood more than Quilla June.

By and large, cities die off the stage, and news of their passing comes from afar. In near-future stories a terrible light in the sky announces the end of Boston or San Francisco or Tampa. When an author posits a limited nuclear war with survivors, little loving care is lavished on urban reconstruction. The most detailed examples, such as Philip Wylie's Tomorrow, describe old crowded cities rebuilt for the better in full suburban style as long low buildings in seas of roads, grass, and parking.<sup>42</sup> The new Green Prairie won't really be a nasty city, but something quieter, milder, and nicer.

These are not stories that revel in the aesthetics of destruction.<sup>43</sup> Instead, by worrying and working through the mechanics of survival, they offer a halfway escape from confronting the full horrors of mass death.

We can also read these fictions as part of a larger flight from modernity and its cultural pressures. Taking Lewis Mumford's indictment of necropolis and his prescription for population dispersal quite literally, most writers who imagine the world after the big blowup look to the small town and the open land for the promise of a different and better future. As Martha Barter has pointed out, the destruction of cities in some cases is presented as an ultimate benefit that opens opportunities for renewal and improvement by returning society its rural roots.<sup>44</sup> Cities were the places that germinated the seeds of their own destruction. Their wealth made them targets that called down death on the whole world. Their alienated residents were unable to help themselves, falling quickly into senseless mobs. And cities may plant the same seeds again if they reappear in the distant future. Walter Miller, Jr. made this connection explicit in A Canticle for Leibowitz, where the North America a millennium after the Fire Deluge regrows cities, recreates weapons of mass destruction, and launches them again for the devastation of the world. If Aeneas had been an American, he would have stayed the hell out of Carthage, holed up in some mountain valley in the Alps, and kept his distance from Rome.<sup>45</sup>

So we're back to the middle landscape and the desire to protect knowledge without the apparatus of urban institutions. The Starmen plunder urban ruins for medicines and books, but they keep their settlement as a tribal refuge that reminds us of a summer resort colony in the mountains. The Bartorstown scientists know that they have to keep their town small, not only for secrecy but because it's the better thing to do. Of all the books that have been mentioned above, Alas, Babylon probably has had the largest readership. The most watched of the movies has been The Day After. Both place smaller towns front and center. If we perish in the aftermath, we believe that places like Lawrence, Kansas will hold on to civilized values the longest. If we hope to survive, it had better be in a place like Fort Repose where the bonds of community can still function and one small public library contains all the practical knowledge that's needed.

\* This article originated as a paper for a conference on “Metropolitan Catastrophes: Scenarios, Experiences, and Commemorations in the Era of Total War” held at the Centre for Metropolitan History, Institute of Historical Research, University of London, July, 2004. I thank the conference organizers Stefan Goebel and Derek Keene for the opportunity to develop and present my ideas.

Notes

---

1. For example, Herman Kahn, On Thermonuclear War (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960) and Thinking about the Unthinkable (New York: Horizon Press, 1962) compared to Jonathan Schell, The Fate of the Earth (New York: Knopf, 1982).

2 I. E. Clarke, Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763-3749 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992);; H. Bruce Franklin, War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Paul Brians, Nuclear Holocaust: Atomic War in Fiction (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1987) [an updated version is on line at [www.wsu.edu/~brians/nuclear](http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/nuclear)] ; Paul Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light (New York: Pantheon, 1985); David Seed, American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999). Also see Martha Bartter, The Way to Ground Zero: The Atomic Bomb in American Science Fiction (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988) and Mick Broderick, Nuclear Movies: A Critical Analysis and Filmography of International Feature Length Films Dealing with Experimentation, Aliens, Terrorism, Holocaust and Other Disaster Scenarios, 1914-1989 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co, 1991).

---

3. W. Warren Wagar, Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); David Ketterer, New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974).

4. The novels, films, and stories that I have selected mostly fall into three categories. Some are important as early responses to the possibility of nuclear war (e.g., books by Wylie, Merrill, and Clarkson). Others have been very widely read or viewed (e.g., books by Frank and King, movies like “Testament” and “The Day After”). A third category are well-wrought stories and novels that have been particularly influential within the science fiction genre (e.g., by Bradbury, Dick, Miller, and Ellison).

5. Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Morton and Lucia White, The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Elizabeth Cummins Cogell, “The Middle Landscape Myth in Science Fiction,” Science Fiction Studies, 15 (July 1978): 134-42.

6. Clarke, Voices, 42, 88; Franklin, War Stars, 24, 46-47; Wagar, Terminal Visions, 121.

7. Homer Lea, Valor of Ignorance, with Special Maps (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1909). The most interesting feature is the detailed maps showing exactly where Lea thinks the Japanese might land, establish strong points, and make other military moves. Lea’s book was an argument for a larger and stronger standing army and navy to support the new imperial and international roles of the United States.

8. Jean Heffer, United States and the Pacific: History of a Frontier (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 184-89; Mike Davis, The Ecology of Fear (New York: Henry Holt,

---

1998) inventories many examples of yellow peril literature. It is interesting that American fears of future wars in the 1920s continued to center on the low-tech threat of Asian hordes. Europeans at the same time were developing fearsome scenarios of aerial bombardment with poison gas—surely a response to the horrors of the Western Front in the Great War.

9. Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light is the best source on the full range of American reactions to the early atomic age. Also see Franklin, War Stars, 157; Clarke, Voices, 167.

10. John Hersey, Hiroshima (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1946). Brians, Nuclear Holocaust, makes this point very well. Hersey's stylistic choices are analyzed in David Seed, "The Dawn of the Atomic Age," in David Seed, ed., Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 88-102. With the actual experiences of atomic war so horrifying, some writers deliberately distanced their stories from its realities. Science fiction writer C. L. Moore chose ironic detachment. Her 1946 story for Astounding, "The Vintage Season," imagines time travelers from the future visiting New York to watch its atomic destruction as a tourist attraction. E. B. White's story "The Morning of the Day They Did It" (The New Yorker, Feb. 25, 1950) used a sometimes playful tone to group pollution, television, and the arms race as threats that trigger the destruction of civilization by alienated technocrats on the moon.

11. Wylie supposed that Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, Philadelphia, and New York were obliterated by H-bombs and that twenty-five smaller cities were hit with fission bombs. The book is dedicated to the Federal Civil Defense Administration and serves as a plea for strong civil defense preparations. Philip Wylie, Tomorrow (New York: Rinehart, 1954). Whitley Strieber and James Kunetka, Warday, and the Journey Onwards (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984). Also see Seed, Science Fiction and the Cold War, 14-25.

---

12. Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, Fail-safe (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962); Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey II., Seven Days in May (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). The movie versions had the misfortune to appear in 1964, the year after Dr. Strangelove.

13. Kidman's character is based in part on Jessica Stern, author of The Ultimate Terrorists (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). Madison Smartt Bell, Waiting for the End of the World (1985) is a more sophisticated variant that uses the atomic terrorism plot to explore the sociology and psychology of alienation.

14. Wagar, Terminal Visions, 11; Ketterer, New Worlds for Old.

15. My discussion deliberately excludes two types of post-apocalypse stories in which cities scarcely figure, even offstage. One is the Adam and Eve story where a handful of survivors (maybe even just two!) have to decide whether to perpetuate the human race. This is the premise of the movies Five (1951), a very early film about life after the bomb, The World, the Flesh, and the Devil (1959), and The Last Woman on Earth (1960). In End of August at the Ozone Hotel, a 1966 film from Czechoslovakia, bands of women search for the last fertile male. Soldiers in 2019: After the Fall of New York (1983) battle through the streets of the post-holocaust city to seize the last fertile woman. The Adam and Eve plot has been especially attractive to science fiction short story writers, who like the challenge of devising one more twist on the two-person plot.

The second story type is the "Mad Max" quest, in which one or a handful of survivors have to make their way through post-nuclear dangers of nasty people and mutant beasts to find shelter, water, and other basics for survival. Examples of films include Damnation Alley (1974), The Ravagers (1979), Stryker (1983), World Gone Wild (1988), and Badlands 2005 (1988)—and of course the original Mad Max (1979) and The Road Warrior (1981). The Mad Max quest is especially popular for low-budget films, since many minutes can be filled with motorcycle



---

chases and long camera shots across desolate landscapes not too far from home base in Los Angeles. Some fictions combine both premises. In Panic in the Year Zero (1962) Ray Milland is a dad who helps his family through chaos after the bombing of Los Angeles. He changes from a typical suburbanite to a fierce survivalist and fights off such dangers as juvenile delinquents in a hot rod. Hell Comes to Frogtown (1987) sends one of the few remaining potent men to impregnate women in the wilderness, but he encounters dangerous mutants on the way. See Franklin, War Stars, 175-77.

For introductions to films about nuclear war and its aftermath, see Broderick, Nuclear Movies; Jack G. Shaheen, ed., Nuclear War Films (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978); and Wyn Wachhorst, "The Days After: Films on Nuclear Aftermath," in Carl B. Yoke, ed., Phoenix from the Ashes: The Literature of the Remade World (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 177-92.

16. The ravages of half-mad mobs of refugees from bombed cities is a subtheme in Tomorrow and another argument for better civil defense preparations. When writers bring survivors back to the city soon after the bomb, the depictions are vastly unrealistic. For example, the film The World, the Flesh, and the Devil (1959) uses the Adam and Eve plot to focus on three survivors of nuclear war who encounter each other in a New York where the dead and decaying bodies of eight million people seem to have evaporated without a trace. Vivian Sobchack, "Cities on the Edge of Time: The Urban Science Fiction Film," East-West Film Journal, 1 (Dec. 1988), 4-19, sees the unpeopled city as a major trope that expresses and repudiates the modern. We should also note the economics of production. It is cheaper to close off a few city streets on Sunday morning and set up a big fan to blow scraps of paper down the empty concrete canyons than to pay for elaborate sets and special effects depicting a ruined city.

---

17. Judith Merrill, Shadow on the Hearth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1950); Franklin, War Stars, 178; Seed, Science Fiction and the Cold War, 57-60.

18. Originally published separately, the story was included as one of the loosely linked stories that make up The Martian Chronicles (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1950). The title comes from a poem by Sara Teasdale, written under the shadow of World War I.

19. Helen Clarkson, The Last Day: A Novel of the Day After Tomorrow (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1959). Helen Clarkson was a pseudonym for Helen McCloy, a successful writer of mystery and suspense fiction from the 1930s to the 1970s. Wagar, Terminal Visions, 186; Seed, Science Fiction and the Cold War, 63-65.

20. Pat Frank, Alas, Babylon (originally published 1959; New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 1999), 144. Pat Frank was the pseudonym of journalist Harry Hart, a successful journalist on foreign relations and military affairs who had written several previous novels. Alas, Babylon, appearing when Americans were worrying about a missile gap with the Soviet Union, was one of the best selling of the nuclear war novels. See C. W. Sullivan III, "Alas Babylon and On the Beach: Antiphons of the Apocalypse," in Yoke, Phoenix, 37-44.

21. Frank, Alas, Babylon, 162.

22. Paul Boyer, When Time Shall be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) is an excellent introduction to this strand of American culture. Also see Edward James, "Rewriting the Christian Apocalypse as a Science-Fiction Event," in Seed, Imagining Apocalypse, 45-61.

23. The Day After is discussed in Charles E. Gannon, "Silo Psychosis: Diagnosing America's Nuclear Anxiety through Narrative Imagery," in Seed, Imagining Apocalypse, 104-107.

24. Sobchack, "Cities on the Edge of Time."

---

25. For a supplementary point of view, Eric Avila, Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) argues that movies depicting the destruction of Los Angeles by mutant insects, Martians, and other such invaders were a means for expressing fear of racial difference.

26. The Scarlet Plague was originally published in the London Magazine in 1912. It can be accessed at <http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/London/writings/scarlet>. Stephen Vincent Benet's story "By the Waters of Babylon" from 1935 is a similar tale of a primitive America long years after the great disaster. See Paul Carter, The Creation of Tomorrow (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 231-32, 241.

27. Thomas Disch, The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World (New York: Free Press, 1988), p. 83, points out that out of the first thirty novels cited by David Pringle, Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels, seven are directly concerned with nuclear war and eight transpose the disaster to other forms via aliens, plagues, and the like. In the first category are Ray Bradbury, The Martian Chronicles, Bernard Wolfe, Limbo, Leigh Brackett, The Long Tomorrow, Alfred Bester, The Stars My Destination, Philip K. Dick, Time Out of Joint, Pat Frank, Alas, Babylon, and Walter Miller Jr., A Canticle for Leibowitz. In the second category are George Orwell, 1984, George Stewart, Earth Abides, Robert Heinlein, The Puppet Masters, John Wyndham, The Day of the Triffids, Arthur C. Clarke, Childhood's End, Clifford Simak, Ring Around the Sun, Edgar Pangborn, Mirror for Observers, and John Christopher, The Death of Grass.

28. Willy Ley, The Conquest of Space (New York: Viking Press, 1949).

29. Brace quoted in Charles Glaab, The American City: A Documentary History (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1963), 329; Ignatius Donnelly, Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century (Chicago: F. O. Schulte and Co., 1890); Nathaniel West, The Day of the Locust (New

---

York: Random House, 1939). For more general fears of disorder, see Frederick C. Jaher, Doubters and Dissenters: Cataclysmic Thought in America, 1885-1918 (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1964).

30. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, Lucifer's Hammer (New York: Putnam, 1977); Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, False Dawn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978).

31. Stephen King, The Stand (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 122-23, 368.

32. A Canticle for Leibowitz consists of three novellas set roughly 600, 1200, and 1800 years after the first nuclear war. The rise of the Texarkanan Empire is found in the middle novella, "Fiat Lux." In 1939, Stanley Weinbaum's novella "Dawn of Flame" posited a similar sort of post-collapse America in which competing city-states battle to control the Mississippi Valley. There is a neo-New Orleans, the Ozarky, and Salui (St. Louis), and a big battle at Starved Rock on the Illinois River. See Edgar L. Chapman, "Weinbaum's Fire from the Ashes: The Post-Disaster Civilization of *The Black Flame*," in Yoke, Phoenix, 85-96.

33. Leigh Brackett, The Long Tomorrow (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 14. Brackett was a successful screenwriter as well as novelist, working on such movies as The Big Sleep, Rio Bravo, and The Empire Strikes Back. Also see Diana Parkin-Sper, "Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow*: A Quest for the Future America," Extrapolation, 26 (Summer 1985) and Donna M. DeBlasio, "Future Imperfect: Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow*," in Yoke, Phoenix, 97-103.

34. "The New Adam and Eve" was written in 1843 and included in Mosses from an Old Manse (1846). I accessed the text at <http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/newae.html>.

35. The novel was republished as Daybreak-2250 A.D. and also paired with No Night without Stars as Darkness and Dawn (New York: Baen Books, 2003). Page references are to this latter edition. Alice Mary Norton, writing as Andre Norton, produced 75-80 science fiction and fantasy novels, for both children and adults from the 1940s to the 1990s. She also wrote a several

---

World War II adventure books with teenaged heroes. Starman's Son was written for the juvenile/teenage market, as is clear from the vocabulary, which sticks close to the word choices with the fewest syllables.

36. Norton, Daybreak, 6-7.

37. Norton, Daybreak, 38.

38. Norton, Daybreak, 132.

39. Kim Stanley Robinson, The Wild Shore (New York: Berkley, 1984).

40. Clarke, Voices, 170-73. Tim Powers, who has written more supernatural terror fiction than science fiction, depicted a somewhat similar southern California in Dinner at Deviant's Palace (New York: Ace, 1985). A century or so after atomic holocaust, Los Angeles is a small farm market center, Irvine is the headquarters of a powerful exploitative cult that leads many followers to their death, and Venice Beach is the home of perverted vice businesses that involve the prostitution of mutants.

41. The story was originally published in 1969. Page citations are to Terry Dowling, ed., The Essential Ellison (Omaha: Nemo Press, 1987), 927, 938.

42. In the decade or so after 1945, a number of city planners advocated planned decentralization of urban areas as a civil defense measure, in effect making suburbanization patriotic.

43. Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," Commentary (Oct. 1965), 42-48.

44. Martha Bartter, "Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal," Science Fiction Studies, 13 (July 1986): 148-58.

45. There is also a practical consideration. American post-disaster fiction can focus on the small town and countryside because North America is so big. Even a narrow peninsula such as Florida has room for new beginnings, not to mention the great central plains and western mountains. In contrast, Charles Gannon argues in "Silo Psychosis" (107-109), nuclear war scenarios in

---

physically constructed Britain tend to linger on the details of the devastated city because there is no practical place of refuge (save perhaps northern Scotland, where survival is hard enough for sheep, let alone people). Indeed, some classic British versions of the big catastrophe, such as John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids, seem to focus on making do and muddling through.