

THE CONVERSATION



From fiction to gallows humour – how Chernobyl survivors are still coping with trauma

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Pripyat is often portrayed as a haunted ghost town. EFREM LUKATSKY / AP/Press Association Images

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It's been exactly 30 years since the world's worst nuclear disaster occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in Ukraine. Yet the trauma is still fresh. Exactly how the survivors handle this trauma has been the subject of a lot of psychological research – and it has identified a range of sometimes surprising defence mechanisms.

According to a WHO investigation, there's some evidence to suggest that populations exposed to the radioactive fallout may still be struggling with a number of health problems, including cataracts, pulmonary disease and congenital disorders. But estimating the exact impact on human health, such as cancer rates, is notoriously difficult.

Nevertheless, we are starting to understand the psychological impact of the disaster and the hasty evacuation of the region surrounding the power station – including the town of Pripyat, built to house Chernobyl's workers and their families. In March and April of 2016, many of the area's former residents visited their old, abandoned homes to pay their respects to loved ones who lost their lives.



Taras, six, a victim of the after-effects of radioactive fallout from Chernobyl, listens to a speaker during a union protest in 2005. AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky

But doing that is tough for many. Natalya Syomin, a survivor of the accident, recalled in a recent interview: “Pripyat holds so many memories for us. Our son was born there and everyone misses it. All we have are memories. It was mentally tough to go back, very painful, so we stopped going.” Another survivor, Lydia Petrovna Malesheva, said: “I miss Pripyat very much. Sometimes it’s too painful to think about it.”

Horrifying fiction

This trauma has been explored in literature, film and computer games, with novels including *The Sky Unwashed* (2000), *Dicky Star and the Garden Rule* (2011) and *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (2014).

In the latter, teenage Chernobyl survivor Artyom loses his father, who was ordered to help cut down and bury irradiated trees, to radiation poisoning. The book is about Artyom remembering his father and revisiting the forest he once worked in, where he sees his father’s shadow dancing around. In this and many other stories, the exclusion zone is represented as a (sometimes supernaturally) haunted ghost town. Horror stories such as the film *Chernobyl Diaries* (2012) and the videogame series *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* (2007-2009) seek to thrill audiences with fear of the zone as much as to educate them about it.



The S.T.A.L.K.E.R video game. youtube, CC BY-SA

Some survivors of the disaster have responded with aversion to such fictionalised accounts, while others have been more neutral. Nikolai Kalugin recalled in an interview that he even thought newspaper and magazine writers were fictionalising the events, competing to see “who can write the most frightening article. They turned Chernobyl into a house of horrors.”

Other survivors claim that imagination and fiction are essential tools for coping with the

trauma – an issue I investigated in my doctoral thesis. For example, Victor Latun described conversations with fellow victims. “Some say aliens knew about the catastrophe and helped us out; others that it was an experiment and soon kids with incredible talents will start to be born,” he said. “We don’t live on this Earth, but in our dreams, in our conversations. Because you need to add something to this ordinary life, in order to understand it. Even when you’re near death.”

Others even contributed to the fiction. Yevgeniy Brovkin, an instructor at Gomel State University in Belarus, wrote a story about what he imagined Chernobyl would be like in a hundred years. His story detailed “a person, or something else, galloping on all fours ... At night it could see with a third eye, and its only ear, on the crown of its head.” However, the publisher he submitted it to wrote back saying that “this wasn’t a work of literature, but the description of a nightmare”.

Meanwhile, the creators of S.T.A.L.K.E.R and The Sky Unwashed are second-generation Ukrainians, who did not experience the immediate aftermath of the reactor explosion. For many people in this generation, this kind of fiction has actually been more cathartic on a cultural level. In an interview, S.T.A.L.K.E.R project lead Anton Bolshakov said that there was so much secrecy around what caused the accident at Chernobyl, and that the game intends to explore the truth.

Gallows humour


I have investigated the use of jokes and tall tales as a coping mechanism among the survivors as part of my upcoming research. “Want to hear a joke?” a driver who transported shift-working soldiers to and from the reactor asked. “Guy comes home from the reactor. His wife asks the doctor, ‘What should I do with him?’ ‘You should wash him, hug him, and put him out of commission’, [the doctor replies].”

Here, as in many other survivors’ testimonies, the joke relates the speaker’s personal experience, but assigns it to another “guy”, thereby enabling the individual to abreact their psychological trauma, while sidestepping – with the aid of gallows humour – the incapacitating, direct confrontation of the painful memory.

This sort of macabre joke is common throughout the Chernobyl liquidators’ dialogues. There is another joke they share, which is based on the remotely-controlled robots initially used to clear the irradiated graphite from the exploded reactor’s roof – until the radiation rendered them unresponsive. It runs: “An American robot is on the roof for five minutes, then it breaks down. The Russian robot is up there for two hours! Then a command comes in over the loudspeaker: ‘Private Ivanov! In two hours you’re welcome to come down and have a cigarette break!’”


It is clear that the Chernobyl accident will continue to be traumatic for those who survived it. We must therefore be accepting of the multitude of ways in which they cope with the memory. In this light, whether we like jokes or fictional accounts of Chernobyl or not, they are a way for the disaster to remain in the global consciousness, as a shared culture. We must study them if we are to learn from and live with the disaster’s painful legacy.




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