

Est.
1841

YORK
ST JOHN
UNIVERSITY

Evans, Anne-Marie (2018) Eat, Live, Remember: Food and the Post-Apocalyptic novel. In: Piatti-Farnell, Lorna and Brien, Donna Lee, (eds.) The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food. Abingdon, Oxford, Routledge, pp. 460-469

Downloaded from: <http://ray.yorks.j.ac.uk/id/eprint/2511/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-Literature-and-Food/Piatti-Farnell-Lee-Brien/p/book/9781138048430>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorks.j.ac.uk

**Eat, Survive, Remember: Food and the Post-Apocalyptic novel.
Anne-Marie Evans, York St John University**

The very nature of post-apocalyptic fiction demands that food is examined and understood in a different way. The word ‘Apocalypse’ comes from the ancient Greek *apokalypsis* and translates as a ‘revelation or unveiling of the true order’ (Heffernan 2008, 4). The new world order that emerges in each of the post-catastrophe novels examined requires a new way of considering the role of food and eating in literature. This chapter will explore the representation of food, eating and cooking in post-apocalyptic fiction of the twenty-first century. Drawing on three recent novels, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011) and Emily St John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), I will argue that food in the post-apocalyptic novel occupies a central dual role in the narrative. Firstly, it functions as a crucial part of day to day survival. All three novels detail the protagonists searching for food in the chaotic spaces of their respective nightmarish landscapes. Food and eating are rarely pleasurable in these scenarios, and are simply another chore to be completed. In McCarthy and Whitehead’s narratives, eating is further complicated by the presence of cannibals in *The Road* and zombies in *Zone One*. The human body is translated into just another food option in both of these post-apocalyptic worlds, and for McCarthy in particular, choosing what to eat, and what *not* to eat, allows a philosophical engagement with the morality of survival ethics.

Secondly - and perhaps this is the most important function of food in these texts – food and eating is always nostalgic. In *The Road*, there is a painfully poignant scene where the man and his son find an unopened can of Coca-cola, an untouched remnant from life before. In *Zone One*, in a Manhattan overrun by zombies, the soldiers tasked with clearing the urban space eat state-sponsored protein snacks and drink whisky at night as they reminisce about their past lives. In *Station Eleven*, the survivors of a deadly flu virus remember the joy of chocolate chip cookies, and the baking of bread at the end of the novel signifies hope and community for the future. Each of these novels are clearly commenting on a contemporary version of America where food plays a crucial role within a broader social critique.

Characters in the post-catastrophe landscape no longer enjoy the luxury of food choices or tastes. Food is fuel and is needed purely for survival. Twenty-first century consumers are able to make informed choices about food, choosing to eat organically or ethically farmed food, for example. In the post-apocalyptic narrative, one of the main distinctions in the function and understanding of food is that choice has been removed. In the post-apocalyptic novel, junk food and pre-packaged items often feature on the menu. Junk food survives the apocalypse because of its high content of non-natural chemicals and preservatives, which allow the chocolate bars and cans of Coca-cola to stay intact in the wake of various global catastrophes. In landscapes where food is scarce, its place in the text takes on a much greater significance.

On *The Road*:

McCarthy’s elegiac and Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Road* is perhaps his best-known work. In the novel, an unnamed man and his son make their way across a devastated American panorama,

the result of what appears to be an environmental catastrophe. As they follow the road towards the sea, the man understands their function as 'Like pilgrims' through a new world (McCarthy 2006, 1). This new post-apocalyptic space is full of smoke and shaken by earthquakes, with 'dust and ash everywhere' (McCarthy 2006, 5). Driven by freezing rain and an inhospitable landscape where nothing grows, and all wildlife is dead, much of the novel is focused on describing their hunt for sustenance, their attempts to cook their food source, and their ever-growing hunger. As in most post-apocalyptic narratives, finding food means living for another day. On this ruined earth, the soil is contaminated and growth is impossible, forcing the man and the boy to rely on a diet of tinned food supplemented by whatever they can find, including dried raisins (McCarthy 2006, 92), and an old ham (McCarthy 2006, 16). Their hunger drives the novel, and McCarthy repeatedly details the man's concerns over his son's thin and malnourished body: 'Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food' (McCarthy 2006, 16). The father sifts through an old bag of cornmeal and removes the rat droppings so he can make some corn cakes for his son (McCarthy 2006, 88). Eating is rarely enjoyable and is a simple fact of survival, 'They ate their poor meal cold' (McCarthy 2006, p8). To complicate matters further, many of the survivors of the apocalypse have turned to cannibalism. The man and the boy – casting themselves as 'the good guys' – refuse to compromise their moral position, even if it leads to their death.

The father knows he cannot provide a healthy diet for his son, and searches for discarded bottles of vitamins in abandoned houses (McCarthy 2006, 84). All the foods the reader understands to be 'good' choices for a child – the fresh fruit and vegetables – are no longer available for consumption. The best the man can provide for his son is tins of canned pears and vegetables. When investigating an old farmhouse, he is distrustful of non-commercial products: 'In the pantry were three jars of homecanned tomatoes. He blew the dust from the lids and studied them. Someone before him had not trusted them and in the end neither did he' (McCarthy 2006, 21). He has faith only in the pre-packaged; nothing home-produced can be trusted. As the man and the boy travel along the road, they use an abandoned supermarket trolley to transport their meagre possessions. The once great symbol of American consumerism is reduced to its literal use value as a form of transportation.

In addition to the corrupted natural environment, houses and supermarkets and other potential sources of food and supplies have all been looted long before the opening of the novel. Any entrance to any house involves a description of a dusty and unused kitchen, full of empty cupboards: 'The country was looted, ransacked, ravaged. Rifled of every crumb' (McCarthy 2006, 136-7). The restorative visit to the bunker forms the extended central section of the novel. Clearly the product of a survivalist lifestyle, the hidden underground bunker is miraculously untouched and the man and the boy find themselves in an undiscovered Aladdin's cave: 'Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs' (McCarthy 2006, 146). This is an Edenic space with the power to heal, restore and rejuvenate. The man notes that his son 'looked drugged' (McCarthy 2006, 153) after eating a plentiful meal. The several days they spend in the bunker allow them to sleep, eat and get clean (there is a functioning shower and toilet) and offers a welcome respite from the horrors of the road. This is a space for resting and refueling, all the more precious because the man knows it would be unsafe to linger in this paradise for too long.

In one of the most famous passages in the text, the man finds an unopened can of Coca-Cola in an old vending machine and gives it to his son:

What is it, Papa?

It's a treat. For you.

What is it?

Here. Sit down.

He slipped the boy's knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.

The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said.

Go ahead.

He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good, he said.

Yes. It is.

You have some, Papa.

I want you to drink it.

You have some.

He took the can and sipped it and handed it back.

You drink it, he said. Let's just sit here.

It's because I wont get to drink another one, isnt it?

Ever's a long time.

Okay, the boy said. (McCarthy 2006, 22-23).

This exchange epitomizes the relationship between the man and the boy, and their joint relationship with food. The Coca-Cola has to be foraged for in the remnants of the supermarket. As ever, the man wishes his son to take the lion's share of the food, and, as ever, the boy wants to share his meal. Food is a way that the contemporary reader can be indoctrinated into McCarthy's apocalypse in a world where a can of Coca-Cola – consumed every day all over the world – can become a luxury item to be cherished. There is a sense of ritual as the father opens the can and leans in to sniff the fizz and bubbles. This is nostalgic; the scent of the drink transports him back to a world now gone forever. The boy, astute as ever, quickly realises that his father's insistence that his son should drink all the cola signifies that this may be a once in a

lifetime opportunity. McCarthy's sparse and pared-back prose reinforces the tenderness of this moment.

Coca-Cola is the only *branded* product that is mentioned throughout the text, and this is deliberate. Lorna Piatti-Farnell reflects that 'Coca-Cola is a known entity, a reliable focus, a consumable piece of history' (Piatti-Farnell 2011, 36). The formula can be dated back to 1886, so this beverage recalls a very particular version of American history, signifying nostalgia, and a specifically American understanding of the past. Tracing the creation and development of the drink right back to the end of the Civil War, Piatti-Farnell notes that it was originally sold as a restorative: 'From the day of its creation Coca-Cola has had a sort of healing function for the United States as a country' (Piatti-Farnell 2011, 37). McCarthy is fully aware of this history, and chooses his brand carefully. The symbolic weight of this find is clear; it would not be as poignant, for instance, if the discovery had been a can of Mountain Dew or a bottle of Lipton's ice tea. It is also significant that it is a food item that prompts this nostalgia, not an old ipod, or book or any other consumer item, but the promise contained by an unopened can of cola. The drink stands as a material memorial to the lost past. The man lets the boy drink it, knowing it will be his first – and most likely, his only – chance to taste this beverage.

Jordan J. Dominy's assessment of this scene notes a connection between the drinking of the cola and the developing culture of cannibalism: 'As a sugary consumer good made for literal consumption, Coke becomes a link between anthropophagy and consumer capitalism' (Dominy 2015, 148). Food becomes a series of choices in the world of *The Road*: what to eat, who to eat, who to steal from, who to disempower. The man is more acutely aware of the potential consequences of their actions, whilst the boy simply wants to help another human being in need. Food and eating play crucial roles in McCarthy's world-building and the development of an ethical framework. If society cannot function humanely, then humanity's survival depends on individual moral choices, on the insistence on being the 'good guys'. Food and eating is then inextricably connected with the nature of being human. Matthew Mullins suggests that: 'For McCarthy, the satisfaction of hunger uncovers both ontic and ontological answers to fundamental questions about what it means to be human, and perhaps more importantly, what it means to be human alongside other humans' (Mullins 2011, 76). The act of eating - and of *not* eating – therefore becomes a political and moral decision. The man and the boy define themselves by what they are not – the bad guys – just as much as they define themselves as who they are and who they aspire to be: the good guys. The man repeatedly faces life-threatening situations in order to provide his son with food; Mullins notes that 'Hunger endangers their lives' (Mullins 2011, 78). The boy understands food as having an ecumenical function, and instinctively wants to share it with those in need. The man, more awakened to the dangers of their world, wants only for his son to survive. The desperate tenderness of the relationship between the man and his son tempers the brutality of McCarthy's narrative.

The man and the boy refuse to resort to the cannibalism, recognising that this would signify the end of their humanity. In a terrifying set piece in the middle of the text, they enter an old plantation house in desperate search of food. When the man breaks open the door to the basement, he finds the living remains of a cannibals' feast: 'Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt.

The smell was hideous' (McCarthy 2006, 116). The descent to this basement of horrors is a symbolic descent into hell, a newly merciless world where people have been forcibly made part of the food chain. The traumatic historical past of the former slave-owning southern mansion is deliberately evoked, as the man approaches the house and notes that slaves would have served food here once upon a time (McCarthy 2006, 112). Agnieszka Kaczmarek summarises: 'In the dehumanized vision of the US created by McCarthy, slaves do not bring food anymore – they serve as food themselves' (Kaczmarek 2015, 194). Cannibalism is part of McCarthy's terrifying vision of an America gone horribly, irreversibly wrong. The man and the boy have to contend with two sources of danger; the inhospitable landscape that vomits ash and will allow no plant to grow, and the human apocalypse that signals a chiasmic shift in behaviour in the unleashing of a worldview that cannibalism is now acceptable. The tragedy is complete, and McCarthy seems to suggest that there is no way to go on. The entry of humans into the food chain signals the start of the final phase of humanity's destruction.

In *Zone One*:

Colson Whitehead's announcement that he was going to write a zombie horror novel was met with raised eyebrows in some parts of the literary academy, but the result was *Zone One*, a fresh and thoughtful adaptation of zombie lore. In the novel, a zombie virus has ravaged America and Mark Spitz is one of the civilian volunteers designated to help clear out Zone One, the area formerly known as downtown Manhattan. The novel details three days in Spitz's life and moves between the present and his memories of the past as he charts his life through his experiences with food, each abandoned restaurant or fast food outlet offering up a new memory. Now that the worst of the virus is considered to be over, the American government, now based in Buffalo, has decided that Zone One's high rise buildings need to be made into living areas for the new officials of this re-imagined America. Whitehead's wry ironic comment regarding how Spitz 'had always wanted to live in New York' (Whitehead 2011, 3) suggests a post-zombie gentrification of Manhattan. 'Mark Spitz', a nickname borrowed from an American Olympic swimmer (Spitz's real name is never revealed) is the product of a racist joke based on his presumed inability to swim. Spitz's African-American identity is not revealed until the finale, leading Jessica Hurley to read the text as a 'meta-passing novel, *Zone One* buries blackness exactly where we can't see it: right there, on the surface' (Hurley 2015, 321). Spitz, however, is unconcerned by the wider implications of his nickname: 'The name stuck. No harm. Affront was a luxury, like shampoo and affection' (Whitehead 2011, 21).

Food is utilised repeatedly to commemorate the world that has gone before, and to critique the capitalist order of new America. The volunteer soldiers survive on army rations provided through corporate sponsorship of the clean-up operation; there is no cooking, only consuming. Spitz is unimpressed: 'He burped up some of that morning's breakfast paste, which had been concocted, according to the miniscule promises on the side of the tube, to replicate a nutritionist's concept of how mama's flapjacks topped with fresh blueberries tasted' (Whitehead 2011, 10). The newly-produced food is clearly of the future – a paste in a tube – and is about nutrition rather than pleasure. The packaging of the paste is problematically nostalgic, urging the consumer to imagine a time before when home-made waffles and fresh blueberries were

possible. The reference to home-cooking is at best insensitive in a world where most people have lost their ‘mama’ to the zombie virus. Living on these meagre rations leaves most of the army hungry and malnourished. Spitz and his team routinely supplement their rations by collecting old chocolate and sweets from the abandoned desks and offices of the corporate buildings they are clearing out (Whitehead 2011, 51, 71). Their official food rations are known as ‘MREs’ which stands for ‘meals ready to eat’. Spitz dreams of the days when he could still purchase a ‘deluxe combo juice’ for breakfast (Whitehead 2011, 108). Instead, he has an MRE of ‘bacon-and-eggs paste’ (Whitehead 2011, 109), another nostalgic nod to the world that has been lost. Unlike in *The Road*, there is little of the scavenging for survival in *Zone One*. Looting has largely come to an end with the restoration of some form of government, although this does not apply to food: ‘juice boxes were still legal tender in some parts of the country – but for the most part, no more stealing, people’ (Whitehead 2011, 38-9). Capitalism has found its place in post-outbreak America. Indeed, the new headquarters of Buffalo has ‘an entire division dedicated to pursuing official sponsors whenever a representative turned up’ (Whitehead 2011, 39). Food supplies are about supporting capitalism just as much as keeping the population alive. Once crops are able to be grown again, they are a precious commodity; fresh corn delivered to the army base is surrounded by an armed guard (Whitehead 2011, 37). The naturally produced must be protected, and fresh food is now a rare luxury.

Former restaurants and cafes are now used as briefing areas for the army, and architecture is constantly re-purposed in the post-apocalyptic landscape. There is no use for a restaurant in this world. Like supermarkets, they have been quickly looted and are now left abandoned in chaos and decay. Previously, Spitz worked at an ‘artisanal sandwich joint’ (Whitehead 2011, 156) and later as the social media manager for an organic coffee company. Post-apocalypse, he continues to think in imagined Twitter updates: ‘Nothing cures the Just Got Exsanguinated Blues like a foam mustache, IMHO’ (Whitehead 2011, 151). The media-speak he learnt in his previous life becomes a coping mechanism for the present. The vast majority of Spitz’s memories of his life before involve food. On Reade Street he finds a chain restaurant he knew well in his previous life. To his surprise, it has not been looted and still stands untouched. Just as when the man and the boy find the bunker of food in *The Road*, the preserved restaurant becomes a museum to the former way of life. Whitehead complicates this trope of post-apocalyptic writing by having Spitz visit a chain restaurant, a place that is designed not to be unique: ‘He had been here before and not been here before. That was the magic of the franchise’ (Whitehead 2011, 155). Spitz’s experience in the restaurant is uncanny, just as the experience of reading the descriptions of a devastated Manhattan are clearly intended to be uncanny for the reader. Michael Newbury, writing about zombie films, argues that from the 1990s onwards, food is a major part of the zombie world: ‘corporate food, eating, food marketing, and food choices abound in the zombie film, so much so that visualizing the movement of survivors through images of a collapsed commercial/industrial food system becomes something close to a structural imperative in the genre’ (Newbury 2012, 100). Spitz’s visit to the restaurant is therefore an important part of the genre that signifies the full and real breakdown of civilization.

Another important form of eating in the novel involves zombie attacks, as much of population now looks on humanity as a food source. The zombie, as a bio-political figure, obviously configures both capitalism and consumerism. Reading the zombie as a development of Donna

Haraway's cyborg, Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry argue that 'the zombie now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system' (Lauro and Embry 2008, 99). Whitehead complicates this dynamic by investing his text with two types of zombies: the 'skels', the classic Romero-inspired bloodthirsty zombie; and the 'stragglers', figures who are non-violent and doomed to repeat one of their actions from life. Spitz sees one at a photocopier (Whitehead 2011, 80) a new form of hell where humanity is caught in whichever mundane task they were most associated with before death. When Spitz visits the chain restaurant from his former life, he has a moment of realisation: 'He was a ghost. A straggler' (Whitehead 2011, 155). He too has become the walking dead, destined to haunt the popular locations of his former existence. Each confrontation with a zombie is a confrontation with the (problematic, historical, racialised) past but also a moment of existential crisis through a confrontation with the (possible) self. Whitehead repeatedly indicates that only a very thin line that separates the living and the not-dead and noted in an interview with *Atlantic* that the 'terror of the zombie' was essentially a fear of the future self (Fassler 2011). This complicates the dynamics of food and eating. Gary, one of Spitz's fellow soldiers, is quick to joke about the situation: 'Gary pointed out that survivors were MREs to the skels, hardy-har' (Whitehead 2011, 71). Kimberly Fain suggests that 'By using the zombie metaphor for the frustrated consumer culture that seeks nourishment from materialism, the zombie represents the consumptive nature and violent transformation within everyone when their hunger for fulfillment is ignored and denied' (Fain 2014, 173).

Spitz is the complete opposite of the boy in *The Road* as he thinks that all hope is temporary. *The Road* ends with potential affirmation of a new family unit (complete with a pet dog) whilst Spitz's fate at the end of *Zone One* is deliberately ambiguous. Surrounded by a huge zombie horde and separated from his team and his base, he decides to take a final stand and try to reach the river: 'Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead' (Whitehead 2011, 259).

At Station Eleven:

Station Eleven is arguably the most optimistic envisioning of post-apocalyptic life in recent times. Set twenty years after the Georgia Flu has ravaged the world's population, Mandel's novel offers a persuasive argument for the enduring importance of and human need for art. Twenty years is the longest post-catastrophe time lapse in all three novels, and the world of *Station Eleven* is markedly different to the worlds of *The Road* and *Zone One*. The novel met with largely admiring reviews and was a shortlist for the National Book Award, and in an interview with *The New York Times*, Mandel noted that the current popularity for post-apocalyptic fiction owes a serious debt to McCarthy's *The Road* (Alter, 2014).

The novel has several timelines, one in the post-apocalyptic present with Kirsten, one of the actors in a small troupe of players known as the Travelling Symphony, and her connection with Arthur Leander, a famous film star who dies on stage whilst performing *King Lear* at the start of the flu outbreak. There is much less attention given to food in this text than other post-apocalyptic novels; characters might not be on the verge of starvation or in danger of featuring

on the menu themselves, but food functions here as a stark and poignant reminder of a lost world that can never be fully restored. Unlike *The Road*, where food is a necessity and a source of stress, or *Zone One*, where food is the product of corporate sponsorship and treated with wry indifference, food in *Station Eleven* signals possible hope for a better future.

At the initial outbreak of the virus, Jeevan – at one point a paparazzi sneaking photos of Leander, and later a paramedic - does a panicked supermarket run at midnight, filling his trolley several times before deciding on the final ‘grace items: vegetables, fruit, bags of oranges and lemons, tea, coffee, crackers, salt, preserved cakes’ (Mandel 2014, 25) to take to his disabled brother. Flashbacks to before the outbreak nearly always involve food; Arthur and his first wife Miranda are spotted by the paparazzi leaving a restaurant (Mandel 2014, 71); they later host a disastrous dinner party in the Hollywood hills when Arthur is at the height of his movie star fame (Mandel 2014, 91); Arthur meets his old friend Clark for dinner in London (Mandel 2014, 110). Arthur is continually associated with different types of food and drink: green tea, orange juice, coffee, grilled cheese, wine, chocolate, croissants. He is characterised through his appetite. Food and dining occupies an inordinate amount of time in the lives of the characters before the outbreak. Post-catastrophe, Mandel places the focus very firmly on art. The Symphony perform Shakespeare as they travel around, performing to small groups and family settlements. ‘Sometimes the Travelling Symphony thought that what they were doing was noble. There were moments around campfires when someone would say something invigorating about the importance of art, and everyone would find it easier to sleep that night’ (Mandel 2014, 119). This focus on art is only possible twenty years after the initial outbreak; there are allusions to the dreadful early years when the world was in chaos. Kirsten, a child when the flu virus spreads across the globe, finds she cannot remember anything about the early years. On his own and travelling after the initial outbreak, Jeevan is forced to eat snow to stay alive (Mandel 2014, 191) and ‘slipped in and out of country houses, searching for canned goods while the occupants lay dead upstairs’ (Mandel 2014, 194). In Year Twenty, the world has changed once again. There is time for art now – unthinkable in the landscape of the *The Road* - and hunger is uncommon. When they stop to scavenge for supplies, the Symphony generally hunts for musical instruments, not food. When they do find supplies – ‘two full bottles of scotch and a can of miraculously still-edible cocktail olives’ (Mandel 2014, 142) – they are a luxury as opposed to a necessity. The Symphony’s motto, painted on the side of their caravan and tattooed on Kristen’s arm, is a quotation from *Star Trek*: ‘survival is insufficient’ (Mandel 2014, 119). The Symphony occasionally need to hunt for their dinner but they are a large and organised group with ‘preserved food stores, rabbit jerky and dried apples’ (Mandel 2014, 140) for when it is deemed too dangerous to risk a fire for hot food, and they have their own cook. This lack of urgency regarding food was noted in the reviews for the novel. Writing for *The New York Times*, Sigrid Nunez maintains that: ‘the survivors [...] do not behave very differently from people living in ordinary, civilized times. Hunger, thirst and exhaustion are alluded to, but there is no penetrating sense of the day-to-day struggle of vulnerable human beings lacking the basic amenities of life’ (Nunez 2014). Mandel has stated in an interview with Lincoln Michel for the National Book Awards that art is at the centre of the novel, not survival politics: ‘We have an instinct for art, even in the midst of catastrophe, and you see that in any of the most desperate places on Earth: people play music in refugee camps and put on plays in war zones’ (Michel 2014).

The landscape has been impacted but is not dead. There are vegetable patches (Mandel 2014, 49) and areas of growth that signal the possibility of a sustainable future. Just as in *The Road* and *Zone One*, architectural spaces previously associated with food have lost their meaning. Restaurants are now living spaces and the concept of eating out is just one more casualty of the flu virus. Kirsten notes that ‘It was possible to look up at the McDonald’s sign and fleetingly imagine, by keeping her gaze directed upward so that there was only the sign and the sky, that this was still the former world and she could stop in for a burger (Mandel 2014, 49). Kirsten edits the film playing in her mind, cropping the shot so that the complications of her present situation are forgotten and only ‘the sign and the sky remain’. Christopher Thurman observes that ‘The golden arches of McDonald’s are empty signifiers. Wendy’s restaurants and Walmart buildings are used to provide makeshift housing’. (Thurman 2015, 57). The golden arches, however, are not completely without signification; it is rather that their signified meaning has changed. Instead of indicating the availability of fast food, they now stand as a memorial for a previous version of America. Just like the Coca-cola in *The Road*, the world-wide symbol of the McDonald’s golden arches signify not just a brand of food but an entire way of life that is no longer possible.

When the virus spreads, Arthur’s old friend Clark is travelling. When his plane makes an emergency landing at Severn City Airport, Clark is stranded there for the rest of his life, eventually making a home with the rest of the survivors and building a small community. Once again, the breakdown and gradual rebuilding of civilisation in the airport is chronicled through the stranded passengers’ relationship with food. In the first few hours of the pandemic, the seriousness of the situation is not clear, and Clark spends his time buying cups of Earl Grey at an airport kiosk (Mandel 2014, 233). Food vouchers are issued to the passengers until the restaurants begin to shut down and the workers leave. Clark, staying at the airport, lives on a diet of ‘corn chips and chocolate bars from a vending machine’ (Mandel 2014, 239) and waits for the National Guard to arrive. As the days pass and the passengers grow hungrier they break into a Mexican restaurant at the airport and ‘cooked an enormous dinner of ground meat and tortilla chips and cheese with sauces splashed over it’ (Mandel 2014, 243). A week on and the passengers begin to hunt for game in the nearby woods, and a small self-sustaining community begins to develop. The breakdown of normality at the airport is illustrated through the food choices the stranded passengers have to make, at first obeying the rules and using their food vouchers before ransacking restaurants and gift shops for snacks, before finally realising that they must become responsible for their own survival.

Just like the bunker in *The Road* and the chain restaurant in *Zone One*, the discovery of an untouched space is a central part of the novel. Kirsten and August find a house set far back from the road on an overgrown driveway. Entering the house is the equivalent of entering the past. They leave with clothing, clean towels and salt (Mandel 2014, 151). The house is not the restorative space of the bunker nor is it the trigger for detailed personal memories of the past but it allows a journey into the time before; it is a signpost for the reader to the here and now that is the imagined past of the novel. In one of the final scenes, Jeevan, now living at a peaceful settlement and married with children, bakes bread for his family using an old oil drum. The scene is clearly intended to offer a sense of peace, hope and new beginnings: ‘In a moment he will go down to the river to retrieve the preserved meat cooling in an old coffee can in the water, he’ll make sandwiches for his family and offer some bread to their neighbours’ (Mandel 2014, 312).

The simple act of baking and then sharing bread offers humanity hope for the future. The scene is peaceful and emphasizes the importance of nature, enterprise and community.

It is clear that self-sufficiency demonstrates civilization - or the potential for civilization – in all of these narratives. The ability to provide food for one’s community marks an entry into a new form of life that moves away from the survival mode. The man and the boy never attain this, and *Zone One* similarly allows only limited hope. It is only in *Station Eleven* where there is a distinct return to the earth and a sense of what nature can provide. Food in all these novels is first and foremost about survival and living for another day. However, food is also needed to forge a connection between the post-apocalyptic world, and the world that has been lost. In each text, food allows the characters to revisit their past and consider their changed circumstances. Post-apocalyptic fiction offers a new and dynamic way of considering the role and function of food in literature.

Works Cited:

Alter, Alexandra. 2014. “The World Is Ending, and Readers Couldn’t Be Happier.” *New York Times*, September 5. Accessed July 17 2016.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/06/books/station-eleven-joins-falls-crop-of-dystopian-novels.html>.

Dominy, Jordan. J. 2015. “Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and the End of Capitalism.” *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*. 13: 143-158.

Fain, Kimberly. 2014. “Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*: Post-apocalyptic Zombies Take Over Manhattan in the Age of Nostalgia, Despair and Consumption.” In *Street Lit, Representing the Urban Landscape*, edited by Keenan Norris, 173-189. Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press.

Fassler, Joe. “Colson Whitehead on zombies, *Zone One*, and His Love of the VCR” *Atlantic*, October 18 2011. Accessed July 12 2016.

Heffernan, Teresa. 2008. *Post-Apocalyptic Culture, Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Hurley, Jessica. 2015. “History is What Bites: Zombies, Race and the Limits of Biopower in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*.” *Extrapolation*. 56: 311-333.

Kaczmarek, Agnieszka. 2015. “Eating Itself to Death: The USA as Seen by McCarthy and Twain.” In *Eating America: Crisis, Sustenance, Sustainability*, edited by Justyna Kociatkiewicz, Laura Suchostawska, Dominika Ferens, 187-200. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

- Lauro, Sarah Juliet, and Karen Embry. 2008. "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism." *Boundary 2*. 35: 85-108.
- Mandel, Emily St John. 2014. *Station Eleven*. London: Picador.
- McCarthy, Cormac. 2006. *The Road*. London: Picador.
- Michel, Lincoln. 2014. "Interview with Emily St John Mandel." *National Book Awards*. Accessed July 12 2016. <http://www.nationalbook.org>.
- Mullins, Matthew, 2011. "Hunger and the Apocalypse of Modernity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Symploke*. 19: 75-93.
- Newbury, Michael. 2012. "Fast Zombie/Slow Zombie: Food Writing, Horror Movies and Agribusiness Apocalypse." *American Literary History*. 24: 87-114.
- Nunez, Sigrid. 2014. "Shakespeare for Survivors." Review of *Station Eleven* by Emily St John Mandel. *New York Times*, September 12 2014. Accessed July 17 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/books/reviews/station-eleven-by-emily-st-john-mandel.html>
- Piatti-Farnell, Lorna. 2011. *Food and Culture in Contemporary American Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Thurman, Christopher. 2015. "Apocalypse Whenever: Catastrophe, Privilege and Indifference (or, Whiteness and the End Times)." *English Studies in Africa*. 58: 56-67.
- Whitehead, Colson. 2011. *Zone One*. London: Vintage.