

Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

Introduction

What is it about post-apocalyptic fiction that makes it such a prolific and exciting speculative fiction genre? It often portrays people suffering the worst of deprivations, or acting in extremely depraved ways, or highlights the worst possibilities for the future. These situations don't portray the best sides of humanity; so what is the allure of this genre?

Some people may enjoy the speculation around the philosophy of human nature that the genre raises. Others might hope that by speculating about particular apocalyptic events they can reduce the likelihood of them actually happening.

In my case the question is simple - "If the worst thing happens, do I think I would survive?"

I think this comes from being a child of the '80s. At that time things were in a state of serious unrest on the world political stage: we had seen the Lebanon torn apart, Russia and America posturing on either side of the iron curtain with enough fire power to turn the entire planet into slag, President 'Ronnie Ray-gun' seeming hell-bent on finding ever more dangerous places to militarise, cruise missile launchers armed with intermediate range missiles prowling the English countryside, while a combination of *'Threads'*, *'The Day After'* and *'When The Wind Blows'* had shown us just how harsh the world could really be. Oh, and by the way, if "the nutters with power" somehow didn't manage to blow us up then they were also looking to destroy us biologically, as books like Frank Herbert's *"The White Plague"* or Terry Nation's TV Series *"Survivors"* showed us.

The basic lesson of the '80s seemed to be that the world was balanced on the edge of destruction and only the fittest would survive. As I write this nearly 30 years later it is a relief that those terrible events haven't happened so far!

A couple of years ago my interest in this genre bubbled back to the surface and I spent a few weeks reading 4 keynote tales back to back. In many respects this was simultaneously mentally scarring yet immensely rewarding. By the end of the reading I felt incredibly depressed and yet satisfied to have survived the experience having learnt some things about human nature.

Why so depressing, and what did I learn? Read on..,

Reading 1: The Survivalist #1 - Total War

I began my reading with Jerry Ahern's 1981 novel, *The Survivalist #1: Total War*.

'The Survivalist' is a series of twenty seven "men's adventure" novels. I had been aware of the books since seeing their striking covers as a boy. They featured a rugged looking man in a

t-shirt, wearing sunglasses and touting a variety of weapons. This 'Rugged Guy' always seemed to be oozing a calm, assured ability to survive regardless of the danger around him. This *survivor* seemed to be a good place to start my reading of post-apocalyptic fiction.

Whilst Mr Ahern's books are very popular, I have to say that I was disappointed. This is the only book in the series I have read and the only one I will ever read; I like more realism in my science fiction.

Total War begins with our 'Rugged Guy', John Thomas Rourke, leading an attack by Pakistani Special Forces on an opium caravan in the mountains near the Khyber Pass. The Pakistanis are rather clinched; for example, "... *these men you trained will do well in this opium war we fight.*" *The Pakistani captain, shorter than Rourke and with a bushy black moustache, lit a cigarette...* - does writing get more cliched than that?

Notwithstanding the cliches, Rourke also seems to have super invulnerability powers: "... *my right leg got shot up. Everybody else was killed. I was left for dead. I had a .45, an M-16 and a bayonet - no food, nothing in the way of medical supplies except some antibiotics... spent ten days in open water before I hit Florida Keys. I was dehydrated, infected, sunburned and had about every everything wrong with me except athlete's foot... in spite of it all, I survived.*" I think that even a cross between Captain America and Superman might have found that experience a bit challenging, but we are supposed to believe that this was a formative experience which turned Rourke into a 'man'.

My own experience of learning karate is that most fighters are reluctant to engage in combat and do so with the humility of understanding that there is always someone better than they are. Rourke doesn't seem to acknowledge that vulnerability; he is a true American, a larger than life superhero, believing his actions can change the fate of the ignorant masses around him. Perhaps it is only self-belief like that that can ensure someone survives an apocalypse, but for me Rourke is not a credible character.

I am not going to spoiler-zone the rest of the story here, except to say that the Russians kick off World War 3 through an invasion across the Khyber Pass. After the bombs fall Rourke begins a journey to get home and find his family - a lot of killing will follow but, if the cover is anything to go by, he will survive and succeed: anyone who can stand in front of a nuclear explosion wearing shades and a t-shirt surely must succeed?

Reading 2: Alas Babylon

So my first delve into the post-apocalyptic genre wasn't very satisfying. Maybe the next story would be better: *Alas Babylon* by Pat Frank.

This tale hails from 1959 and once again features conflict with the Russians. The Cold War was raging between the United States and the Soviet Union at this time and the US was investing huge sums on defence in real terms. From about 1950 spending by the US on

defence surged from a post-World War II decline to about 15% of GDP, before slowly reducing over the next 30 years to around 5% of GDP ¹.

Between 1952 to 1959 (the date of Frank's book), US defence spending was at least \$143 billion per annum ² – which gives a conservative cost of fighting the Cold War over this period of at least \$1.1 trillion (US measure, \$1 trillion = \$1000 billion).

President Eisenhower's "New Look" policy (formalised on 30th October 1953 when he signed National Security Council document 162/2) committed the US to relying on "... strategic nuclear weapons to deter potential threats, both conventional and nuclear, from the Eastern Bloc of nations headed by the Soviet Union" ³.

Eisenhower's "New Look" Policy shifted the emphasis of US defence capabilities from the use of conventional forces to an "air-atomic" strike force operated by the Strategic Air Command (SAC). Land and naval forces were reduced in size while the US sheltered behind a shield of strategic air power that could project "Massive Retaliation" if required. The doctrine of Massive Retaliation was intended to overwhelm the ability of any other power to attack the US, as John Foster Dulles (Secretary of State) explained on 12th January 1954 when he said, "... Local defences must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power." There was an implicit understanding that this meant that if the USSR backed conventional conflict anywhere around the world, that the USA was prepared to respond with a nuclear strike against the Soviet Union itself. Today this reads to me as "... if you twitch at us we will stamp all over you."

By 1954 the "New Look" policy was being tempered by emphasis towards strategic "sufficiency" instead of superiority, and the use of tactical nuclear weapons in "limited wars" fought by standing forces (instead of a reliance on reserves). This marked the start of a shift towards a more "flexible response", and in 1958 the US probably deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Korea ⁴.

The backbones of the "air-atomic" strike force were the Boeing B-47 Stratojet (20,000lb bomb load, or two 1950s nuclear weapons) and the Boeing B-52 Stratofortress (60,000lb bomb load, or eight B28 thermonuclear free-fall bombs in two internal 4-bomb clips, although typically only one clip was used and the other carried ADM-20 Quail decoys). Some idea of what it might have been like to co-exist with these aircraft and the threat of nuclear war can be had from these 2 iconic films: *Failsafe* (1964) and *by Dawn's Early Light* (1990, based on the 1983 novel *Trinity's Child* by William Prochnau). I saw a B-52 up close at the 1992 RAF Mildenhall Air-Fete. Seeing the aircraft on the ground made its huge size

¹ See Trends in U.S. Military Spending - Dinah Walker, Analyst, Geoeconomics – Council on Foreign Relations - <http://www.cfr.org/defense-budget/trends-us-military-spending/p28855> -

²See U.S. Military Spending In The Cold War Era: Opportunity Costs, Foreign Crises, and Domestic Constraints - Robert Higgs - <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa114.html>

³ See "New Look (policy) - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Look_\(policy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Look_(policy))

⁴ "See U.S. Deployment of Nuclear Weapons in 1950s South Korea & North Korea's Nuclear Development: Toward Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" - Lee Jae-Bong, The Asia-Pacific Journal - http://www.japanfocus.org/-lee-jae_bong/3053 - introduction

very real to me. More shocking was the realisation that even one of them has the capacity to kill tens of thousands of people and the total production run was 744 aircraft⁵ (the last B-52H being delivered in October 1962).

Such was the world that Pat Frank was living in, and he had already seen a great many shocking things, including reporting on the Korean War. In the preface to *Alas Babylon* he writes that the inspiration for the book was a question from ‘an acquaintance’: “What do you think would happen if the Russkies hit us when we weren’t looking – you know, like Pearl Harbour?” Apparently Frank felt that his acquaintance didn’t understand the potential effects of “fifty or sixty million” Americans being killed in attack like that, and this book is his explanation of what that might look like.

I was optimistic that *Alas Babylon* might be a more real description of living in a post-apocalyptic world.

In the story Randolph (‘Randy’) Bragg, the probably alcoholic son of a politicians’ family, receives a telegram from his brother Mark, an Air Force officer working for SAC Headquarters, warning that nuclear war is imminent. The message reads, “Urgent you meet me at Base Ops McCoy noon today. Helen and children flying to Orlando tonight. Alas, Babylon.”

When he has read the message, Frank shows us how Randy reflects on the moment that Mark told him how the US has slipped behind the USSR by relying on bombers instead of missiles. Mark says that although the US has built thousands of “the most beautiful bombers in the world” they cannot prevent an attack on SAC Headquarters. In the event of probable nuclear war, Mark says he will send the code-phrase ‘Alas, Babylon’. The brothers associate that expression Preacher Henry of the Afro-Repose Baptist Church, who used it when preaching from the Revelation of St. John.

The message tells Randy that Mark’s wife, Helen, and their children, Ben Franklin and Peyton, are flying down to join Randy at the family home in Fort Repose, Florida. Randy warns his friends and neighbours, and begins to stockpile food. He picks up Helen and her children at the airport, as the radio reports that tensions are escalating between the two superpowers.

War breaks out the next morning and nuclear weapons destroy all of Florida’s major cities. Similar attacks occur across the country. Frank describes the experience of living through a nuclear attack:

“A stark white flash enveloped their world. Randy felt the heat on his neck. .. In the southwest, in the direction of Tampa, St Petersburg, and Sarasota, another unnatural sun was born, much larger and infinitely fiercer than the sun in the east... a thick red pillar erected itself in the southwest, its base the unnatural sun. The top of the pillar billowed outward. This time, the mushroom was there... the ground-conducted shock

⁵ The World Encyclopedia of Bombers – Crosby 2004 – ISBN 1-84477-511-9, pp. 170-171

wave rocked the house... the blast and sound wave covered them, submerging all other sound and feeling.”

Despite the concern raised by Peyton being flash-blinded, to me these events still seem rather remote from the survivors at Fort Repose. Although, with nuclear weapons being used the only way they *could* survive would be by being sufficiently remote from the explosions. If we want to speculate about what the events might have been like in Tampa, St Petersburg or Sarasota, all we need do is read John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* – that is a truly horrifying account of the impact of the first atomic bombing in World War II.

Fort Repose loses all power and communication with the rest of the country and becomes completely isolated. Randy’s friends all come to live with him in his house and, working together, they manage to survive. They hook up a freshwater supply to the house and their neighbours, getting food from the Henry farm and a nearby river.

Anarchy starts to spread but Randy is a former Reserve officer and becomes increasingly respected as the “authority” in Fort Repose. He takes responsibility for law enforcement when a radio announcement declares that former Army Reserve officers are to assume responsibility for martial law in isolated areas. When a group of bandits attack and brutally beat Dan Gunn, he collects a posse and hunts them down (on the same afternoon that he and Lib are married). Three of the bandits are shot dead, one is captured and then later hung “*from a girder supporting the bandstand roof in Marines Park.*” Randy orders that man’s body is to be left up until sunset, “*... he wanted the strangers [in town] to be impressed and spread the word beyond Fort Repose.*”

In the summer the town struggles to survive a brief shortage of fish but a lack of salt becomes more devastating. The town had been rationing its salt supply but eventually faces a crisis as it runs out. Randy finally remembers a diary entry from Lieutenant Peyton, an ancestor, mentioning the location of a nearby pool with a copious supply of salt, and the crisis is solved.

That autumn, government planes begin flying over the town, and a helicopter brings in Paul Hart, a military man and Randy’s friend. Hart says the country is still trying to restore basic services and that it may take a thousand years contaminated zones are “*restored .. to anything close to normal.*” Hart offers to take them out of Fort Repose, but they all prefer to remain in the community they have made.

Alas Babylon was closer to the kind of post-apocalyptic experience I was expecting to read about. The events are described realistically and the characters behave within the bounds of a normal person’s capabilities. They face hardships and challenges, including the risk of a complete collapse of civilised behaviour into anarchy. The problem I have with the story is that events are a little but too *convenient*:

- Randy’s brother just happens to work at SAC Headquarters,
- The family home is sufficiently remote to give a chance of survival,
- Anarchists don’t overwhelm the town,

- They have a freshwater supply that is not contaminated with fallout,
- They gain access to a salt supply using the diary of a Bragg-family ancestor,
- The authorities (in the form of Paul Hart) acknowledge that it will be a thousand years before the contaminated zones ‘recover’, but in the meantime it seems that Fort Repose has quickly ensured its survival,
- Oh, and of course, the Americans won the war.

Somehow I still think that post-apocalyptic survival will be harder than Pat Frank imagines. We don’t all have conveniently placed houses to shelter in, with the assistance of firearms and knowledgeable kinsfolk. So what would *real survival* look like for most of us?

Reading 3: The Road

My next reading was *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy.

Mr McCarthy is another American writer but maybe the gap of fifty years between his story and Frank’s will have allowed time for more reflection on the true nature of what a nuclear apocalypse might be like?

In *The Road* we follow the travels of a father and his young son across a landscape that has been destroyed by an unspecified, but tantalisingly briefly described, cataclysm. On p.54 McCarthy tells us through the inner voice of The Man: “*The clocks stopped at 1:17 A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions... he went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone... a dull rose glow in the window-glass.*”

Later in the book they pass by a coastal city: “*... the cluster of tall buildings vaguely askew. He thought the iron armatures had softened in the heat and then reset again to leave the buildings standing out of true. The melted window glass hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake.*”

It would seem that the apocalyptic event was probably a large-scale nuclear attack. A weapon has probably detonated in the city, melting the buildings either in the temporary heat of the blast or an ensuing firestorm.

However, in this book the cause of the apocalypse is not dwelt upon. Instead we focus on The Man and The Boy, and their terrible daily struggle to simply stay alive. Most of civilization, and most life on Earth, has disappeared since the cataclysm and their post-apocalyptic landscape is dominated by falling ash.

Despite the despairing scene they are stuck in, The Man realises that they cannot survive the oncoming winter in their house and he leads The Boy south towards the sea, carrying all their possessions in backpacks and a supermarket cart.

There are some other remaining human survivors. Some of them are too weak to threaten The Man and The Boy. Some are furtive and may put their lives at risk by stealing the things they need to survive, like the thief who takes their cached stores from the beach towards the end of the book (pp 270 – 278). Other survivors have formed gangs and are resorting to cannibalism, scavenging for flesh wherever they go.

The man coughs blood from time to time. He knows he is dying but he continues to try and keep his boy fed, warm and safe from attacks. He has a gun but only two bullets. Initially the bullets would be used to kill them both if things go badly wrong. Later on The Man has to use one of the bullets to save his boy: “... *he was a big man [an assailant] but he was very quick. He dove and grabbed the boy and rolled and came up holding him against his chest with the knife at his throat... The Man ... fired from a two-handed position ...the man [ie the assailant] fell back instantly and lay with blood bubbling from the hole in his forehead.*” (p. 68).

The boy knows that the remaining bullet will be used on him if they get into serious trouble with cannibals, or that he might have to turn the gun on himself. They have to abandon most of their possessions as they flee from their assailant's companions. Fortunately, The Man finds an unlooted hidden underground bunker filled with food, new clothes and other supplies just as they are close to dying from starvation. The bunker is not safe though, and they can only stay there for a few days.

Throughout their journey, The Man often tells The Boy that they are "the good guys" who are "carrying the fire." This is important because The Boy is seeing horrific things (like a newborn infant roasted on a spit) and they are having to sometimes do 'bad things' in order to survive. Sometimes 'doing a bad thing' can involve doing nothing: they stop at a house and discover a group of cannibals' larder: “... *he started down the rough wooden steps... flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering... an ungodly stench... huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands... Help us, they whispered. Please help us.*” The Man and The Boy run away and barely escape the cannibals. They hide in a cane field until the depths of night and have to listen to “... *hideous shrieks coming from the house... after a while the screaming stopped.*” (p.116 & p. 121).

The Man and The Boy do eventually reach the sea but The Man is shot with an arrow and falls ill. Just before he dies he tells his son perhaps the most heart-breaking thing in the entire book: “... *You have my whole heart. You always did. You're the best guy. You always were. If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. You'll see. – Will I hear you? – Yes. You will. You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you'll hear me.*” (pp. 298 – 299). The Man eventually dies and his son holds wake over the corpse for three days, with no idea of what to do next.

On the third day, The Boy encounters a man who says he has been tracking them. The man is travelling with a woman and two children. He convinces The Boy that he is one of the "good guys" and takes him under his protection.

Mr McCarthy said that the inspiration for *The Road* came during a 2003 visit to El Paso, Texas, with his young son⁶. He wondered what it might look like 50 to 100 years into the future. He imagined "fires on the hill" and thought about his son. The notes he made then eventually came back to his mind a few years later and he was able to write the novel quickly. I think many parents have these moments of reflection about what the future may hold for their children. I remember listening to folk singer Jon Boden being interviewed by Mike Harding on BBC Radio 2 after the release of his post-apocalyptic album *Songs From The Floodplain*. Boden's story was strikingly similar to McCarthy's and some of the same themes of desolate danger appear in his album.

McCarthy's book is closer to my expectation of a realistic post-apocalyptic tale, but is it too bleak? Perhaps not. If Hershey's *Hiroshima* is anything to go by, a truly apocalyptic event causes unimaginable consequences and a degree of suffering that is beyond comprehension until you are forced by events to have to endure it.

Reading 4: On The Beach

So, if *The Road* is a fairly realistic portrayal of a post-apocalyptic existence, just how bad could things really get?

After reading my way through *The Survivalist*, *Alas Babylon* and *The Road* I was already feeling pretty depressed. My final reading over this 'summer of discontent' was a bit of a cheat: rather than being a post-apocalyptic tale, Nevil Shute's *On The Beach* is the ultimate tale of apocalypse.

To misquote Douglas Adams, in the world of *On The Beach*, 'this is it, after this there is nothing, just absolute void'.

A nuclear war has destroyed the Northern Hemisphere, leaving the atmosphere full of lethal radioactive dust that is steadily drifting south, killing everything in its path. In less than a year it will reach South Australia. No one really even knows how it started or why it escalated, but they speculate that Albania started an Arab-Israeli War, which caused a Russia-NATO war, which led to a Russo- Chinese war.

As the story proceeds we come to the realisation that regardless of what we, the reader, might prefer to happen, everyone in the story is going to die.

In this world, by the end of the story, everybody on Earth will be dead

The story proceeds in an oddly stereotypical, 'stiff upper lip' caricature of life in the 1950's. Despite their impending deaths, things continue as normal in the southern hemisphere. In Melbourne, Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes of the Australian navy is appointed as a

⁶ Interview with Oprah Winfrey, June 2007

liaison officer to the American nuclear submarine *Scorpion*, captained by Commander Dwight Towers.

Peter is worried about leaving his wife at home with their baby, Jennifer, but he still accepts the posting despite knowing that the radiation cloud will reach Melbourne in about 6 months. He invites Dwight to spend the weekend at his home, where he meets Moira Davidson. She is drinking heavily in order to forget that her impending death means she will never get to live the future of her dreams.

Dwight intellectually knows that everyone in the Northern Hemisphere is dead, but he still thinks of his family as if they are alive and waiting at home for him. He gives Moira a tour of the submarine and then they go dancing. They are almost courting each other in a strangely accelerated yet futile way. A day later, the *Scorpion* departs on an eleven-day cruise up the coast of Australia to look for traces of life. The only living creature they see on the entire voyage is a single dog. The crew have an almost emotionless discussion about what they have seen:

“They couldn’t look on shore, any more than we could,” the captain said. “Nobody will ever really know what a hot [radioactive] place looks like. And that goes for the whole of the northern hemisphere.”

Peter said, “That’s probably as well.”

“I think that’s right,” said the Commander. “There’s some things that a person shouldn’t want to go and see.”

John Osborne said, “I was thinking about that last night. Did it ever strike you that nobody will ever - ever – see Cairns again? Or Moresby? Or Darwin?”

They stared at him while they turned over the new idea. “Nobody could see more than we’ve seen,” the captain said.

“Who else can go there, except us? And we shan’t go again. Not in the time.”

“That’s so,” Dwight said thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t think they’d send us back there again. I never thought of it that way, but I’d say you’re right. We’re the last living people that will ever see those places.” He paused. “And we saw practically nothing. Well, I think that’s right.”

When the *Scorpion* returns, Dwight and Moira spend more time together and become good friends. Dwight talks about his family as if they are still alive. Moira falls in love with Dwight, but she realises that he will not be able to forget his wife.

Peter and Mary are also spending time together, planning their garden despite knowing that their flowers won't bloom until after they are dead:

“Another thing I want to do,” she said, “is to put in a flowering gum tree, here. I think that’d look lovely in the summer.”

“Takes about five years to come into bloom,” he said.

“Never mind. A gum tree there would be just lovely, up against the blue of the sea. We could see it from our bedroom window.”

He paused, considering the brilliance of the scarlet flowers all over the big tree against the deep blue sea, in the brilliant sunlight. “It’ll certainly be quite a sensation when it was in bloom,” he said.

Shortly afterwards Dwight and Peter are sent on a mission to investigate the “Jorgensen effect”, a controversial theory that claims that snow and rain will cleanse the atmosphere so the radiation will never reach southern Australia. They are also instructed to investigate the source of an intermittent radio signal that has been coming from the Seattle area.

Before the *Scorpion* departs Peter tells Mary that the radiation sickness might reach her and Jennifer while he is away. Mary becomes angry when he says she might have to give Jennifer a lethal injection so that the baby will not die a slow, painful death from radiation sickness:

“...I think you’re crazy,” she exclaimed. “I’d never do anything like that, however ill she was. I’d nurse her to the end. You must be absolutely mad. The trouble is that you don’t love her...”

Later that night, Mary accepts their inevitable fate:

At about two in the morning he awoke, and heard her sobbing in the bed beside him. He stretched out a hand to comfort her.

She turned to him, still sobbing. “Oh, Peter, I’m sorry I’ve been such a fool.”

When the *Scorpion* reaches a small town near Seattle, a seaman jumps ship and swims ashore, knowing that the radiation will kill him, but wanting to die in his hometown. The submarine continues up the coast to investigate the mysterious radio signals. The absolute inescapability of the death of the world is driven home by Shute when they find that the signal is being generated by a broke windowpane that presses on a transmitter button whenever the wind blows.

When the submarine returns they find that the radiation is expected to arrive in Melbourne in August. The residents of the city are beginning to slow down and do whatever they want in their final days. Peter and Mary spend time in their garden, while Moira and Dwight go fishing in the mountains.

At the end of August everyone becomes ill from the radiation and Peter kills Jennifer before he and Mary take their suicide pills together in bed:

[Mary] sat looking down at the child for a minute, and then lay back wearily. "I'd rather think about her like she was, when we were all well. Give her the thing, Peter, and let's get this all over."

... He gave the baby the injection in the arm. Then he undressed himself and put on clean pyjamas, turned out all the lights in the flat except their bedside light...

He got into bed with Mary, mixed the drinks, and took the tablets out of the red cartons. "I've had a lovely time since we got married," she said quietly. "Thank you for everything, Peter."

He drew her to him and kissed her. "I've had a grand time, too," he said. "Let's end on that."

They put the tablets in their mouths, and drank.

Is it possible for three deaths, at the end of the world, to be more poignant than that?

In the closing pages of the book, Dwight sails out to scuttle the *Scorpion* and goes down with his ship. Moira sits in her car watching the submarine depart before taking her suicide pill with a shot of brandy...

On The Beach is a relentless sermon on the futile horror of nuclear weapons. It presents a polar opposite picture of apocalypse from the preceding 3 stories... Everyone has died. Everyone.

There are no sunglass wearing superheroes surviving through a combination of trained preparedness and firearms.

There are no convenient homesteads where death can be avoided.

There are no bunkers where life-saving materials can be found.

Nobody can simply *endure* when everyone else has succumbed either to the elements or man's baser nature.

In *On The Beach* there is no hope and no possibility of avoiding the end of all days.

Closing thoughts

So what can we conclude about post-apocalyptic fiction from these 4 examples?

It would seem that many writers are very pessimistic about the future that is waiting for us. In their view, survival will at best be brutal, at worst we will be driven to the most terrible temptations a human soul can face before death. Should we face apocalypse it seems that our only hope of avoiding those terrible things is the "Shute situation", when the inevitability of the total death of the Earth numbs us into submission.

Of course, other writers have seen alternatives, but even the solution proposed by Walter M Miller Jr is not a real solution, since the Order of Isaac Leibowitz is revealed to have preserved the knowledge that leads to a second 'flame deluge', and that they have also arranged for that knowledge to be carried to man's colonies in the stars (see *A Canticle For Leibowitz*, not discussed in this essay).

The apocalyptical setting of the aftermath of nuclear war has a special resonance with me due to witnessing the end of The Cold War (although it feels as I write this essay that Mr Putin's Russia is rapidly pushing us back into that state). We can only hope that the events portrayed in these stories, and which Robert Oppenheimer came to fear so much, will never happen. Let us hope that every man (and they are very likely to be men) who holds the keys to these terrible weapons of mass destruction, or their biological equivalents, reads both *The Road* and *On The Beach*, having prepared the path by reading Hersey's *Hiroshima*.

Readers please note: This essay is an expression of my personal responses to the stories discussed and the events surrounding them, both fictional and real. Any opinions expressed in this essay are my own. These personal opinions are not meant to defame, humiliate, and or injure anyone should they decide to read, act upon or reuse any or all of the information provided in this essay, and any such events would be entirely unintentional.

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