

## [Why are many of Today's Hottest Authors Writing Post-Apocalyptic Books?](#)

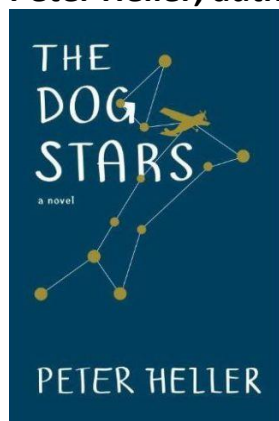
By Charlie Jane Anders, Oct. 21, 2014; <http://io9.com/how-did-post-apocalyptic-stories-become-the-hottest-boo-1649022270>

If there was any doubt that post-apocalyptic fiction rules the book world, it was probably erased when Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* became a National Book Award finalist. But why do today's hottest writers write stories set after the end? We talked to Mandel and four other post-apocalyptic authors, to find out.

### What Made You Want To Write Post-Apocalyptic Fiction?

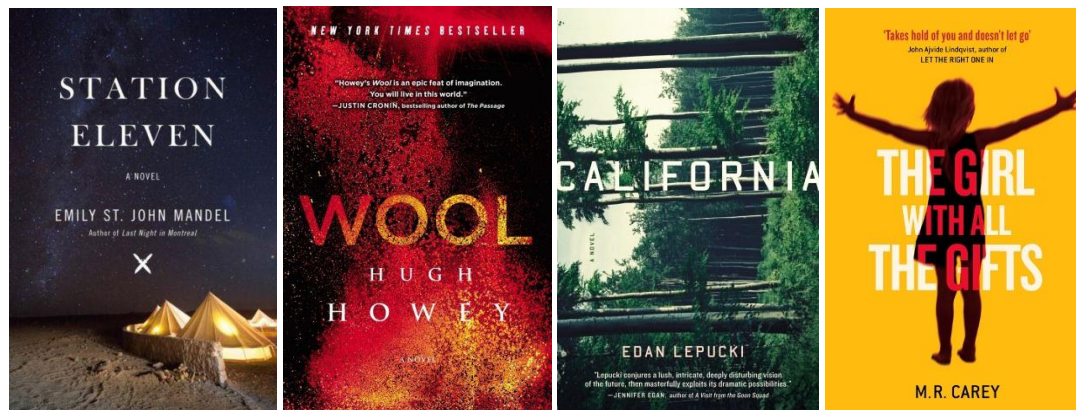
We asked this question to five different authors, and here's what they told us:

#### **Peter Heller, author of *The Dog Stars*: (Vintage, 2012)**



We're in the middle of the Sixth Great Mass Extinction, this one caused by us. We're losing species at a rate comparable to the dinosaur extinction 65 million years ago. Two-thirds of flowering plants are endangered, 20% to 25% of all mammals. We've lost half our wildlife in the last forty years. Jesus. This **is unequivocally the Story of Our Time**. You don't need to know the stats to feel the accelerating losses. We all do, every day. We are overwhelmed, bewildered, unmoored. We have committed a crime as a species — no, a sin — for which we can never be redeemed. Literature, which is the canary in the coal mine of our inner landscape, has to respond. And of course the Apocalypse makes for the best stories — the higher the stakes the greater a poem or a novel can be.

#### **Emily St. John Mandel, author of *Station Eleven*: (Knopf, 2014)**



[Station Eleven: A novel](#)

My starting point with *Station Eleven* was that I wanted to write about the life of an actor. I'm interested in film and theatre, and I'm interested in what it means to devote a life to art, the costs and the joys of that. I'd thought I'd write a book about an actor in a traveling theatre company in present-day Canada. At the same time, there's something I'd been wanting to write about for a while now, which is the awe I feel—I don't think awe is too strong a word—at this incredible world in which we live: this place where rooms are flooded with electric light at the flick of a switch, it's possible to cross the Atlantic in hours, and speaking to someone on the far side of the world is as simple as entering a series of numbers into a handheld device.

One way to write about something is to consider its absence, which is why I set much of the book in a post-apocalyptic landscape. I thought of the book as a love letter to the modern world, written in the form of a requiem. Also, I really like post-apocalyptic fiction — *THE DOG STARS* and *THE ROAD* are particular favourites — and I thought it would be an interesting landscape for a traveling theatre company.

### **Hugh Howey, author of the *Wool* series\*: (Simon & Schuster, 2013)**

I'm an optimist. From my reading of history and current events, I see a world getting better over time. But I think part of the reason the world improves is because we demand that it does. Activism and raising the public's awareness on social, political, and environmental issues must help create some forward-driving pressure. The challenge is to remain positive while issuing warnings and demanding change. You can't give up hope or get dire about tomorrow. You have to appreciate the progress we've made thus far. So for me, writing about a broken future is a way to satirize or comment on the mistakes we're making today. Most of them are the same mistakes that we make over and over. And that's what *Wool* is about, the challenge of breaking that cycle and making the world a better place.

### **Edan Lepucki, author of *California*: (Little, Brown and Company, 2014)**

What really got me excited about writing *California* was the idea of writing a "post-apocalyptic domestic drama," a phrase that popped into my head one day and wouldn't go away. I was inspired by the idea of telling an intimate story of a married couple against a high-stakes backdrop of a ruined world. I loved that mash-up of the private/small with the public/big. I had never tried to write anything speculative or apocalyptic before, so what I focused on in the early drafts was this interpersonal relationship, the way they communicate, the way their pasts affect their present behavior, and how their dynamic is altered by other people. My interest is in smaller moments between people, and with all my work I want to depict human consciousness on the page.

### **M.R. Carey, author of *The Girl With All The Gifts*:**

In some ways it's the narrative application of an industrial process testing to destruction. If you put something under extreme stress, you find out a lot about its make-up and that goes for people as much as for anything else. But I suspect that's not primarily what draws us. Endings, things falling apart... that's fascinating in its own right. Especially at a time like this, when so many kinds of catastrophe (environmental, economic, epidemiological, et cetera) seem to be stalking us. When you write about the apocalypse these days, it feels a lot like documentary reportage.

And even more than that, it's appealing. This is sick, but it's true. **We're drawn to the idea of civilisation coming crashing to the ground because it would make most of our day-to-day worries irrelevant at a stroke.** You'd never have to fret about going into the office again, about traffic or money worries or noisy neighbors or political corruption or your kids getting on at school. **It's like what Renton says about heroin addiction in *Trainspotting* it just gives you the one BIG thing to worry about, so all the scary complexity of life fades away.**

And in the same way, **for a writer, a post-apocalyptic setting can clear away a lot of unnecessary clutter and let you focus on the big, important stuff however you personally define that.** You can use the apocalypse for triage, exploring which aspects of our nature are situational and which are inherent and unchanging.

### **Why is Literary Fiction Going Post-Apocalyptic?**

It may have gone more high-profile with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, but literary fiction has been in love with the apocalypse for quite some time now. Books like *California*, *The Dog Stars* and *Station Eleven* have joined *The Passage*, *Zone One* and a slew of other post-disaster books that gained literary acclaim and awards. Not to mention Margaret Atwood.

So why are literary authors going post-apocalyptic? Mandel says she keeps getting asked "why there have been so many post-apocalyptic novels lately. The short answer is I don't know." One possible explanation is that it reflects our real-life anxieties as Heller suggests — but then again, "When have we ever not believed that the world is ending?" She adds that it's just possible that "*The Road* inspired a generation of novelists to try their hand at post-apocalyptic literary fiction."

One thing's for sure, says **Lepucki: the rise of literary post-apocalyptic novels is part of a broader trend of genre divides being erased.** "In the last few years we've seen a *real explosion of literary fiction influenced by genre*," says Lepucki "The demarcations are just not that clear cut anymore, and people who grew up on straight-up genre are letting those influences inform their work."

Adds Lepucki:

*We've got Jonathan Lethem using noir, mystery and comic books in his stuff, and Colson Whitehead writing a zombie novel. Lev Grossman writing literary fantasy. Visitation Street by Ivy Pochoda utilizes some crime novel conventions, as do books by Megan Abbott. Even Gillian Flynn's crime novels are only sort of crime novels —with each book she moves more and more away from a straightforward whodunit.*

*When I was at Iowa [Writers Workshop], people were obsessed with The Wire — and at the same time that people were consuming that show, they were reading stuff like Virginia Woolf and George Saunders. There's a really lovely sense that we can have eclectic tastes, and that these narrative styles or genres overlap more than they diverge. Nowadays, everyone is gaga for True Detective and Top of the Lake, which, to me, feel like cop shows that are influenced by the literary novel, which are traditionally more tangential, atmospheric, and thematically thorny than standard crime fare. I love this kind of cross-genre pollination.*

"I think the literary novel is moving away from a 'nothing happens' model, and **more toward one that revels in story**," Lepucki adds. "**And the apocalypse is a big story — maybe one of our oldest as a species.**" She wonders if the pendulum will eventually swing back towards the "more quiet story," or the "more formally-challenging, fragmented Modernist model. Time will tell, I guess."

Writing *California* felt really good to Lepucki, because "I could write about people talking in a room, but suddenly everything felt so much more significant and important. I loved the tension of smaller issues between Frida and Cal next to larger issues about staying alive, bringing kids into a ruined world, and so on."

Is there a particular style that a post-apocalyptic story demands, as distinct from other types? Mandel says you might want to keep it subtle. "I think that to be truly effective, the form demands a certain lightness of touch," says Mandel. "My personal opinion is that if you're writing about something so vast and dark as the end of civilization, your book will be more effective if you don't hit your reader over the head with the horror."

*\* Full disclosure: Howey is also co-editor of [The Apocalypse Triptych](#), a three-volume series that serializes my novella "Rock Manning Can't Hear You."*



### [The End is Nigh \(Apocalypse Triptych Book 1\) \(CreateSpace, 2014\)](#)

To quote Peter Dinklage in the too-shortlived sci-fi series "Threshold" : "People have been predicting the end of the world since the beginning of the world and so far exactly zero percent [were right]."

### [Craig Michael Ranapia](#)

I always liked Stephen King's response when asked why he wrote *The Stand*: "Sitting down at my desk and wiping out the human race was *fun*."

A: Because we all have a fundamental (and biological) desire to be part of a world where we matter (single biggest reason why society doesn't work)