

Utopia vs. Dystopia and the Function of Memory in *The Giver*

REVIEW:

Why do scholars like Amy Murphy argue that endless descriptions of the “end of human civilization” function as an expression of our “**utopian desires**”?
Murphy, Amy. "Nothing Like New: Our Post-Apocalyptic Imagination as Utopian Desire." *Journal of Architectural Education* 67.2 (2013): 234-242.

Although the post-apocalyptic seems to be a version of the *dystopian*, in fact it often serves *utopian* purposes.

Murphy observes that the idea of “the end” is not just used by the conservative right, “more recently by the environmentally prone left to equal magnitude.” She notes that in its great diversity, the post-apocalyptic genre may “rival in quantity the most ubiquitous plot formula of all — boy-meets-girl. In fact, most recently, in films ranging from the animated feature *Wall-e* (2008) to the romantic comedy *Seeking Friend for the End of the World* (2012), the plot often is one and the same.”

[to get a sense of that diversity, and the booming number of products being released, glimpse at]:

1. List of apocalyptic films
 2. Best Post-Apocalyptic Fiction
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[begin browsing that list, and choosing texts for presentations]

Murphy continues:

[two forms—during or after calamity] Both forms rehearse specific cultural fears as well as inherent desires— particularly in regard to future communal or urban life. As Martha Barter writes in "Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal:"

[whether the “Great Chicago Fire” of 1871, or the 1906 San Francisco earthquake] we can see how these major cities benefited by having to rebuild.... Cities get old, worn-out, dirty, dysfunctional. **We long for the opportunity to clean house from top to bottom,** to "make it new."¹

Although labeled dystopian, most post-apocalyptic plots are structured in such a way as to slowly reveal several contemporary Utopian ideals. "The basic narrative script of an apocalypse

strives to reach the **ultimate closure**, while at the same time **opening up the space of sequentially**," argues Elana Gomel in her article, "The Plague of the Utopias." She continues:

The apocalypse is meshed in the logic of continuity. ... The end is never final. ... The **equivalent of the scriptural millennium today is Utopia**, a total transformation of the social (and even physical) universe, some ideologically scripted brave new world, arising from the destruction of the old. ...

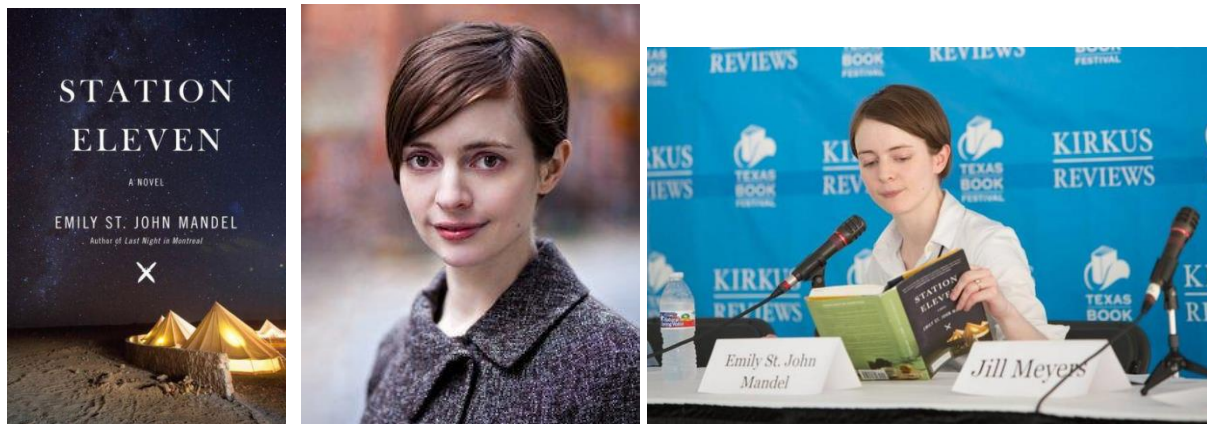
[aside: in what sense, by this definition, is *The Giver* post-apocalyptic?]

Let's look at what writers in the genre have to say:

[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>

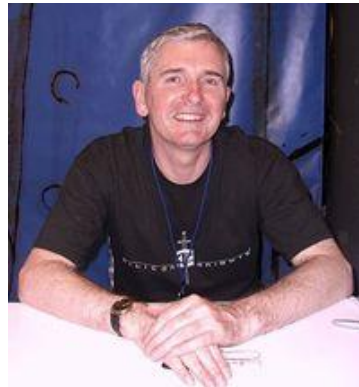
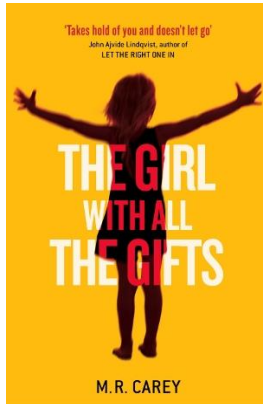
Emily St. John Mandel, author of *Station Eleven*: (Knopf, 2014)



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 ... 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 — & I thought it would be an interesting landscape for a traveling theatre company.

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



... 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.**

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.**

Transition: their value to youth audiences and young adults:

Steward, Susan Louise. "A Return to Normal: Lois Lowry's *The Giver*." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 31 (2007): 21–35.

The Giver and other utopian or dystopian novels have the potential to “**seriously portray dissent** for younger audiences and make it clear that young people must be integrated into political life” (Carrie Hintz 2002: 263). [in Steward 22]

Reading *The Giver*

In what way can we see in *The Giver* that utopia and dystopia “are **antithetical yet interdependent**”?? (Kumar 1987: 100).

Kumar, Krishnan. *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times*. New York: Blackwell, 1987.

What is *good* about the world Lowry describes?

[reference reading]

The Giver (Lowry, 1993) invites readers to experience a world without poverty, without suffering, without chaos. By presenting a seeming utopia, this sophisticated, multi-layered text engages readers in inquiry about how such a society functions and in the struggle to reconcile it with the reality they know. (Lea 2006: 51).

Lea, Susan G. "Seeing Beyond Sameness: Using *The Giver* to Challenge Colorblind Ideology." *Children's Literature in Education* 37 (2006): 51–66.

Residents in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) "lived in a highly regimented and disciplinary society, but they enjoyed civil order, were well fed, had good medical care, and worked six hour days." (Hanson 2009: 46)

Hanson, Carter F. "The Utopian Function of Memory in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*." *Extrapolation*, 50.1 (2009): 45-60.

Lowry's community "can be reasonably examined as utopian in the sense More intended." (47)

Lowry's citizens enjoy absolute stability, safety and freedom from any material want. Levels of general satisfaction, civic participation and communal responsibility are very high in each community" (Hanson, 2009: 47). ...

"I'm starving"....

"a brief private lesson in language precision.... No one in the community was starving, had ever been starving, would ever be starving" (89) Ch 9

"The community was extraordinarily safe, each citizen watchful and protective of all children" (56, Ch 6)

"How could someone not fit in?" (61)

"thoroughly accustomed to courtesy within the community" (87, Ch 9)

What is *missing*?

[student responses]

“the Capacity to See Beyond” (79, ch. 8)

Why is control of memory so important?

Hanson, Carter F. “The Utopian Function of Memory in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*.” *Extrapolation*, 50.1 (2009): 45-60.

[As with many dystopias] the suppression of historical memory [is] a tool of static totalitarian control and the **production of infantile citizens**. (44)

[But Lowry shows that even **fragments of memory** not under state control] is a source of considerable individual and **emancipating power**. (45)

The peaceful orderliness that pervades Jonas’s community....is largely a function of the absence of memory (Latham 134).

[The novel dramatizes the results of loss of memory, when Jonas becomes Receiver]: “I’m sorry sir... I don’t know what you mean when you say ‘the whole world’ or ‘generations before him.’ I thought there was only us. **I thought there was only now**” (Lowry, 78).

Jonas’s selection as the new Receiver of Memory, a very rare event, is also unusual because it momentarily ruptures the community’s atemporality and even *acknowledges its amnesia*. (51, my emphasis)

...it is Jonas’s memories of the past that expose the contradiction that the utopian peace and order of his present society is built on unseen violence. Jonas’s memories lead to hopes that things could be different; this is the novel’s utopian drive... (55)

The Giver is a striking object lesson in the human and political costs of relinquishing historical memory. Without directly satirizing contemporary American culture, Lowry critiques the anesthetizing effects of cultural amnesia—“the ability to forget” which Marcuse argues is the “mental faculty which sustains submissiveness and renunciation” (163, in Hanson 58).

[Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization*. London: Sphere Books, 1972]