A CRITIC AT LARGE

WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT OUR WORLD BY IMAGINING ITS END

Some fear we'll be buried in brimstone; others expect to be extinguished by A.I. But is there comfort to be found in our apocalyptic visions?

By Arthur Krystal

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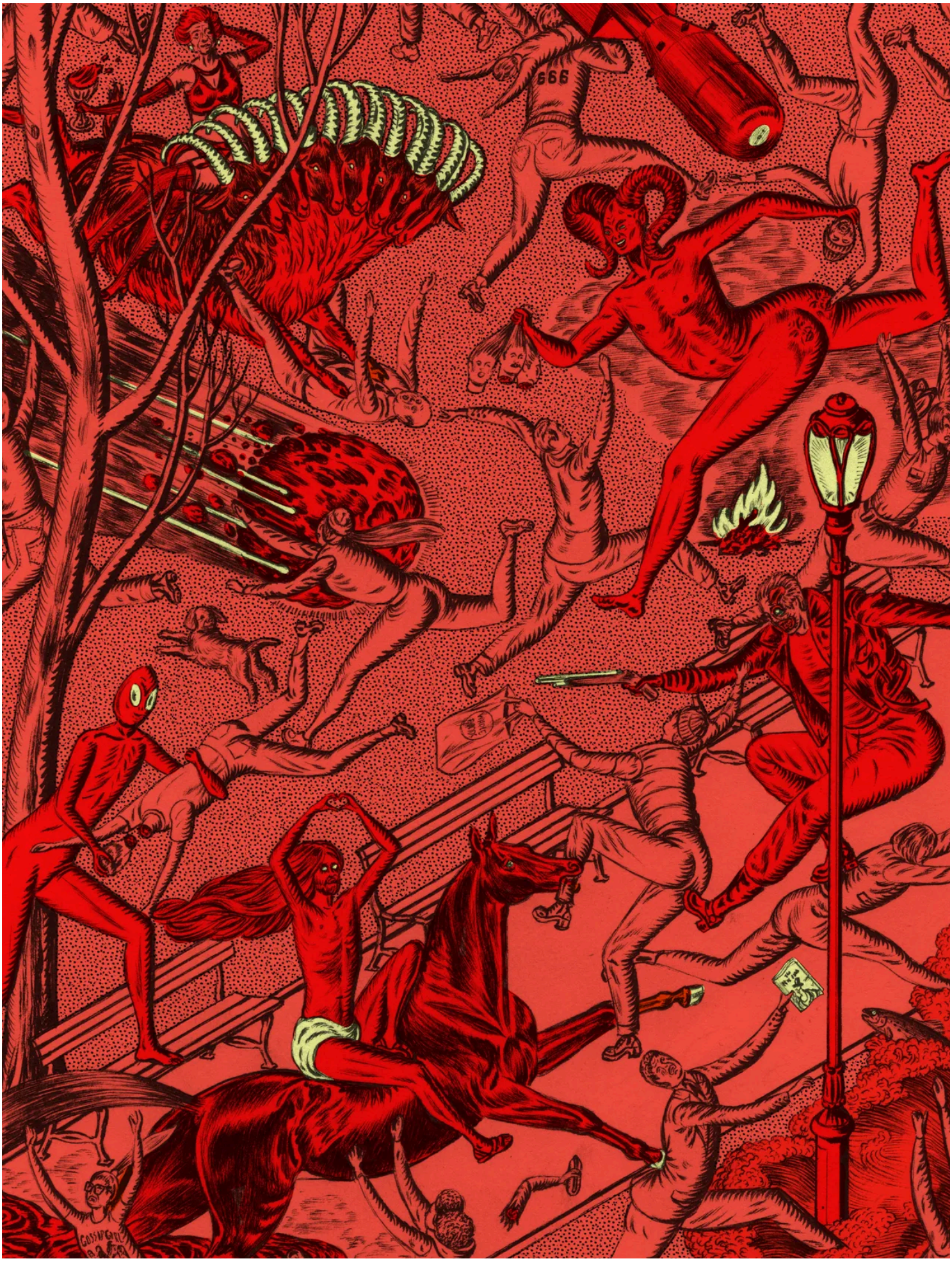
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Depictions of the end times have crowded the human imagination, from the works of John of Patmos to the lyrics of Tom Lehrer. Illustration by Tim Enthoven

It's a mite soon to start grieving, but scientists now project that life on Earth will probably end in about a billion years. A Monday in February, 1,000,002,025, would be my guess. On that inhospitable day, give or take a few million years, the sun will become so hot that the oceans will boil, Earth's oxygen will disappear, and photosynthesis will cease, as will all living things. We should be so lucky. There's a pretty fair chance that life could be wiped out well before then—say, in early June, 2034, or on a cloudy Sunday in November, 3633. Then again, who knows?

Plenty of people do, as it turns out, and, if you want to know who they are, Dorian Lynskey's "Everything Must Go: The Stories We Tell About the End of the World" (Pantheon) is a good place to start. Lynskey, a British journalist and podcaster, has assembled biological, geological, archeological, literary, and cinematic permutations of existential finales, leaving no stone unturned, be it meteor, comet, or asteroid. If a book, a song, a story, a film, a headline, a title, or a study has "world" and "end" in it, Lynskey has unearthed it. Just about everyone who's had anything to say about the world's demise, from John of Patmos to Doris of Lessing, seems to warrant a mention.

Lynskey's own multilayered narrative pays respects, in its opening pages, to Saul Bellow, Norman Cohn, Richard Hofstadter, and Susan Sontag. Further along, the comedian Marc Maron shares a berth with the critic Frank Kermode. Jean Baudrillard also makes an appearance, which seems like shaving white truffles onto a perfectly good omelette. Popular culture nuzzles literary culture in these pages because the end of the world obviously casts a pall on all culture.

Self-styled polymaths, buckle up. Lynskey fearlessly juxtaposes Skeeter Davis's song "The End of the World" (about heartbreak) with Mary Shelley's "The Last Man" and the 1971 film "The Omega Man." Karel Čapek's sentient robots are here. So is the made-for-TV movie "The Day After," which emptied movie theatres and restaurants on the evening of November 20, 1983, when something like a hundred million Americans decided to watch the world blow itself up. A recap of the Y2K scare, which now seems quaintly innocent, reminds us of simpler tech times, and, naturally, every science-fiction doomsday story is trotted out, including Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer's 1933 novel "When Worlds Collide," which contains the sardonic yet sprightly lines "It is a new intoxication—annihilation. It multiplies every emotion." Am I wrong to think that this could be a lyric in a Tom Lehrer song? And there it is on page 159, Lehrer's 1959 nuclear-war anthem, "We Will All Go Together When We Go." ("There will be no more misery / When the world is our rotisserie.") In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. The End, however, clearly needed fleshing out.

Apparently, we've been thinking about wholesale termination at least since about 1800 B.C., the date ascribed to the myth of Atrahasis, a Mesopotamian creation story that predates Biblical writings by several hundred years and features a world-cleansing flood. In Zoroastrian scripture, a comet called Gochihr collides with the Earth and wreaks havoc, as comets will. Hebrew prophets, in turn, began transforming pagan cycles of birth, death, and renewal into a rectilinear history. They kept the flood but lost the comet and installed a monolithic God who thundered and roared against his land, threatening to pass judgment on all mankind and to put the wicked to the sword.

None of these stories, strictly speaking, were apocalyptic in the sense that we use the word today. "Apocalypse," from the Greek *apokálypsis*, originally meant "an unveiling" or "an uncovering"; it connoted revelation, not destruction. Only in the mid-nineteenth century did the English word become synonymous with the idea of time coming to a full stop, signalling both punishment and redemption. Scholars now generally agree that the Book of Daniel, written around the period of the Maccabean Revolt, in 167 B.C., was the first text to sound real apocalyptic notes.

Daniel was meant to offer hope to Jews of the second century B.C., who were persecuted by the Greek tyrant Antiochus IV. Both corrective and cautionary, the book's apocalyptic language and fierce imagery heralded a "Son of Man" who would one day defeat Israel's enemies and establish God's sovereignty over the earth. The world doesn't end, exactly, but injustice and oppression are eliminated. Daniel, of course, provided the backdrop for an itinerant preacher who would die, return, and promise to return again, offering the world redemption. And no one did more to chart his post-earthly life than John of Patmos.

John, the self-named author of the "Apokálypsis of Jesus Christ," seems to have been a high-strung Aramaic-speaking Jewish convert from Judea, who had been banished to the Aegean island of Patmos in about 95 A.D. by the Roman emperor

Domitian. Drawing inspiration from Hebrew texts and whatever shrooms grew on the island, John ramped up Daniel's visions to include angels with feet of fire, the Whore of Babylon, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and a hundred and forty-four thousand virgins (or *parthenoi*), most likely male.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, Revelation only gradually entered the canon. What troubled the early Church fathers wasn't just its enigmatic language ("a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet") and cockamamie numerology; certain passages evidently had an Old Testament feel to them. Yes, the Book of Revelation was too Jewish. Some of the fathers didn't care for John's vision of Jesus sitting on a throne in Jerusalem. Given his parentage, they preferred that he reign in Heaven rather than on earth.

In time, the Book of Revelation became the cornerstone of apocalyptic thinking. Kermode's "The Sense of an Ending"—perhaps the most incisive commentary on Revelation's appeal—found that it "showed, and continues to show, a vitality and resource that suggest its consonance with our more naïve requirements of fiction." In other words, it's a hell of a story. Not the one about Jesus' life and death, but the one about his Second Coming, featuring the world's best foils: the red dragon, i.e., Satan, and the beast from the sea, whom theologians later interpreted as the Antichrist. Good and evil clash at Armageddon, ushering in a Messianic age lasting a thousand years, at which point Satan reappears, this time with Gog and Magog in tow, leading to a thrilling and satisfying dénouement: "Now I saw

heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself."

In the first centuries A.D., John's depiction of the Last Days wasn't just a story; it was an infallible prophecy, which, as Norman Cohn noted, in his intricately argued "The Pursuit of the Millennium," was felt to be perpetually "on the point of fulfilment." Most people lived in houses and walked on streets that Jesus would have recognized, and they cleaved to the Apocalypse partly because life on earth was no picnic. Commoners could look forward to a paltry thirty-five or forty years of a hardscrabble existence, without the benefit of medicine, dentistry, or a decent sewage system. People slept on floors or straw pallets, flicking aside mice and fleas. Diarrhea was prevalent, and pneumonia and serious infections were often a death sentence.

The Apocalypse was a way out, a temporal doorway to God and Heaven. The clergy could expect the fulfillment of prophecy, and the poor and the oppressed could look forward to absolution and better living quarters. A paradisiacal future that is tantalizingly close begs for an outstretched arm, and Revelation became integral not only to the Christ story but to those who believed in him. For them, Jesus was part of the life cycle both before *and* after death—so much so that Augustine of Hippo, the most levelheaded of saints, worried that anticipation of the Apocalypse was "carnal" because it felt too much like a worldly concern.

Although not intended to be part of history, the Apocalypse helped shape it. Millenarian prophets associated it with empire, persecution, and decadence, often fomenting social unrest and rebellion. Apocalyptic thinking fuelled the Crusades, stoked the English Civil Wars, and gave rise to seventeenth-century religious movements like the Fifth Monarchists. But it was in America, Jonathan Kirsch writes, that "the Book of Revelation would reach its richest, strangest, and most

enduring expression," one prophesied by a certain Italian explorer. "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John," Christopher Columbus wrote, in 1500, "and he showed me the spot where to find it."

Columbus was an adherent of the twelfth-century Italian monk Joachim of Fiore, whose chronological template of God's plan for humankind progressed in three stages of spiritual development. His ideas impressed both Dante and Hegel, but not Martin Luther, who was suspicious of the original work. "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book," Luther wrote, in 1522, noting that "Christ is neither taught in it nor recognized." Despite his misgivings, though, Revelation appealed to those who condemned the Papacy and couldn't wait for the millennium to begin.

The first Puritans to settle in America brought the word of Revelation with them and identified the New World, or, more specifically, New England, with the New Jerusalem. The sentiment was voiced in seventeenth-century pulpits, and no doubt induced the American minister Michael Wigglesworth to write the colonies' first best-seller, the 1662 epic poem "The Day of Doom: Or, A Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgment." More than a century later, Thomas Jefferson wasn't having it. "The ravings of a Maniac," he said of Revelation, "no more worthy, nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams." But Jefferson, a coastal élitist, was in the minority. Prophetic belief, as the historian Paul Boyer put it, "has been a continuing motif in American thought."

Prophecy, of course, is all about time—knowing the future, and letting others in on it. The Calvinist priest and poet John Mason evidently assigned a date in 1694 as the start of the true millennium. (If so, he died a few days into it.) Both Isaac Newton, the inventor of calculus, and John Napier, the inventor of logarithms, took a stab at it, and, for reasons of public safety, I should note that Newton posited 2060 as the probable arrival of the Apocalypse. According to Jonathan Edwards, the arch-demon's reign had begun in 1606 and would end around 1866.

Perhaps impatient with Edwards's timeline, the New York preacher William Miller, whose success at prophecy can be inferred from what is known in the Millerite movement as the Great Disappointment, predicted that the Second Coming would occur on October 22, 1844. And let's not forget the chicken in Leeds, England, which, in 1806, laid an egg inscribed with the words "Christ is coming." Much to the amazement of the local populace, the eggs kept popping out—until it was discovered that the owner was writing the words and reinserting the eggs into the hapless hen's cloaca.

Being wrong puts off neither prophets nor their followers. The term "cognitive dissonance," coined by the psychologist Leon Festinger in the nineteen-fifties, described an imbalance between conviction and information. He had been studying a cult led by Dorothy Martin, a Chicago housewife who promised that, in December of 1954, an alien spaceship would arrive, followed by a great flood. When both events failed to materialize, the cult's members were convinced that their own prophesies had stopped them from happening.

"The time is at hand," John tells us—once at the start of the "Apocalypse" and once toward the end. But it wasn't, and the delay led to the first apostasies and, after a while, to the seemingly endless stories about the end times. Lynskey, whose range is impressively ecumenical, tells us that secular eschatology properly began in the early nineteenth century with the publication of Lord Byron's poem "Darkness." Fair enough. What earlier poet would have envisioned the earth as "seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless— / A lump of death"? The poem, triggered by the famous sunless summer of 1816, when Europe was shrouded by ash from an eruption of the Indonesian volcano Mt. Tambora, offers a line that belongs in any zombie apocalypse: "The meagre by the meagre were devour'd."

God may have started to disappear from nineteenth-century literature, but there was no slacking off in apocalyptic thinking. Although nobody at the time really

believed that nature was going to snuff us out, writers could still dream. Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's novel "Le Dernier Homme" (1805) relied on sudden infertility ("one of the oldest ideas in apocalyptic fiction," Lynskey observes), and Mary Shelley's novel "The Last Man" (1826) made use of a global plague. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion"(1839) is the oddest end-of-the-world story by way of a comet, if you don't count Gochihr. And Richard Jefferies's "After London; Or, Wild England" (1885) doesn't specify the source of the catastrophe but lets us know that very few Victorians survived it.

Early filmmakers felt a similar pull toward a planetary flameout. The prolific Danish director August Blom ended the world in a 1916 silent, and Abel Gance's 1931 "End of the World," based on Camille Flammarion's 1894 novel "Omega: The Last Days of the World," considered the effects of a streaking, albeit blundering, comet—a trope later reimagined in such films as "Deep Impact," "Armageddon," and "Don't Look Up." A less ambitious writer might have been wary of conflating the actual and the fanciful, but Lynskey, whose real subject is the human imagination, deftly interweaves nature's destructive power with art, literature, and religion.

In America, generally speaking, Christian fundamentalism steadily gained influence, peaking in the latter part of the twentieth century, when televangelists like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker spread the good word in living rooms everywhere. Prophecy-oriented publishers and bookstores flourished in the nineteen-seventies, a decade in which, as one historian wrote, "watching, waiting, and working for the millennium . . . has become, even more than baseball, America's favorite pastime." Two years after Muammar Qaddafi's 1969 coup, in Libya, Ronald Reagan described it as "a sign that the day of Armageddon isn't far off. . . . Everything's falling into place. It won't be long now." Long enough, however, for Jerry Falwell, the head of the Moral Majority, to inform his followers in 1999 that the Second Coming would occur within ten years. The Antichrist, he added, "if he's going to

be the counterfeit of Christ, he has to be Jewish. The only thing we know is he must be male and Jewish." You can't miss him.

This vogue of divination was attributable in large part to the extraordinary success of Hal Lindsey's "The Late Great Planet Earth," which became the best-selling nonfiction book of the nineteen-seventies. Lindsey's next books, including "The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon" and "The Rapture," drew on the teachings of John Nelson Darby, an Anglo-Irish dispensationalist, who, in the eighteen-thirties, conceived the notion that God would whisk the righteous up to Heaven right before the Tribulation—a period of lawlessness, sinfulness, suffering, and the machinations of the Antichrist. Darby gave it its nifty name, the Rapture, thus adding an exciting new wrinkle to the Apocalypse. Less fervent Protestant denominations demurred, but the Rapture helped fill evangelical churches while creating a mainstream end-of-times industry. Between 1995 and 2007, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins produced the sixteen-novel "Left Behind" series, which sold more than eighty million copies, and today there seem to be more Bible-driven books about the end of the world than there are virgins in Heaven.

For many of the books' readers, it's just a question of time. According to a 2022 report by the Pew Research Center, fourteen per cent of all Christians in the U.S. "believe that Jesus will definitely or probably return in their lifetime." That fourteen per cent represents some thirty million Americans who right now are planning to spend a thousand years in a Messianic kingdom on earth or else speed directly to Heaven. It may be closed-minded to ask, but how much do the rising oceans matter to them? If the Second Coming is on the earthly horizon, might not your concern for the horizon's health be somewhat limited?

"Extreme weather" is the foremost contender for presenting us with a "material crisis on a global scale," the World Economic Forum's 2024 "Global Risks Report" stipulated. Scorching heat could render large parts of the planet uninhabitable, even as coastal cities are submerged beneath rising seas.

Melting permafrost could release vast amounts of methane and accelerate global warming, causing the collapse of the Gulf Stream and other boundary currents and further destabilizing the earth's ecosystems. But, just when we thought it was unsafe to go into the water, along come other scientific authorities who claim that the sharks are farther offshore than we think. Last year, Hannah Ritchie, a senior researcher in the Programme on Global Development, at Oxford, gave us "Not the End of the World," whose subtitle assures us that "We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet." What's a poor climate ignoramus supposed to think?

It does seem obvious, though, that we're moving too slowly to stop climate change. This slowness, I once believed, was due to the slowness of the change. Sultry summer days aside, we're just not sweating enough. But no, things are actually worse than we think, David Wallace-Wells says resoundingly in "The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming" (2019). "The slowness of climate change is a fairy tale," he writes, "perhaps as pernicious as the one that says it isn't happening at all."

And there's plenty more to worry about. Russia and America have approximately ten thousand nuclear weapons between them, and at least twice—in 1962 and 1983—human error almost launched a nuclear attack. When the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* introduced the iconic Doomsday Clock on its June, 1947, cover—designed by the artist Martyl Langsdorf, the wife of a Manhattan Project physicist—the clock was set at 11:53 P.M. Last year, all we had left were ninety seconds. It's not hard to understand why. Fusion has taken its place alongside fission, Putin has succeeded Stalin, and Iran may soon develop its own bomb. God figures less than ever in precincts of apocalyptic thinking. We can take care of our own destruction, thank you very much.

Perhaps even with assistance from our digital helpmeets. The philosopher Toby Ord, a senior researcher at Oxford, believes that we face an existential threat from

"unaligned artificial intelligence"—that is, A.I. whose values no longer coincide with ours. One fine morning, some incarnation of A.I. might decide, for reasons of its own, to change things up, much as Skynet did in the "Terminator" movies. Ice caps may continue to melt while coral reefs bleach in the hot oceans, but it's the descendants of Karel Čapek's Czech robots that may do us in.

Lynskey allots space to all sorts of apocalypses, but, for the most part,"Everything Must Go" is doom without the gloom. His accounts of natural disasters are leavened not only by the imaginary disasters in his purview but also by his obvious enjoyment of them. If, on occasion, the prose is slightly purple—artists "dipped their pens in the foaming ink of revelation"—the book's own stock of revelations never runs short. Did you know that Stanley Kubrick was so convinced of imminent nuclear war when filming "Dr. Strangelove" that he made plans to move to Australia? Or that the Pentagon took issue with Stanley Kramer's film "On the Beach," because the brass maintained that only five hundred million people would die in a nuclear war and not, as the film suggests, basically everyone? Or that J. G. Ballard, deservedly famous for his dystopian fiction, raised the idea "that the human spirit might be somehow transfigured by an apocalyptic nuclear war, even at the cost of millions of deaths"?

It's only because Lynskey's book is so thoroughly researched that one notices peculiar omissions. Why, for example, does Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" rate

inclusion but not Bryan Walsh's sobering "End Times: A Brief Guide to the End of the World" or Elizabeth Kolbert's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Sixth Extinction"? Such absences don't detract from Lynskey's achievement—they're just head-scratchers. On the plus side, a section titled "Climate," which tips its hat to Rachel Carson, Bill McKibben, Jonathan Schell, and Jonathan Franzen, is, in its way, an implicit tribute to this magazine's informed recognition that what threatens the environment threatens us. Indeed, in a survey of people around the world between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, fifty-six per cent agreed that "humanity is doomed."

Endings are invitations to ruminate, but not every ending has to be apocalyptic. Sara Teasdale's lovely poem "There Will Come Soft Rains" concludes, "Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree / If mankind perished utterly; / And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn, / Would scarcely know that we were gone." Which points to another problem with the Apocalypse: it leaves no room for melancholy. Instead, it speaks to our need for order and for a narrative that circumvents simple chronology. The Christmas story gets even better when you know that Christ will return. It's certainly better than any man-made apocalypse, since a secular one is the end of us, while the original lets us go on.

That's the thing about the Apocalypse: for all its nuttiness, its fire and brimstone, and the agonies of the Tribulation, it offers both closure and continuation. We get to live our happily ever after, and with Jesus. But then what? Christianity rubber-stamps the Apocalypse without considering what continuation really means. True, some people get tossed into a fiery lake, but what about the saved? Perhaps it's best not to know. The truth is, a world that endures forever actually makes less sense than one that doesn't. And the same goes for us. We can imagine existing a thousand years, maybe even ten thousand—but a million? Surely Heaven will present us with a few longueurs.

Scriptural literalists may welcome Christ's charging down from Heaven as the last step in the plan that God set in motion, His purpose for creation finally achieved,

but for the less millennially inclined this is an ending that effectively diminishes whatever came before it. If the Apocalypse is a fact, then all other facts follow obediently toward its realization, making human agency and history itself beside the point. This is what the theologian Martin Buber found so objectionable. "Everything here is predetermined, all human decisions are only sham struggles," he wrote. "The future does not come to pass; the future is already present."

Buber especially disliked what he termed "faith in doom," which inhibits us from living authentically and in harmony with God. But what Buber considered ruinous is what many fundamentalist Christians, knowingly or not, continue to prize: the idea that history is already written and that a state of permanent imminence not only exists in the future but also overlaps with our harsh or meaningless present. For them, prophecy, even when it falls short, is always preferable to uncertainty. For the rest of us, though, certainty is unavailable, and we're left to ponder which perilous force—nuclear, climatic, or biological—will get us first.

Augustine connected our anxiety about the Last Days to a fear of death. I'm not so sure. Not to get too existential about it, but existence itself may be the source of such anxiety. It isn't just that we find ourselves asking what it's all about ("Is that all there is?," as Peggy Lee used to sing); it's the deep-rooted suspicion that, whatever "it" is, it amounts to nothing. Kierkegaard famously made the leap into faith because he had come to the conclusion that he had little choice. It was either faith or nothing: "I stick my finger into existence—it smells of nothing. Where am I? Who am I? How came I here? . . . And if I am to be compelled to take part in it, where is the director?" We know where the director is, and his movie is about both the Christmas story and the Apocalypse.

If an ending must come, let it be from the stars. The universe gave us birth; let it give us death as well. But it will take time. The sun provides heat and light, the moon keeps the tides in check, and the planets revolve nicely around a star that's

neither too small nor too large, and just the right temperature. It almost makes you think that someone had a hand in it.

And wouldn't you know it: the signs are lining up again. After nearly two and a half millennia, the Jews are back in Israel and messianic messengers stalk the halls of power in both Iran and the Knesset. Autocrats rule nations whose war chests are brimming with nukes and the missiles to deliver them. Wouldn't it be a hoot if the Hebrew prophets were right and Judgment Day is at hand? Should it come, however, there had better be a convincing explanation for all the misery and suffering that human beings have always inflicted on one another. Christ on a horse does not atone for the gas chambers.

In the meantime, in between time, we exist in a kind of cosmic game of checks and balances that works amazingly well, as long as we avoid destroying ourselves or being struck by an Earth-seeking asteroid. And while we wait let's keep in mind that the Earth is an infinitesimal dot on the skein of existence. Perhaps a hundred billion stars exist in our galaxy alone—and who knows how many planets? Moreover, there are as many as two trillion galaxies in just the observable universe. Do I need to spell it out? The end of the world is small potatoes.

Having to come to terms with this eventuality is the price we pay for being able to imagine it in the first place. And because we can, Lynskey's darker forebodings become, in their own compendious way, almost heartening. So many dire prophecies, so many pronouncements of doom from clerics and secularists alike, so many tributaries flowing toward extinction—yet here we are. And here we remain until we or the universe decides otherwise. ♦

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