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Title of Collection: **The Ends of the World**

There is something uncomfortably reassuring about reading about the end of the world. It's as if spitting it out on paper purges its possibility from appearing the future. Dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels allow us to experience the unease of "what if" while removed and comfortable in our living room sitting chairs. We can read as the world cracks apart into madness while waiting for dinner to be ready.

There is something obscene in all of them. Something that rings true about the terrifying reality of human nature, wrapped as it may be beneath layers of nuclear holocaust, plague, war, famine, alien invasion, overpopulation, zombie uprising or some other disaster. A few supply us a measure of hope at the end – *The Giver*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Anthem*, or *Fahrenheit 451* to name a few. But the overwhelming majority leaves us lost, shaking our heads because *that can't be how it ends*. Can we really end like this? After all these years of progress, thousands of years of art, science and discovery, can we end in oblivion?

Coming close to that oblivion is an addiction. It's a nagging itch that lingers throughout the day as the milk is poured and the dishes are put away. A good dystopian novel will change us, pull out the carpet of normalcy from under us and force us to scrutinize the unswept floor beneath. They should make us think, *are we headed there now?* For me, I first felt the pull with *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. I came across *The Giver* in the fifth grade at my school library during Mandatory Reading Period. It was only a matter of time before I found it, hiding there amid the stacks. I was not one to idle during Mandatory Reading Period; I must have looked through every book at least once. It was a quick read and maddeningly short. The ending, with all its implicit reasons and open-ended interpretations left me puzzled, even unsettled for days. All the books I had consumed before this were neatly packaged worlds with a clear beginning and closure at the end. *The Giver* was disorienting in its lack. If I read it again, just to be sure I hadn't missed anything. I read anything I could about *The Giver*, including the companion novel *Gathering Blue* in order to extract greater insight into Lois Lowry's intentions. Frustratingly, people applauded the uncertain ending, even giving her a Newberry Medal for her brilliance. I branched out into anything remotely similar – strange old books rotting in my attic, fantasy, science fiction, *Harry Potter* – in order to feel that pull again. *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle came close, with its strange notions of space travel, tesseract and great and terrible evils, but a book my sister found at the local Borders called *Z for Zachariah* by Robert O'Brien was the true inheritor. It was a book on independence, loneliness, survival and the end of the world. I would not be able to find anything so mentally challenging again until high school. The series that tided me over during my Dark Ages was *Left Behind* by Jerry Jenkins, a fantastical version of the biblical apocalypse about the Antichrist and the struggle of Christianity during the End Times.

Although the unraveling of each society is unique, each novel unfolds naturally enough. There is an Event, a trigger, that causes society as we know it to collapse. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Z for Zachariah*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Obernewtyn Chronicles*, *The Postman*, *On the Beach*, and *Alas, Babylon* all deal with the consequences of a nuclear holocaust. Some, like *The Postman*, *Z for Zachariah*, *The Obernewtyn Chronicles* or *Alas, Babylon* offer a glimpse back into the light of a civilized society. Although death and destruction reign, there is a chance for humanity to rebuild itself, even if we haven't solved all our societal ills. *The Obernewtyn Chronicles* by Isabelle Carmody introduces "misfits" or people with powers such as telepathy,

animal communication, empathy or healing into the world. Like those without gifts, they must cope with the consequences of the Beforetime, such as remnant technology and blighted land, as well as fight for equality and acceptance in their own time. *The Postman* by David Brin ends with much of the United States still in tatters but a belief that order will eventually be restored. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter Miller, however, details the destruction and renewal of civilized society over a thousand year period that ends with another nuclear war.

War provides the basis for such classics as *1984*, *The Forever War* and *We*. Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* may be the most underrated post apocalyptic novel I own. It's themes of totalitarianism, collectivism and the loss of aestheticism are recycled in novels such as *Brave New World*, *1984* and *Anthem* but it is rarely cited as a great dystopian novel. Plague novels, in all their vile, varied forms, were always the most feasible, and therefore even more disturbing. *The Stand*, *I am Legend*, *Oryx and Crake*, *World War Z* and *Blindness*, to name a few, are the hardest to digest. That sheer volume of illness can overwhelm modern medicine, grind society to a halt and even reverse it, reveals how precariously our world sits at the edge of oblivion. *The Stand* is a monstrous work by Steven King detailing in exquisite detail how society crumbles when a plague is accidentally released by the government. No other work tackles the transition into a post-apocalyptic world with such macabre alacrity and sweeping pop culture commentary.

High school was my renaissance, my rediscovery of old works and exploration of the new. I sifted through the forgotten tomes in my parent's attic and finished *1984* by George Orwell and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley by my freshman year. A friend lent me the first *Obernewtyn Chronicle* in Honors Biology and I was so infatuated with its plot, the next week I went to my local bookstore and picked up the rest of them. *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess jumped out at me from a table of classic works and I was so intrigued by the title I had no choice but to buy it too. The mere name of it promised a read quite like anything else, and I was not disappointed. *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury was required for class my sophomore year. Despite delving deep into the metaphors and themes of the work, I did not grow to hate it, much to my chagrin. After all, for a bibliophile since age three, memorizing books to save humanity was a premise I could get behind, if only I could decide which one to choose. I found *The Stand* during a Steven King phase at a used bookstore during a family vacation. I read it carefully, a little ashamed at reading such a lewd, disturbing novel while we passed through the cornfields of Iowa on our way to see the west coast. *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and *Anthem* by Ayn Rand followed shortly after, on different family sojourns.

Undergraduate life at Johns Hopkins should have zapped my zeal for books. Where was the time, amid the papers, problem sets and lab work, to read anything for the pleasure of it? But one of Baltimore's greatest treasures for any bibliophile is the Book Thing, a free bookstore on Vineyard and Greenmount, and my collection almost doubled in my four years here. I discovered *The Postman*, *The Forever War*, *Brave New World Revisited*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *We* over many, many weekend visits poring over its unsorted shelves in search of missing pieces. I did, begrudgingly, purchase the remaining *Obernewtyn Chronicles* books that I had neglected to update since high school, as well as *Neuromancer*, which I had heard of often but never bothered to acquire. I assumed it must be worth holding onto, so I bought it from the university bookstore and read it as well as *The Postman* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* over a weekend in a burst of dystopian fervor. Sophomore year I rescued *R. U. R* by Karel Apek from a friend who finished a class on automatons in fiction and was unwilling to keep it. Although I have never warmed to plays, *R.U.R* proved to be one of my favorite books that semester.

The dystopian books that linger well past their due, like ink slowly seeping into fabric, are those without any Event at all. *The Road*, *The Giver*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Brave New World* all involve great societal disruption without explanation. It's either implied, as in *The Road* or a gradual fall, as in *A Clockwork Orange*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World* and *The Giver*. I am not surprised that those books that leave the horror open ended, that allow us to weave our own nightmarish scenarios and craft a world distinct through our interpretations, are the most celebrated of all. These are the titans of dystopian fiction, the masterpieces that craft elaborate futures but allow us to imprint ourselves onto its pages. I am pleased to own these few, but I am not finished. There are a great many more to acquire – *Blindness*, *The Day of the Triffids*, *Lucifer's Hammer*, *Oryx and Crake* – each with their own flavor of the end of the world. I would love to delve into older dystopian novels such as *The Day of the Triffids*, *Lucifer's Hammer*, *After London*, or *Bend Sinister* to see how the end has changed with time. I am also sorely lacking Philip K. Dick Novels, especially the much glorified *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

In the back of my mind, the itch for these worlds always lingers. On ordinary days, after class and research, dinner and emails, when things are at the apex of normalcy, and we think to ourselves *where is my life going?* dystopian novels are there to remind us of the things we take for granted. They are there to assure us that despite any hardships we may encounter, despite days ruined by flat tires, broken glasses and rainy weather, we can always say to ourselves *that could have been much, much worse.*

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#### Works Cited

1. Apek, Karel. *R.U.R.*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.  
The first source to coin the term “robot”, this play describes the robot usurpation of the human race as the dominant consciousness. Emotions, however, do not die with humanity. This has become one of my favorite plays, and I believe it was well ahead of its time.
2. Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.

A “feminist” interpretation of a dystopian world, in which the act of sex becomes a ritual symbol as well as rebellion, I read this book at a Catholic high school during abortion and premarital sex debates. In this context, this book became a warning against taking those age old arguments too lightly.

3. Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1987.

Books are banned as society gradually decays and burned when found. Such a concept alarmed me when I first read this. I knew I too, would rather be burned alive than give up my books, and I imagined elaborate schemes on where to best hide my stash. I have yet to settle on a book I could memorize and keep alive forever, however.

4. Brin, David. *The Postman*. New York: Bantam Books, 1985.

A complex saga about the power of symbols and order fighting against chaos, this book left me emotionally exhausted by the end. Chapter after chapter I waited for a final victory, a message of hope that things could still be better. I had to wait until the very last page to find some shred of optimism, but it was worth the wait.

5. Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. New York: Norton, 1995.

What is there to say about Anthony Burgess’s linguistic, cultural masterpiece that hasn’t already been said? Cruelty, violence with Nietzsche and Beethoven and an abrupt last chapter that unraveled everything again, this book revealed to me the power of language, the importance of free will and the need for greater understanding of violence in our society.

6. Carmody, Isobelle. *The Obernewtyn Chronicles*. Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin Books, 2002.

Although this is a children’s book, per se, the series is not slated to be finished until November 2011 and I intend to collect them all. Even after a five year gap, the characters remained as vivid as ever and I devoured the books in one sitting. A strong, independent female character is the savior of the world, and despite countless obstacles, she just succeed.

7. Engle, Madeleine. *A Wrinkle in Time*. New York: Farrar, Straus, And Giroux, 1962.

This book may be part of the reason I became a scientist. Suddenly science could battle the forces of evil in its search for truth, and complex mathematics could lead the way to higher dimensions and space travel. These were quite the life altering concepts for a fifth grader!

8. Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: Penguin, 1984.

Not one of my favorite reads, but a classic none the less, I am sure if I read this book before growing up with the internet I would have been dazed by its predictions. The cultural jargon in this book was difficult for me to get through, and although I don’t agree with the ending, I am sure that our future will be closer to William Gibson’s predictions than anyone else’s’.

9. Haldeman, Joe W.. *The Forever War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

A strange book about war in space and the effects on society back on earth, this book brilliantly handled the notion of relativity, century long technology development and the failures of species to communicate. The questionable morality of war is all the more poignant during my own *Forever War*. I have an aunt and uncle in the Navy, one of my good friends in the Marine Corps and my best friend’s father a military police officer in Afghanistan.

10. Jenkins, Jerry B. *Left Behind*. Colorado Springs: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1998.

The bible’s book of Revelation comes true, in all its sordid detail and those left on earth have seven years to pick up the pieces before the world ends completely. This is probably the most mass-consumed book on this list, and for good reason. The writing is brilliant, entertaining and thought provoking. After these books, I became more interested in other cultural and religious doomsday scenarios, but I have yet to find another work of fiction quite like it.

11. Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: Harper, 1946.

I must admit, when I first read this book I favored *1984* as the epitome of dystopian novels, but as the years have gone on I recognize the Huxley's vision as a more plausible scenario. The world is becoming more desensitized and seeking greater distractions while our civil rights are gradually eroded.

12. Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World Revisited*. New York: Harper, 1958.

Huxley expands his views in these essays and pleads even greater urgency on matters such as world health, dictatorships, democracies and propaganda. An excellent companion novel, I am now more cognizant than ever to mindless entertainment and the authenticity of power.

13. King, Stephen. *The Stand*. New York: Penguin Group, 1991.

A horrifying tale much in the style of King's other works, *The Stand's* exquisite detail during the collapse of society and the task of the remainder eroded my confidence in the health care system to avert such a crisis but reassured my belief in the triumph of good vs. evil.

14. Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

The first dystopian novel I read, and my most beloved, I still think back to the implications of this book and its characters.

15. Matheson, Richard. *I am Legend*. New York: Doherty, Tom Associates, Llc, 1997.

A human becoming the boogeyman of vampires was a twist I did not see coming. The struggle for one man to find a cure and restore humanity against overwhelming odds was exhausting. I found myself rooting for the vampires to take his burden away.

16. McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

The Event is never revealed and the back story is only hinted at but *The Road* does more with sparse detail and implied situations than any lavishly filled 500 word opus. Hemmingway, one of my favorite authors, suddenly came alive again in one of my favorite genres.

17. Miller, Walter M.. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. New York: Bantam Books, 1997.

Another book with religious overtones, Miller's thousand year epic through the rise, fall and rise again of humanity almost gave me hope that we would learn from history's mistakes. Alas, he yanked the rug out from under me before I could have that satisfaction. As a Catholic, this book was an interesting hagiography as well as dystopian piece.

18. O'Brien, Robert C.. *Z for Zachariah*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1987.

Another early read of mine, O'Brien's strong female lead dealing with an intruder into her valley amid loneliness and radioactivity gave me much to contemplate for weeks.

19. Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Signet / New American Library, 1981.

2+2=4, Big Brother, doublespeak - all are becoming increasingly important in a world drowning in information and lacking in truth. This book showed me for the first time what a malevolent government was capable of.

20. Rand, Ayn. *Anthem*. New York: Plume, 1999.

I am a huge fan of Ayn Rand's other works, and *Anthem* did not disappoint.

21. Zamyatin, Yevgeny Ivanovich. *We*. New York: Plume, 1959.

*We* and its themes cropped up everywhere after I read it. I have a lack of foreign authors in my collection, and I am quite proud to own this particular one.

## Wish List

1. Adams, John Joseph. *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse*. San Francisco: Nightshade Book, 2008.

I have seen this book on numerous occasions, and would love to own an anthology of dystopian short stories.

2. Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake: a novel*. New York: Nan A. Talese, 2003.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was life changing, and I can't wait to get a copy of this plague inspired work about the consequences of genetic engineering for my collection.

3. Bachman, Richard. *The Long Walk*. New York: Signet, 1979.

Another Steven King work I would love to own, in all its exquisite detail.

4. Ballard, J. G.. *The Drowned World*. London: Millennium, 1962.

The main character does not go slowly mad or even suffer trauma over the consequences of the end of the world, but instead embraces it. Such a thing is unheard of to me, in all my other works, and I wonder if I would like or loath this new change.

5. Barry, Max. *Jennifer Government*. London: Time Warner Books UK, 2003.

Corporate takeover of the government seems more inevitable with each passing day. A book devoted to developing this theme is sorely missed from my collection.

6. Brooks, Max. *World War Z*. New York: Crown, 2006.

I laughed when I heard about this book. Zombies? How can that be any good? I have heard stellar reviews, however, and its only a matter of time before the zombies get to me too.

7. Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968.

*Blade Runner* is one of my favorite movies, and I am keenly aware of not having access to its source material.

8. Forstchen, William R. *One Second After*. New York: Forge, 2009.

A more modern tale of electromagnetic disruption and its consequences in a world increasingly plugged in, I would love to read a book that tackles these concepts.

9. James, P. D. *The Children of Men*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993.

I have heard great reviews of the movie, but even better ones of the book. Overpopulation is suddenly turned on its head, and I am always looking for an interesting twist.

10. Jefferies, Richard. *After London*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Pub., 1885.

I am always searching for older post apocalyptic works to see how times have changed and if the disturbing quality to the end is still there.

11. Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Bend Sinister*. New York: Time Inc., 1947.

Another older work by a foreign author. Much like *A Clockwork Orange*, I am drawn to this from the interesting title as well as the atypical plot.

12. Niven, Larry, and Jerry Pournelle. *Lucifer's Hammer*. Chicago: Playboy Press, 1977.

I own no works about meteor strikes, and this is a clear choice to fill that void. The failure of scientists is a subject I would also like to explore in this genre.

13. Nolan, William F., and George Clayton Johnson. *Logan's Run*. New York: Dell, 1986.

Novels involving characters switching from bad to good have always interested me. *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451* did this exquisitely well, I am most assuredly going to add this gem to my collection.

14. Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Years of Rice and Salt*. New York: Bantam Books, 2002.

Until this book, I did not know that historical dystopian novels existed. I would like to read this and branch further into that area.

15. Saramago, José. *Blindness*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1998.

Saramago is a Nobel prize winning author. The Hugo, Philip K. Dick and Nebula award winning books I own would be jealous of such an acquisition, but I'll just keep them in a different room.

16. Shute, Nevil. *On the Beach*. New York: W. Morrow, 1957.

Another classic I have failed to acquire.

17. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Player Piano*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1952.

I am a fan of Vonnegut, and I have heard only whispers about this novel. I own many of his other works and would love to add this to both collections.

18. Weisman, Alan. *The World Without Us*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2007.

A nonfiction story that would be my second after *Brave New World Revisited*. I have seen the miniseries and was so pleased by the results I am excited to add this to my collection in the future.

19. Wyndham, John. *The Chrysalids*. London: M. Joseph, 1955.

An early work involving Christian overtones would fit nicely between *We* and *Left Behind*.

20. Wyndham, John. *The Day of the Triffids*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951.

An early, strange work about man-eating plants would be splendid to find in its first edition. I will more than likely settle, however, and pick this up with 19 at the nearest Barnes and Noble.