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## **NOTES FROM AN APOCALYPSE: A PERSONAL JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE WORLD AND BACK (2020) BY MARK O'CONNELL**

Review by Oliver Rendle

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O'Connell, Mark. *Notes From An Apocalypse: A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back*. Granta Books, 2020.

It may be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but the former does not necessitate the latter. In fact, according to *Notes From An Apocalypse: A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back* (2020), a small proportion of the Western world is already securing its economic privilege, anticipating and even investing in the prospect of various immanent catastrophes. Documenting a range of Western obsessions with 'TEOTWAWKI (The End of the World as We Know It),' *Notes From An Apocalypse* is a difficult book to categorise; displaying, as it does, first-hand experience, literary criticism, and emotionally compromised bias in equal measures (25). Researched prior to 2020 (a year whose events have seen a sense of apocalypticism explode across online, print, and broadcast media), *Notes From an Apocalypse* expands on the mortal preoccupations explored through the author's award-winning *To Be a Machine* (2017). Scaling up the existential threat from the demise of the individual to the demise of the human race in its entirety, Mark O'Connell's new book is a dryly humorous and ethically disturbing exploration of the prospect of death on a global scale. By confronting the complexity of twenty-first century apocalypticism, therefore, *Notes From an Apocalypse* reflects stereotypical Western attitudes towards worst-case scenarios and the author's reluctant identification with selfish and competitive ideological positions.

Apocalyptic narratives have underpinned human civilisation for millennia – “from Ragnarok to Revelation to *The Road*,” as O'Connell puts it – each vision reflecting the specific socio-historical anxieties of the culture it arose from (11). Hence *Notes From An Apocalypse* follows in the footsteps of prior studies of apocalyptic fiction (see, for instance, Heather Hicks, 2016) when it insists that its “true concern is the present moment” (18). The premise of the book itself is deceptively simple: in each main chapter O'Connell presents first-hand research and encounters with Western groups that are seriously anticipating some form of apocalypse. During the course of each account he scrutinises how said groups envision this cataclysm, their attitude towards it, and how they intend to react to its arrival. Like the subjects of O'Connell's research, therefore, *Notes From An Apocalypse* uses the looming prospect of global catastrophe to interrogate perceived flaws in the present – the difference being that O'Connell is self-consciously attempting to get ahead of this process. In so doing, O'Connell's book not only grants his readers a window into the future (or *futures*, to be more accurate), it also reveals the political ideologies that are bringing these apocalypses into fruition.

Following an introspective introduction that outlines the aims and hypocrisies of this project, O'Connell opens his book by delving into the racism, sexism, and escapism represented by "preppers": (overwhelmingly) right-wing males whose self-aggrandising discourse glorifies machismo and consumerism in their gleeful anticipation of a "SHTF ("shit hits the fan") situation" (21). O'Connell makes said groups' "good old-fashioned original style fascism" plain to see, sardonically using them as a vehicle to mock right-wing agendas before the proceeding three chapters follow this exclusionary impulse up the economic scale (29). Chapter Two therefore sees O'Connell travel to South Dakota to meet Robert Vicinio, a "real estate magnate for the end of days" who openly exploits apocalyptic fears/fantasies (44). Vicinio shows O'Connell the converted weapons silos that he trades in and, as if aware of apocalyptic fiction's externalising function, demonstrates how his sales pitch is built upon a smorgasbord of apocalyptic scenarios. It would be naïve to describe O'Connell's account as objective, yet in the image of this sexist, closet anti-Semite's utopian vision of a subterranean suburbia (lifted straight from the pages of Harlan Ellison's *A Boy and His Dog*, 1969) it is not difficult to discern a "nightmarish inversion of the American dream" (65).

While Chapters One and Two depict the desire to reclaim and preserve society respectively (namely through poorly concealed notions of social, economic, and ethnic cleansing), the next two chapters present Western groups abandoning their societies entirely. Chapter Four, for instance, explores a more glamorous alternative to Vicinio's vaults, following O'Connell to the luxury New Zealand boltholes already being fortified by venture capitalists and Silicon Valley moguls. Focusing on Paypal cofounder Peter Thiel as the epitome of this movement, O'Connell convincingly reveals how this "island haven amid a rising tide of apocalyptic unease" is becoming an exclusive lifeboat for the wealthiest minority (73). Stretching the definition of a prepper to breaking-point, Chapter Five then examines how billionaire entrepreneurs are looking to the stars to help them abandon ship. Here O'Connell meets with the Mars Society, foregrounding the prepper ideology bound up in their interplanetary colonial ambitions and revealed by their exclusionist rhetoric. These fleeing expatriates and would-be pioneers, O'Connell argues, are cherry-picking apocalyptic narratives to justify avoiding the much-resented social and ecological caretaking that present societies require.

Although O'Connell is clearly horrified by the exclusionary politics reflected by these prepper ideologies (and it would be ridiculous to call this book politically impartial), this does not mean that he finds left-wing apocalypticism more affirmatory. Chapter Six, for instance, sees the author meet the Dark Mountain Project, a group of liberal thinkers and ecologically minded individuals assuaging their eco-despair with communal trips to wilderness areas. Accompanying one such trip to the Scottish Highlands, O'Connell tries to empathise with the group's eco-fatalism, partaking in a "nature solo" to better understand his transitory role in the "sublime" natural order (165, 181). Ultimately, though, the author dismisses this defeatism as blinkered and selfish, reasoning that one cannot flee from environmental responsibilities as "[t]here is no place where you are outside of power" (182). Indeed, to try and convince yourself otherwise is a political act of wilful blindness. Reiterating this condemnation, Chapter Seven shows how actual apocalypses have already been absorbed into capitalism through a visit to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Here, in a place that is both "a prelapsarian paradise" and a "post-apocalyptic wasteland," the author meets the tour

operators and (re)settlers ('samoseli') whose livelihoods are built on this "graveyard of progress," and whose local economy attests to humanity's ability to normalise and commercialise its own destruction (190, 191, 203). Somewhat an outlier in this book for focusing on a clearly demarcated catastrophe that has already happened, the salient feature of this chapter, however, is the ethical hypocrisy of O'Connell's "extreme tourism" (184). No matter how noble his motives are for visiting the Exclusion Zone (or interacting with any of these groups, for that matter), O'Connell recognises that he cannot escape the fact that he is consuming a product, that he is complicit in a system that exploits human suffering.

This hypocrisy itself comes to the forefront of O'Connell's book, the encounters ultimately serving as a framework for the author to interrogate his own apocalyptic anxieties – particularly anti-natalism, fatalism, and the sustainability of political freedom, empathy, and honesty. After all, what separates O'Connell's critique of end-of-the-world planning from much prior research concerning apocalyptic narratives is the author's personal investment in said plans' efficacy, not to mention his conviction that such preparations will be imminently necessary. Consequently, the scathing accounts that O'Connell delivers are subsumed somewhat by an overriding sense of guilt and complacency, the cumulative effect of each chapter being one of pointed introspection. For instance, even after O'Connell explains why he finds the 'preppers' socio-political values "reprehensible" and their "shared escapist fantasy about an imagined return to the American frontier" absurd, he openly admits to identifying with the existential and social fears that underpin such ideologies (39, 27). After describing how one man's survivalist lifestyle drove their wife away (lingering on the irony of a rugged individualist resorting to eating his apocalypse rations because he cannot cook), O'Connell remarks that this ridiculous man "was an outlandish avatar of [his] own anxieties and meta-anxieties" (38). Such instances epitomise and perform the personal crisis which O'Connell's book recounts: the ecologist's Gordian knot of paralysing fears concerning oneself and loved ones, the damage such obsessions can have on personal relationships, and a selfish desire to live comfortably and happily.

O'Connell's repeated consideration of his own privilege, his own collusion in the inequalities that he is so clearly repulsed by, conjures an inescapably distraught tone (or perhaps a distraught sense of inescapable-ness), one best encapsulated in the book's opening pages. From the very first line ("It was the end of the world, and I was sitting on the couch watching cartoons with my son") *Notes From An Apocalypse* makes clear what its subtitle indicates – this really is a "Personal Journey" – while simultaneously demonstrating that it must be (1, my emphasis). Of the many anecdotal vignettes O'Connell invokes throughout his work (including, but not limited to, discussions with his wife, therapist, children, total strangers, and a lengthy analysis of Dr Seuss' *The Lorax*, 1971) this initial tableau is perhaps the most apt vehicle for the book's message. As his son watches the *Loony Tunes*-esque hijinks of a cartoon bear, O'Connell hides a click-bait video of an emaciated polar bear scrounging through bins. The terrifying similarities between the two creatures (both suffering in the name of commercialism, prosperity, and entertainment) are not lost upon the author, nor is the irony that the manner in which he is watching this scene is, indirectly, the cause of the polar bear's suffering. Saddened and repulsed by what he sees, O'Connell hides the video from his son, not wanting this child to live in a world where such scenes exist, even while admitting that

this species-wide self-delusion is perpetuating and exacerbating the climate crisis. And, thankfully, in a book so bleak, O'Connell makes the absurdity of such a situation as plain as possible. Indeed, throughout the text O'Connell repeatedly juxtaposes the mundane with the existentially terrifying, lacing his disparagement of right-wing principals and human exceptionalism with dead-pan humour – one that inevitably returns to attack him in the form of guilt, anxiety, and unanswerable moral dilemmas.

The obvious scorn O'Connell feels towards those people and ideologies he encounters is therefore rescued from sheer vanity by the author's acknowledgement of his own hypocrisy, his own complicity, indirectly inviting the reader to reconsider the moral and ethical complexities of the current age. While the authorial voice may appear a little arrogant on occasion (no amount of ironic comments on pretentiousness rescues an author from pretentiousness, unfortunately, and what, exactly, does a "supercilious Scandinavian accent" sound like?), such instances are hardly out-of-place in a book that explicitly foregrounds the hubris of the modern subject (120). *Notes From An Apocalypse* is by no means a cheerful read, the questions it raises are mostly left unanswered, including a particularly tragic impasse regarding anti-natalism. Here, O'Connell's doubts over the ethical implications of reproduction continually appear alongside startlingly heartfelt accounts of his own children – who seem, at times, to be the author's only source of joy. Yet questions are raised, moral and ethical questions that are intrinsically linked to scientific research but cannot (or should not) be divorced from their emotional and inter-social dimensions.

Cathartic, witty, and often deeply tragic, *Notes From An Apocalypse* inhabits a difficult middle-ground somewhere between impersonal academic discourse and anecdotal journalism, frankly presenting various Western relationships to apocalyptic narratives – but not without an explicitly subjective agenda. O'Connell's book therefore bridges a gap between rational speculation and personal diatribe, quite appropriately combining the two approaches in its form and content. By confronting such issues without compromise, though, without resorting to soothing platitudes and pacifying affirmation, O'Connell's book presents a startling insight into the emotional and political conflicts that afflict a significant number of individuals in an age of apocalypticism. The efficacy of such a project and its ability to mediate impending disasters will remain up for debate – though not in perpetuity. Even so, this work does promise to shed light on a fascinating intersection between visions of the future and perceptions of the world in the present moment. While being neither a strictly academic work nor didactic manifesto, therefore, O'Connell's book remains a timely offshoot of apocalypse studies and a crushingly honest foray into the moral and ethical dilemmas that mark the twenty-first century.

## BIONOTE

**Oliver Rendle** is currently undertaking his PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University's Centre for Gothic Studies, where he researches nihilistic satire, philosophically cynical humour, and their relationship to sociopolitical disillusion in contemporary culture. He is a graduate of the University of Glasgow's Fantasy MLitt program, where he specialised in humour theory and existential horror, and he has presented papers on these topics at Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations, Fantastika, and Tales of Terror.