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Notes from the Post-Apocalypse

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Notes From the Post-Apocalypse

Super-flu, global warming, ice caps melting, massive flooding, earthquake, epidemic, nuclear winter, poisoned water, zombies, aliens, and man-eating plants: these are the ways the world could end, if you believe the books in my collection. Since I was twelve years old, I have been collecting stories of disaster and keeping them on my bookshelf. A morbid hobby, perhaps, but when I look at my collection of post-apocalyptic fiction I see not only classic novels, but also ten years of rewarding effort. There is no set of books I would rather have lining my shelves than this dramatic and exciting collection of messages from the post-apocalypse.

My first encounter with this genre came when I was a student at a Catholic grade school and I rescued an old paperback copy of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* out of the “rejected” pile of donated library books. There were many books in that pile, but this novel’s imposing red cover caught my eye. It depicted a dramatic black-cloaked figure carrying a scepter, and in general had such a look of hellfire that I was not surprised the Catholic school library had turned it away. I was curious, so I slipped the book under the waistband of my plaid jumper and snuck it home. I started reading that night, and instantly fell in love with the desperate mix of tragedy and hope that characterizes post-apocalyptic fiction. I was used to the quiet routine of living in my small, rural hometown, but as I turned the pages in my darkened bedroom, I saw new worlds opening for me under the beam of my flashlight. I knew I had to get my hands on more like it, and I promised myself that I would find and read as many as I could. I have kept that promise, and I have enjoyed every minute.

Alex Barger

In the last ten years, my quest has taken me from tales of devastating nuclear wars and their aftermath, to apocalyptic plagues, to dire predictions of the final consequences of global warming. The stories are tragic, but for me the appeal lies in the strength of the characters whose worlds have come to an end but who manage to persist and reconstruct their lives. Every time I pick up a new rendition of doomsday and the rebuilding that follows, I am inspired all over again. This is one reason I have kept collecting over the last decade. Another is the addictive process of collecting itself. The owner of my hometown used bookstore knows about my collection and helps me by keeping an eye out for new material. It's so exciting to walk in and watch him pull a book or two out from beneath the register and ask, "Is this what you're looking for?" I also love waking up early on summer weekends and looking through yard sales hoping to find one more book to add to my shelves. I have books purchased in seven states, and even an old copy of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* that a friend found abroad in London and shipped back to me as a gift. I could buy any of these books on Amazon, but it's so much more fun to stumble upon them when I'm not expecting it. I also meet some pretty interesting people at bookstores and yard sales, including some who share my interest, and some who think it's creepy. I still remember the look on the face of the Barnes and Noble cashier when I, a twelve-year-old in a plaid skirt and matching bow, walked up, smiled, and asked for "*Damnation Alley*, please."

While there are some great memories attached to my books, I ultimately collect them because I want to read them, not display them on a shelf. As I travel the country for school and work, they travel with me. Once I packed them in a box from

Alex Barger

the grocery store, and they smelled like bananas for days. I dog-ear them, crease their spines, and leave them out in the sun. A few summers ago, I dropped *Lucifer's Hammer* in a swimming pool, and spent an hour laboring over it with a hair dryer so it wouldn't mildew. People often borrow from my collection, and I know of at least one who has started his own library of post-apocalyptic fiction as a result. Over the last decade I have grown very attached to my portable library. It is a traveling companion, a source of intellectual stimulation, a perfect blend of classic literature and thrilling science fiction, and an excellent conversation starter. I'm so grateful that twelve-year-old me had the insight to save a rejected library book, because it was the start of a fascinating and hopefully lifelong collection.

To summarize, these books are important to me because they are familiar and have character. They represent a decade of effort, and they are uniquely mine. However, they are also important because they represent a challenge. It's easy for me to become closed off in a cozy bubble of classes, work, and social life and to shut the door on more uncomfortable ideas about the world in which I live. Books like *The Road* or *A Gift Upon The Shore* send a cold wind whispering into my safe existence, stirring up uncertainties and reminding me that what I have is fragile. Others, like *Day of the Triffids* and *I Am Legend*, are pure entertainment. These books let monsters banished to childhood closets out to roam for awhile, where they can frighten and inspire. In short, I read these books because they prop open my imagination and leave me wondering *what if...* So while my safe and stable daily life moves around me, I'll keep collecting, and waiting for someone to put a new face on the end of the world.

Alex Barger

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