Twice Upon a Time:

Starting Over After the Apocalypse

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There have been great societies that did not use the wheel,
but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.

~ Ursula K. Le Guin

Stories are…

stories are everything
stories are a haunted genre
stories are for joining the past to the future
stories are data with a soul
stories are powerful

~ Google search 2 May 2015 "Stories are"

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Abstract

The Untellable Story

Several centuries after a double catastrophe brought about by human attempts to intervene in both the effects of climate change and the effects of Alzheimer's disease, the human race is left largely without the ability to tell stories. Annabelle, born a Storyteller into a world hostile to her ability, is forced to hide her identity to protect her life. When her secret is discovered, she must flee the village of her birth and enter a shadow world in which the few others who share her power plot to dominate.

Twice Upon a Time: Starting Over After the Apocalypse

This exegesis explores the subgenre of YA postapocalyptic fiction, discussing the way in which the apocalypse has been adopted as a metaphorical rendering of the turmoil of adolescence and as a "clean slate" upon which new stories can be written. Moving to an examination of the role of storytelling in building and maintaining cultures, societies and individuals, the exegesis interweaves critical thinking on story from narratology, psychology and other fields with an analysis of how concepts of storytelling are reflected through the creative component of this thesis.

Statement of Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submissionin my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Tim Sinclair, August 2016

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1/

Introduction

I cannot begin but with a sense of irony: this is the tale of writing a story about a lack of story. My original impetus for wanting to work on this project was a desire to explore the end of the world, and the world that would emerge from its ruins. In doing this I slipped sideways. What I have ended up doing in writing the novel *The Untellable Story* is exploring not the end of the world, but the end of story. You could almost say I went in the opposite direction — away from The End and towards The Beginning. More accurately, my research led me on the circular path that forever joins the two.

I started my exploration in the way that I know best — through creative writing. I have always written to answer questions, but it is only through getting to the end that I find those questions. At first I thought I was writing about the appeal of postapocalyptic literature to young adult (YA) readers. I started writing a postapocalyptic novel. And what happened, very quickly, was that I started to feel as though I was regurgitating formulaic plot lines. Just another by-the-numbers-YA postapocalyptic novel. Paradoxically, this made me excited: it confirmed to me that there *was* a formula, that there was a range

of genre expectations to be researched and subverted, explored and pulled apart.

Much postapocalyptic fiction of the last ten years centres on environmental catastrophe. It's an understandable zeitgeist fear, and therefore a powerful plot driver: peak oil, peak phosphorous, peak water, peak energy. I started to wonder — half facetiously, half seriously — about Peak Story.

In H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine,* one of the seminal texts of the postapocalyptic oeuvre, the protagonist finds himself at some point far in humanity's future, in which the human race has split into two subspecies: the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Eloi are simple, pure and free, and it takes the Time Traveller some time to realise that they are virtually cattle, left to roam free by their cannibalistic cousins the Morlocks until it is time for them to be guided to the slaughterhouse. Their creativity has been exhausted because everything is provided for them. They have no spark, no desires, no imaginations. They have reached Peak Story. There is nothing more to say, nothing more to create.

Following on from my early explorations, the thought experiment of my novel became this: what is left of humanity if you take away the ability to tell stories? What is left of human society? Can you call such a society fully human, or has it lost something that is so intrinsic that it can no longer be considered so?

I came up against story time and time again writing the novel, and mostly without realising I was doing so. Story, I came to understand, infuses

everything: from our understanding of the world around us to the way we pass on knowledge, from what we talk about to how we talk about it. I had to invent new phrases for the simplest of social interactions. *Tell me your story* became *tell me your truth*. Rumours were not able to exist in a world where truth was the only option. Partial truths were acceptable (i.e. possible within the constraints I had set) and useful, but only with a valid lineage.

Through the novel, I explore these questions on the immediate/micro level of the main character and her interactions with such a world; and I explore on a macro level what this world feels like and how it works, how people interact, how knowledge is passed down or passed along, how anything is learned without the mnemonic of story, and how cultures and family groups can bind without the glue of a common story. Through the exegesis that follows, I explore these questions as raised through the works of other writers, focussing on the subject of my initial research — YA postapocalyptic literature.

The end of the world distils all the questions. The end of the world distils all the stories. That the subgenre of postapocalyptic fiction is appealing to a young adult readership is not surprising. In the chaos of transition that is the teenage years, having the explosion of choices narrowed down to a few pressing issues of survival can be an appealing thought. Indeed "old adult" readers are drawn to the subgenre for much the same reasons, and much the same desire to have life's complications narrowed down by an order of magnitude or two.

Claire Curtis draws this out beyond simple survival in her studies of the fictional postapocalypse, maintaining that the importance of the subgenre lies in the fundamentally philosophical questions that it asks:

> …how can a group of people, with disparate aims and interests, live together peacefully? *The mechanism for asking this question is artificial, fictitious and violent, but each of these novels* (even those that reject any potential answer) *confronts the question itself.* (188; italics mine)

Her picking up and tossing aside of the more lurid aspects of the category is important here: much deeply philosophical and ground-breaking speculative fiction over the decades has been dismissed/overlooked by the literary establishment due to its alignment with genre writing (for example Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, or Philp K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*), and postapocalyptic fiction (especially that which is written for children, or even more so, the shallow, fickle, feckless audience of young adults) has been similarly in danger of being thrown out with the pulp.

However, James Gurney, in examining the appeal of utopian literature to younger readers, maintains that the importance is more to do with the individual than with any philosophical system: it is "a chance to inhabit the dreams that fuel their growth into independent life" (10). He goes on to say, "My belief is that they read not to escape their world, but rather to engage more fully in it, for only through fantasy can they try on any identity and live as actors in their own dramas" (10).

For the sake of my explorations, utopia and dystopia, along with the apocalyptic and the postapocalyptic, are conjoined concepts. As will become clearer through the exegesis, they serve very similar literary functions in my exploration.

As explained above, when initially venturing into my research I had intended to examine the appeal of postapocalyptic worlds to a YA audience. What emerged however, was story. I found myself examining the appeal of story, the centrality of story. I came to understand that it is impossible to explain what a culture is without understanding its stories. I found myself unable to clean the slate. I literally could not work with a world in which story did not have a place. What became the central dramatic push for my novel was a re-emergence of the capacity for story into this world I found increasingly bleak.

The thought experiments of YA postapocalyptic fiction tend to cluster around three poles:

- something bad (nuclear war, viral pandemic, zombie attack, global terrorism) is about to happen to the world/the entire human race. How can we prevent it happening?
- something bad has just happened. How do we survive? How do we rebuild?
- something bad happened several years/generations/centuries ago. The civilisation that has emerged is repressive. How do we fix/change this?

All of these proposals rely on human nature remaining fundamentally the same. *Given human nature X, what happens when you drop them in Y scenario*? But I wanted to distort the X, to find out what happens if you presuppose a

seismic shift in human nature. Like all such fictional speculations, the reason I wanted to do so was to reflect back upon what I was distorting. The questions thus revealed included: What is humanity without story? Can we survive without story? Can we be human without story? Would storytellers in a world without story come to dominate? Is it some kind of evolutionary superpower?

The research led me to fascinating places — both the "traditional" academic research that informed my background thinking and the practice-as-research of writing the novel — and it was compellingly complementary. I tried my best to imagine humans without story. I failed. The story would not let them go; they would not let go of story. My reading across psychology, anthropology, narratology, and neurology all seemed to support this failure, and support the idea that storytelling is fundamentally bound up in what it means to be human. In the following chapters I will tease out the many ramifications of this precept, including the way that this activity became so intrinsic to who we are.

Chapter Two is a brief survey of the end of the world, particularly as it relates to young adult literature. I examine some of the common threads and preoccupations of the subgenre, especially as an acute metaphorical rendering of the turmoil of adolescence, and explore the way through which studying the end led me to my fictional beginning.

In Chapter Three I delve into what story is, what it means to us as individuals, and what it means on a societal level. Having had the realisation, through

writing the first act of my novel, that I literally could not excise story from the world and characters I was creating, I needed to know more about this force. Through reviewing concepts of storytelling from narratology, folktales, psychology, anthropology, and neurology, I demonstrate that story is fundamental to human experience.

Working from the point of view that story truly is integral to what it is to be human I then took to the creative practice to explore the ramifications for my growing fictional world. Chapter Four details this research and exploration, and shows just how fundamentally entwined are the end and the beginning. I explore/expose the fallacy of postapocalyptic fiction's "wiping clean of the slate," and work with the unavoidable fact that humans will never "escape" story.

The key task of *The Untellable Story* was examining not the end of a world of stories but the beginning of a new world with renewed capabilities for storytelling — a "twice upon a time" tale (hence the title of this thesis). At the point in this project when I had this realisation, I remembered with resonance the Ursula Le Guin quote with which I opened the thesis: "There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories" (*Language of the Night* 31).

It seemed apt and it seemed wise (as Le Guin often is)… and after a while, it felt a little like a curse. Who did I think I was that I could defy the edicts of one of the giants of my field? What she said made so much intuitive sense. How could a society *be* without story? How could it survive? The only way to

answer those questions, of course, was to write the story and find out. In the important tradition of speculative fiction (or, one could argue, of *all* fiction) I threw a handful of question marks at my characters and tried to find out how they would deal with them.

2/

The Story So Far

He turned it on and cycled through the channels, but there was nothing on. Literally nothing. Snow, that's all. Seventy-five channels of snow. The end of the world had always been televised in Wyndham's experience. The fact that it wasn't being televised now suggested that it really was the end of the world.

~ Dale Bailey (288)

In Bailey's story "The End of the World as We Know It," with its very knowing references to the tropes of fictional apocalypse, the main character Wyndham (whose name is surely a nod to John Wyndham, grandmaster of the postapocalyptic subgenre) stumbles through a series of non-events. There is never any explanation as to why the world has ended. There is never a zombie attack. There are never stylishly fiendish bikies to contend with, and cannibalism never comes into the picture. Wyndham simply sits on a porch drinking gin and watching the sunset, night after night. Even the introduction of another character — a woman, with whom he could rightly be expected, given the requirements of the subgenre, to commence repopulating the Earth — does nothing to invigorate him. The world ended for the rest of the

population abruptly. Now it's ending for him slowly, the way the world ends for most of us: one day at a time.

The story is a reminder that the postapocalyptic subgenre has, it its core, some of the most primal questions about human existence. Whether we are sitting on a porch in an everyday small town or sitting on the same porch on a planet devoid of people, the big questions of *why?* and *how?* and *how come?* still remain. When the world has (all but) ended, however, it becomes impossible to ignore these questions. This is one of the core preoccupations of the subgenre. In fact, I don't think it would be an overstatement to say that this is one of its main reasons for *being*. Strip away the everyday, and you are left with only two things: survival and big questions. Once your main character knows where their next meal is coming from, they cannot help but ask why they should go looking for it.

This is why postapocalyptic fiction makes so much sense as one of the dominant subgenres of YA fiction. YA fiction, by and large, is concerned with the big questions of identity, belonging, and meaning, and what better crucible than the end of the world to cook them up in? In this section I will tour several key texts within the subgenre of fictional post/apocalypses, looking to draw out some common threads and hoping to demonstrate that the "point" of these stories is far less about the means of destruction and far more about the questions that are thrown up as a result. I also begin to explore the idea that the end of the world and the end of story are tightly interwoven, an idea I will go into in much more detail in Chapter Three.

When you are asking big questions, of course, you are faced with big answers: beginnings and endings; what came before; what's coming to get us afterwards. Riddley Walker, the eponymous character from Russell Hoban's classic, knows this:

> Its diffrent right the way up to the end and thats why the end is diffrent. If the way is diffrent the end is diffrent. Becaws the end aint nothing only part of the way its just that part of the way where you come to a stop. (172)

"The way" is certainly different in Riddley's world, but not so different that we cannot recognise the timeless themes and preoccupations of YA postapocalyptic literature. I should note, however, that it is contestable that Hoban's book is YA literature. It certainly was not marketed as such when it was published in the early 1980s. The classification "YA" — the marketing label, as some would cynically have it — hardly existed then, and certainly was not the publishing juggernaut that it has come to be today. I think there is little doubt that the book would be sold as such today, however.

Walker's world is also obsessed with story; the endless iterations and analogies manifested in and interpreted by the puppeteers and the "connexion men." Whereas the world of *The Untellable Story* is a world based upon the denial of story, the world Hoban creates is one in which story oozes out of every circumstance. Every incident has an analogy; every person has a part to play in the constantly reinterpreted story of the kin group.

Rereading *Riddley Walker* having reoriented my project's focus on story, I was struck both by how absurdly rich the stew of story was that the characters moved through, and how impossible it was, using this lens, to imagine a world *without* story. I began to wonder if story really was absent from my world, or if its absence was (to use an irresistible phrase) a *fiction*. You are, as a creator, supposed to be in charge of your own premise. I felt it slipping away from me, or changing. Or simply, I now realise, reasserting its own reality. In the world I was writing, story was not absent, it was simply buried.

In working with and around these conundrums, I found myself thinking of China Mieville's *The City and The City*, in which citizens of a divided but overlapping city have learned to "unsee" those parts of the city which are "over the border" and therefore not allowed to be seen, even if this means unseeing the other side of the street you walk down every day.

Were the people of my world "unseeing" story on a daily basis? If storytelling is such an intrinsic part of being human (and I had decided that I was writing about humans, not human-like aliens) then surely some similar cognitive trick was required? Was I in fact writing about a society deluded about its own capacities, blinded by dogma? I started to see my protagonists a little more clearly. Rather than possessing some clichéd YA "powers," perhaps they were simply more attuned to the propaganda of their times, and more adept at navigating around it. Like postapocalyptic Holden Caulfields, perhaps they were merely resisting the "phoniness" all around them.

Mass death

There is one level at least, on which the end of the world strips away all artifice, all phoniness. There can be no room for sentiment when the zombies are attacking. The stories — the stories we tell ourselves over and over again as we move through life, the stories that accrete so naturally that they seem intrinsic, the stories that make up our common cultural heritage — are all removed.

In Danny Boyle's movie *28 Days Later…*, the main character Jim wakes from a coma, twenty-eight days after the "rage virus" has destroyed most of the population of the UK. He wanders the streets of London trying to work out what has happened, at one point stopping to stuff loose pound notes (powerful and now-irrelevant symbols of yesterday's story) into his bag, before he has comprehended the magnitude of the disaster.

Even after finding newspaper headlines in a looted newsagent sketching out the speed and scale of the epidemic, Jim cannot let go of the old stories. Seeking solace in a church, he is attacked by a priest who has become Infected. He strikes the priest down in self-defence, and is immediately stricken with remorse. "I shouldn't have done that, I shouldn't have done that," he gibbers, even as the priest rises back up with death blazing in his eyes (*28 Days Later…*).

Having met two survivors who explain to him what's going on, who tell him that their families are dead and who assure him that his family will be dead

also, he still feels the needs to go and see for himself. It's a strength of the film, and a strength of the subgenre at its best, that apocalypse cannot truly be appreciated except on the human scale. What are the lives of millions of strangers, after all? What are their deaths? But confirming the death of all the people you knew and loved is a way of confirming that the world, as you know it, has indeed ended.

And if the world has indeed ended, what then? There is survival, of course, but once you have dealt with that you are back to the existential questions. They become unavoidable once you have stripped away all the stories and all the distractions, all the ephemera we manage to keep ourselves busy with precisely in order to avoid contemplating the bigger things.

Having escaped London, our survivors flee for the hope of an army base that is broadcasting its existence on an emergency frequency. Upon arrival however, the promised sanctuary is quickly revealed as a place of exploitation. The commander takes Jim on the grand tour: "Secondary to protection, our real job is to rebuild. Start again" (*28 Days Later…*). This could sound reasonable, of course, except ten minutes later his real meaning becomes clear as he chillingly explains his rationale.

> I promised them women… We fight off the Infected or we wait until they starve to death, and then what? What do nine men do except wait to die themselves? Because women mean a future. (*28 Days Later…*)

The only future here, of course, is slavery and sexual servitude. Our protagonists flee.

The stark cruelty offered by the commander, however, is simply one way to address the central concern of the art — it is a particularly postapocalyptic twist on the central existential question of life. In the times when life is barely hanging by a thread, the question *what is the meaning of* my *existence* comes a distinct second place to the question *what is the meaning of* humanity's *existence?* The barbarism the commander is proposing is justified in his eyes through the survival of the species, at whatever cost to the individual. The Bigger Story is the one that matters most.

This approach remains unacceptable to some, however. Indeed, it is the dignity and the "good" (however nebulously defined) of humans in trying circumstances that is the thing that must be protected against all else, according to some survivors of the fictional end. Claire Curtis notes that "carrying the fire" in this way is one of the central, although cryptically undefined, preoccupations of the central character in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (38). Without this vaguely defined goal, there is surely nothing left: the father and the child move through a world without colour, without purpose, without hope.

P.D. James's *The Children of Men* manages to throw up the big questions of the apocalypse without killing a single human. All she does is imagine a world in which no more humans are ever to be born. There is no explanation given (or needed). There is simply the undeniable fact that the humans alive in the now

of the story are the last who will ever live, and this carries the same weight of paralysis and galvanising energy than if there were only a small band of rugged survivors carrying the fire for humanity's sake.

The point is not the deaths. The point is what *meaning* the survivors attribute to their deaths, and what meaning they create for those left alive.

Human 2.0

Most postapocalyptic fiction, YA or otherwise, has one simple root at the cause of its destruction: people. There are meteor strikes, true, and there are acts of God/s, but in the last few decades the overwhelmingly destructive force at work has been of humanity's devising. Climate change is high on the list; as are overpopulation and wars over water/oil/food/resources, genetically engineered zombie armies, biohazard, nuclear war, greed, and general stupidity — all human vices are aired. As Tobias Buckell notes, "postapocalyptic SF is often a way of doing literary penance for all our imagined or real modern sins" (101).

As a side note to this — but certainly in support of my thesis that the YA subgenre is less preoccupied with the *why* of destruction, and infinitely more interested in the *why* of existence — one scholar of the apocalypse, Chandra Phelan, read nearly 500 works written over the last century, and constructed a chart illustrating the causes of the end. While the overwhelming majority of the apocalypses represented were of human origin, including nuclear war and those brought about by anthropogenic climate change, he also observed that

in the last few years the *cause* has become far less important than the ramifications to the survivors (io9.com).

Another binding thread, linked somewhat pessimistically to the above, is that humans *can be* united, can work (or fight) together for the common good. Unfortunately, however, this fictional unity is mostly short-lived, and is always in opposition to a greater threat. Once the climate disaster or zombie horde has been vanquished, humans in these scenarios are almost universally quick to scatter back into tribalism and self-destructive pettiness.

One of the first YA postapocalyptic stories I read as a child, John Christopher's classic *White Mountains* trilogy, laid out this template very clearly, and very bleakly. Rereading the books as an adult it is still possible to feel the same utter disillusionment with the human race. After the climax of the story, when the mind-controlling alien invaders have been defeated and humanity has thrown off slavery to reclaim the Earth as its own, there is an inordinately quick slump back to disunity and bickering. In this instance, it is almost as though a cynical Christopher is suggesting that humans can only live peacefully when under the control of another race.

This authorial desire for Humans 2.0, for a better kind of human, is another binding thread throughout apocalyptic literature. Of course the desire to play God mostly leads to disastrous ends, either for the presumptive creator or for the rest of the human race. The arrogant megalomania of Crake, for example, attempting to supplant the human race with his own blue-genitalled super

humans in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake,* is just the tip of this iceberg of derangement.

There are countless other examples in this vein, but I will focus in some detail on Nancy Kress' story "Inertia" for its clever subversion of the superhuman trope. In the story, a disease of unknown origin has afflicted a significant proportion of the North American population. The disease is disfiguring, and communicable; those with the disease are rounded up and mandatorily interned. The story, set several generations after the appearance of the disease, sees a young underground researcher from Outside come into one of the interment camps postulating a new theory: that the disease has a previously unknown mental effect which reduces levels of aggression.

> Intelligence is not affected at all. The results are emotional and behavioural, not intellectual. You become — all of you — calmer. Disinclined to action or innovation. Mildly but definitely depressed. (220)

The researcher's theory has arisen from study of the camps, in which those inside have developed a workable system of self-government (a practical anarchy in fact) despite generations of physical deprivation and a gross restriction of liberty. Having discovered this, he intends (as the trope calls for) to play God, and inflict the rest of the human race with the disease, thereby preventing the human race from destroying itself as the inevitable result of its warlike tendencies.

The call for postapocalyptic literature to redesign the human race stems of course from our own sadly aggressive history of eugenics, and the distinctly dispiriting thesis that once a society reaches the capacity for destroying itself through technology, it will do so (Octavia Butler's *Dawn* describes humans as almost genetically predestined for self-destruction). Whether through warfare, genetic experimentation gone wrong, disease, or environmental vandalism, humans seem doomed, time and time again, by the very evolutionary traits that have brought us to the top of the food chain. It is postapocalyptic fiction's job, therefore, to deal out the consequences of this unfortunate trait.

It is ironic, then, that in one such fictional exploration it is humanity's lack of aggression that is what dooms it. H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* is a masterly study of the apocalypse. Part of what makes it so compelling is the fact that what finally destroys humanity, or at least one half of the human race, is its own success. Having achieved domination over the elements — over disease, war, and starvation — humans have succumbed to luxury and devolved to placidity. There is no longer any need for the creative fire that we think of as characterising our species.

> I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide. It had set itself steadfastly towards comfort and ease, a balanced society with security and permanency as its watchword, it had attained its hopes — to come to this at last. (137)

When the Time Traveller's Eloi companion, Weena, is killed in the forest fire he accidentally starts, he is relieved that she has at least escaped the fate of

being eaten that she would otherwise have been destined for. Despite the Morlocks being in some ways more like humans of his own time (in that they are obviously more creative and intelligent, keeping the machinery of their underground domain functioning while the Eloi live in blissful ignorance), the Time Traveller allows himself to be persuaded by what Curtis has noted is the ultimate distinction between civilised and non-civilised society — cannibalism (19).

Stumbling around the ruins of a museum, he encounters a room full of decayed books "long since dropped to pieces… every semblance of print had left them" (119). Humanity has reached the end of story. There is nothing left but blank pages, and a siren call to the slaughterhouse.

In the end, of course, there is nothing. *The Time Traveller* jumps far enough forward into the Earth's future that there is nothing but a postprimal sludge slopping endlessly back and forth beneath a dying sun. Humanity and all its stories have long been irrelevant to this world.

Another fictional future in which the human race seems doomed more by its own apathy than by external circumstances is explored in J.G. Ballard's *Drowned World*. In a world in which the Earth's temperature has risen so much that most land has been covered, the main character travels the drowned and drowning cities of the earth, surveying the wreckage and attempting to rescue the last inhabitants of the dying cities, for the most part malnourished and radiation-crazed psychopaths who seem reluctant to leave the only home they have ever known.

Kerans, born and bred in one of the last viable human outposts on earth, is strangely detached and uninterested in unearthing the "secrets" of the drowning cities he surveys, and this is perhaps the bleakest vision of the book. Whether the remainder of his kind shares his malaise and lack of curiosity is never made clear, but removing humanity's fundamental need to know seems to spell the end of the species far more surely than any apocalypse.

Getting on with it

Andrew Smith's *Grasshopper Jungle* is one of the most brilliantly realised and strongly voiced stories of the YA postapocalyptic subgenre. There are many things that make it so: the complexity of the main character's sexuality (rabidly in love with his girlfriend, confusedly horny about his gay male best friend); the stylish looping and re-loopings of personal catchphrases and teen-boy logic of the main character in a distinctly Vonnegut-like interweaving; and the sheer inventiveness and bravery of the plot to ride out its kooky vision to its logical conclusion.

But reading through this series of more and more inventive scenes, one of the images that stands out for me is an image common to the subgenre, although it is no less powerful for its commonality. Indeed, given the surrounding weirdness of the plot, in which an army of two-metre high praying mantises (engineered through a combination of blood, semen, and egotism) threaten to destroy the human race, the image is given a stark poignancy. It occurs in the epilogue. The end has come; the mantises have taken over the world. Two of our survivors have left the safety of their bunker for a brief trip aboveground.

Four years after humanity has been all-but destroyed, the animals are returning. “The deer had already forgotten why they should be afraid of human beings” (390).

Here is the appeal, carrying over through all the weirdness and all the intricacy: a simpler time, an Earthly paradise, a chance to start again. The bunker in which our protagonists shelter is named Eden.

Even as light-hearted plot device, the end of the world is useful as a focussing tool for the big questions. Melissa Keill’s novel *Cinnamon Girl* is premised on the ramblings of a no-star internet video host who attempts to improve his ratings by predicting that a small town in outback Australia will be the only place to survive the upcoming conflagration (of an unspecified nature). Somehow his wild prediction gains traction, and the town finds itself swamped with apocalytes. None of the main teen characters of the novel can really take the threat seriously, but even the *idea* of a full stop of some kind functions as a challenging and motivating forces in their lives. (*If the world really* is *ending maybe it’s time I declared my love, had my first sex, made up with my estranged friend, made some attempt to get over my childhood trauma,* etcetera.)

Cory Doctorow’s story “When Sysadmins Ruled the Earth” takes place at the end of the world, and in the six months after that. Apart from all the usual tropes — the scramble for survival, the divvying up of resources amongst those remaining, the guilt of those left alive — he focuses on an often-ignored theme in the subgenre: when all else is equal, people just want to *get on with it*. For all that people love to complain about the rigours and the drudgery of

work, most people are happiest when they know what they have to do after getting up in the morning.

In the six months in which the story is set, the (remains of the) human race goes from chaos to small pockets of organisation, and even though there are obvious limitations to the society that emerges, the protagonist manages to find himself a job doing essentially what he was doing before The End. "Tomorrow, he'd go back and fix another computer and fight off entropy again. And why not? It was what he did. He was a sysadmin" (147).

Although the author is clearly aiming for a lightly humorous piece, he is also exposing a fundamental truth. Humans, after all, are humans. We need food, shelter, love, sex. And then we need something to keep ourselves busy with. The big questions are just too heavy to ask all of the time.

The final story in this brief postapocalyptic survey is another Margaret Atwood novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The apocalypse here is "quiet," but no less devastating than a nuclear explosion. Everything has changed, and those in power, of course, control the story.

> When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out.... (144)

Of course there is too much to tell. There is always too much to tell. And in the Handmaid's frustration I found the beginnings of the cracks in my work-in-progress. Compression, of course, is one of the functions of story. You cannot hope to describe everything, so broad strokes and sketches are widely employed, with detail filled in as needed or desired. How, then, could a world work where this ability was not present? Would not daily life be mired in a mass of detail?

This was a question I found myself coming back to after writing the first act of the novel. Having spent enough time with the main characters to start to know who they were, I realised I had to spend some more thought on the mechanics of the "story-less" world they inhabited. What had I overlooked in their interactions, if they truly could not tell stories? How would a day be shaped if stories were completely excised from the picture? What would it mean for human society? In other words, having dropped the bomb, I now had to figure out just how twisted the wreckage would be.

3/

The Cost of Story

We're in an unceasing flow of time and events and people, and to make sense of what goes past, we put a beginning and an end to a certain thing, and we leave things out and we heighten other things, and in that way we break the unbroken flow into stories, because that's the only way we can give it significance.

~ Tobias Wolff (11)

Temerity. I would say audacity but that doesn't ring true. Foolhardiness, certainly. What the hell was I thinking trying to create a world without story?

Walking through the Ikea showroom I watch two children playing house. One of them sits without a trace of self-consciousness as she spoons imaginary cereal into her mouth from a made-in-China-from-Swedish-design bowl. The other rounds up the couple's imaginary children, getting them organised for school. What else would you do as a bored child in Ikea, given your parents' distraction and the perfect props?

There is nothing out of the ordinary about this scenario. Except if I were to transplant these two children into the fictional world I was trying to create,

they would be outcasts due for execution. How could something so natural as play-acting, so important to learning, be excluded? If you took this ability away from these two little children what would be left? Ikea leaves me more full of doubts than usual, this day.

Intuitively, instinctively, we understand both the power of story and its all-pervasive nature. We feel we understand its place in our lives, and the way we use it as both a tool and a recreational pursuit. Clearly, however, the "intuition" that might guide a creative practice needs to be explicated in an academic study such as this. In this chapter I will touch on some of the key theoretical findings and understandings in relation to story in its many forms: from the addictive nature of narrative as powerful mnemonic device; the "universal" nature of many stories across human cultures; the culturally binding element of group narrative; the paradox of how such a "trivial" activity became so embedded in our evolution; and the last question, the big question which started me on this exploration in the first place, of our repeated conviction in stories that predict The End of the World.

Even when you *know* what's going to happen next, you still want to know what's going to happen next. This is narrative's hold over us. You're halfway through a romcom that you flick past randomly one quiet TV night. You know exactly what it is, because the genre markers are writ large, and you know how it's going to end, because if they don't get together in the end then it's not what it says on the packaging. It's not even particularly good, because not

many of them are, and yet you stay up too late to reach the inevitable conclusion.

You're disappointed, but only in yourself for being taken in yet again. You would only be disappointed in the movie if it had failed to deliver the held-breath punchline that our protagonists had to fight towards through misunderstandings and mishaps to get to in the end — the end, the payoff, the money shot whirling kissy bit. It's what we have all waited for, disbelief suspended, and it's what we will all come back for, time and again.

How could I believe in a world without a drug that is so powerful? The idea that fiction is addictive is hardly new: after all, Scheherazade kept herself alive for 1001 nights relying upon the compelling power of having to know what comes next. It is a trope which is played out through the entire fictional spectrum: at the other end of space and time from *The Arabian Nights*, in the science-fictional world of *Red Dwarf*, it takes a dispassionate computer to intervene and prevent the bodies of the humanoids in its care from wasting away entirely, lost as they are in the utterly immersive fictional environment of the game *Better Than Life*.

Walter Ong explores this addictive quality in relation to both the mnemonic power of narrative and narrative as "societal glue" (138). A lot happens. In life, in your family's life, and the life of your village, your town, your culture, your country. Without narrative, without cause and effect and a framework to hang it all on, this mass of information would overwhelm us. Ong argues, "Developing a story line is a way of dealing with this flow" (137).

In the oral cultures which Ong is examining, narrative is especially important as a mnemonic device, because of the function it plays in holding together vast amounts of lore in a way which will last (138). Narrative in this case plays the decidedly functional role of joining together important events in a memorable way.

We make stories out of our lives as shorthand, as memory aid, as a way of understanding our otherwise incomprehensible lives and, let us frankly admit to it, as a way to make ourselves seems more interesting. *Person goes on journey of self-discovery* is a much more interesting story than hearing about the twenty years of procrastination that went on before that.

Oral history relies for its efficacy on our narrative desire. It does not explain *why* we find narrative so compelling. It does however show up the almost algorithmic compression that story is capable of; the important things are preserved, no matter the changing details. Narratives stick, so we remember the correct sequence of a complicated harvest process not by rote learning, but through a moralistic tale that has the necessary details embedded within a memorable human drama.

Of especial use in the preservation of stories are what Ong calls "outsize figures," grotesque or exaggerated or mythical beings. Ong elaborates, "…it is easier to remember the Cyclops than a two-eyed monster, or Cerberus than an ordinary one-headed dog" (69). These figures are important as narrative signposts as much as anything; especially in the oral storytelling tradition, they will ensure an important part of the story will not be forgotten.

A mistake I made early in my first draft involved just such an outsize figure: an enormous hermit, Maldor, who had been exiled from the village of his birth and who now roamed the mountain landscapes at the edges of the small "civilised" world of the villagers. There was nothing controversial about this in terms of the world I was building; however, I found myself repeatedly falling into the habit of the outsizing storyteller. I had mothers exaggerating the size of this creature, turning him into a giant with which to scare their children into obedience. I had fathers telling children that he would *come and eat them up* if they didn't do their chores.

I wrote these things unconsciously. It is how we are used to thinking. I did not even notice until rereading this section some weeks later. My characters were telling stories. They were creating an outsize figure to illustrate their point and to reinforce the common goals of their small society. In other words, in terms of the world I was trying to build, they were doing the impossible. How easy it was to write; how easy it was to miss.

Ong also observes the direct correlation between the rise of print culture and the slow disappearance of the outsize figure (70). With print providing a more stable medium for narrative, the burden falls from the hero, and allows for the rise of both more "normal size" figures and even antiheroes to come to the fore. While agreeing with this assertion to some degree, I observe the rise and rise of the Marvel blockbuster and question this disappearance. Indeed the whole subgenre of Japanese *kaiju* anime and manga, which has been rising for the better part of sixty years, depends entirely on literally outsize monsters.

In the conclusion of his seminal work *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell discusses the universal aspects of myth and ritual across human societies and/or human nature.

> We may therefore think of any myth or rite either as a clue to what may be permanent or universal in human nature, or on the other hand, as a function of the local scene, the landscape, the history, and the sociology of the folk concerned. (461)

There is clearly a great divide between a foundation myth and a soap opera, but as George Lucas demonstrated quite clearly in his 1975 movie *Star Wars* the line is closer than most of us think. (George Lucas is widely credited as being the first Hollywood director/producer to acknowledge the influence of Campbell's work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, alongside his other books [Larsen 541]. With the further dilution and commercialisation of the original *Star Wars* franchise we are clearly headed further into soap opera territory, but it is important not to forget the cultural impact of the first movie at the time of its release.)

Whether it is *Genesis* or *Home and Away*, to imagine a society devoid of story is surely to imagine a society without God/s, without beginning, without end. Where then does the apocalypse fit this scenario? Where then the *post*apocalypse? I kept coming around and around to this problem. I had made my bed in this scenario but I just couldn't get comfortable in it.

In reading through the works of Vladimir Propp, one of the founding voices of the field of narratology, I started to appreciate the enormity of the mental

exercise I had set myself (at times, it seemed, the abject futility of thinking I could simply wave my pen and excise story from the human race).

Amongst the broad strokes of his analysis I focussed in particular on his examination of initiation rites, "the most ancient stage of storytelling" (118). Throughout the ritual described, young men have everything that is happening to them interpreted through the lens of the ancestors, of the customs of the tribe, of the stories that have gone before. Story is both mediator and creator.

Referencing Franz Boas's Native American Indian tales Propp notes that the tales and legends of the tribes Boas is researching must be contextualised within daily life in order to make sense (119). In other words, they are not only intimately connected with the way of life of the people they describe, but they help to *define* that way of life. The "legends" cannot be separated from daily life: "Myths are not only components of life; they are part of every individual person. To take away a man's tale is tantamount to taking away his life" (120).

In writing *The Untellable Story*, I rubbed up against this embeddedness in daily life, instinctively and uncomfortably. I found story bleeding back into my world in the guise of truth. Rather than have a people with no narrative anchor, I found myself inserting one in the form of Truths, capital "T." (I must note the wry horror I felt even as I did this, for rampant and gratuitous capitalisation is one of the giveaway clichés of the YA postapocalyptic subgenre.)

To transmit culture, origin stories, and the inevitable questions and answers of the time before the apocalypse, I had to insert stories-that-were-not-stories. There needed to be a third category, lodged somewhere *outside* of story; a story, in fact, that could be passed along as though it were nothing but fact, stripped of anything like narrative and rendered into truth through mass consensus.

This issue is borne out by Propp: "Without its myths a tribe would not be able to perpetuate itself" (120). I needed a realistic way to carry on with my unreality; story dressed up as truth (as Truth, in fact) seemed a plausible way to do so.

Writing nearly one hundred years after Propp's foundational *Morphology of the Foktalke*, Marina Warner critiques Propp's project and indeed the work of the many formalists and structuralists who built upon his work in the following decades. While she sees enormous value in the folklore databases thus created — what she calls "monuments of literary archaeology" (xx) — she is wary of the loss of specificity that they can encourage, and the limits of "universalising" (xxi). She does acknowledge, however the immense power of the fantastical: "…it is often more compelling to translate experience through metaphor and fantasy than to put it plainly" (95).

I needed stories-that-were-not-stories, myths-that-were-not-myths, fantastical fables that could somehow be read as truth. In this way the society I was building became a fundamentalist society of the most extreme kind. Religion was not something I had been expecting to uncover, but it was exactly what I

had found. In his study of the evolution of religion, Daniel Dennett says of ritual and religion as a cultural vector:

> …we should consider the case that can be made for rituals as memory-enhancement processes, designed by cultural evolution (and not by any conscious designers!) to improve the copying fidelity of the very process of meme transmission they ensure." (142)

When you step away, as anthropologists have done for decades, from the religious aspects of religion and strip out the beliefs to focus on the practical benefits, it is clear that religion plays a very important role in the perpetuation of culture. It is a story (or set of stories) commonly told. It is a story shared. And the most powerful aspect of this story is that it is not seen as "story." It is seen as Truth: its very power resides in the perception that it is an incontestable, incontrovertible, capital "T" Truth.

There is a clear evolutionary advantage in sharing a story that is so powerful that it has transcended the status of story. A story is to be told, and a story may have many purposes. A Truth, however, is to die for. A Truth is worth defending at all costs, and a Truth is worth ensuring that your children pass on to *their* children. When you have moved from story to Truth, you have secured your bloodline.

Coming back to *The Untellable Story*, moving from story to Truth effectively secures a power structure. If you are to inculcate a population with the idea that anyone who has the ability to create stories is inherently cracked, you

perpetuate your own story as Truth. Dictators and totalitarian regimes, both real and fictional, have long understood this to be the case. As V (from *V is for Vendetta*) explains to a young and bewildered Evey, who is struggling to come to terms with the new truth that is being revealed to her as the old is turned away, "You couldn't be expected to know. They have eradicated culture… tossed it away like a fistful of dead roses… " (Moore 18).

Story, as examined so far, can almost be ascribed a self-serving role. Squeeze any culture hard enough and the glue of story will fill your hands with its enticing stickiness. But what of its *function,* removed from its effectiveness, and its apparent ubiquity? I turn to Boyd's analysis, as he asks the question most elegantly:

> How did a behaviour so complex, often so costly in terms of time and even resources, and of so little apparent benefit in a competitive struggle for existence, ever become established throughout humankind? (11)

It is a necessary question, for on the face of it, fiction makes little sense. Intuitively we would think that dwelling in a fantasyland, rather than a land of certain facts (*that predator is about to tear my throat out*, for example), would be a certain route to evolutionary exit.

Boyd makes an important distinction between fiction and narration. It is easy to understand, as I have previously explored, how *narration* is an important adaptive skill to have, both for the individual and for the group. *This happened*

because I did this. These are the things we need to be careful of. Over there is the way to a food source.

Fiction, however, is harder to understand, unless we look at in terms of its capacity to communicate the "capacities, dispositions, intentions, and reactions" (130) of others both inside and outside of our societal group. It serves as a modelling ground and an exploration of human potential, and is thus a rich learning environment.

In highly social animals, which humans undeniably are, there is a high gain to be had from commanding attention, and negative consequences (ostracism, mockery) for those who cannot do so (168). Stories offer an easy way of gaining attention, if they are well told and relevant, and in a longer-term way, status for those whose stories are particularly, and consistently, socially valuable (169).

You could see the explanation above as applying only to facts. After all, a highly skilled narrator can weave an incredibly compelling story from nothing but factual information. What place fiction then? For that, Boyd goes back to the examination of children at play, of the stories and fantasies that are created universally and unprompted by young children across all cultures. Story play, with its rapid back-and-forth changes of perspective, place, and time, greatly increases the capacity of children to interact in "real" situations (191).

Drawing on the rapidly evolving area of research into mirror neuron activity (that which is triggered in our own brain simply by observing others participating in an activity) and neural plasticity (the ability of the brain to constantly change according to circumstances presented), Boyd postulates that it is likely only a matter of time before science will catch up with art, and reveal what we intuitively understand to be the case, which is that fiction improves "our ability to detect social and agential patterns" (192).

Fiction also allows us to play at real life, "at high intensity and low cost" (193). The case is often made for the importance of YA and/or children's fiction to "be educational" or "have a message." What is ironic about these calls is that, in light of the above research, there is no way that fiction of *any* kind can fail to "be educational." Who you are exposing to which content, at which age, is of course, something to be considered carefully; but that the content, *any* content, is having some kind of effect upon the reader is undeniable.

In a highly social animal such as a human, where survival and success (in the sense of the biological success of passing on one's genes) depend upon flexibility and the speed with which an individual can adapt to a new situation, "the thought experiments of pretend play and fiction offer a telling advantage" (195). Fiction has evolved alongside of, as a part of, human interaction. What could possibly be left if you were to strip that away?

In Kermode's classic work *The Sense of an Ending*, he sets out to address exactly this kind of question, with particular reference to the end of story. Which is to say, The End, the apocalypse, the moment when the story is no

more. In discussing The End as a trope, Kermode argues very convincingly both for its continued presence and longevity in our culture, as well as its place in our understanding of the universe: "Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. This is part of its extraordinary resilience" (8).

There are countless examples, over thousands of years of recorded history, of doomsday predictions that have come and gone: the end of the first millennium, by the Western calendar; the year 1666 (with its Satanic connotations); the end of the second millennium (for the traditional); the Y2K bug (for the technological); and 2012 (for the Mayan devotees and/or Hollywood SF junkies) are just scratches on the surface of a deep well of doom that has never quite been realised. And yet humans seem to have such a desire for The End that we can reimagine, very quickly, what happens after these dates come and go without incident.

> Men of all kinds act, as well as reflect, as if this apparently random collocation of opinion and predictions were true. When it appears that it cannot be so, they act as if it were true in a different sense. (Kermode 29)

We are good at telling ourselves stories about stories. How deliciously ironic. But how important too. It is precisely because The End is so important to our sense of ourselves that we continually alter the story, and justify the fact that "nigh" may have to be rescheduled yet again. And the understanding that we are given by this slippery fact, Kermode argues, is precisely due to the light which it throws on our own "personal apocalypse" — that of our own death, our own End (7).

All of the cultures, all of the eras that he studies have Apocalypse stories: from the "armies in the sky" of the Old Testament, to the "Mutually Assured Destruction" of the Cold War era (95). It makes a certain intuitive sense that the externalisation of our own apocalypse should manifest in a story of such power and historical longevity as to be present throughout the ages and across so many cultures.

The above point resonates very strongly with some of the universal themes of YA literature. The teenage years are, for many, the first time that people have truly had to come to some understanding of their own mortality. This realisation is of course something that must be dealt with by all of us in ongoing and evolving ways through the different stages of our lives; but it carries an especially urgent poignancy for those who are first grappling with the effect upon the psyche of the idea that one day you will end. One day you will reach The End.

It was as I was reading Kermode's chapter "Fictions" that I started to feel the foundations of my (fictional) world shake. "Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change" (39). Fiction is more than a collection of facts, or even an interpretation of facts. Fiction is more than the winner's view of history, more than one family's intergenerational bias against another family. Fiction, it started to seem to me, was crucial. It was *impossible* not to have.

I had been working on the assumption that fiction had disappeared from my world, with the few exceptions of my main character and others of her ilk who

she uncovers along the way. Now I started to wonder if it had been there all along, disguised beneath social convention and restricted by a code of conduct of a people who were violently opposed to the *idea* of fiction, rather than being physically incapable of it.

It made me realise that what I was uncovering was not a story about the end of story, but an "in the beginning" story. Story was starting to seep back into my world. Across the span of the novel (and in the two I have plotted to follow it) Once Upon A Time was starting to break. If you need an end (an "End") to explain the piercingly short amount of time we have as individuals on this earth, then you assuredly need a beginning story to match that. I came to realise I had become involved in Genesis almost by accident. It was a fitting position for a novelist to be in, and I enjoyed the irony of being taken off guard by the story. Most novelists revel in playing God; in this case the position had been thrust upon me by my creations.

Further research on fiction and storytelling led me further from the idea of a world without story, and closer to the idea of a world in which story was re-emerging. Gottschall's *The Storytelling Animal* echoes much of the work I have mentioned above, including a convincing argument for the utility of story: "Evolution is ruthlessly utilitarian. How has the seeming luxury of fiction not been eliminated from human life?" (24). If I needed further convincing that story was not a luxury but a necessary function of human existence, his reasoning continued to win me over. With a second solid case now before me as to the evolutionary advantage created by story, I began wondering what

kind of people, what kind of humans could possibly exist *without* this advantage.

As it turns out, my subconscious was having trouble with that too, or perhaps my linguistic reflex, or simply my habit of mind. It was becoming hard to tell. In any case, writing *The Untellable Story*, I kept making mistakes. Half the time I didn't even realise I had made them.

I was trying to create a world in which story was impossible, in which humans had lost the ability to create something fundamental to being human. We tell stories. It's what we do. And here I was, with my high concept in hand, trying to tell a story of a society without story, where story was leaching back in. The very fact that I could not imagine it became part of the reason for wanting to do so.

How fascinating. How frustrating. How implacably the story kept creeping in through the cracks without my realising that it had.

In early drafts I had parents threatening their children with the hermit figure Maldor, mentioned above, saying he would "eat them alive" if they were bad (telling stories). I had fireside companions saying to each other "what's your story?" (telling stories). I had people whispering half-truths and spreading rumours (telling stories).

I repeatedly wrote phrases such as, "I saw myself for an instant as they must see me: hunched over Yoshi's body lying sprawled on the path, like I was

some kind of devilish mountain spirit," and then realised that I couldn't write such things. Such things as metaphorical spirits did not exist in this world. My supervisor, Eva Hornung, had to gently point out to me at one point that a mother probably would not threaten her errant son by telling him that his father would "have his balls when he got home," as in the world I was constructing, that could have had only one horribly literal meaning.

It was confusing. It made me realise, again and again, just how ingrained the impulse to narrativise and fictionalise is, through every aspect of our culture and our language. More than once (in fact, more than a thousand times) I began to think the whole thing was futile. What an absurd concept. As a storyteller, how could I truly imagine humanity without storytelling? Is that not one of our defining features? How can you write about the rainbow if you are blind?

I found a parallel in Gottschall's analysis of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (a postapocalyptic text which carries the dubious distinction of having "escaped" the SF ghetto through its adoption by the respectable Literature family). In examining the classic he talks specifically about the ways in which the humans of Huxley's world are in fact *not* fully human because they have had their desire for story stripped away to some degree by genetic modification (191).

In this world, feature films have been replaced by the "feelies"; evidence, Gottschall argues, that the humans of this future world are no longer quite human because they are satisfied with plotless sensation. They appear to have

lost the insatiable appetite for story. The one exception to this of course is John the Savage, "who is a deviant partly because he prefers Shakespeare to feelies" (191).

I had thought initially that my humans were something like these humans, carrying neither the desire nor the capacity for story (see the next chapter for the technical details of how humans evolved to this state in the terms of my fictional universe). It was becoming more and more clear, however, that this was not the case. Story continued to seep into the boat, and there was no way I could bail fast enough to keep it out.

In wanting to write a world without story, I first had to research beyond a "common understanding" of story. In doing so, I found it was impossible to separate humans and their stories.

I have explored in this chapter the use of story as mnemonic device, as transmitter of culture, as societal binding agent, and as "flight simulator" for life. While I had expected my research to lead me into some of these areas, I did not anticipate that what I would discover would veer so far from the purely utilitarian. Story indeed functions in all of the above capacities, but has an irreducible quality which far transcends the practical. I will explore the implications of this on the writing of my novel in the next chapter.

4/

The Inescapable Story

We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep,
the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.

~ Jonathan Gottschall (xiv)

I started writing this novel with the idea in mind of a world in which story was *prohibited*. I wanted to write about a postapocalyptic world in which the cultural narrative was this: that it was story that had brought humans to the point of destruction; story that was the danger; story that had to be stamped out wherever it reared its head, for it was the poisoned sword that would destroy the human race.

I soon realised that this would be impossible. It was too much to ask of any dystopia, however farfetched and totalitarian, to extinguish the *desire* for story. It seemed fundamental to what makes us human. My original intuition about that is clearly borne out in the research, as detailed at length in the previous

chapter, but I will give one further example as I think it makes the case as clearly and conclusively as anything else I have encountered.

In 1944, two psychologists conducted an experiment at Smith College (I originally encountered this experiment during the course of my research in an *Atlantic* article, "The Psychological Comforts of Storytelling," but have since come across numerous references to this classic piece of investigation). Thirty-four students were shown an animated film in which geometric shapes — two triangles and a circle — moved about the screen, while a fourth shape — a "partially opened" rectangle — remained stationary in one corner. The film was short, black and white, and had no sound. After viewing the film, the students were asked to describe what they saw, with no further prompting from the investigators.

The conclusions were both incredible and entirely to be expected. Only *one* student recorded that all he had observed was "geometric shapes on a screen" (Delistraty 2). All the other students created stories, projected emotional states onto the objects, and gave them personalities. "The circle was 'worried', the 'little triangle' was an 'innocent young thing', the big triangle was 'blinded by rage and frustration'" (2). Numerous similar experiments have since been conducted, with similar results (Boyd 137).

If this was what I was working against, then nothing — no cult of personality, no religious mania, and certainly no totalitarian state — could prevent story from arising in the minds of humans. How could I possibly hope to take it away with a simple edict? Even the most hardline and soul-crushing state

cannot control human consciousness entirely. I had to change tack. I had to make story not forbidden, but impossible.

It is the results of such an experiment (and the failure of this experiment) that I will detail in this chapter, along with an exploration of the desire to perform this eradication, in which I have come to recognise one of the central projects of YA postapocalyptic fiction: that of the clean slate. If story is a universal human characteristic, then so too is the desire to tell that story better. Ridding the world of the mess is a central theme of end times literature; clearing the way for a new society that might just get it right this time. And this desire loops back around to the central preoccupations of YA literature in general – those big questions that just won't go away. In a brave new world there is a chance for new meaning, there is a chance to find a fairer, more meaningful way.

My story-wiping experiment ran thus: thanks to a genetically-engineered catastrophe coinciding with environmental disaster, the few humans remaining (huddled together in the far-flung and geographically sheltered continent of Australia) continued on with literally no capacity for telling story. This was my starting point, at least, but as explored elsewhere, the end result was far from that simple.

The details of my catastrophe, however, seemed pertinent, and I wanted to base them as strongly as I could in reality. (As a side note, I noticed with interest — and amusement — this desire for fictional veracity. Even the most farfetched story will ring "more true" if it starts from a plausible beginning.

We are far more willing to suspend our disbelief if we feel that someone is taking good care of it in the meantime. The postapocalyptic world of *The Matrix*, for example, in which it is revealed that human beings are being kept alive by super-intelligent machines purely as a power source, is given plausibility thanks to both one minute worth of well-written exposition and the gravitas with which Laurence Fishburne delivers the news to the stunned Neo [The Wachowskis, *The Matrix*]. Of course the scenario is ridiculous, but its internal logic works, and perhaps more importantly, its *emotional* logic works. Having built a base of plausibility, however improbable it may be, the story can proceed.)

For my own stab at plausible implausibility I intertwined three strands from the current scientific literature: Alzheimer's research, brain-enhancing drugs, and the SPICE Project (a scientific experiment to prevent global warming).

Alzheimer's disease

My research led me to a small community in rural Colombia, Medellín, where most of the inhabitants will develop, and die, of Alzheimer's — a disease they call *La Bobera*, the foolishness (Belluck 3). One of the young villagers interviewed for the article I read has had a hysterectomy, so terrified is she of passing on the mutation to any future children.

At the time the research paper was written there was no explanation as to why this was happening. For the people of this village, life itself is an ongoing and inexplicable apocalypse.

Medellín came to the attention of the US government through NIH researchers, and they took the "unusual step" of assigning US$50 million from that year's budget for research deemed "too promising to wait" (1). This is clearly a priority. People are terrified of Alzheimer's disease. They are terrified of losing their memories, their faculties, and their abilities to look after themselves. They are terrified of losing themselves, and terrified of losing their stories.

I took this article's grim findings and extrapolated into a future in which a promising wonder drug so developed goes horribly wrong, but whose negative side effects only show up several generations later, when the damage has been done. The damage, in this case (as the reader will probably already have inferred), is the loss of the ability to create story.

Brain-enhancing drugs

In 2008, Henry Greely et al wrote a paper observing the growing trend in US university campuses towards taking drugs such as Ritalin and Adderall to enhance brain function and achieve higher grades. The authors claim that up to 25% of students on some campuses had used these sorts of drugs in the past year (702). The authors' proposal is that this kind of use, while still frowned upon by the mainstream, is likely to pave the way for wider community acceptance of the practise. In this way, campus culture is continuing the trend of "mainstreaming" drug usage, but in a distinctly different direction from the spiritual/recreational direction of the 1960s and 70s.

Again I extrapolated, imagining a societal shift away from recognition of the importance of "dreaming" and a move towards a more efficient and "streamlined" human. It is not impossible to see a future in which the drive towards machine-like efficiency could start to erode the human capacity for creativity and imagination. Couple this with drugs both designed to have just this effect and widely accepted as beneficial, and you have a potential scenario in which the human race evolves quite rapidly away from story.

The SPICE Project

The final piece in my unholy trinity was a geo-engineering project known as the SPICE Project: Stratospheric Particle Injection for Climate Engineering.

Inspired by the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in The Philippines in 1991, in which massive clouds of sulphur dioxide and water spread into the atmosphere and effectively created a mirror effect, cooling the Earth's atmosphere, research teams are now considering ways to emulate this process in a more controlled fashion (Press Release: The University of Cambridge). The result desired is a reduction in sunlight reaching the Earth's surface, and thus a reduction in the heat of the atmosphere.

If this seems drastic, it is. There is such a level of fear surrounding the project that a (very) small-scale test procedure (planned for May 2012) had to be aborted due to community concerns (Specter 5). (As a side note, it is interesting to note that at least part of the concern was not so much with the result of the test, as with the idea that by venturing any way at all down this

path we are effectively giving up on the quest to limit CO^2 emissions, and are giving our politicians the license to do nothing.)

These then were my three starting conditions, and it doesn't take much to infer that in my imagined future all three of these global experiments went spectacularly wrong, leading to the position of the human race, some hundreds of years after these failed experiments, being in the state of "storylessness" in which they are when the novel opens.

Curiously, this state I was aiming for is a common desire in dreams of the apocalypse. If, as all my research leads me to believe, story is absolutely fundamental to the human experience, than the desire to remove that amounts to a desire to begin again, to clean the slate. And this desire for a new beginning is absolutely fundamental to the longevity of the apocalypse as a trope, and as a fascination.

Wipe the slate clean. Start again. Repeat if necessary. There are literally thousands of novels devoted not just to the end of it all, but to what comes next; to the project of presenting humans with a chance, finally, to get it right this time. And before the novels, of course, came the religious doctrine. The Catholic Church (for example) espouses the notion of *apocatastasis*: this "restoration to the original condition" was an element of theology taught by St. Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century Turkish bishop. It was a radical departure from the orthodox Christian teachings of the time, as it espoused the idea that *all* human souls would, in the fullness of time, be returned to

God. Hell, instead of being a place of eternal damnation, instead became a furnace of purification:

> The punishment by fire is not, therefore, an end in itself, but is ameliorative; the very reason of its infliction is to separate the good from the evil in the soul. (Battifol 1907)

It is not hard to leap from a doctrine such as this to a future postapocalyptic world or society in which these teachings are used as justification for all manner of repressive regimes. The very fact of the fire (be it nuclear war, global warming, or rain of volcanic ash) is evidence enough of the evils of humanity, and the world which exists now is the time of purification.

This clean slate sentiment is echoed all throughout history, not least in the bloody and desperate history of colonisation where the coloniser's desire to begin anew was imposed onto a "slate" which needed to be "wiped clean" of its original inhabitants and its original stories. The United States of America is a good example of this, as so much of the rhetoric of the founders was concerned with breaking away from the Old Country and its decadent traditions:

> We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birth-day of a new world is at hand. (Tom Paine, quoted in Berger 133).

I will focus on the rhetoric, not the obvious and hideous fallacy entwined in this notion that the land is "free" to be made new, unencumbered by, for

example, a diversity of rich and complex civilisations. Australia and its founding claim of *terra nullius* fall into the same category, of course, although there was never the high-minded rhetoric of a New World here; simply a desire to dump some undesirables somewhere undesirable.

There is always the ideal of transcendence, when we are starting again. As Claire Curtis puts it in her book *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract*, postapocalyptic stories "provide both the voyeuristic excitement of terrible violence and the Robinson Crusoe excitement of starting over again" (5). She also notes wryly that it is remarkable, when "everything" has been thrown out, just what is taken for granted when there is a new beginning being proposed. Even after everything has been destroyed, we see example after example of worlds in which normative notions of gender, social practise, and political ideas blithely continue on (7).

I found these sentiments echoed precisely in Amy Kathleen Ryan's *Sky Chasers* series. These books, which follow two colonising vessels on their long voyage from Earth to a far-distant planet, carry both the wild optimism of new hope and a fresh start (the Earth from which they flee is crumbling behind them under aeons of toxic human infestation) as well as the insidious seeds of the old traditions. One ship maintains a strict policy of atheism — with the prevailing narrative that ideological clashes were partly to blame for Earth's downfall — while the other ship has "descended" into "religious superstition." The drama in the series revolves around the literal and physical clashes of ideology, as the same story of a polluted new beginning is played out.

Kahn-Harris explores this desire for a new beginning through his analysis of the rise of "apocalypse culture" in extreme heavy metal (and if there is a YA genre of popular music, then surely heavy metal is strongly represented in its ranks). He notes that while extreme metal is not always explicit about the *nature* of the end rushing towards us, it carries the symbolic weight of seeking to "collapse boundaries, limits and assumptions inherent in the modern vision of the world" (25). In other words, it strives for, or encourages us to imagine, something bigger, and something better.

He contrasts the art (and the attitudes) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which humans had the ability to shape the environment in ways that were undeniably positive, with the art/attitudes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where for the first time the "frightening unintended consequences" of scientific "progress" include antibiotic resistance and global warming (22). This change in capability leads to a shift in mood in the arts, and in terms of his analysis, a shift towards the apocalypse in extreme metal.

Kahn-Harris notes two threads emerging here, both of which involve a "wiping clean." Extreme metal tends to treat the apocalypse as inevitable, but contains within this message the chance for redemption, or at least a starting again for whoever comes next (33). Black metal, however, not only sees the apocalypse as inevitable, but *welcomes* its arrival, as a way of cleansing the world for the "elite" who will come afterwards (35). Disturbingly, this elite tends towards Supremely White.

Putting the finer grains of metal taxonomy to one side, it is clear that apocalypse is commonly viewed as one side of a second-chance coin, the first stage in a potentially hopeful rebuilding. And there is much from this set of attitudes that maps directly onto the project of YA fiction. For to be a young adult is to be in a state of flux; almost by definition you are "betwixt and between" (to use anthropologist Victor Turner's description of liminality, highly relevant to the young adult experience). It is not too much, I think, to describe the years between childhood and adulthood as some kind of slow-motion apocalypse, with all the upheaval, chaos, and monumental wiping clean that it entails.

If we can say nothing else definitive about postapocalyptic literature (whether written specifically for a YA audience or not), we can say that at its core it contains some of the most primal questions of human existence. When the world as we know it has ended, it becomes impossible to put the big questions aside any longer. To come at the question from the teen audience's point of view then, it is clear that this process of rebuilding from nothing is enormously empowering for a teen readership. Faced with their own relative powerlessness in everyday life, to join forces with a fictional group of young adults upon whose decisions the fate of the world rests cannot but be an enormously liberating experience.

In the first book of James Dashner's *Maze Runner* series, the young protagonists wake without any memories of their former lives, in the middle of a giant and unsolvable maze full of creatures ready to punish mistakes with

death. It is an exaggeration and literalisation of the emotional state of many teenagers, forced to confront a confusing world where the rules seem arbitrary and the power cruelly wielded. In Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* series there is a very clear system of control in place, but it is still up to the teen characters to negotiate and ultimately subvert the system that presents them with the very stark choice of kill or be killed. Even Koushun Takami's *Battle Royale* — a decidedly bleaker take on the young-people-killing-each-other-for-entertainment story, in which the players are forced to wear explosive collars around their necks which will detonate if there have been no deaths for twenty-four hours — hangs the promise of redemption on its young protagonists, can they but defeat the all-powerful State which has forced them into this battleground in the first place. John Marsden's *Tomorrow* series likewise presents a scenario in which the teen characters must take on a repressive adult regime. And so on and on, in an endless stack of cathartic redemption.

Ultimately, it is the *literal importance* that hangs on the characters' actions that give the most weight to the subgenre, and makes it so appealing to young adult readers. Teenagers are, almost by definition, self-absorbed, but the actions of a self-absorbed character whose decisions could quite literally save the human race become that much easier to value. And it is in the importance these characters gain, the centrality and the legitimacy they have, that the subgenre has its strongest appeal to young adult readers.

Rebecca Solnit writes, "To become a maker is to make the world for others, not only the material world but the world of ideas that rules over the material world, the dreams we dream and inhabit together" (60). Solnit is talking about writing here, but her words apply equally to storytelling, to world building, to creating something after the wiping clean of the apocalypse.

Who controls the story controls the world, and in the classic YA postapocalyptic literature such as the texts mentioned above, the teen heroes are making their world. They are taking charge. They are creating the stories and writing the narratives, precisely in the way which is denied to their teen readers. This is incredibly powerful and alluring. It is also problematic, for it idolises the outsider in an often completely unrealistic way.

I realised this as I started to swing my novel away from the focus on "the end" of the apocalypse and towards a focus on "the beginning" of story. In my initial reconceptualisation, the ability to tell stories was something that was impossible for "normal" humans. My main character Annabelle, imbued with the gift/curse/power of story, therefore became instantly an outsider, as did the rest of the characters she encountered who shared her ability.

While the role of the outsider is a crucial one to YA fiction — enmeshed as its teen readers generally are in negotiating how, where, and why they fit into the new world order of adulthood — it is far too easy to rely on this trope to carry all the symbolic and/or narrative weight.

> Today's the Thing Day. Normally one thing happens, but this time a different thing will happen, because of how different we are, which is unusual. There's only five things you can be, but I'm a different thing. Society just made everyone pick one thing, somehow. You have to wear the matching jumpsuits or else you're the wrong thing. (Ortberg, *The Toast*)

This delightful parody of everything YA postapocalyptic, published at both the height of the craze and the inevitable backlash in 2014, raises this point of cliché very clearly. If something can be satirised so easily, and so succinctly, it is clearly problematic. ("There's only five things you can be, but I'm a different thing" brings instantly to mind Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games,* or Veronica Roth's *Divergent,* and would surely send a shudder of shame through even the most devoted of readers.)

That this piece parodies the most laboured or most clichéd of the tropes of the subgenre goes without saying, but nevertheless the easy tropes are there for the picking on. This is my reservation (in general) about the easy "outsider" YA trope, and became my reservation (in particular) about my own work. In setting up my main character as possessing the power of story I felt I was setting myself up to hit my head on a literary low bar. It felt that it would be hard to escape the level of easy cliché; or that even if I were to surpass it, it might go unnoticed by the reader, who had already been hoodwinked by the cliché markers. At this point it seems relevant to mention literary giants such as Ursula Le Guin and Margaret Atwood, not because I am putting myself in their league, but because of the troubles they have faced for most of their careers by including "genre markers" such as dragons or time travel, and the

critical cost they paid for doing so for much of their early careers. "For most of my career, getting that label — sci-fi — slapped on you was, critically, a kiss of death. It meant you got reviewed in a little box with some cute title about Martians — or tentacles" (Le Guin "Art of Fiction," 3).

As I have explored above, storytelling (and story in general) had not actually disappeared from my world. It was through researching story more fully both through the writing of the novel and in my wider reading that I came to this realisation. The people I was writing about were indubitably human, and by this fact alone, I was now convinced, they had story at their disposal — it is just that it was buried more deeply in most of them than they themselves realised. Story was leaching back into my world, and there was nothing that either the characters or I could do about it.

The novel is written in the first person voice; my main character is a full-blown (fully realised) storyteller; she is on the run for the crime of her storytelling for most of the book; she is a teenager. All of these things mark her as "outsider," and I do not want to pretend that I did not rely on this trope to some degree. It is, after all, a perfectly valid fictional device with which to explore a new world. What I hope I have avoided, however, is Thing Day Syndrome, where the main character becomes nothing more than a plot device wrapped in a cliché.

The Untellable Story was always planned as the first part of a trilogy, and I feel that through researching and writing this first instalment I have broadened considerably the scope and the depth of both the first episode and the two

episodes yet to come. That story has never left this world was news to me, and the *way* in which story manifests/manifested leads me to think that there it still much to be explored.

The teasing out of narrative, and the idea of story itself, is something I intend to continue to explore and develop in the trilogy. This is particularly relevant to the intended audience, for young adults are forever in a state of reinvention and "self storytelling," often in reaction to what appears as arbitrary rules and restraints placed upon them by figures of authority. As Scott Westerfeld (whose millions-selling teen dystopias have him well placed to speak with authority on this matter) puts it, "Teenagers' lives are defined by rules, and in response they construct their identities through confrontations with authority, large and small" (scottwesterfeld.com).

The idea of self-narrativisation, the notion of subjective experience or perspective, the realisation that things are not always as they seem, is something many young adults are starting to come to terms with. More importantly, things are not always *as they are told*, and this realisation becomes an important learning tool to query the dominant discourse in order to gain a fuller understanding of the world — an understanding of the ways in which the stories we tell in fact *make* our world.

Another story that will be explored further in books two and three of the trilogy is the fiction of gender, stories told to enforce a dichotomy of male/female, and the way in which the artifice of gender is constantly normalised and policed. In writing *The Untellable Story* I found myself

becoming more attuned to the social construction of gender; I was also very conscious that I was a male writing a female voice, and I was very concerned about getting the voice "right."

The voice of a novel is a nebulous thing, often judged simply by a gut reaction on the behalf of the reader. Either it works or it doesn't; either it is "true" and convincing, or it feels contrived. This is a concern for any author, writing any character. Writing Annabelle was a first for me, in the sense of a long-term engagement with a female protagonist, and I found myself constantly questioning her presentation, her way of speaking, her interactions with the world.

The social and personal politics of gender, race, sexuality, class, dis/ability, etcetera are important issues for a teen readership to be engaging with. If I had set out to insert these throughout the book as some kind of morality teachables, however, they would have come across as horribly contrived. The readership, well versed at deconstructing preach and/or detecting bullshit, would have (rightly) become annoyed, and (most likely) have stopped reading. That these things emerged organically for me, through the process of writing, gives me hope that they are not only integral to the story, but will be read and understood that way by the intended audience.

My final note in regards to future directions for the trilogy as a whole has to do with story as power. As I have previously explored in this exegesis, humans have story today because of the evolutionary advantage that cultivating this trait has given us, and continues to give us today. What then of a group of

people who are more tuned in to this resource than the rest? Would they not wield the most extraordinary power over their slower and more literal cousins? How would this inequity not lead to a state of enslavement and/or domination? These are yet more question marks to throw at my characters as I turn to writing the next instalment of Annabelle's story.

5/

Conclusion

I started my research in 2012, a year interpreted by some as being the last year of Planet Earth. (These interpreters include scholars of the Mayan calendar, the hippies who took their words perhaps a bit too literally, and the Hollywood executives who are never slow to cash in on a trend when it presents itself). Soon after starting my work, a surprising email landed in my inbox. It was a brochure from Tucan Travel promoting travel to South America, and it included this delightful passage:

> If it does happen as the ancient Mayans are said to have predicted on 21 December of this year, can you think of a place you would rather be to herald the end of it all? Of course if it doesn't happen, you can celebrate the next few days of life with renewed vigour by climbing active volcanoes.... (Tucan Travel)

It was the most explicit postapocalyptic advertising copy I had encountered, and it did give me pause for thought. Clearly there was a zeitgeist about, for when has advertising (except of the most confident and well funded sort) ever led the way rather than followed the mood of the day? This development gave me both the hope that I was chasing something culturally relevant, and left me to wonder if perhaps the end of The End was nigh, pop-culturally speaking.

Through the research and the writing of this project, my focus slowly shifted: from the stories after The End to the stories about stories. The postapocalyptic aspect of the project still made sense in terms of YA literature — the premise of the clean slate is a rich field for speculation, as demonstrated by the literally thousands of novels devoted to the end of it all — and it continues to remain the perfect metaphor for the transition from childhood to adulthood. What came to the fore, however, was the building and rebuilding of a world, a culture, a society through the sharing of history, the telling and retelling of stories.

Through the main character of *The Untellable Story*, through her retelling of the world, we experience her slow shift into the consciousness of an adult. We see the craft of the storyteller; we get to see "behind the scenes" as a world is created and a personality built. This is the way in for the reader and it has also become *my* way into this world; and my way into the metanarrative of story, the big question of how story shapes our reality.

Through exploring and synthesising the work of theorists including Walter Ong, Joseph Campbell, and Vladimir Propp, I have confirmed the fundamental nature of storytelling to human society. Engaging with the same material through my creative work, I have come to the same conclusions from a different angle — that to tell stories is human, and to be human is to tell stories.

Acknowledging the work of the authors who have come before me, I have explored the formulaic conventions and tropes upon which much YA postapocalyptic fiction is based. Through consistently engaging with my central theme of storytelling and the role of the storyteller in society, I have offered an original take on these conventions.

I have one final story to conclude this exegesis: Penny Russon's novel *Only Ever Always*. It is hard to say if it is a postapocalyptic novel; it is hard to say *what* it is, and it is hard to say *where* it is. We are between worlds. You are between worlds. The voice changes from second person to third person, and sometimes you are here (this world, "our" world, here) and sometimes you are there — sometimes she is there — there is a girl in a world a lot like ours but very different too; as though our world had been hit with some kind of catastrophe, some kind of breaking apart. Both of these worlds have apocalypse in them, but the world which is more like our world has the everyday apocalypse of the violent death of a loved one.

There are many kinds of apocalypse. A schism is a drama is a dramatic device is a plot point is the beginning of an exploration. It is what we have come to rely on to make drama, to make a novel, to tell a story. The end is always the beginning.

The End of the World is not going away. It is an endless source of fascination for us. In the time that I have been researching and writing this thesis I have come across literally hundreds of clickbait articles from across the internet with titles like "The 99 Most Beautiful Abandoned Places Around The Globe."

They are beautiful, these places, and they do carry gravitas and melancholy and meaning of some kind, even embedded as they inevitably are with links to the rest of the mess of humanity (*"You Won't Believe This Midwest Mom's Fat Fighting Routine!"*)

I take the bait every time I come across it. I take a moment out of a hectic day full of too much news and too many problems and I sit for a minute with an abandoned theme park, or marvel at the beauty of a once-grand cathedral, rotting from the inside out and filled with spreading trees.

Sometimes there is just no denying the appeal of quiet, of an earth released from the swarm of humans and our never-ending mess. There is no better way to end than by quoting from Rick Yancy's novel *The Infinite Sea*: "The Earth dark and quiet, the way it was before we showed up to fill it with noise and light. Something ends. Something new begins" (40).

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