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Fragmented Fiction: Storyworld Construction and the Quest for Meaning in Justin Cronin's *The Passage*

Maria Lindgren Leavenworth and Van Leavenworth

Abstract: This article examines Justin Cronin's post-apocalyptic novel *The Passage* (2010), with emphasis on how literal and figurative forms of fragmentation and shifts between temporalities can affect the reader's storyworld construction. Working from the assumption that expectations connected to genre are a pivotal part of the reader's storyworld creation, the novel's temporal settings, the pre-apocalyptic Time Before and the post-apocalyptic Time After, are analyzed with particular attention paid to the ontological distance between readers and characters produced by fragmentation and temporal shifts, to the collapse and reconstitution of cultural knowledge, and to how various text types contribute to a destabilization of narrative authority. The reader's quest for meaning, collating information from various sources and temporalities to reconstruct or keep track of events, is mirrored by the characters' world building in the post-apocalypse as they (re)assemble information and cultural knowledge. The storyworld evoked in the mind of the reader, expanding with new details and events, thus finds a concrete parallel in the characters' (re)construction of the world. Since the latter process is collaborative, with characters having to pool resources to both survive and make sense of the world, and the former occurs within an individual meaning-making process, the organization of the novel occasions a sense of isolation in the reader, mirroring the overarching theme of the narrative.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic fiction, storyworld construction, immersion, *The Passage*.

Biography: Maria Lindgren Leavenworth is Associate Professor of English at the Department of Language Studies, Umeå University, Sweden. Her research interests include transmediality, cognitive approaches to literature, and contemporary modifications of the paratext. Lindgren Leavenworth has also published extensively within the field of fan studies and is co-author of *Fanged Fan Fiction: Variations on Twilight, True Blood, and The Vampire Diaries* (2013).

Van Leavenworth is Assistant Professor of English at the Department of Language Studies, Umeå University, Sweden. He is interested in and has published articles on science fiction, the Gothic (in diverse media forms) and conceptions of otherness in narrative storyworlds.

Justin Cronin's *The Passage* (2010), the first novel in a trilogy, depicts a post-apocalyptic US plagued by a virus which turns victims into vampire-like beings, and which is spread by twelve initial test-subjects with super-human strength and abilities. By killing or turning their victims, the creatures forcefully decimate the nation's population and the spreading contagion cuts the US off from the rest of the world and isolates surviving groups of humans. The novel is divided into eleven books, the first two engaged with the before, during and shortly after the apocalyptic moment, the remaining nine focused on a struggling post-apocalyptic community almost a hundred years later. Interspersed sections in several of the books, as well as a postscript, also move the narrative perspective to a distant future in which the apocalypse and its aftermath, as chronicled in diaries or evinced through recovered artefacts, are studied.¹

The transitions between these temporalities structure *and* rupture readers' knowledge and create an ontological distance to the main characters. The reader of the novel is privy to the nature of the threat and the context in which it appears, imaginatively relocates to the post-apocalyptic setting in which rules of existence are estranging and in which cultural knowledge has been lost or suppressed, and needs to take into account that some form of life remains a millennium into the future. The reader's storyworld construction thus requires engagement with what David Herman refers to as the "complexities in the design of the blueprint" that the novel constitutes (*Basic Elements of Narrative* 107) and that evokes in the mind of a reader "mental models of the situations and events being recounted—of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner" (106, 107). To examine potential complications in the engagement with the novel, we take as one starting point Herman's contention that readers of a fictional text are required to relocate to the storyworld in question "if they are to interpret referring expressions . . . and deictic expressions . . . —mapping them onto the world evoked by the text rather than the world(s) that the text producer and text interpreter occupy when producing or decoding these textual signs" (113). To make sense of events and characterizations and to navigate the narrative thus require readers' immersion in the world evoked. However, in a later work, Herman draws attention to particularly challenging texts that are designed in such a way that they inhibit or even actively derail attempts to build a definitive storyworld—attempts in which, however, those texts also paradoxically invite interpreters to engage" (*Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* 147). The numerous complexities of Cronin's novel and the potential invitations and inhibitions these extend to the reader work in tandem with a thematic and structurally salient fragmentation.

The Passage is not an extreme type of "non- or antinarrative" which actively prohibits storyworld construction (*Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* 147), but both encourages immersion in the storyworld and emphasizes its ongoing process of construction. In this manner it aligns with Merja Polvinen's claims about works of self-reflexive fiction which "build a reader position which assumes readers to be able to maintain . . . two states of mind at the same time—one experiencing the presence of a fictional space, characters and events, and another acutely aware of their imaginariness" (20). Polvinen demonstrates this through an analysis of China Miéville's *The City & The City*, a work of speculative fiction that, similar to *The Passage*, imagines a world developed yet highly distinct from real-world referents.

Working from the assumption that expectations connected to genre are a pivotal part of the reader's storyworld creation, we examine the novel's temporal settings, the Time Before and the Time After, with particular attention paid to the ontological distance between readers and characters, to the collapse and reconstitution of cultural knowledge, specifically as regards vampires, and to how various text types contribute to a destabilization of narrative authority. The reader's quest for

¹ The second installment in the trilogy, *The Twelve*, was published in 2012 and *City of Mirrors* in May 2016. The former evokes an expanded storyworld with a similar focus on the Time Before and the Time After, and the latter contains lengthy sections set a millennium into the future. Here, we contend that individual novels in a series can be regarded as discrete blueprints for the reader's storyworld construction.

meaning, collating information from various sources and temporalities to reconstruct or keep track of events, is mirrored by the characters' world building in the post-apocalypse as they (re)assemble information and cultural knowledge in order to be able to combat the threat. The storyworld evoked in the mind of the reader, expanding with new details and events, thus finds a parallel in the characters' (re)construction of the world. Since the latter process is collaborative, with characters having to pool resources to both survive and make sense of the world, and the former occurs within an individual meaning-making process, the organization of the novel occasions a sense of isolation in the reader, suited to the overarching themes of the narrative. The different forms of fragmentation thus frustrate attempts to create complete cohesion, but simultaneously invite both characters and readers to build the world anew.

The Time Before

Eschatological fictions constitute an opportunity for authors and readers to engage with questions of identity and meaning in the shadow of the end. Frank Kermode establishes that (post)apocalyptic stories and imagery routinely follow real-world social and technological change and “underlie our ways of making sense of the world from where we stand, in the midst” (29). What concretely occasions the apocalypse in Cronin's novel is a scientific discovery that bats in the Bolivian jungles carry a virus that can temporarily cure serious illnesses and leave individuals rejuvenated through a re-boot of the thymus gland. The genetic discovery is corrupted by military involvement and leads to an experiment, Project NOAH, in which twelve prisoners on death row are injected with the virus in the attempt to create superhumanly strong and fast soldiers. The promise tendered by the genetic discovery in *The Passage* is in this way complicated by contemporary concerns likely shared by both characters and readers regarding genome alterations and fast-spreading biological or computer infections, and is turned into catastrophe when the vampire-like beings break out of the Colorado test facility they are in to wreak havoc on the world.

Two epigraphs on one level emphasize the work as a construction and on another level prepare readers for the diegetic impending doom. The first, appearing before the entire narrative starts, presents Shakespeare's 64th sonnet, with the exception of the last two lines, which has been described as “catalogu[ing] instances of inevitable destruction so as to provide a consolation for death” (Stockard, note 17, 480). The second epigraph, prefacing the first book, is a quotation from Katherine Anne Porter's “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” (1936) which, forging a thematic similarity with *The Passage*, revolves around a plague (the influenza pandemic of 1918). The quoted section includes the phrases “[t]he road to death is a long march beset with all evils” and “no covering of the eyes shuts out the landscape of disaster, nor the sight of crimes committed there,” thus emphasizing horror and inevitable destruction (Cronin 1).² In his seminal study of the paratext, Gérard Genette argues that the epigraph, quite literally on the threshold to be crossed on the way into the text, is a “mute gesture whose interpretation is left up to the reader” and thus naturally out of reach for the characters (156). In the context of storyworld construction, readers' interpretations of the epigraphs may thus imbue the text with additional meaning: the epigraphs supply information which sets up a context of destruction, while being inaccessible to the characters about to face it.

Setting the novel apart from many other post-apocalyptic fictions, Cronin carefully outlines what in later sections of the novel comes to be known as the Time Before. Although imaginatively returning to the past that determines their present, the man and boy in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2010), for example, are introduced as traversing an already destroyed landscape, Robert Neville in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) is trapped in his isolation at the very start of the novel, and six hundred years have passed since the nuclear apocalypse in Walter M. Miller's *A*

² All formatting corresponds to the original.

Canticle for Leibowitz (1960). Mary Manjikian argues that “a sense of unease” is produced “in the contemporary reader” by the device utilized by authors like these “in which a future point is identified and then contemporary events are reread as history by an omniscient narrator who already knows how the story turns out” (220). Events more or less contemporaneous with the reader are in the post-apocalyptic narratives revealed as “regressive” rather than “progressive” and as a consequence, he or she may be “‘lost’ in the narrative” (220-221).

While facilitating aspects of the reader’s world-building, Cronin’s narrative strategy of delineating events leading up to the apocalyptic moment, the moment itself, and its immediate aftermath, may result in a different sense of being lost, because the depicted world is only slightly removed from the reader’s present. Following J. R. R. Tolkien, Mark J. P. Wolf describes storyworlds as secondary worlds that imaginatively derive from the Primary World in which authors and readers exist (24). The degree of “‘secondariness’ of a story’s world” is contingent on to what extent “new combinations of existing concepts . . . replace or reset the Primary World defaults” (24, 25). Events in the first two books in *The Passage* are indicated to play out around 2014, four years after the publication of the novel, and its contemporary reader is faced with a fictional setting, reasonably close to the Primary World. Disturbing developments then heighten the world’s secondariness. For example, Hurricane “Vanessa” has caused extensive damage to New Orleans and in the novel’s initial present, the city is “patrolled by Homeland Security forces in full battle dress” (Cronin 65). Added is also a sense of renewed or intensified global hostility, rendered in biological terms: “war was everywhere, metastasizing like a million maniac cells run amok,” and it is made clear that the hoped-for super-soldiers infected with the virus would be put to use “in the mountain caves of northern Pakistan, or the eastern deserts of Iran, or the shot-up buildings of the Chechen Free Zone” (Cronin 84, 183). Rather than evoking a storyworld completely separated from the actual world, *The Passage* is anchored in a context which then has to be incrementally adjusted.

Although events in the fictional setting do not drastically reset the defaults of the Primary World, the novel’s first sentence, containing a proleptic description of Amy, one of the protagonists, pulls in a different direction. Although Amy is in the initial present “just a little girl,” she will become “the One Who Walked In, the First and Last and Only, who lived a thousand years” (Cronin 3). Immediately after this brief indication of Amy’s future fate, the narrative shifts back into delineating her earliest childhood and to how her mother is forced to abandon Amy at an orphanage in Memphis. Long before being transformed into a near-immortal, however, Amy is portrayed as already, inexplicably, extraordinary. The most salient example of her apartness is when Amy is taken to the zoo where she communicates with the caged polar bears, telling her distraught minder Sister Lacey that the bears know “[w]hat I am” and inciting a general uproar in the other animal exhibits (97). These conflicting images of Amy create a number of what Alan Palmer refers to as “ontological gaps” in the evoked storyworld (34). Amy’s “true” nature is in the novel’s present that of a young, vulnerable girl, albeit with unusual powers, and in the projected future that of a singular survivor, likewise with abilities that set her apart. What these gifts and abilities yet mean within the storyworld is not determined, and Amy’s fictional mind remains challenging because of the double temporal perspective. Further, a distance is created between the reader and the characters she interacts with in the “now” of the narrative, since the latter have no knowledge of the references indicating what Amy will become.

The main resetting of Primary World defaults, however, results from the novel’s hybrid genre-belonging; while anchoring some events in science it also borrows heavily from the fantastic genre, specifically from vampire horror. Yet, at the outset references to vampires as belonging to myth and legend align readers and characters. Professor Jonas Abbott Lear, who makes the initial discovery of the virus in Bolivia, is asked by a high-ranking military officer if he is “the vampire guy” and relating the event to a friend in an email, Lear reflects: “You know how I feel about that word—just try to get an NAS grant with “vampire” anywhere in the paperwork” (Cronin 20).

Illustrating a wish to avoid a derogatory term, Lear's initial and subsequent emails simultaneously gesture to a reality that is more difficult to align with fiction. He refers to statues found in the jungle, photographs of which are attached to the messages (images not included in the predominantly text-based novel) and by way of explication instructs the addressee to direct attention to "the bent animal posture, the clawlike hands and the long teeth crowding the mouth, the intense muscularity of the torso" (21). He also likens the objects to other artefacts: "the pillars at the temple of Mansarha, the carvings on the gravesite in Xianyang, the cave drawings in Côtes d'Amor" (22). The references conjure up an image of a possibly supernatural presence, surfacing periodically in different times and cultures. The relatively slow process of turning realism into the fantastic "enable[s] readers to recenter themselves in a fictional world that is governed by different physical laws (and therefore accommodates different possibilities) than the world of everyday experience" (Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* 147). In the process of storyworld construction, that is, vampires as traditionally envisaged remain lodged in the domain of the fantastic and something new, but related, takes their place.

Even as the test subjects in Project NOAH begin to exhibit traits that align them with vampires in the cultural tradition, the word vampire is used sparingly, and only when other descriptors seem insufficient. In contrast to many contemporary vampire narratives, the monster's perspective is only sporadically represented in *The Passage*, which contributes to exacerbating the threat it constitutes. These glimpses reveal further ties to common conceptions of vampiric strengths and weaknesses including a loss of individuality, insatiable blood lust, and abilities to powerfully influence human minds. Along with references to the selection process and the test subjects' isolation, these glimpsed perspectives can be used in the reader's storyworld construction, but are inaccessible to the human characters populating the Time Before. Although both readers and select characters start to conceive of the test subjects as progressively more monstrous, they may do so for different reasons: the former because of what they are explicitly told about feelings of alienation, dehumanization and violence, the latter because their close proximity to the test subjects allows them to observe aberrant behaviors.

The apocalyptic moment in *The Passage* represents a figurative border that produces a higher level of secondariness of the fictional world. And the moment is clearly demarcated: it takes "[t]hirty-two minutes for one world to die, another to be born" (Cronin 192). This, then, is when the test subjects break out of the facility they have been held in and upend the state of affairs in the surrounding world. The narrative's focus on Amy, who has been taken to Colorado by the FBI agent Brad Wolgast to be a thirteenth test-subject, means that the reader is situated in close proximity to the catastrophe, a witness to its climax, and the ensuing shifts between various perspectives give a relatively complete picture of events.

Considering the novel's opening sentence, it is not surprising that Amy survives the disaster, and in book two Wolgast brings her to Oregon to weather the aftermath of the apocalypse during what is referred to as the "Year of Zero" (Cronin 211).³ Rumors travel among the scattered survivors, relayed through the Internet and intermittent newspaper reports. The first newspaper article represented in the novel effectively enforces the difference between anonymous masses on the one hand and the reader, Wolgast and Amy on the other: the latter have witnessed the apocalypse and can see through the attempts to couch reality in slightly more reassuring terms. The article refers to the outbreak as the "Colorado fever virus," perceived as spread by "anti-American extremists," and to the Government's aim to "punish those responsible" (223). In the second news report, published two months later, the infection is straightforwardly referred to as a vampire virus. The main story of the piece is the fall of Chicago; victims are divided into casualties and infected

³ This designation may mean that time has been reset after the apocalypse for Wolgast, but within the storyworld this also alludes to "Subject Zero," the first of the infected, whose actions allow the test subjects to escape.

and there are reports of fires following flyovers, but no confirmation that this is part of an official strategy to contain the virus. The political decision is important to the reader, however, since it makes understandable the detonation Wolgast and Amy later experience and which ends the former's human life. Included in the report are also references to the first steps taken to divide the country, thus foreshadowing the severely fragmented humanity that will exist in the post-apocalypse. Despite the time lapse between the two reports, their details allow the reader to fill in the blanks and construct a causal chain in which resistance has given way to desperation.

The sections of the novel set in the Time Before are thus thematically joined by various processes starting or resulting in isolation even before the apocalypse occurs. For example, all the nuns at the orphanage in Memphis, except one, are killed once Amy has been taken away. Project NOAH is based on the idea of “[z]ero footprint,” that is, the test subjects (including Amy) and workers at the facility are chosen because they have no immediate family or friends that will miss them (89). As Herman argues “different kinds of narrative practices entail different protocols for worldmaking, with different consequences and effects” (*Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* 105). The fragmentation of humanity is expected in (post)apocalyptic narratives, and paralleled in *The Passage* by the switch between different text types and narrative perspectives already in the Time Before. The evoked storyworld is thus one of uncertainty, on the levels of both content and structure.

The Time After

The mix between the genres of science fiction and fantasy/horror in *The Passage* continues to set up protocols for storyworld construction, and the devastation of a recognizable environment and culture in the post-apocalypse is expected, as are a marked absence of security, a shortage of resources, and an absence of overarching laws. The bulk of *The Passage* is set almost a century into the future, paratextually signaled at the opening of each book by the temporal marker 92 A.V., the abbreviation arguably standing for After Virus or After Viral Outbreak.⁴ The reader's transition into this new present is complicated, however, by a mix of text forms that draw attention to rather than close narrative and ontological gaps, and references to yet another temporality.

The short, third book, “The Last City,” marked 2 A. V., opens with an undated evacuation notice from Philadelphia, with information about the procedure and what each child must and cannot bring. Then follows an excerpt from a book presented at the conference taking place in 1003 A.V. While all fiction, Palmer notes, “is necessarily incomplete and full of blanks where nothing is said about a part of the storyworld and gaps where something but not everything is said” (34), the slight temporal difference between books two and three in *The Passage*, along with references to texts and artefacts that have been produced in one time and consumed in another, place high demands on the reader's cognitive engagement. The reader is kept close to the Time Before, and then informed that some form of life exists also a millennium from the apocalyptic event. However, the book excerpt contextualizes the evacuation notice by giving a first-hand account of the process of forced relocation. In the passage from the book, Ida Jaxon (at this point unfamiliar to the reader) reflects on her childhood memories in Philadelphia, being separated from her family; she describes the windowless train cars, and how children as well as adults are shot in the confusion surrounding the boarding. Palmer argues that “real-world knowledge, . . . stereotypical sequence[s] of events, and . . . ways of reacting to stereotypical situations and events” are used to fill in the gaps occurring in all written discourses (46). Although the aim of the journey is to save the children, the reader's

⁴ The characters do not use the abbreviation A.V., only refer to the year 92, but a reference is made to “the GREAT VIRAL CATAclysm” which resets time (Cronin 265).

emotional response may be one of trepidation as the text forms together evoke images of trains to concentration camps, and by extension genocide.

The fourth book, “All Eyes,” opens with a text presented in the distant future and then shifts to 92 A. V., the timeframe in which the actual narrative plays out, but the juxtaposition in this instance means that the distance between the reader and the characters is enhanced: the latter’s dwelling place and judicial documentation may be perceived as objects of study in a future setting. A reconstructed map of the Colony is followed by a document from 17 A. V. which outlines the structure and organization of an agricultural society. It is not indicated who, or by what means, the map has been reconstructed, but it is signaled as presented at the 1003 A. V. conference, whereas the “DOCUMENT OF ONE LAW” is inserted without reference to it being accessed in the distant future (Cronin 264). What the latter makes clear, however, is that the fragmentation and isolation beginning in the Time Before are sustained in the post-apocalyptic world and that literal as well as figurative boundaries have been erected. References are made to the importance of family belonging, to “THE WATCH” upholding the safety of the community through firepower, and to “THE SANCTUARY,” in which children are kept separate until their eighth birthday (265). Anyone violating the rules ensuring that a quarantine is kept, such as the use of a radio or opening the gate, or divulging information to the young children about the surrounding world, receives “the penalty of PUTTING WITHOUT THE WALLS” (266). The two texts provide a visual image and a shorthand to rules of existence in the setting the reader is about to imaginatively relocate to.

The first chapter focused on life in the Colony opens with another prolepsis introducing Peter Jaxon, “Peter of Souls, the Man of Days and the One Who Stood [who] in the last hours of his old life” is waiting on the high wall surrounding the community (267). Forging a link with Amy in the Time Before, Peter is doubly introduced: as the individual he is at the moment the reader meets him, and as who he will become once his life transitions into something new. As with Amy, the reader alone is privy to the fact that a transformation is imminent and arguably uses this knowledge in the process of character and storyworld construction.

Emphasizing the secondariness of the fictional world, the chapter effectively summarizes past and present human existence in the isolated community, which may facilitate the reader’s orientation in it. In fact, Peter’s thoughts, which are described as, “a mental inventory in three dimensions with complete sensory accompaniment,” flesh out the previously inserted map by adding details such as “the smell of animals,” the “fog of humidity” in the greenhouses, and “the voices of Littles playing” outside the Sanctuary (268). Peter occupies an isolated, bird’s-eye perspective in this scene. No one speaks to him this evening, “the sixty-third of summer,” because he is waiting on the wall “to serve the Mercy” for his brother: to kill Theo should he return as a “viral” (268, 270). New familial obligations have thus been introduced as individuals are transformed, and left alone on the wall, Peter reminisces about the past hope for rescue and contact, about his own father’s journeys as far away as the Pacific Ocean, and about the diminishing possibility of encountering a Walker, that is an uninfected human, outside the Colony. This history chronicling a progressively more circumscribed and isolated life is concluded by Peter thinking about the beauty of stars, witnessed and talked about by both his father and by their relative Ida Jaxon, who is consequently re-introduced to the reader and placed within the 92 A.V. temporality. The stars, however, remain invisible to him as Second Bell tolls, instructing those working outside the wall to return, as the heavy gate closes, and “the lights c[o]me on” (275).

The situation the reader navigates is consequently one of paranoia and unrelenting light due to the ever-present threat of photophobic virals, and one in which much knowledge is lost or has been repressed. The few books that are “allowed to remain” in the Sanctuary gesture to the many that have been deemed unsuitable because “the Littles . . . were not to know anything about the virals or what had happened to the world of the Time Before” (270). Starting with withholding information from the children, the ignorance follows characters into adult life: as Peter reflects,

“most things from the Time Before” confound him. “How did people live? . . . If there were no virals, what made them afraid?” (296). Peter and the other characters in 92 A. V. are one or two generations away from the apocalyptic event but not necessarily aware of what they no longer are allowed to know. The result is an ontological distance between characters and readers, and potentially also a sense of frustration in the latter as some information could be of importance in the new circumstances. The reader is consequently in a curious position, bit by bit learning about the new conditions of 92 A. V., while simultaneously knowing considerably more than the characters about the past that defines their existence.

The well-lit post-apocalypse suffers from a crisis that introduces an end-within-the end: the depletion of mundane batteries. “Mankind had built a world that would take a hundred years to die,” one character reflects. “A century for the last lights to go out” (306). The novel’s second turning point is a result of this crisis and a crumbling trust between the Colony’s inhabitants, foreshadowed by repeated references to dreams and nightmares. These dreams often “feel like . . . someone *else’s* memories” and Colony leader Sanjay Patel perceives of the nighttime voice as belonging to an “imaginary friend . . . singing its mysterious name: *I am Babcock*” (Cronin 451, 408). Babcock is one of the original test subjects in Project NOAH and his ability to influence minds is in this way continued from the Time Before. The Colony inhabitants are also pitted against each other through Amy, who inexplicably has Walked In to the community and who possesses unnatural gifts of healing. In this fraught situation, the lights go out and the thirty-two apocalyptic minutes that end the world in the Time Before, are in the Time After replaced by three nights of violence and destruction as the community is invaded by virals. The end of a century of relative safety prompts Peter and a small group to set off towards Colorado to track down a radio signal—a faint and forbidden trace of the technologically advanced society preceding them—to establish contact with others and, if possible, avert the threat of a definite, nation-wide end.

Amy, who in this temporality is still superficially a young girl, accompanies the small band of characters, and the century that separates the reader’s encounters with her produces a significant ontological gap. As Palmer argues, the assemblage of a complete fictional consciousness is contingent on a “process by which the reader constructs a series of encounters with a particular fictional mind into something that is coherent and continuous” (186). That is, through coalescing a character’s “cognitive, ideological and perceptual viewpoint[s],” the reader assembles a representation of a mind through narrative clues: statements, actions, reported thoughts, and emotions (187). “[W]hat is not made explicit under [a] particular aspect is indeterminate,” Palmer continues, and it is down to “the competence of the reader to fill in the gaps by creating more aspects under which the character may be implicitly or hypothetically perceived;” a process commonly made easier because of the reader’s real-world experience of constructing whole minds of people she or he encounters sometimes only sporadically (198).

Amy, then, is challenging on the one hand because of the scant narrative clues given, on the other because her unchanging appearance and supernatural gifts lack real-world referents. In the final brief chapter in book four, the reader follows an unnamed female character moving with the changing seasons, asking the question “*who am I,*” and having dreams, which, like the Colony inhabitants’, answer the question with “*I am Babcock. I am Morrison, I am Chavez. I am Baffes-Turrell- Winston-Sousa-Echols-Lambright-Martinez-Reinhardt-Carter*” (351, 354). As the reader knows that Amy is the thirteenth test subject, the list of the previous twelve help establish that the text passage is indeed centered on her, but the poetic and fragmentary nature of the chapter raises more questions than it answers. As Petter Skult argues, building on Palmer’s ideas, “all that is not viewed, named, placed by the author, becomes a sort of ontological gap in the reader’s mind” (106). The innumerable experiences (the unnamed) Amy must have had during almost a century are unaccounted for and the reader encounters her on terms relatively similar to the characters’ in 92 A. V., bit by bit learning about her isolated existence and extraordinary gifts.

This form of ontological gap to be filled in by characters and readers alike is paralleled by the “reclamation” of geographical areas, knowledge of which has been lost in the post-apocalypse; as these “are again named” in the narrative “they emerge out of the ontologically gray-spaced unknown” (Skult 108). The fragmentation characterizing existence in *The Passage*, however, entails an incomplete or only partial reclamation of physical space. The most effective example is when Peter, Amy, and the small group enter a dilapidated large city. Even though unfamiliar with cities as such, the artificiality of it strikes the travelers as markedly different from what they have expected. Names of buildings, such as Mandalay Bay and The Luxor mean nothing to the travelers and neither do signs outside shops such as “Prada, Tutto, La Scarpa, Tesorini” (Cronin 522). The clash between reclamation and collapsed cultural memory is especially pronounced in the characters’ reactions to “a massive structure of ribbed steel [with] four legs that tapered to a narrow tip” (527). Several characters recognize the Eiffel Tower and know it should be in Paris, as they have encountered images of it in books from the Time Before. The illogic of seeing it in their own country, however, makes them reach the conclusion that it must have been moved to this strange place from France. There is thus a lingering awareness of places beyond the country’s boundaries, but no active memory of Las Vegas, the latter hindering the characters from reclaiming the abandoned city through naming. To the reader, in contrast, the descriptions of the city arguably result in a process of reclamation, as well as the construction of a causal chain of destruction pre-dating the small group’s arrival.

The fragmentation of knowledge regarding vampires in the evoked storyworld similarly introduces a significant distance between characters and readers, one that is potentially frustrating because some knowledge of vampires could help the characters. In the Colony, as previously noted, all vampire-related fictional artefacts are inaccessible, and a pseudoscientific explanation of the process of transformation is presented, by which “a virus [steals] the soul away” from the infected (270). This is represented as “the one truth from which all other truths descended,” and introduced to children when they leave the Sanctuary on their eight birthday (270). However, the intermittent contact between the small group and other survival communities illustrates that all have assembled their own stories and explanations, and also that levels of suppression vary. At a military compound, Peter is present at a showing of Tod Browning’s 1931 film *Dracula*. Of course, he has had no previous contact with the visual medium, but then realizes that it is “[a] story, like the old books in the Sanctuary, the ones Teacher read to them in circle” (656). Despite this reference to fiction, Peter’s conclusion is that “the movie seemed almost to be a kind of instruction manual” and that it may reflect a real past event (657). Given this understanding, Peter assumes that Jonathan Harker in Browning’s film will perform the Mercy once it is clear that his wife Mina has been turned. Here, the film showing grinds to a halt because of a viral attack and it is not until later that one of the officers tells Peter what happens. ““They don’t kill the girl. They kill the *vampire*. Stake the son of a bitch right in the sweet spot. And just like that, Mina wakes up, good as new”” (742). Peter’s experiences make him misread the events in the film, but it is nevertheless instructive since, it turns out, killing one of the original virals releases the souls of those he has turned.

The group’s meetings with other isolated pockets of humanity also highlight the conflicting stories told about the apocalypse. In Colorado, Peter is told by a general that: ““Some people say the quarantine worked, that the rest of the world is just humming right along out there without us. . . . Others believe . . . that everybody’s dead [and] that the quarantine wasn’t quite as tight as people thought”” (650). Logic underpins both strands of development. In the former, the communication silence surrounding the US is explained by an “electronic barricade” matching the geographical, in the latter, the breach of the quarantine is seen as a result of greed (650). Inhabitants of other nations would have been unable to resist the suddenly unguarded valuables, resources and military equipment, but as a result of their infringement, they have likely carried the virus back to where

they came from. To Peter, this speculation is logical and leads him to see the world as a forever “empty place” (650).

The reader, however, is put in another position due to the knowledge of “the Third Global Conference on the North American Quarantine Period” in 1003 A. V. as it demonstrates that some form of life exists after the apocalypse and that, by extension, Peter’s conclusion is faulty (250). Manjikian comments that post-apocalyptic narratives commonly make “the reader . . . ‘decentered’ because the narrative he [sic] has used to make sense of the world has been rewritten, and as a result his [sic] sense of place is different” (206). In *The Passage*, the reader has already been decentered twice as the recognizable landscape of the US has first undergone a crisis, then been depicted as a bleak post-catastrophe world. The conference, then, introduces a third set of assumptions the reader has to contend with. However, very little is said about the conference participants and audience. Manjikian argues that they are “anthropologists and historians from the future” and that the results they “present are based on their analyses of hand-written journals and other artifacts rescued from the new post-apocalyptic civilization” (214). This reading demonstrates Manjikian’s own cognitive filling in of gaps in the narrative, as she is assigning identity to characters not explicitly described and awarding them an agency which likewise is not part of the narrative in *The Passage*.⁵ The reader’s knowledge of the conference proceedings is just as likely to result in an uneasy identification process that fills an important decentering function, forcing him or her to ask questions about the motives and identity of the conference participants.

The conference takes place at the “Center for the Study of Human Cultures and Conflicts [at the] University of New South Wales, Indo-Australian Republic,” a geographical location that does not in itself suggest that the US is still uninhabitable, but that other changes have taken place (Cronin 250). In an analysis of neo-imperial tendencies in Cronin’s novel, Glennis Byron and Aspasia Stephanou maintain that “older colonial assumptions about the primitive other are . . . put into play” and “racist attitudes” are reinscribed, particularly in placing the discovery of the virus in “uncivilized” South America (193). The conference is left out of Byron’s and Stephanou’s discussions, but it illustrates a reversal of positions. Again, since it is impossible to determine the identity and objectives (even the species) of the scholars within the narrative, it is difficult to state how they see the objects presented. The featured documents produced in a distant past can be seen as signs of a highly developed preceding civilization, or as artefacts belonging to a primitive phase. However they are viewed, the characters the reader has come to identify with become objects of study, and as Othered in this process as previous civilizations in the reader’s “now.”

Conclusion: Fragmentation and Collaborative World Building

In all processes of storyworld construction, Herman argues, readers “do not merely reconstruct a series of events and a set of existents, but imaginatively (emotionally, viscerally) inhabit a world in which, besides happening and existing, things matter, agitate, exalt, repulse, provide grounds for laughter and grief.” Even if these reactions and responses are not always identical, they need to be experienced “both [by] narrative agents and [by] interpreters working to make sense of their circumstances and (inter)actions” (*Basic Elements of Narrative* 119). In *The Passage*, the challenge to the reader’s immersion is foremost underscored by temporal and structural fragmentation which demands that the reader continuously reorients her- or himself. Immersion into two separate timeframes is consequently required and the erratically inserted sections from the future conference disrupt the process, especially as they remain unconnected to a narrative progression and lack specified narrative agents. This potential deferral of immersion may be paradoxical at the outset

⁵ The third installment of the trilogy reveals that Manjikian’s assumptions are correct. However, her 2012 discussion is (and could only be) based solely on *The Passage*.

because the mental construct evoked in the mind of the reader, the storyworld which continues to expand when narrative details are added to it, finds a parallel in the world building of another kind as inhabitants of the devastated post-apocalypse try to piece information together and reconstruct the world.

In relation to the world building that takes place in the novel, the reader's position within and movement between temporalities can also occasion a sense of isolation. The characters in *The Passage* are on different levels presented as cogs in a machine. Figuratively, characters from the different time tracks are revealed to complement each other—there is a sense of fate guiding their actions which points forward to an eventual resolution. In literal ways, each character strategically utilizes his or her specific strengths and abilities. Survival in the post-apocalypse is thus a question of teamwork as far as the human characters are concerned. The reader's process of storyworld construction is of a related, yet distinct kind. In some respects, there are significant parallels, especially when the protagonists encounter individuals or communities that can complement or supplant previously held information. In these instances, ontological gaps are filled in by the reader and characters in tandem: the characters' world expands as does the reader's storyworld. At other times the reader is in a privileged position with cultural memory intact and with access to information hidden from the characters. The evoked storyworld is in these cases significantly larger than the world and world-knowledge held by characters confined to a particular temporality. Finally, the novel's protagonists in the post-apocalypse do not have to learn about their own reality as the reader is required to do: the characters' world stays the same, the evoked storyworld expands. Ultimately, the characters' world building and the reader's storyworld construction pull in different directions and preclude an alignment between the reader and the characters he or she is invited to laugh or cry together with. Effectively mirroring the salient theme of Cronin's novel, the reader is alone.

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