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Short Circuits

# Postfictional Genres

## The Christian Apocalyptic Thriller

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THE NOVEL IS FICTION. That, in a sense, is its job description; it depicts an imaginary, parallel universe similar to, yet separate from our own. But this accepted notion of the novel as fictional world seems to be one that has become increasingly unstable in recent years. One feature of much recent literary fiction is a consistent probing of its own fictive status, and an attempt to reimagine and recalibrate the relationship between fictional and factual worlds. W. G. Sebald's quasi-autobiographical circumlocutions are a case in point, as is Iain Sinclair's 'documentary fiction' mode. However, my trajectory in this article is not so much *Downriver* as downmarket. Venturing into more commercial realms reveals innovation and hybridisation of a different and altogether more contentious order. The past decade's big unit-shifters have attracted notoriety for playing fast and loose with the boundary of fact and fiction. Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* made much of its supposedly factual basis, mixing thriller, history and grail-hokum into a formula that saw it in the dock accused of plagiarising a work of non-fiction (Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln's equally spurious *Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*). Likewise, 'misery memoir' — that daytime TV of the literary world — has regularly courted controversy for

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fictionalising history a little too freely. James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces,* famously outed by Oprah as a fabrication, was only the first in a succession of such exposés, and now it seems that every lurid revelation of a traumatic past will soon be accompanied by inevitable accusations of lies and exaggeration.

My focus here is not the conspiracy blockbuster or misery memoir, however. I did promise downmarket after all, so here instead is a genre more brash, more lowbrow, and altogether stranger than either of these. The 'Christian apocalyptic thriller' or 'prophecy thriller' presents readers with a fictionalised account of the end of the world. While it may have has remained somewhat under the radar in Britain, it has emerged as a bestselling and highly visible genre in the USA over the last decade or so, where its success is linked to an apocalyptic turn in evangelical Christianity, and in particular to the rise of so-called 'end times' theology. *Left Behind*, the genre's most prominent example, is not so much a novel as a marketing phenomenon. The original book, published in 1996 by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, has given rise to around 20 sequels and prequels. Total sales for the series have surpassed 65 million copies. Several spin-off series exist, including one for teens and younger readers. There are also films: three are already available on DVD, but there are now more ambitious plans to turn each of the books into a feature film for general cinema release. Avid fans of the series may also play two computer games and listen to a CD of related music.

*Left Behind* bills itself as 'a novel of the earth's last days', and is based around an event known as the Rapture, when the faithful are suddenly spirited away while non-believers must remain on earth. This novel and its many sequels follow the fortunes of airline pilot Rayford Steele, whose wife and son have abruptly vanished along with millions of others, plunging the world into mayhem. The storyline centres on his search for the truth and his dawning realisation that he and his fellow characters are living through the biblical time of Tribulation, a period of chaos lasting seven years when evil forces will be unleashed, culminating in the final battle of Armageddon. The plot weaves Steele's personal story together with global events, as biblical prophecy unfolds at a literal level and the charismatic but sinister figure of Romanian president Nicolae Carpathia emerges as the Antichrist predicted in the book of Revelations. The cast of characters includes investigative journalists and high ranking politicians, while the action — involving murder, suspense, pursuits and explosions — criss-crosses the globe. *Left Behind* is, in other words, recognisable as a thriller of sorts, yet its scenario of mass disappearance and global catastrophe draws heavily on the conventions of science fiction.

Translating biblical events into a popular novel format thus produces a peculiar hybrid in terms of genre. But it also has another, odder, effect, which stretches existing novel conventions almost to breaking point. *Left Behind* is a strange read. This is not just because it is badly written, although it is indeed badly written; cliché-ridden and stodgy, with formulaic dialogue and a clunky plot. But what makes this such a peculiar text is that it throws into question the whole idea of what a novel is, how we engage with it, and what its purpose might be. By introducing religious eschatology into the novel form, *Left Behind* radically alters the rules. Novels have traditionally been a fundamentally secular, humanist form, narratives whose focus is the individual in society. It's a

generalization, perhaps, but a reasonable one, to say that the driving force of the novel's plot is human character, human agency, and human moral choice. For *Left Behind*, such secular concerns are unimportant in the larger context of the battle between good and evil. The characters' relationship with society is unimportant beside their relationship with an absent but very real God. Human agency and choice matters only to the extent that characters may choose to join the ranks of the faithful and be saved, or be seduced by the forces of evil and worldliness. The apocalyptic plotline is divinely ordained. The characters in *Left Behind* cannot intervene to change the course of events, therefore, but only attempt to prepare for the inevitable end. Human progress and development, that staple of the *Bildungsroman*, can ultimately have no meaning in a novel about the end times. Simply put, there is to be no more progress, and no more time in which to develop.

The criticism most often levelled at poor novels — that the characters are merely one-dimensional ciphers — is not so much a flaw of this text as part of its very nature, then. The primary purpose of Rayford Steele and his fellow *Left Behind* characters is not to populate an alternative, believable fictional world, but to rehearse the destruction of this world. And because of this, the apocalyptic thriller demands a particular and unusual form of readerly engagement. Conventionally, novelistic fiction asks for a 'suspension of disbelief', that is, we temporarily enter into the world of the novel, empathising with characters as if they were real, but in the full knowledge they are not, and never will be. *Left Behind* demands something different of its readers however: true belief in the novel's prophecies. Through the events in the novel, readers are prompted to imagine and rehearse their own eventual redemption. And here we see exactly why reading this novel can be a disconcerting experience. In the first place, the non-religious reader is placed in an awkward position since, in narratological terms, the gap between the 'implied' reader and 'real' reader becomes too wide for comfort. In the second place, the apocalyptic thriller is not fact, but not quite fiction either. The events it depicts have not actually happened, but neither are they presented as belonging purely to a hypothetical, imagined realm, separate from the real world. They are based instead on prophecy; these are narratives that claim to represent a reality, but one which has yet to take place. *Left Behind* may call itself a novel, therefore, but it doesn't do many of the things we associate with novelistic fiction. In some ways it seems to occupy a position closer to the kinds of religious allegory that historically predate the emergence of the novel as a form.

Two questions, then. How can we account for this new mode of prophecy thriller, and perhaps more to the point, why should we bother with a genre, which, according to usual standards of literary analysis, is so aesthetically uninteresting? To both of these questions, the short answer might be this: the Internet. To really understand the emergence of this new genre of prophecy thriller, in other words, we have to first be aware of the online context that shapes and informs it. The *Left Behind* series may derive its most obvious inspiration from biblical prophecy, but this prophecy is filtered heavily through a specific mode of millennialist belief that has been elaborated in Internet communities over the past decade or so. The source of the novels' motifs and plotlines are to be found not in the book of Revelations but on

raptureready.com and on the scores of other websites and forums where users incessantly discuss, debate, and rehearse the details of the imminent apocalypse. The *Left Behind* novels share not only a belief system but a vocabulary, a chronological scheme, and a set of narrative conventions with this mode of online discourse. The central concept of the Rapture, for instance, can be a contentious one among Christians. Arguably, it is not to be found in the Bible at all, or at least not in the very specific form it assumes in the prophecy thriller genre. This particular scenario of mass disappearance is one which emerges only in recent end times thinking, and comes into view only through its elaboration on the Internet. The prophecy thriller may be the first example of a 'networked genre'; a type of novel existing in dialogue with the Internet, whose rationale, conventions and readership are formed in large part through online conversation, and interaction.

So, the success of the *Left Behind* series may tell us about something about the emergence of a new popular genre. But beyond this, it might reveal things about the nature of the novel form more generally. And here, I think, is one answer to my question about why we need bother with something which, according to the criteria of literary aesthetics, is so uninteresting. What it indicates is literature's porous boundary, and its place in a wider ecology of contemporary media technologies. It is also one of the more notable examples of recent mutations in the paradigm of novelistic fiction, pointing to the possible emergence of something like a 'post-fictional' mode of novel. The further we travel away from the institutionalised realms of literature, it seems, the more pronounced this mutation becomes. To speculate for a moment: if something is happening to established modes of fiction, then it is entirely possible that the epicentre of such a disturbance would be the Internet, where the discursive conventions of print are being reinvented, and where new maps of narrative, genre, and even knowledge are emerging. To see where the shocks of this are registering most clearly, we should look not to developments and aesthetic experimentation in the literary novel, but to the kinds of popular genres which customarily fall below the disciplinary radar of literary studies.

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