

# Violence at the End of the World

...and I feel fine.

Claire P. Curtis

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What do we find so compelling about the end of the world? While some people are unconvinced or uninterested, others find fictional accounts of nuclear war, plague, or environmental disaster to be mesmerizing. In an unscientific survey recently conducted in a utopia/dystopia class, a majority of the students—who read fiction, watched movies, or thought about the end of the world—also imagined themselves surviving such events.

But the students who did not think about the end of the world also tended not to think that they would survive—or that they would not be around to see the event. In part, our interest in accounts of the end stems from the desire to find the right how-to guide: What do you pack? What skills do you need to have?

End of the world accounts almost always include some didactic purpose—even if they seek primarily to excite and entertain. The cinematic apocalyptic accounts often favor violence and special effects over message, but a message always remains, even if it is only a vague caution. As a mode of political philosophy, end of the world accounts act as contemporary and fictionalized states of nature where basic human motivations are revealed.

Thus, most speculated ends of the world (*On the Beach* is the exception here) are not really “ends” at all. Even if they stop at a point when the end seems imminent, that point is usually one at which survival is still possible. The need to have survivors may be an American phenomenon. Unlike America’s *The Day After*, the British film *Threads* pulls no punches on the end, following the survivors of nuclear war for one generation until their eventual demise. It is a grim and almost unwatchable movie, because there is no possibility that just wearing a better pair of shoes might have made the difference between bouncing back or not.

The ideological leanings of end of the world accounts are as diverse as the writers who create them. Where *The Day After Tomorrow* might have a soft warning about global climate change and *On the Beach* a powerful argument against nuclear war, other accounts, such as Larry Niven’s *Lucifer’s Hammer*, provide a blueprint for a more authoritarian style of politics. Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* goes in the opposite direction, with a wholly egalitarian socialist feminist world-view. But all of these accounts demand that readers or viewers engage with their messages. This engagement requires putting ourselves into the action. How would you protect yourself? Who would you pick to come with you? What forms of technology could be brought back to life and what tools could we live without?

The hugely popular Left Behind series provides an exception to this framework for interpreting fictional end of the world accounts. In this most moralistic of storylines, the reader need not create a new way of life after a collapse; only conversion is required. Yet the texts are not even evangelistic calls, but rather, celebrations of the grisly deaths of those who fail or refuse to convert. The readers welcome this violence and should in fact imagine themselves on the ultimate sideline, as heavenly voyeurs during the period of the tribulation, the seven years of horror between the rapture and the second coming of Jesus.

The Left Behind series concerns the coming rapture of believing Christians and the seven-years of tribulation that will follow for those “left behind.” Written by Jerry Jenkins under the theological guidance of Tim LaHaye, the founder of the Council on National Policy (and husband of Beverly LaHaye, of Concerned Women of America), the

series has 65 million books in print to date. *Left Behind*, the first book in the eponymous series, takes up the moment immediately following the rapture, when “believing Christians” (meaning a fairly narrow slice of evangelical Christians) all ascend into heaven, along with all children (the upper age limit is left uncertain, but it seems to be puberty) and the unborn.

The Left Behind series purports to describe what is called a pre-tribulation rapture. In this view, the seven years of calamity that herald the second coming are preceded by the rapture. This is a controversial view among evangelical Christians: many Christian extremist groups, for example the Christian Identity movement, believe in a post-tribulation rapture. The post-tribulation view says that these are the last days and thus can be the vehicle for more extremist politics. The pre-tribulation view advocates a greater political apathy (convert, and then, you won’t have to live through all that violence).

Following the rapture the four main characters realize what has occurred, convert, and then work to prepare themselves and others for the last days. Only these characters can see what has really happened; most unbelievers (most of us) go about our lives as if nothing has changed. At this point, 50 or so pages into the first of the 15 books, *Left Behind* reads like the usual end of the world account: something terrible and unexplained happens, and the first of the plucky band of survivors gets together to figure out what has happened and what they are going to do.

But in this account figuring out what has happened means figuring out that there is nothing that you have to do. Converting involves simply signing onto the righteousness of seven years of plagues, natural disasters, and torments. You watch for the inevitable: the rise of the one-world government, the one-world currency, the one-world religion. You wait for the identification (but never the potential defeat, since that is left to Jesus) of the Antichrist, who will himself precipitate quite a bit of appalling violence.

LaHaye’s main characters do act: they work themselves into the upper echelons of the Antichrist’s staff; they outwit his laughable henchmen; they warn people and occasionally give sermons. But the reader is not asked to put herself in their shoes. In fact, the reader cannot put herself in their shoes, for to do so would be to admit that one would not be raptured. Preparing to watch the death and destruction from heaven, the readers are never asked to risk anything for anyone. Rather, they are lulled into the authoritarian politics of evangelical Christianity where someone with more knowledge than you is always in charge. All you need to do is follow instructions.

If the audience for these books was as narrow as their message, then the series would merely be an interesting little footnote in understanding the evangelical mind. But the books are hugely popular and have spawned computer games, a teen series, offshoot “military” and “political” series—and a website ([leftbehind-dot-com](http://leftbehind-dot-com)) featuring all of the available products. My objection to the Left Behind series is not necessarily political or ideological. While *Lucifer’s Hammer* has politics that I abhor, it seriously addresses how to respond to the chaos of the post-apocalypse and it makes a compelling argument for the role of spices in the post-apocalyptic economy. Rather, my objections deal with how the books glorify—and even revel in—violence against non-believers. The books are sold as they were a guide to better living, when in fact, they are simply empty exhortations to delight in violence against the “goats”—the undecided.

Rhetorically, LaHaye has accomplished a difficult task. He wants to argue that non-believers deserve to die. But he wants to do so without frightening the reader by evoking other, more familiar forms of genocide. In contrast to the overt hatred of *The Turner Diaries*—which depicts a future America run by white supremacists and celebrates gruesome violence against blacks, Jews, and the white women who fraternize with them—the Left Behind engages in an almost gentle intolerance. The series is homophobic, sexist, racist, patriarchal, authoritarian, pro-western, and pro-white. But it avoids almost all racial, sexist, and bigoted slurs (excepting the treatment of homosexuality in the second prequel). Thus, it kills and tortures without labeling those who die—other than as non-believers. Belief is the only identifier that matters; that most believers are white, upper middle class, American, and heterosexual is left for the reader to ponder (if the reader even notices).

Yet the punishment for non-believers is grisly. Do not equate the Left Behind series with a warm and fuzzy New Age Christianity; this is the violent fire and brimstone of traditional millenarians. The violence is initially invisible: millions of people are killed and sent off to hell, but few of these violent deaths are described. At the moment of the rapture, when all believing Christians are sucked into heaven, planes, cars, trains, and boats will all lose their pilots and operators. Thus millions of people will die without even knowing that the rapture has occurred, before getting a chance to reconsider the state of their souls. As the series progresses, the violence increases. Still the reader is

expected to be complacent about an increasing number of horrors befalling non-believers (the violent deaths of Christians are made better through their immediate salvation as martyrs).

The violence culminates in the final book of the origin series, *Glorious Appearing*, and happens only at the hands (and words) of Jesus. Jesus slaughters followers of Satan with a series of decisive declarations: “their bodies ripped open, blood pooling in great masses...with every word, more and more enemies of God dropped dead, torn to pieces. Horses panicked and bolted. The living screamed in terror and ran about like madmen”; “It was as if the very words of the Lord had super heated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin”; “Their innards and entrails gushed to the desert floor and as those around them turned to run, they too were slain their blood pooling and rising in the unforgiving brightness and the glory of Christ”; “It was as if the Antichrist’s army had become the sacrificial beasts for the Lord’s slaughter.” And this is just the first of four battles described in detail: “Jesus will do all the work, and the battles — three more following this one — will not really be battles at all, but rather one-sided slaughter.” After a hailstorm (with chunks “the size of a dining room table”), some of the few remaining survivors still fail to show the proper attitude by “trying to find cover or protecting their heads or even falling to their knees and begging for mercy.” Instead, “They lifted their faces to the sky, shouting, apparently railing against God, flashing obscene gestures at Jesus and His army. Soon they were crushed under the monstrous hailstones.” From the moment when Jesus’s face first appears in the sky to when the last of the undecided are cast into an enormous chasm, the novel alternates between pages of bloody descriptions and repetitive praise. The blood imagery is impossible to miss. The reader gets washed in the blood brought by the lamb, resurrected.

So, the series is violent and celebrates the violent destruction of others. But how is this different from other end of the world accounts, all of which are necessarily premised on death and destruction? It is. One lesson universal to all other end of the world accounts is that we should beware of those undisturbed by the violence of the end.

There is a fine line to draw here—being cognizant of the potential for your own survival often means being able both to move on and to use violence against the inevitable bands of cannibals (as most recently and grimly predicted in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*). But survival also means not reveling in the violence. Those who think nothing of death are always the ones to avoid. They are the cannibals who did not think about packing spices and stocking up on peanut butter. But in the Left Behind series, not caring about violent death of nonbelievers is a sign of proper respect for God’s plan. If you are not saved, then neither your body nor your soul matters. If you are saved, then your violent martyrdom will be rewarded with immediate ascension to heaven. You illustrate your saved status by acquiescing to this violence.

LaHaye is fully aware that his readers (Amy Homer’s *Rapture Culture* identifies them as white, southern, female, and college educated) might object to portrayals of violence. Chloe, the daughter of the hero, Rayford Steele, who is nearing her own death by guillotine for refusing to take the mark of Satan, notes that the televised executions started by Satan’s regime are hugely popular with the masses: “the bloodlust was apparently insatiable. It had come to the point where the most popular of the live execution shows were those that lasted an hour and included slow motion replays of the most gruesome deaths...This was what the public wanted to see, and the more the better.”

While reveling in this Satan driven violence is described as bloodlust, within three pages, LaHaye himself lovingly describes the guillotining of a non believing convict: “the rusty thing, blackened by blood, flipped at an angle just before it bit into the victim’s neck.” The victim is then described as extricating himself from the guillotine before he “spun, staggered, flying blood and gore.” LaHaye criticizes the portrayal and enjoyment of violence, associating it with the manipulations of Satan. But this criticism is not to make the reader question her own enjoyment of violence. Instead, he gives his readers a free pass to enjoy violence and feel no shame about that enjoyment. Satan promotes violence; but Jesus promotes righteous punishment. Nonbelievers enjoy televised executions and should feel shame; believers watch the blood spurting from the skin of unbelievers and praise Jesus.

These books are not advocating armed rebellion or even political action by saved Christians. What they do provide is a soma-like soporific, accustoming readers to violence and mayhem, encouraging readers to do what they are told, and reminding them of what the future holds. The individual is solely responsible for her fate; you must convert. There is no condition of living that would keep you from conversion, and there is nothing beyond conversion that anyone should be concerned about. The books preach apathy in the face of the total destruction of the world. God wills it; Jesus produces it; and believers celebrate it while non believers learn just what “God is love” really means.

Love for the converted means a world cleansed of all who believe differently and a bonus of animals that walk to the slaughterhouse willingly. Love for the non believer means blindness, locusts, hailstones, and if you live long enough, Jesus's voice forcing your blood to burst through your skin. But your gruesome death is your own fault. *Left Behind* offers smug self-satisfaction about the violent destruction of the majority of humankind, a minor concern about whether your family and friends are saved, the assurance that someone who knows better will always tell you what to do, some divine assistance in escaping the worst of Satan's violence. But it primarily feeds on the reader's voyeuristic curiosity about how and when the damned will die. All the reader needs to do is sit back and watch.

# fifth Estate

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