

## DOING THE DARK POP APOCALYPTIC GENRE HOP

*BINARY STORM* by Christopher Hinz is published by Angry Robot and is out now. A streetwise computer wiz, his politically savvy girlfriend and a tormented supersoldier form an uneasy alliance to stop assassins existing simultaneously in two bodies from threatening the world with apocalypse. The standalone novel serves as a prequel to the more distant future of “Liege-Killer” and the Paratwa Saga.

First, try uttering the title of this essay three times in rapid succession, preferably to the beat of clapping hands and stomping feet. Did you manage to do it? Great! Now you might be in the right frame of mind to experience the following thought waves.

Apocalyptic stories or those depicting bleak futures (dark pop) are nothing new in SF/Fantasy, whether in books, movies, comics, games or other media. I can’t tell you who crafted the first one but it doesn’t matter in respect to my point, which is this: Each new generation, especially those born into the nuclear age, at times needs to whisper/shout/shriek that “the world can’t go on like this”, “doom is upon us” and “all is lost” because we didn’t (multiple choice):

- A) Eliminate nukes
- B) Respect our fragile environment
- C) End prejudice and bigotry
- D) Other
- E) All of the above

But what seems to have changed in the dark pop apocalyptic canon in the last decade or so (besides the remarkable ascendance of zombies and other delegations from the brain-dead), is the increasing migration of such stories from the borders of SF/Fantasy into the genres of Young Adult and Mainstream/Literary fiction, and thus into wider public consciousness.

And yes, let’s get real here. Mainstream/Literary is and always has been a *genre*, no matter how relentlessly its advocates might protest otherwise. As defined in most dictionaries, a genre is a category of artistic composition with distinctive form, content and style. M/L fits that criteria, although admittedly it can sometimes wander across a more expansive story landscape than some of the other genres, although perhaps not with the depth of comprehension found in SF/F, which often can break free of 2D landscapes to explore the higher dimensions. In any case, M/L just happened to have made it to the top of the storytelling pyramid ahead of everyone else, which means it was able to set the agenda, define the categories and guard its lofty intellectualized summit with the ferocity of Smaug nesting on treasure.

Okay, I’ve got *that* out of my system. Moving on...

Recent well-received apocalyptic novels of M/L persuasion such as *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029-2047* by Lionel Shriver and *The Sunlight Pilgrims* by poet/novelist Jenni Fagan, as well as somewhat older books such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, paint bleak futures for Earth and humanity. In the YA realm we have *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *The Scorch Trials* by James Dashner and other series too numerous to mention.

Bottom line, dark pop and apocalyptic fiction is springing up across the literary landscape faster than kudzu in the Carolinas. And the spread is likely to continue unchecked for the foreseeable future.

Why? Depending on one's political views, the answers might come down to:

- A) The collapse of civilization's established social pillars (i.e., old white men no longer exclusively running things)
- B) The destruction of the environment
- C) The increase in global economic inequality
- D) Other
- E) All of the above

But here's something interesting. According to Max Roser, an Oxford University economist (and others who've done similar analyses), we're living in the safest, healthiest and most peaceful era in recorded history. There are fewer wars and homicides. Poverty rates are dropping across the globe. Democracy is on the upswing.

When it comes to cherished apocalyptic belief systems, statistical analysis can be a real buzzkill. (Roser's data can be found here: <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-10-23/world-actually-safer-ever-and-heres-data-prove>)

If Roser and others indeed are correct, why is there such an escalating need for dark pop apocalyptic fiction? Could it be that such fiction serves a purpose distinct from rationality and logic, namely that we don't *feel* safe and secure in today's world and thus require fictional as well as nonfictional reinforcement for those feelings?

I come from the generation just prior to the information explosion, where three or four TV channels broadcast news segments only a few times a day. Most citizens learned what was happening in the world largely through those broadcasts, as well as through newspapers and magazines. At the time, the mental/emotional engine known as Christopher Hinz had far less mileage on it, which meant it still possessed that blend of qualities inherent to the young: blind optimism odd-coupled with cynical indifference. Nevertheless, despite living in the heat of the Cold War, the limited scope of those broadcasts and publications somehow served to make my universe feel safer and more secure.

The main reason for the ascendance of dark pop and apocalyptic fiction can be attributed to the drastic changes in our media environment, I believe. Today, information bombards us constantly via 24/7 news channels and the internet. On the positive side, the news has been somewhat democratized by being removed from the sole control of a small number of elite gatekeepers, enabling minorities and all manner of the disenfranchised to have a voice. On the negative side, that democratization has all too often allowed heat to triumph over light, allowing emotions unbridled by reason, such as anger, fear and hate, to increasingly dominate the discussion. *Heat*

has ascended to the top of the pyramid while *Light* - rational discourse - has been pushed to the bottom. Sort of analogous to the way Mainstream/Literary attempts to keep Science Fiction/Fantasy firmly under its boot heels.

OK, I didn't quite have it out of my system. Moving on...

A few conclusions might be gleaned about the incessant, multisensory onslaught known as the contemporary media. First, in spite of democratization, gatekeepers can serve a vital role in maintaining a rational discussion (i.e., provide a better balance between light and heat). Second, we're pummelled daily by the notion that we're all mad as hell and not going to take it anymore.

And that intense media heat - all that anger, fear and hate - is steaming up the windshield, making it difficult to see what's in front of us. We're forced to run the wipers at full speed. And in the constant struggle to make out the blur ahead, we feel the need for occasional refuge. We temporarily escape the hazy unknown of the real future by losing ourselves in universes that in some way reflect our bewilderment. Fictionalized catastrophe becomes a safe space, a retreat from the relentless bombardment of pessimistic and upsetting emotions.

Yet somewhat counterintuitively, experiencing invented civilizations that are coming apart at the seams or have already fallen into the abyss also can serve to refortify our psyches. Having already explored the worst possible futures, we're better shielded to face the turbulence of the present and the great unknown that lies ahead.