



Press Release

## Apocalypse in Great Britain

The Freiburg English literary scholar Martin Hermann investigated stories about the end of the world in his dissertation

A virus transforms humans into zombies, a comet throws the planets in the solar system off their course, and extreme pollution renders the Earth uninhabitable: British authors have postulated a whole host of scenarios in which humans are entirely or very nearly wiped out. These are the kinds of stories **Martin Hermann** focuses on in his dissertation, written at the English Department of the University of Freiburg. Hermann studied various expressions of this genre in Great Britain and traced their historical development over the past 120 years. His most important finding is that novels, short stories, and other works of fiction describing the apocalypse are a reflection of the collective fears and worries of society during the times in which they were written. Only in the wake of historical events of great significance, such as the world wars or the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, do these fears shift, giving rise to new ideas on how the world might end.

Hermann investigated a total of 150 novels, short stories, TV series, and films. Also included in his analysis are front pages, articles, and caricatures from newspapers and magazines with a high circulation in Great Britain. Apocalyptic stories may be found in many cultures and are already present in the Old and New Testament. In Great Britain, the genre experienced a surge in popularity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when people's fears were kindled by new scientific theories. The short story "The Star" by H. G. Wells, for example, speculates on the consequences of Charles Darwin's theory of

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■ evolution for the future of humanity and recent discoveries in astronomy: A comet careens toward Earth, almost collides with it, and wreaks environmental havoc.

Most apocalyptic stories from the end of World War I to the end of World War II illustrate how traumatized the British populace was by the experience of war. During the Cold War era, on the other hand, British fears focused primarily on the dangers of atomic weapons, and in the 1960s and 1970s the fear of environmental catastrophes came to the fore. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the threat of climate change dominates apocalyptic stories. Moreover, many contemporary authors have explored the fear of a global pandemic, often within the context of a zombie story, such as in the film *28 Weeks Later*.

Notwithstanding the shifts in predominant collective fears over time, there are three general themes that come up again and again in British apocalyptic literature: The role of Great Britain in the world, science and war, and the nature of human beings. Up until the Second World War, most of the stories about the end of the world are told from a British point of view, reflecting Britain's self-confidence as a world power. In later years this national perspective shifts to a predominantly globalized standpoint in which Great Britain plays only a subordinate role on the world stage. The authors view science and progress as meaning either the death of humanity or its salvation, as Hermann found. The question of how scientific advances are put into practice is often framed in direct relation to human nature: It is up to us how we make use of science. Therefore, the factors responsible for the downfall of humanity in fiction from the Cold War era are more often than not science-driven warfare, the use of nuclear weapons, and mad scientists.

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