HOPELESS DECADE:
POST-APOCALYPSE LITERATURE IN THE WAKE OF 9/11

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ABSTRACT

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An examination of four specific post-apocalyptic works, produced following the attack on the World Trade Center, illustrates an increase in pessimism in three specific types of social situations: biological, religious, and heritage. Examining each novel’s word choice, connotation, and tonal establishment indicates how this harsh realism manifests itself as hopelessness. Examinations like this reveal new insight into this specific time frame. The works that I have examined and identified as examples of this stark decrease in optimism include *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy; *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood; *Wool* book 1 by Hugh Howey; and *Immobility* by Brian Evenson, all of which are compared with the early classically optimistic work *Earth Abides* by George Stewart from 1949. By utilizing both media archeological techniques and historical approaches it becomes clear that the events of 9/11 altered the American mindset for just over a decade, resulting in a marked decline in hope. Focusing on the shift in writing in the post-apocalypse genre reveals an understanding of the American reaction to this historical event.
Dedicated to

John and Rose Hageman

My loving parents

Who taught me to always do my best,

Who are my constant support,

And who always believe in me even when I do not believe in myself.

Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the events of September 11th, 2001 North America recoiled with the fear, anxiety, anger, confusion, and the stress of living under attack. This historical event stimulated such an emotional reaction because the attack was unprovoked. A sudden harsh reality crashed upon America, resulting in a prevailing sense of negativity and pessimism. The ramifications of this emotional state were lasting and penetrated the American literary culture. As time passed one genre of literature was notably changed more distinctly than others.

Before the decade from 2001 to 2011 the apocalyptic novel was fundamentally a thought experiment. Novels in this genre used hypothetical situations to contemplate various outcomes based on the human response to crisis. These novels focused on the resilience of humanity and society as fundamental truths. Most apocalyptic novels before 9/11 functioned on the cyclical principles of death and life. Many were formulaic and highlighted primary struggles that the author or readers should consider threats to the American Dream. Some classic examples include The Stand by Stephen King, The Day of the Triffids by John Wyndham, Swan Song by Robert Mc Cammon, and I am Legend by Richard Matheson, among many others. Yet, in the wake of a truly apocalyptic threat, writers embrace pessimistic realism over the optimism of the past.
Post-apocalyptic novels have been representative of human resilience. The change in this core representation reveals the linguistic pessimism which emerges during the hopeless decade due to the fear caused by 9/11. By utilizing Siegfried Zielinski’s practice of deep-time “cutting,” an assessment of this linguistic shift is possible (7). Deep-time “cutting” is the practice of analyzing one media type throughout various decades to assess how history affects the media and vice-versa. This method is a particularly effective way to gain insight into historical situations over the course of time while keeping a unified media as the measuring device.

Historical events have lasting ramifications on art of all kinds and the novel is no exception. As Jussi Parikka claims, “Media archeology has been interested in excavating the past in order to understand the present and the future” (172). In terms of September 11th, the effect of this historical event is seen very clearly in the shift that the post-apocalyptic genre takes. Using Zielinski’s model, I will view the “stratified layers” of the genre comparing language use and tone before and after 9/11. This examination reveals the stark differences between the early optimism and modern pessimism in the texts. For the purposes of this study, the use of optimism should be taken to mean confidence about the future or the successful outcome of events. In contrast, pessimism should be considered a tendency to see the worst aspect of things or believe that the worst will happen. Pessimism also represents a lack of hope or confidence in the future. The word choice in both the historical primary text and modern comparison pieces is assessed for connotations, denotations, implied means, and tonal establishment.

The most memorable texts that came out of this genre in the decade are all united by the same hopeless tone and pessimistic word choice. Unlike novels before 9/11 these
texts do not end with recovery or the glimmering promise of a new tomorrow. As professor M. Keith Booker asserts, “the imagined futures of [science fiction] texts are quite typically most interesting for the way they create new and defamiliarizing perspectives on the present” (150). Examinations like this reveal new insight to this specific time frame. The texts that I examine and identify as examples of this hopeless decade include *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy; *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood; *Wool* book 1 by Hugh Howey; and *Immobility* by Brian Evenson, all of which I compare with the early optimistic work *Earth Abides* by George Stewart in 1949. An examination of the word choice and tone of these texts shows a sharp increase in realism and pessimism concerning three specific types of social situations: biological, religious, and heritage.
CRITERIA

For this analysis the texts were selected for their plot resolutions, identifiably “American” settings, the authors’ nationalities, and the publication/conception dates. All of the texts contain indeterminate ends that are left deliberately unidentifiable as hopeful or hopeless. The settings are recognizable as taking place in modern North America. This is seen either through direct allusion to American icons or settings that relate to natural American landmarks, such as natural parks, cities, or monuments. The authors are all North Americans and are already writing at the time of September 11th. They are all established and published writers, though their mainstream popularity is not a criterion.

Though much has been written about the events surrounding September 11th, very little research has cast a specific focus on the post-apocalyptic genre. Some research has been published on the texts of both Atwood and McCarthy, but nothing pertaining to Howey or Evenson. However, all of these authors are doing something that breaks the mold of previously established patterns, because all of the works dare to portray the harsh realism of a modern apocalyptic event. In addition, previous research has failed to take into consideration the dramatic shift in tone and language choices between modern texts to those written in the classic era of post-apocalyptic writing.
This is important because only in understanding the extreme nature of the shift in language is it possible to see how different the two generations of writing have become. These differences translate into a reflection on post 9/11 readers. By extension, the reader is satisfied by darker tones for a time before the optimism returns. This dissatisfaction with pessimism results in the transition from the hopeless decade into optimistic sequels. So only when the language is examined is the importance of this shift in perspective conveyed clearly.

*Earth Abides* by George Stewart represents an ideal model of pre-9/11 optimism in the post-apocalyptic novel. While this piece from 1949 is often forgotten, it should be considered, as Noel Perrin deems it, a lost gem in American literature. The plot, as summarized by Elizabeth Wells, “tells the story of Ish, one of the few [global] survivors. . . It is set in a crumbling San Francisco in the near future, and chronicles Ish’s journey as he sets out to discover other survivors and rebuild a community from scratch”(1). Like many novels that followed, *Earth Abides* is considered a prime example of early post-apocalyptic themes. This text more than any other that followed in the genre establishes the patterns and themes of post-apocalyptic writing and exists untouched by other science fiction elements. This offers a pure framework for comparison, despite its age. It is structured in two sections.

The early chapters explore a journey across the country to assess the damage and loss of life; these sections identify Ish as a “Robinson-Crusoe” type (Stewart 37). In these early sections the degradation of both natural and man-made structures is evidenced as the remains of civilization retreating. The narrator describes the road on which Ish is navigating cross-country, “Now it lay empty. Where six lines of cars had speeded east
and west, now the white lines on the pavement stretched off unbroken toward their meeting at infinity” (Stewart 35). The term “unbroken” in this quotation should be considered for its nature as continuous and unfailing. Similarly, the term “infinity” encompasses the boundlessness and limitlessness of the emptied world. Both of these words are positive in the way that they establish the continuity of survival. This image evokes the sense of the open road, which is a commonly identified notion of freedom derived from isolation. The concept of the open road is one of hopefulness and possibility.

In this isolation Ish is able to grapple with personal emotions and express his beliefs about mankind as a whole. For instance, Ish both figuratively and literally leaves his fears on the side of the open road when he decides to abandon his additional precautions. When cutting loose his back-up transportation Ish considers his newfound perspective; “Thereupon he resolved that if he was to live at all he would live without fear. After all, he had escaped a nearly universal disaster” (48). The inherent optimism that Ish derives from his personal survival creates a tone of hope. Even being on his own does not hinder this hopefulness because “he felt a new security and even satisfaction at the contemplation of a solitary life” (Stewart 39). His “satisfaction” in solitude is embracing freedom and is optimistic that the future holds positive outcomes. While both the open road and his satisfaction with solitude are about dealing with sudden isolation; they are also a means of personal discovery and freedom carrying an inherent positivity. These survivor contemplations are a hallmark of classic post-apocalyptic texts.

The second section of the novel chronicles the recovery of some semblance of civilization and community. Ish grapples with the key issues of the aftermath of
civilization’s downfall. These changes include plagues and disease, as well as, animal threats and human violence. He and his small community called the Tribe deal with each of these issues in turn and hope prevails. In their efforts to lay plans for the future Ish comes to realize “When he could think more calmly... What you were preparing against—that never happened! All the best-laid plans could not prevent the disaster against which no plans had been laid” (Stewart 280). To consider “all the best laid plans” reveals the irony found in trying to predict future events. In optimism the community supports these “plans” with the confidence that nothing will arise that they collectively cannot handle. The Tribe can only have faith that their precautions will be enough in the future. After each disaster, they again have an expectation that the community as a collective has learned how to deal with each new struggle. Their resilience and optimism establishes a tone of hope throughout the novel. The knowledge that Ish secures some measure of safety and security for his children’s children reinforces his optimism for the future.

It is precisely this kind of optimism that marks the early post-apocalyptic novels. However, hope fades away in the decade after 9/11 when the writing approaches the now realistic topic of global destruction. What results is the mediation between the “double consciousness with respect both to the fictionality of the world portrayed and to its potential as our own world’s future” (Snyder 470). In this case, “double consciousness” means that, while readers are cognizant of the fictional nature of the text, they are simultaneously aware of the likely reality (or its potential) of the ideas coming true in their real lives. This new pessimistic depiction in post-apocalyptic literature darkens the decade manifesting in the hopelessness that marks it.
UNRECOVERED GROUND

When approaching the stark landscapes of modern novels one of the important central themes of early post-apocalyptic texts is the ultimate recovery of the land. As Stewart famously ends his novel “‘they will commit me to the earth,’ he thought. ‘Yet I also commit them to the earth. There is nothing else by which men live. Men go and come, but the earth abides’” (345). The “but” in the final phrase “Men go and come, but the earth abides” establishes a contrast. By introducing the distinction between the human species and the earth as a collective the text is revealing the earth’s power through the longevity of the life cycle. The power for resilience is both positive in the word “abides” and hopeful in the tone supporting all life. In comparison, these newer, darker novels lack the sense of the Earth Recovery Model and imply a point-of-no-return. The Earth Recovery Model is the formulaic patterns by which destruction returns to prosperous life, and is often depicted in the classic post-apocalyptic novels. Additionally, the point-of-no-return is the moment in a text when it is apparent that the cycle patterns of the Earth Recovery Model are not present and life will not prevail over the destruction. The biological landscapes presented in The Road, Oryx and Crake, Immobility, and Wool are all fundamentally toxic and/or will never recover in a sustainable way. Their ecologies are permanently destroyed by the events.
All four of the novels dwell on the concept of life-as-we-knew-it, which means they idealize the nostalgic past in order to cope with their present. They mark distinctions in the land as past and present, whereas Stewart’s Ish simply noted the loss of man as having no lasting effect on the planet because their existence was fleeting and insignificant in the life of the world as a whole. Stewart even goes so far as to say that only one species would truly suffer from the fall of man claiming, “Of half a million species of insects… the only ones actually threatened with extinction were the three species of the human louse. . . At the funeral of Homo sapiens there will be few mourners. . . Homo sapiens, however, may take comfort from the thought that at his funeral there will be three wholly sincere mourners” (59-60). Stewart asserts a positivity and optimism into the extinction of mankind when the author intentionally uses the phrase “may take comfort.” This concept of comfort, even in extinction, is completely absent in the modern texts. Earth Abides establishes a world in which the worst thing that can happen is not the death of man, but the death of the planet.

Ultimately, even in his demise man is expected to take comfort from the reassurance that life itself continues on. This is a bolstering claim in favor of the Earth-Recovery-Model in the sense that man is not the only species of importance in the world view that Stewart asserts, but rather is simply another animal in a larger ecosystem. The egocentrism of modernity is present in the later pieces and allows for the focus of the hopeless decade to revolve around mankind. This narrow egocentrism reflects a key contrast to Stewart’s holistic view. Modern readers tend to be drawn in by texts that reflect their own priorities and in the current generations the singular priority is the
individual. In contrast, Stewart acknowledges man’s place in the larger network of ecology.

In the decade of writing stimulated by the 9/11 attacks, the individual takes priority over the holistic viewpoint of classic more optimistic pieces. Margaret Atwood, in *Oryx and Crake*, explores the apocalypse with this modern egocentrism specifically through Snowman, her main character. Snowman is the lone man left to explore and conquer the world as best he can, but the gravity and reality of Snowman’s situation is cast more directly onto the darkness of what it means to be the dregs of a dying species. In direct contrast to the freedom Ish realizes in his isolation, Snowman is sickened by his solitude. For Snowman the pressure of losing society has resulted in hallucinations like this one about his former lover Oryx: “Now he can feel Oryx floating towards him through the air, as if on soft feathery wings. She's landing now, settling; she's very close to him, stretched out on her side just a skin's distance away” (Atwood 113). Oryx’s “soft feathery wings” identify her as a figment of his imagination. It is this kind of clinging to ghosts that identifies Snowman’s isolation as unhealthy compared to Ish’s.

To create a juxtaposition of the two characters’ responses to the dreaded isolation; Ish releases his fears and embraces possibility. Snowman, however, wallows and lives with ghosts of the past both in his figurative imagination and the reality of the state the environment is left in. Some critics assert that Snowman is a “new Robinson” in his lonely existence in the desolate landscape (Stefan 294). However, this assertion falls flat because unlike the industrious Ish or Robison, Snowman does nothing to improve his situation or grapple with his solitude for a positive world view. Snowman never grows comfortable with his solitude.
The ghosts of mankind are depicted by Atwood in her comments on the biology and ecology, which imply that in the current world, man as a collective species is interfering with nature in an incomprehensible and irreversible way. This can be considered a “Present-day phenomena... projected into the future in ways that are intended to sharpen the awareness for dangerous developments and trends that are already taking place. Thus, the texts create a sense of urgency (to react before it is too late)” (“Zero Time” 223). When Atwood is “projecting into the future” or working to “sharpen the awareness” she is doing this by playing on realistic fears. Her tactics are quite different than Stewart’s. While she uses fear to create the tone of darkness and to stimulate urgency for change, Stewart uses a tone of positivity and possibility to sooth the fears that come with isolation or death. Several examples of this urgency are highlighted by Atwood, concerning environmental, ecological, biological, and genetic issues only in the interest of human preservation. Each instance of urgency that Atwood presents as in need of change is paired with the hypothetical fear of the future based on the realistic present. Stewart, in contrast, highlights the reality of the unpredictable and mankind’s need to “abide” with the earth. In Earth Abides it is a deadly virus that kills the population, but Stewart does not harp on the need for better medications or health research. In fact, Stewart dismisses the virus and its destruction of the human species as part of the life cycle. His optimism stems from not dwelling on the pessimistic feelings that come from his isolation.

In the world after disease and death, Atwood emphasizes the rise of genetically modified organisms. Such genetic modifications are anti-nature. They call attention to real life situations like genetically designed plants and chemical pesticides in foods. One
example of this in the novel is the ChickiNob: “What they were looking at was a large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each tube another bulb was growing” (Atwood 202). The image of the “thick fleshy tubes” evokes association with an umbilical cord. While the umbilical cord is a fundamental image of life, the false replication of this image is a distortion of nature. This grotesque substitute is a pessimistic example of what nature has become in the hands of mankind. This negative example is Atwood’s call for change. The breakdown of the natural order is completely opposed to the ideas Stewart asserts, because no matter the situation that Ish and the Tribe face they can always count on the natural order reestablishing balance. Atwood’s genetic modifications break down the natural order and imply a slippery slope. This slippery slope establishes that the downfall of the human species starts with genetically modified chickens for extra meat and results in the entire population being replaced with a more genetically perfect being. While this seems hyperbolic, it is, in fact, a real issue in modern society that Atwood uses her novel to address. This piece calls for urgency to act on these issues in the present. The call for change is an inference that the readers of this text would agree with the pessimistic and dark future Atwood is projecting in the story. In the text the biological order is destroyed by the actions of mankind, marking them as the force that brings about their own fall.

Critically, it can be understood that Atwood is directly commenting on the distance man is creating between himself and nature. This idea is best summarized through metaphor: “Man is a wolf to man especially since there are no real wolves
anymore” (“Zero Time” 233). But the idea of man as a predator goes even farther, and
suggests that man has consumed everything:

Nor is there any ‘nature’, only genetically improved species . . . Scientists and the
general public argue for the greater common good and accept their estrangement
from ‘nature’ for the sake of a natureculture that is similarly ‘red in claw’. . . The
human race has evolved, and it has left behind humanism. (“Zero Time” 233)

Atwood’s apocalypse is driven by man as an animal that has preyed upon the earth in an
irreversible way. In claiming “estrangement from ‘nature’” the critic is actually asserting
that mankind has removed itself from the cycle and in doing so has attempted to flee their
guilt in its destruction. Ultimately, even with distance from nature and complacency with
environmental destruction mankind cannot escape this process unscathed. To say that the
human race has evolved beyond humanism evokes two ideas. First, that like all other
species, man is ever changing to become the strongest form possible. Second, this
evolution is implying that in order to gain strength the species must shed the logical and
philosophical aspects that define it. Man has become a refined animal in the system, but
has sacrificed morality to gain power. This moral sacrifice is inherently bad because
without morality the species will self-destruct. This self-destruction will sink the rest of
the system as well. Man is tied to the ecosystem and will determine its fate. Only by
accepting that “the earth abides” can mankind be part of the system and have optimism in
its eventual recovery, with or without the human species.

In addition to her discussion of genetics Atwood makes it clear that the earth itself
is not saved by the death of mankind, but rather his existence is littered everywhere.
Snowman is caught between the past and the present as the planet dies from all the mistreatment it receives at the hands of man and he awakes to this reality daily: “On the eastern horizon there’s a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow. . . . The shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic” (Atwood 3). The negative tone of a post-human earth is established with terms like “shrieks,” “grinding,” and “traffic.” Sounds like “shrieks” evoke the human fear of pain. Both “grinding” and “traffic” infer close proximity and the abrasion of friction. The unpleasant images constructed by these words open the novel with an uneasiness derived from the dark tone. The absence of man does not leave the earth absent of his remains and refuse. Snowman himself “is a relic of a lost world, a post-apocalyptic atavism who has lived past his own time and conceivably past the human epoch” (Snyder 472). In his isolation Snowman comes to represent all the things that mankind has left behind. Snowman is the dregs of a species and cannot be like Ish because he is fundamentally nostalgic. In his nostalgia Snowman fails to release the pessimistic past and embrace the optimism of the future.

Atwood implies that whoever comes to exist after man will have questions about all the things that our species has left and destroyed. They will ask, “How did this happen? Their descendants will ask, stumbling upon the evidence, the ruins. The ruinous evidence. Who made these things? Who lived in them? Who destroyed them?” (Atwood 222). The implied mystery of the questions “who” and “how” show that Atwood is creating an inquisitive and conscious future generation. The term ruinous evokes both the idea of destruction and ancientness. By using the concept of ruinous to evoke the image
of ancient “ruins,” Atwood is implying the distant future after humans are gone. The idea is also repeated to create a disbelief or astonishment at the magnitude of the “ruins” history.

Atwood’s genetically modified Crakers are curious about the things left by their evolutionary brothers but have no way of finding answers except to come to Snowman. They bring things before him: “a hubcap, a piano key, a chunk of pale green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. . . . A computer mouse, or the busted remains of one, with a long wiry tail” (Atwood 7). Each artifact from the past is a remnant from civilization and unexplainable for the Crakers. To Snowman, however, each piece builds the nostalgia. The trap of this nostalgia holds Snowman and the Crakers alike tied to a false mythology that is ever in formation. The fact that the Crakers find these things is evidence of the human impact, but even more telling is the risk that these things pose to the Crakers.

“Will they hurt us?” Sometimes they find tins of motor oil, caustic solvents, plastic bottles of bleach. Booby traps from the past. He’s considered to be an expert on potential accidents: scalding liquids, sickening fumes, poison dust. Pain of odd kinds” (Atwood 7). Atwood is exemplifying the nature of man’s legacy as a dangerous and harmful one. Words like “caustic,” “scalding,” “sickening,” “poison,” and “pain” are all chosen for the express purpose of their negativity. By connecting these words to mankind Atwood is asserting the pessimism of humanity’s wasteful existence in the present reality. The remains of man’s existence will not simply dissolve into the earth like the extinction of so many other species. Man will instead linger in his harmful refuse.

So unlike Stewart’s assertion of the earth will abide Atwood claims that the earth will remain unrecovered. Stewart, in contrast to the wasteful society that Atwood
presents, depicts the Tribe as frugal and practical. For instance, they are characterized as “living as a scavenger upon what was left of civilization; they, at least, were still living creatively, close to the land and in a stable situation, still raising most of what they needed” (59). The term “scavenger,” meaning a person who searches through discarded material, is contrasting with the idea of “creatively.” In addition, “stable” means able or likely to continue or last. To position “living creatively” in contest with “scavenging” creates the notion that it is better to choose the more “stable” path, which presents a lasting solution to the loss of civilization. However, Ish briefly exists as a “scavenger” and implies that the use of the remains of civilization is positive until a new way can be found. This would imply that the remains are positive and not harmful like the “scalding poisons” of Atwood’s discarded world. This stark difference indicates the way Atwood is positioning the earth as irreparably damaged. Similarly others among the hopeless authors venture the same assumption.

In addition to Atwood, one author who asserts the earth will never recover is Cormac McCarthy. The Road’s plot is driven by an unnamed event that destroyed the natural world. McCarthy intentionally avoids specific details which causes the event to resonate with the reader. The only insight McCarthy gives about the actual event that destroyed the world is this memory the Man has, “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. . . He went into the bathroom and threw the light switch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the window glass” (52). There are no further details given about the event and the only clues lie in the way that McCarthy describes the dead earth. Both McCarthy and Evenson are dealing with settings that assume the potential results of nuclear fallout or nuclear winter. A
nuclear war would result in settings much like McCarthy describes. Scientific studies have shown that the global devastation would be vast, explicitly resulting from ash clouds. “Particularly the black, sooty smoke from the burning of cities and industrial facilities in the aftermath of a major nuclear war would induce a significant diminution of global surface temperatures, leading to a global climate modification lasting several months, with disastrous consequences for people all over the planet” (Dorries 199). Most of McCarthy’s critics agree that “the physical landscape, with its thick blanket of ash; the father’s mystery illness; and the changes in the weather patterns of the southern United States all suggest that the world is gripped by something similar to a nuclear winter” (Grindley 11). This uninhabitable and pessimistic setting constructs a tone of death in McCarthy’s work. This setting is situated in contrast the lush optimism of Stewart’s Earth Recovery.

The background McCarthy is establishing is important as an expression of his criticism of modern man’s present situation. The Man knows that the world will never be the same. Potential reality is the setting for the story as if the world was set on fire:

the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened light poles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in the clearing and beyond that reach of meadowlands stark and gray and raw red mud bank where a road works lay abandoned. (McCarthy 8)

The dead color scheme of McCarthy’s setting expresses the negative connotation of the description. By describing things as “black burn,” “blackened,” “stark,” “gray,” and even
“raw red” he is using color to establish death as the setting for this survival story. In contrast the vibrancy of Stewart’s recovering earth is flush with color and life; “He gathered green corn . . . there were ripe berries and fruit . . . he found a head or two of lettuce . . . he pulled up carrots” (64). Terms like “green”, “ripe”, and “fruit” all represent the new growth and colors that are invoked in this process. To use “fruit” causes the reader to recall any number of items that fall into this category from their personal memory of natural plenty, as in “fruits of the earth”. This empowers the word “fruit” to encompass all growing things, not just edible items. McCarthy’s tone is set by the words he is using to establish his dead earth setting, whereas Stewart is using words to depict the abundance of life that will remain.

McCarthy utilizes the contrast of the Man’s memories and nostalgia to convey the utter hopelessness of the world as it is in the present. The Man comes to represent the divide between a world that was salvageable and the world that is beyond saving. This notion of life-as-we-knew-it is prevalent in the decade of hopelessness as the modernity of the novels dictates that there is a point-of-no-return. In all the novels under examination, the point-of-no-return is when the world is beyond redemption. For McCarthy, the point-of-no-return is long gone and the dregs of existence are the true setting. This novel’s plot takes place after the point-of-no-return and as such never gives the opportunity for hopeful recovery.

One unique critic utilizes Plato’s cave metaphor, evoking ancient philosophy unlike other critics, to situate the point-of-no-return; while living in the shadows, the Boy will never know the world of light and the Man can never explain to the Boy what he cannot show him (Hunt 155-157). To use this metaphor allows for a simplified
understanding of the more complex situation and illustrates the core struggle between the Man and the Boy. This is a possible explanation for why the Man clings to life and drags the Boy along in an attempt to salvage the one part of the earth that may survive. Like Atwood, McCarthy grapples with the idea that the human species will leave many unanswered questions after their partial or complete extinction. McCarthy addresses this struggle by inundating the Man with questions from the Boy saying, “Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past” (53). To claim “there is no past” shows the Man’s complete inability to convey the reality of the past to the Boy in words that the Boy could comprehend. In saying that the past is “not even a memory” he is actually citing the fact that the child was born after that world was completely destroyed, making it physically and mentally impossible for the Boy to even recall it. Like Snowman, the Man has no way of explaining what mankind was and how the things it left behind fit into the past. All the two can do is keep the innocent safe from the broken remains of humanity. The Man can never explain an earth that existed before the destruction and “he understood for the first time that to the boy, he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed” (McCarthy 153). This alien planet is something unrecoverable. In the phrase “that no longer existed,” the use of past tense is a reinforcement of the destruction that annihilated any recognizable aspects of the past. The term “alien” should be considered beyond the extraterrestrial implication and also be taken to mean a person who has been estranged or excluded. To understand the Man as estranged from the Boy is much more revealing of their broken communication and relationship than the simple explanation of dissimilar histories.
The Boy is the one thing that the man created which will outlast him. The Man’s determination to force life into a dead earth is his personal struggle for optimism. The nostalgia the Man has in his final moments shows that he understands the world will never recover: “Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the streams in the mountains. . . . On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (286). The crushing hopelessness is clear in the line “Not be made right again.” This is when the Man finally gives up hope and leaves it as his only legacy to the Boy. This is so unlike Ish’s final moments because Ish passes into death with confidence in the future generations feeling very reassured of their potential for great success. And this potential for success is derived directly from his abundance of optimism. Stewart and McCarthy are portraying completely opposing depictions of the passing of one generation to the next. By expressing the possible reality of destruction McCarthy is using the same speculative urgency that critics apply to Atwood. In highlighting the results of nuclear winter McCarthy is motivating the reader to identify these settings as undesirable and in extension calling for avoidance of global destruction through his pessimism about the future. He is establishing an extremist example to make a point in the same way that Atwood hyperbolizes to make her own criticisms.

Brian Evenson also establishes an extreme setting when he depicts the aftermath of nuclear fallout in a similar way to McCarthy. The world in Immobility is equally destroyed when compared to McCarthy’s and Atwood’s depictions. Like both Atwood and McCarthy this depiction of the destroyed earth directly connects to the pessimistic
tone of the novel. Evenson takes the harsh realism one step farther and makes the life on the surface of the planet impossible; forcing the human population to dwell below ground. The main character Horkai is somewhere between a genetic phenomenon, an alien, and a God. His bizarre change after the bomb drop results in his ability to endure the radiation soaked earth and to heal himself. This twist on the post-apocalyptic novel is very similar to Atwood’s Crakers. The inclusion of the ability to self-heal is used to establish the supernatural quality of these new evolved beings.

However, despite Horkai’s positive new condition, the earth is in ruins, lifeless, and unsafe for humans. Evenson describes it as such: “Outside was a ravaged landscape, ruin and rubble stretching in every direction, the ground chocked in dust or ash. Remnants of buildings, mostly collapsed. The sky was bleak with haze, and a wind blew, hot and indifferent. All of it was pervaded by a strange, unearthly silence” (26). All around the bleak landscape reinforces the idea that this world will never recover. In selecting words like “ravaged,” “ruin,” “chocked,” “bleak,” and “unearthly silence,” in particular, Evenson is establishing the sensation of physical discomfort. “Ravaged” and “ruin” both play on the physical destruction that nuclear fallout will cause the body. While “choked” implies an obstruction or blockage, and because of its similarity to choked evokes a breathless or airtight image. “Bleak” in the phrase “bleak with haze” draws a connection to visual impairment. Yet more specifically than any of the other selected phrases “unearthly silence” established the quality of deafness that accompanies global destruction. To call something “unearthly” situates it as the exact opposite of a preconceived idea of what the earth looks like, or in this case sounds like. The loss of sound makes the earth become unearthly, undoing its own existence. Horkai only
remembers the world before this death and destruction but not who he was or what he did in that world. The loss of his humanity in favor of the genetic change stole away his past and has left him hopelessly in the present which he physically cannot understand due to his changed form.

Despite this limitation of knowledge or physical understanding Horkai seems to be the only hope for the human race to survive. The criticism Evenson is establishing with his pessimistic protagonist is very similar to McCarthy’s Man. They both use their hopeless main characters to pursue life in an effort for recovery, which express the human impulse for optimism. On this stark wasteland Horkai is faced with an earth that is hostile and uninhabitable by naturally occurring species. This is shown when some alien form of plant life begins to grow, but much like Horkai it is distinctly changed: “just past the asphalt of the road and the gravel of the shoulder, in the dirt: four small, scraggly plants, perhaps four inches tall. They were twisted and contorted in on themselves, their leaves pale and semitransparent, but they were alive: the only living plants that Horkai had seen since going outside” (108). This new alien species is as twisted, pale, and otherworldly as Horkai himself. In spite of their evolutionary advantages these new species are depicted in a negative way using words with pessimistic tones. Words like “scraggly,” “twisted,” “contorted,” and “pale” evoke sinister ideas. The villain is classically described in these terms, which is why it is so important that Evenson uses them to characterize his protagonist and species like Horkai. Additionally, “paleness” or the absence of color casts these characters as part of bleakness and death that paints the surrounding landscape. This could mean that these colorless beings match the new
environment, or it means that they are not naturally occurring in the world unless death and destruction are present.

Of course, Horkai is not the only one changed in this sinister way he seems to be part of a new subspecies of humanoids. They all are characteristic of each other:

The man on the other side of the door could have been his double. His skin was exceptionally pale, almost the color of bleached bone. His head was hairless, even the eyebrows missing, and from what Horkai could see—forearms, hands—the rest of his body appeared to be hairless as well. (Evenson 119)

Like the plant species words like “exceptionally pale,” “bleached bone,” and “hairless” draw the unnatural connection from these terms meanings. Again the idea of “bleached bone” brings back the image of death, because the only time bones are exposed to bleaching is in death. “Hairless” also works to expose a dead quality, because in death everything but the hair and bones is recycled into the earth through decomposition. If these beings are “hairless” then they lack innate mammalian quality. In contrast the cyclical and natural world in Earth Abides, the sterilized world of Immobility expose the distorted imagery and characterization that comes from going against the natural order. Much like Atwood, Evenson is replacing the human species with a new non-evolutionary brother. The only things that will recover are these new genetically enhanced species of humanoids and plants which form outside of the bounds of nature and evolution. The earth will never be life-as-they knew it. It will never recover to a state similar to what it was before the destruction of mankind because the ability for the earth to recover in the old way has been superseded.
So, in this world there is no hope for humans and there is no hope for those who could not adapt or improve. It is very explicit that these humanoids are an improvement on human beings. Evenson claims that humans are the cause of war, destruction, and killing the planet. As such forces of destruction they will never be rewarded with a recovered earth:

Never again we say: God will not allow it. We say no to torture, and then we find a reason to torture in the name of democracy. We say no to sixty-six thousand dead in a single bomb blast over a defenseless foreign city, and then we do it again, a hundred thousand this time. We say no to eight million dead in camps, and then we do it again, twelve million dead in gulags. Humans are poison.

Perhaps it would be better if they did not exist at all. (146)

In claiming that “humans are poison” Evenson is asserting blame in a realistic post-apocalyptic setting. This is important because in order for modern readers to buy into the possibility of the setting Evenson has made it extremely plausible up until the introduction of the new species. Yet, as punishment the elimination of humans dictates the rise of a new dominant species. Claiming “it would be better if they did not exist at all” exposes two key ideas. First, saying “they” instead of “we” shows that Horkai does not consider himself human any longer, and by extension his “brothers” are not human either. Second, “better” works as a qualitative statement positioning the past as superior for everyone, not just humans. Therefore, the humans are demonized and wished away because of their negative and deadly actions in the past. And the new humanoid is given the planet in favor of *Homo sapiens*. Thus, the humans in the novel will never live long
enough to see the world recover and Evenson, like Atwood, takes the earth from the Homo sapiens by giving it to a more advanced non-evolutionary species.

While Hugh Howey is certainly making a statement about the destruction of earth he never takes the planet away from humans or turns it over to a new species. In Wool the surface of the planet is uninhabitable resulting in a society below ground, living in what is dubbed “the silo.” The microcosm of the silo is Howey’s way for critiquing the narrowing perspective and advancement of society. His critique culminates in the hopeful/ hopeless paradox involving escape through death. By establishing that death is the only escape Howey is directly aligning a pessimistic world-view below the destroyed earth.

Howey asserts that environmental destruction is not a new notion when Holsten, the main character, observes that, “The sky above the hills was the same dull gray of his childhood and his father’s childhood and his grandfather’s childhood” (7). This generational delineation shows that the earth has been in a continuous state of toxicity for a substantial amount of time. By expressing the destroyed earth as a historical fact Howey is commenting on the generational acceptance and complacency with pollution.

So when Holston exits the silo and sees the false image of a recovered earth he feels rewarded, “At the top of the ramp, Holston saw the heaven into which he’d been condemned for his simple sin of hope. He whirled around, scanning the horizon, his head dizzy from the sight of so much green!”(Howey 39). Phrases like “condemned for his simple sin of hope” work throughout the novel to directly link the idea of hope for escape to death, pain, and suffering. The term “dizzy” in this situation meaning bewildered or
confused, opposed to physical disorientation, reveals the unexpected nature of this positive image. Rather Holton has come to expect harsh realism and negativity.

By the end of the novel Holston realizes, upon his death, that the image of the recovered earth was a lie and that his dying is the only escape now that he is outside of the boundaries of the silo. His death is harsh; “He threw up again. Wiping his mouth feebly, looking down the hill, he saw the world with his naked eyes as it was, as he’d always known it to be. Desolate and bleak. He let go of the helmet, dropping the lie he had carried out of the silo with him. He was dying” (Howey 48). The action of “throwing up” exposes the toxic nature of the outside world, because it literally attacks his body. Holston’s simple description of reality is “desolate and bleak” which becomes a repetitive description calling it barren. The repetition re-enforces the idea for impact. A barren landscape directly implies a state of lifelessness above ground. Drawing direct attention to the term “lie” evokes the meaning of deliberate deception. Consequently, by presenting hope as a paradox Howey calls attention to how dark and dismal endings are the kind of realism modernity now accepts. In the fear following 9/11 Howey wrote this piece for a more pessimistic generation who will never accept hope as a realistic end. Only the dark, cold, hopeless realism of death prevails as a logical end to the path modernity has mankind on. This biological demise is the reward man has been given for his utter neglect of the earth itself.

In contrast, Stewart is writing to a more optimistic generation who had yet to see the environment in crisis. They still believe that the earth will always recover no matter what because they still buy into the possibilities of the future. Atwood, McCarthy, Evenson, and Howey are all addressing a generation who is chipping away at the earth
piece by piece through deforestation, the burning of fossil fuels, overpopulation, oil spills, and genetic manipulation. All of these things contribute to the negativity that permeates reality, and when 9/11 catalyzed these writers, this was the present that they are addressing. This generation is also under attack by terror, war, intolerance, and hate. The overarching point of view for such a hopeless generation is cold realism about lifestyles that are not sustainable for the planet or humanity.
Throughout all of the texts under examination there is a prevailing struggle with God and religion. Much like the events of 9/11, post-apocalyptic novels deal with the trauma and doubt. When the world is destroyed the first response many survivors have is doubt and typically they begin to question how any God could be so cruel. In opposition to this doubt some survivors turn toward God for sparing them. A third common response that is represented in the genre is the God complex struggle and the issue of taking on the role of the deity. *Earth Abides* deals with all three of these responses in positivity, even when faith is lacking, because faith is the pure form of optimistic hope.

From the beginning of the novel, both in his solitude and in his fledgling community, Ish struggles with the idea of religion. As a survivor he grapples with the idea of a God that destroyed the world and tries to justify religion’s position in a world after society has died. He becomes primarily fearful of the God complex within himself, realizing “if a man began to think of himself as divinely appointed, he was close to thinking of himself as God- and at that point lay insanity. … ‘What happens, at least I shall never believe that I am a god. No, I shall never be a god!’” (Stewart 39). In this case giving into the temptation of believing in “divine appointment” would mean that the grasp on reality is slipping away.
In addition, the use of the phrase “shall never” is a positive affirmation or a promise that Ish is making. By making this claim repetitively he is establishing a mantra to ward off the “insanity” that exists in this belief. Ish must fight the idea that his survival is linked to divine intercession. Yet, he must still hold a debt of gratitude to the cosmic being who could have interceded, because as Ish maintains, “‘There are no atheists in foxholes,’ he remembered, but the whole world now was nothing but a huge foxhole!” (Stewart 69). The parallel between a war zone implied by the term “foxhole,” and global apocalypse is an accurate analogy that encompasses the struggle for faith very well. Despite his personal struggle with God’s presence and/or absence in the world after destruction he is still hopeful for a community that will be free of religious intolerance and ignorance.

As this small society forms it is his goal to instill reverence, faith, and hope without the superstition or fear that often accompanies religion. In considering how to proceed forward Ish realizes that “Actually, no matter what he said, it might easily be twisted and made into some kind of religion. Again, as years before, he revolted from the idea, for he treasured the honesty of his own skepticism” (Stewart 223). The notion of “treasuring his own skepticism” indicates the balance Stewart is attempting to achieve through Ish. More specifically this notion that “honesty” or truth comes from Ish’s “skepticism,” linking the idea of “skepticism” to inherently positive words like “honesty.” This connection gives the formerly negative word “skepticism” a positive tonal shift. The duality of faith and “skepticism” reveals a more fully developed character for Ish than blind faith or shear doubt would assert. Stewart is acknowledging the human tendency to waiver in faith, but still maintains general optimism. Through it all Ish’s
fundamental response to religion is positive and hopeful. The Tribe utilizes religion with the express purpose of motivating society and positivity.

Atwood’s writing approaches the issue of religion through Snowman’s two struggles with religion. First, he dictates “truth” to the new Crakers and has been warned by Crake himself to be cautious with these fledgling beings and their belief formation. Crake’s genetic manipulation included the specific attempt to remove the Crakers’ human inclination toward religion, “Crake thought he’d . . . eliminated what he called the G-spot in the brain. God is a cluster of neurons, he’d maintained” (157). “Elimination” in this case means physically absent through deliberate agency. To use the term “G-spot” draws on the double meaning of the sexual pleasure zone and the single location that allows for control of the subject. Understanding that “elimination” and “G-spot” are used in his instance to call for both the removal of basic pleasure, and by extension basic control. Additionally, Crake conducts this removal of “religious pleasure” with complete awareness of the inclination that he is depriving his Crakers of.

Snowman continues to work in figurative language about the past attempting not to create mythology or deity, which is nearly impossible. He is a contradiction of this mythological avoidance himself because of his chosen name of “Snowman, or more specifically the Abominable Snowman…conveys this lack of clarity. . . and [is] an abstract product of culture—a legend, a creature that exists only in the imagination of human beings” (Dunlap 5). Just like the concept of religion or God, the Abominable Snowman is a figment of mental construction and persistent belief. Belief is about consistency and maintenance of “legend” in the “imaginations of human beings.”
The second struggle that Snowman has with religion is that he could easily assert his authority and make himself a deity to this new species. In giving Snowman this deified power Atwood is commenting on the loss of faith in post-apocalypse settings. Snowman grapples with this impulse based on morals alone which is ironic and paradoxical considering Snowman’s amoral and narcissistic personality before the fall of mankind. He does act as a prophet of sorts speaking from the past and protecting the future. Despite his reluctance to accept it, “He is Crake’s prophet now, whether he likes it or not; and the prophet of Oryx as well. That, or nothing. And he couldn’t stand to be nothing, to know himself to be nothing. He needs to be listened to, he needs to be heard. He needs at least the illusion of being understood” (104). As a prophet he sets himself off as inaccessible. This is another example of how Snowman’s isolation is unhealthy specifically when compared to Ish’s isolation. In his role as Prophet Snowman loses touch with reality and begins to think himself divinely appointed, which as discussed is an exercise in futility. By maintaining his balance between belief and skepticism Ish is able to stay grounded in reality and optimism, unlike Snowman.

This role as prophet dictates that “in his reincarnation as Snowman [he] has to invent a new religious narrative, which he potters together in the rather unplanned and contradictory manner” (Kuester 82). This stresses the issue for Snowman because in an effort to create religious truth he must delicately balance the Crakers’ perception of him as something between prophet and God. The “unplanned” and “contradictory” stories that Snowman construct reveal his human nature through the imperfection in his role. If he were truly divinely appointed it would only be logically that he would possess skills in the role. Therefore, his lack of skill reveals his nature as human, not divine. By
presenting each of these issue Atwood expresses the fundamental problem with religion in a world after society has collapsed. How do thinking and logical beings place their trust in a cosmic force that has already destroyed its predecessors? When considering this alongside the issue of 9/11, how do people turn toward a God that allows so much destruction and death? Also, how can a God like that to be trusted in faith if he failed to protect the believers in the first place? The struggle of faith is the same no matter how God has failed the believers, be it through apocalyptic event or terrorist attack.

In contrast to Atwood’s assertion of doubts, McCarthy is making a claim that when nothing is left all that remains is to maintain personal hope. McCarthy stresses that individuals are obligated to cling to the last stitch of faith and belief that they have (this is hope) but in *The Road* they call it “carrying the fire.” The Man and the Boy see horrible things including cannibalism and torture, but after every instance of violence the Man and Boy discuss the fact that they are “the good guys” and that they are “carrying the fire.” This ritualized habit becomes their simplistic and motivating religion. The Man has doubts like any believer, which at some point it becomes apparent that his faith is false and only kept as a pretense for the Boy. The Man is fundamentally pessimistic and through his doubts he fails his son’s faith in him. Ish, by contrast, supports belief even when he holds his own doubts. In a time of doubt the Man has a strange discussion, about the Boy, with an old man they meet on the road, the old man says,

> When I saw the boy I thought that I had died.
> You thought he was an angel?
> I didn’t know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn’t know that would happen.
What if I said that he’s a god?

The old man shook his head. I’m past all that now. Have been for years. Where men can’t live gods fare no better. You’ll see. It’s better to be alone. So I hope that’s not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it’s not true. Things will be better when everybody’s gone.

... 

When we’re all gone at last then there’ll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. (McCarthy 172-173)

While this exchange is indicative of the Man’s personal struggle with understanding the child and his misplaced worship of the Boy, it also is very revealing of how McCarthy is positioning God in this world. To have a character assert that, “Where men can’t live gods fare no better” (172), is to make an assertion that God is not present in this world without society to maintain him. This creates a paradox between the faith that the Man and the Boy harbor by “carrying the fire” and the fact that God does not exist in their world any longer. They are truly hopeless if God is dead. In this way the Man and Boy are presented as worshipers at an abandoned altar. McCarthy is directly highlighting the feeling of abandonment and forsakenness that believers have in the wake of destruction and death. Which makes the assertion that “there’ll be nobody here but death” is all the more pessimistic. In the wake of hopelessness lies death, because optimism and faith are all that maintains life.

A few critics imprecisely assert that McCarthy’s setting reveals an underlying religious tone based in the Catholic tradition. Critics like Lydia Cooper claim that The
Road is a Grail quest based on the setting struggles that the characters go through (220).

While another critic claims that

the novel echoes many of the themes that John the Divine describes in the Book of Revelation—themes that would become the trademarks of nuclear winter. In particular, McCarthy’s description of the novel’s landscape aligns with the effects of the Seven Seals (Rev. 6.1–6.17), Seven Trumpets (8.6–9.21), Seven Thunders (10.1–10.7), and Seven Vials (16.1–16.21). The effects seen in Revelation and The Road include fire from heaven, the trees and the grass burned up, ships destroyed, all sea life dead, the sun and the moon blotted out, plagues and earthquakes, cities full of unburied dead people, and so on. (Grindley 11-12)

While there are parallel structures to Revelation in almost all apocalyptic novels it becomes clear through analysis of the Man’s claim, that the Boy could be a God, that the more specific elements of personal faith can be considered reflective of all religions and loss of faith in general. These critical analyses have specific merits in regard to how they explain the destruction of the physical earth, but they fail to take into account the polytheism represented by the characters and their dialogue. This Judeo-Christian analysis also fails to address the wife’s apparent suicide, the cannibalism, and the death of the Man. If this setting was structured after the Revelations description then there would be an implied supernatural force in action, which is never seen in the plot. In understanding this representative loss of hope, all religions become applicable to the text, not just Judeo-Christian beliefs.
Similar to McCarthy’s godless setting, Evenson also constructs a world in which God abandons even the most faithful when the world is destroyed. In establishing an abandoned group of believers paired with a cult like cohort Evenson is asserting that some faiths rise up when others die. Horkai and his “brothers” in species seem to exist in the role of facilitators from the old world to the new. Their exact role is debated between themselves, as well as the humans. For instance when Horkai makes contact with others of his kind he is told all of their theories on their new existence:

Lots of theological debate over that one. . . Jonas believes that God works by natural means and that he’s allowed us to be infected by a polyextremophilic bacterium . . . Teancum wonders if we’re becoming transfigured beings. . . Translated by the finger of God from mortals to immortals. The fact that our bodies seem exceptionally resilient seems to support this, though the fact that we seem also to continue to age, albeit somewhat slower than humans, does not. . . I think we’re the guardian angels of the human race. (Evenson 126)

Concepts like “transfigured”, “immortals”, and “Angels” work to situate these beings as positive despite their extremely negative physical descriptions. While these words are supportive of belief and faith, Horkai is skeptical. His skepticism and pessimism result in his ability to take a neutralized position on faith. It would seem that without formalized religion Evenson emphasizes a demigod or angel into the world. This is an interesting declaration in the absence of society. In contrast to McCarthy’s allegation that without society there is no God; Evenson is implying that when mankind is gone something divine will rise in our place. Evenson asserts that these beings are more worthy of the world because they are not humans. Horkai proclaims in disbelief that “The problem with
faith. . . is that there’s no arguing with it. Same problem, he admitted to himself, with lack of faith” (Evenson 134). This struggle for the protagonist is the struggle of any survivor who no longer knows what they believe. In the aftermath of 9/11 individuals of faith were left lost and confused about how to proceed in regaining their faith for years after the initial events. The struggle for faith and truth is one of the most distinct aspects of Immobility that parallels real world response to disaster.

Of the novels in consideration Wool is alone in its indefinite stance on religion. The implication of religion is alluded to and small references to religious organizations within the silo are present, but never directly. If there is any God figure mentioned it would be the vague praise the inhabitants of the silo have for the builders. The builders take on the role of creator and savior but not overtly. What is grappled with more directly is the idea of faith. The concept of believing in the unseen is very present in the novel. Holston has struggled with the loss of his wife and subsequently his lost faith in her. By extension losing faith in her equates to losing the only God he worships. He finally takes the leap of faith to follow her out of the silo and in doing so he is reasserting his belief in her for better or worse. This leap of faith also marks him as pessimistic because he assumes he will die which is defeatist at best, and completely hopeless at worst.

The desire to leave the silo is a great taboo bordering on blasphemy to the people of the silo who believe it is the only safe and habitable place for their existence. Howey is making a social commentary about conformity of belief. Howey uses Holston’s desire to leave as a means of addressing the idea of fighting the majority belief and instead being an individual in faith. His isolation against the masses is his death sentence, and the only religious “freedom” is found in death. Howey is noting that to be on the outskirts of a
society can and does result in “death,” even if it is only metaphorically. Though the idea is stated and explored it is unclear whether Howey views society as the evil or the departure from it as evil. He walks a deliberate line between the two citing the risks and faults in being wholly conforming or wholly unique. Howey’s tightrope approach in terms of religion and faith states a need for balance between belief and realism. It is made clear that living in the extreme binary of either is hopeless, because at either end of the spectrum lays error.

The novels all hinge upon belief as the measure of pessimism or optimism. Believers are left to struggle with understanding their survival in terms of a cosmic being while non-believers are left questioning their existence in terms of purpose. No character escapes the existential crisis that comes with surviving. This is one of the reasons the genre speaks to the survivors of the terrorist attacks, because every survivor who was affected by the fear afterward has grappled with the same existential issues. This struggle with belief is realistically expressed in church attendance statistics for 2002. In statistical studies of American attendance at worship services, “the overall rating for organized religion in 2002 [plunged] to its lowest level in more than six decades” (as cited in Hadaway 318). Notably, no matter how attendance was recorded, either by self-reported attendance or sampling, the results still showed a massive decline. While this only bares a correlative relationship to the hopelessness in literature, it certainly bolsters the assertion that Americans are in a religious struggle after the events of 9/11. This links the reality of hopelessness to fictional representations of the pessimism.
BORN OF DISASTER

As a whole one of Ish’s most pressing concerns is always the future and how the generations will survive. The pervading anxiety of inheritance forces Ish to create plans for the future, which results in an optimistic worldview for the entire Tribe. First, he attempts to convey real knowledge and education in a formal sense but abandons these attempts to futility. After the failed endeavor to introduce the future generations to formal scholarship Ish turns to basic skills that he introduces through fun and creativity. He insures a future of success by teaching fishing, hunting, and other basic survival skills. Throughout the novel he suffers moments of despair for the future when his children die or show ignorance, but ultimately, he is hopeful that the future will be bright even if he cannot know with certainty how such success would be achieved. Ish instead lives for the knowledge that he shares with the future generations:

When he had first made an arrow, he recollected, he had imagined that The Tribe would revert to stone arrowheads. Instead they had taken a shortcut, and were already fashioning metal. So perhaps The Tribe, his own descendants, had already passed the turning point, were no longer forgetting more old things than they were learning new things and were no longer sinking toward savagery, but were maintaining a stable level or perhaps gradually beginning to win new security.
By showing them how to make bows, he had helped, and he felt greatly comforted. (Stewart 322)

It is clear that “passing the turning point,” “learning new things,” “to win new security,” and to feel “greatly comforted” are all positive affirmations of hope. The optimism of his words creates a tone of positivity even at the close of the novel, with the future unknown.

By contributing to the future generations Ish is optimistic for his descendants and the world as a whole. It is the hope that comes from securing future generations that functions as fulfillment for survivors of apocalypse. There is an obligation on the part of surviving cohorts to propagate and to educate the next generation. In the novels after 9/11 there is no clear evidence that the future generations will ever be secured, and the children that do exist are indicated as unlikely to survive. The death of the species is one of the most telling measures of hopelessness in the four novels. Children equal hope and failure in maintaining the heritage for the future is a hopeless future. There is no hope without a future generation.

Atwood has functionally replaced the population with a new species. Snowman is framed as an isolated survivor who is unlikely to reproduce or to bring children into the world as it is. Beyond simple isolation the state of his world perspective forces celibacy. In the novel the population is destroyed through the “miracle” product Blyss Pluss, which allows for unlimited sexual enjoyment without risk of disease or pregnancy. The pill is designed to make the population, unknowingly, sterile, and beyond sterility it is also the time released method by which the population is infected with a terminal virus. Sex is literally the downfall of society in the novel. As Crake observes, “Homo sapiens doesn’t seem able to cut himself off at the supply end. He’s one of the few species that doesn’t
limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources. In other words—and up to a point, of course—the less we eat, the more we fuck” (120). When Crake asserts that “the less we eat, the more we fuck,” this is Atwood’s way of directly connecting sex to death. In deconstructing that statement, eating less will result in death, and fornicating more will result in a need for more food. So the paradox of these two human impulses proves to be faulty on a fundamental level. The Pill and the Plan are the means by which Homo sapiens are replaced by the genetically engineered Crakers who do not possess this faulty impulse pattern. The implications of Atwood’s systematic genocide is that when writing she was playing on the pervading hopelessness that the human population is unlikely to survive in the current cycle of resource depletion.

After 9/11 the mindset had shifted to one of “who would bring a child into a world like this.” The ramification of fear and violence in the terror attacks is exactly the kind of thinking that would lead to an avoidance of reproduction. In fact research reports that “The overall U.S. birth rate, which is the annual number of births per 1,000 women in the prime childbearing ages of 15 to 44, declined 8% from 2007 to 2010” (Livingston & Cohn 2). Similar studies concerning fertility and birth rates concur with the notable decline that is reflected in the data collected for the CDC (Hamilton & Ventura 1-13). This data supports the implications of what the novels reflect. While the novel functions as a hyperbolized reflection of the pessimistic response to attack it does express the general trends very clearly. The post-apocalyptic genre reflects an emotional state that is hopeless about the future. After the terror attacks, the war, and the economic decline lead many people to feel that the future was not one in which they would want their children to live. It was not until after 2011, the end of the hopeless decade, that
those birth rates increased once more. In the decade after 9/11 the emotional and psychological effect resonated in the culture and was captured in the medium of writing specifically in fiction.

A very specific contemplation on generational hopelessness is conducted in McCarthy’s *The Road*. The novel is not only about the death of the Man leaving the Boy to struggle for survival, but also about murder of the next generation. Literally, the current generation kills and consumes the next generation via cannibalism. While exploring an abandoned campsite the Man finds that “They’d taken everything with them except whatever black thing was skewered over the coals. . . What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. . . I’m sorry, he whispered. I’m sorry” (198). To address the effect of this scene the phrase “I’m sorry” must be understood. While the Man has no direct guilt in this situation, because he was not the cannibal or committer of infanticide, he does carry the burden of apology. He could be apologizing to the Boy for letting him see this ultimate evil, or he could be apologizing for not stopping the act. But what all of these possible reasons for apology contain is the need for the older generation to apologize to their children for the way the world has become.

This scene shows the two opinions in the event of an apocalypse. The first choice is to struggle on and attempt to bring another generation through the event and help them to recover what was lost or the second choice is to give up all hope of future generations ever recovering from the damage that the last one created. The message that is derived is that as society destroys the natural world, killing itself and the planet, the next generation is effectively being destroyed in the process. Cannibalism is the symbolism by which
McCarthy conveys the senseless consumption of resources in current society which will literally eat away the next generation.

McCarthy also makes a notable attempt at conveying the next generation’s hopelessness in the face of the world left to them. By viewing the next generation’s disgust and disappointment with the condition of the world, McCarthy is making an attempt to convey just how powerful our current actions will affect the future. He asserts utter disappointment and dissatisfaction with what will be left for the Boy but more importantly the Boy is also hopeless about his own young life. Even as a child the hopelessness of his situation has the Boy expressing a desire to escape via death, causing the Man to ask “Do you want to die? Is that what you want? I don’t care, the boy said, sobbing. I don’t care. The man stopped. He stopped and squatted and held him. I’m sorry, he said. Don’t say that. You mustn’t say that” (85). The implied surrender in the phrase “I don’t care” shows the negativity of the words. To give up on the struggle for survival is to give into hopelessness. The pervading guilt the Man feels about the Boy’s hopelessness is a representation of the guilt this generation bares to the next. When the Man says “You mustn’t say that” he is actually in denial of the reality of their situation. To ignore the very logical desire to be freed from suffering is the Man’s most pessimistic action, because it is his fear that death will be worse that keeps him from having hope that death will be a release. The Man’s pessimism about what comes after death keeps the Boy in suffering. Ultimately, it is because of the collective failure of one generation that the next will falter and suffer.

Evenson also asserts symbolic notions of generational death. For instance, by the end of the novel it is revealed that the surviving population is sterile. Sterility
symbolically implies that this generation has taken away their own future and by extension their hope. This is the driving force behind the plot because Horkai is sent to save the Seed, which are actually fertilized embryos. The hopelessness of a sterile generation repeating the mistakes of the past over again is a direct commentary on the present society. Horkai speaks to this thought when he address the belief that human beings are not worthy of possessing the earth: “Humans are poison. Perhaps it would be better if they did not exist at all” (146). When considering the novel’s sinister characterization of the humans in the story the idea of them reproducing is an extremely distasteful one. Writers from the hopeless decade express this same disgust with the level mankind has fallen to, and the events of 9/11 are a catalyst to their issues with the current generation who are likely to repeat the mistakes of the past. Heritage is more than simple biology but is a legacy of action. When the current generation is viewed the unprovoked murder of thousands on 9/11 a pervading sense of hopelessness was felt in regard to the future. This is not a world fit for children.

The world that Howey demonstrates in Wool is another representation of a world unfit for the next generation. Howey uses the microcosmic existence that the population lives in the silo as a commentary on the limitations of planetary resources. As the citizens of the silo struggle to exist in a balanced stasis, the most precious commodity is the right to raise children. There is a yearly lottery for couples to participate in during which they can win the permission to procreate. Holston’s only lasting regret in regards to his wife’s death and his own preeminent one is that they never conceived when they had the chance: “Holston thought suddenly of the lottery he and Allison had won the year of her death. He still had the ticket; he carried it everywhere. One of these kids—maybe he or she
would be two by now and tottering after the older children—Could’ve been theirs” (Howey 4). This regret and longing is the definition of hopelessness. “Could’ve been theirs” echoes in the past tense the only regret he carries to the grave. The negativity of that statement is derived from the lost potential in the sentiment. With no children to remember him Holston is quintessentially forgotten and does not survive even in memory. The hopeless decade implies a longing to be remembered positively and without the next generations survival the longevity that comes through memory is not possible. With no children to carry on our traditions, beliefs, genetics, or memories this generations dies hopeless about the future.
SAVING HOPE

As the hopeless decade draws to a close there are clear signs of recovered hope in the genre. Primarily this recovery is seen in the call for sequels. While readers initially were drawn to these four novels because of their mindset during the time after 9/11 things began to change as the initial shock and terror subsided. Each of these four novels ends with hopeless or ambiguous endings of unanswered fear. As readers stopped identifying with this brief period of pessimism the endings became unsatisfying. All of these novels are critiqued for their need for a sequel. Both Atwood and Howey carry their stories on past the point of hopelessness and instill a more optimistic recovery model in later texts. Ultimately, for Atwood this means that some humans recover, they form a small society, and learn to live in harmony with the new world order. In the Wool series Howey takes both sequels and prequels to explore the mindset and global situation that lead to the destruction and its eventual recovery. Howey returns the Silo inhabitants to the surface of the earth and a bright future.

What can be understood by the call for sequels is that the decade of hopelessness was a temporary shift in the genre that reflected the situation of the September 11th attacks. This break in the mold allowed for growth and exploration in the creative realm of this type of writing. By attempting a distinctly different type of post-apocalyptic writing the authors were able to expand the critical limits of the genre.
It overcame the cyclical mindset and formulaic pattern it had fallen into.

Cormac McCarthy’s work in *The Road* has influenced writers in the current sphere of post-apocalyptic and even dystopian literature. Such writers include Suzanne Collins, Veronica Roth, Peter Heller, and James Dashner all of whom have become bestselling authors in these genres. Despite calls for a sequel to *The Road*, McCarthy insists that there is no story to tell after the ending. This overwhelming desire for a more satisfying and hopeful close to the novel marks the recovery of optimism. The unknown in both *The Road* and *Immobility* are considered “unsatisfying” in the sense that they never answer the human desire for hopefulness.
LOOKING FORWARD

Understanding the relationship between historical influences on genres of writing allows for word choice and tone to be explored more comprehensively. In order for this method to be applicable in future research it is important to maintain fixed points of comparison, such as *Earth Abides* role in this analysis. Future texts of post-apocalyptic fiction can be assessed in the same way to see if it returns to the cyclical and formulaic patterns of optimism or if it continues to expand exploring new limits. This genre can and will always be a source for social criticism and therefore will be representative of the mindset during the time it is written. This is why in the future further study of the genre will be necessary.

Ultimately, this exploration of the genre yields insight about the importance of the word choice in setting tonality caused by historical events and how they become represented in literature and writing. The speculative nature of the post-apocalyptic genre offers possible outcomes to present situations, which draws attention to the aspects of our society that can and should be changed. This call to action must be considered with judicious minds and understood as the warning that it is. Due to literature’s position in social commentary it will always be important to look to novels to understand our past, present, and futures.
WORKS CITED


