Further Adventures in ApocaLit

Earlier this year I wrote about a few examples of ApocaLit I had been reading as the world seemingly bursts into flame around us. I have continued to mine this vein of things-are-fucked-up-and-bullshit entertainments. Is this a strategy of face the beast head on or escape the beast by engaging a substitute? Works for me either way.

The looming specter of a great contagion or disaster that destroys civilization is as old as time: the Epic of Gilgamesh, Noah and the flood, the Revelations, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, &c. My recent readings have been not quite that old: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*(1915).

The Shelley and London books provide instructive examples of the limitations of speculative/sci fi written in any period. Both books take place c. 2073. For Shelley, that year is the beginning of the end, which (Spolier!) culminates in the narrator as the last surviving human in 2100, wandering barefoot and revenant. For London, the plague arrived in 2013 and pretty well wiped out all but a sliver of humankind in a matter of months; our narrator is telling a gang of feral lads about what things had once been like, before.

One notable feature is how the authors could not imagine too far beyond the prevailing technological norms of their times. For Shelley, this means a total absence of rapid

communication, transport almost entirely via horse and buggy or on horse back, and continued reliance on candles and torches. The language is High Romantic, and at 375 pages it is an overdose of the lofty, enough to make one wish for the sweet release of the plague itself.

Example: The narrator has been infected and is sure to die. (Spoiler: He is one of the few to survive and gain immunity.) He flies to his beloved (because of course he did) and over the course of three pages, this flowery tosspot goes on a Romantic tear, finally spilling the tea: He has the plague. They clasp hands and heave their bosoms, likely while bringing the backs of their hands to their troubled brows.

There are indeed moments when a heartfelt "Yo girl, you know I love you so much, but I'm dying yo" would be more apt. But alas, and forthwith, we have Lionel Verney as a guide, not Jason Mendoza.

Now that there is some romancin'
Shelly was working out some deep personal trauma with this book, written in the wake of her beloved Percy's death by drowning. Frankly, I do not recommend this book as a casual escape from our own looming worries, unless you just love you some High Romantic puffery. The first half of the book is plague-free, and Shelley paints the idyllic scene of meadows and glade and Nature's wondrous bounty and depicts Percy and Byron pretty clearly in her two main protagonists. All is bliss and crashing ennui.

Since you are not going to read this anyway, here's the book's secret. By this time in her life, Shelley is well and truly over the glory of nature riff. Her man is dead, and the world is bleak. More than any real attempt at speculative fiction – hell, everybody still holds Shakespeare and Haydn as the exemplars of cultural achievement – this book is Mary Shelley taking the piss out of Percy's and Byron's childish fantasies.

Read in that light, there is a certain sharp edge to her mimicry of the High Romantic folderol. But the joke is way inside, and suffers to sustain several hundred pages.

(To be fair to Shelley, she was indeed a badass in many ways. After *Last Man*, I went back and re-read *Frankenstein* (1818) for the first time since high school, and it just. fucking. rocks. She wrote it on a challenge between Byron, Percy, and herself to see who could come up with the scariest story. She won. She was 20. Bad. Ass. Those boys had no idea who they were dealing with.)

Jack London, on the other hand, gets right to the point and whipsaws us through the tale of disaster in a brisk 160 pages. London was an unapologetically commercial writer; intent on making a buck to buy the next bottle of hooch. These days, London is remembered chiefly as a writer of adolescent adventure fantasy, best known for his Alaska potboilers and other tales of derring do. But he was also a socialist activist, taking every opportunity to slip rad ideas into his stories. Yet another visionary unfairly derided for his 'genre fiction'.

(His book *The Iron Heel* (1908), one of the earliest dystopian novels of authoritarian horror, is terrific. Get it. It predates Orwell and Huxley by a longshot, and is a good fifteen years before Soviet dissident Yevgeny Zamyatin published *We* (1924), which both Huxley and Vonnegut lifted pretty much intact for *Brave New World* and *Player Piano*. To his credit, Vonnegut happily admitted the theft. Not our Aldous.)

London's plague chronicle takes a more robust stab at the sci-fi/speculative realm than Shelley. Granted, he had the advantage of another century of 'progress' to draw upon. There are aspects of global communication and air travel, but the narrative is still trapped in an early-20th century framework. (*Iron Heel* was much more successful in its imaginings of

future ‘improvements’.)

Unlike pioneer speculators like HG Wells and Asimov, or later savants like PK Dick and William Gibson, neither of these writers managed to extrapolate much beyond their own near-horizons. This is not a complaint so much as it is to acknowledge how difficult it can be to really imagine something that does not yet exist. The people who successfully anticipated changes that eventually arrived are notable exceptions. (See also the proliferation of flying cars that look like shark-finned Chevy and Cadillac models from late 50s speculative efforts. Not to mention the speculative brassieres that seemed cut from the same template!)

I read the London as I was halfway through Shelley. I needed a break from the “O mighty heavens that span above like a twinkling etc.” It’s a quick read, and really fun, too. The narrator was once a professor of literature, probably at Berkeley. (London loved the Bay Area settings.) After the plague did its job, he became a wanderer, member of one tribal group or another as necessity demanded. As he begins his tale around a campfire, his speech is raw, unadorned. But as he gets going, he falls back into his professorial mode, much to the aggravation of the feral teens he is addressing.

“Why do you have to use made up words like ‘scarlet’? Can’t you just say red?”

But our man is undeterred, and as he carries on, his original love for the humanities rekindles, and he enthuses about the aspects of what was lost. He talks of finding a library during his lonely wanderings, sounding as wistful as Henry Bemis. He implores his young friends to hear his pleas to learn to read and write and to commit to preserving the best of humanity’s works. All but one boy wanders off laughing at him.

It may seem perverse to find solace in these sagas of collapse (fwiw, *Mr Robot* was a deep obsession here at the casa this

spring, and the latest pair from William Gibson is a ripping yarn), but it can be comforting to see how relatively not-awful our situation is compared to the fevered speculations of these tales of societal disintegration.

Because it could never get as bad as all that. Right?