

MERRY ARMAGEDDON

One of my favorite novels from childhood is L. M. Montgomery's *The Story Girl*. Sarah Stanley, an orphan living on Canada's Prince Edward Island, spins tales that mesmerize and enchant her cousins. With their imaginations fired, the children come across an article in the newspaper about an American preacher who has announced that the world will end on August 12 at 2 p.m. They decide to die together out in the orchard. The children leave the front door to the house open so that they will hear the old grandfather clock toll the hour of their doom. The wait seems endless. Finally, one of the cousins returns home to investigate. She rushes back to let everyone know that the clock has stopped, it's actually 4, and her mother says they should all come in for tea.

This book, which was a gift from my grandmother, may have been my first exposure to the end of the world scenario, but it was certainly not my last. One New Year's Eve, I had to promise my husband (a computer programmer) that if we were going to party while it was still 1999, we would take the stairs when we returned to our apartment building. We hadn't actually succumbed to any millennial hysteria, and didn't think the nation's infrastructure was about to come apart, but my husband suffers a little from claustrophobia. He was worried about the strain of computer compliance on local utility companies and couldn't contemplate spending the rest of the night stuck in an elevator. It was a small price to pay for a fun evening out. I dutifully made my way up the stairs to the seventh floor, but as the perils of Y2K sputtered out, I found myself becoming even more sanguine about the end of life as we know it.

As I write this editorial on a hot summer day in July, the world is very much around me. I imagine that for you—reading this magazine in the late fall or early winter—the Earth's status won't have

changed much. Like me, you probably aren't particularly worried about the cataclysmic ending that has possibly been foretold by the Mayan Long Count calendar. These days, apocalyptic warnings are virtually a dime a dozen. The world could end in May or October. It could go out in the fire of midsummer or the ice of midwinter. All of these dates with destiny have been predicted at one time or another, yet the Earth keeps trundling along, ignorant of its doom.

Despite the Earth's indifference, science fiction writers can never quite restrain themselves from gifting us with the joy of total destruction. Time-honored ways to destroy the Earth or at least disrupt the lives of a sizable number of its inhabitants include natural disasters: epidemics, ice ages, floods, volcanoes, earthquakes, and lots of asteroids. Then there's the manmade kind: nuclear Armageddon, the next Y2K, over-population, pollution-poisoned atmosphere and waters, greenhouse gasses—the possibilities here are endless. Finally, there's the truly SFnal version: the alien invasion.

All of these scenarios do well in SF Filmland. Alien invasions have been covered from *The War of the Worlds* to *Independence Day*. Natural disasters, whether regional or worldwide, include the prosaically titled: *Earthquake*, *Volcano*, and *Meteor*. Movies with appellations that are almost as descriptive include *Deep Impact*, *Outbreak*, *When Worlds Collide*, *Contagion*, and *Armageddon*. Some end of the world, or end of society as we know it, films are not as immediately recognizable from their titles—*The Andromeda Strain*, *Testament*, *Melancholia*, *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Children of Men*, *I Am Legend*, *The Road*, *The Quiet Earth*, *On the Beach*—but the circumstances are just as disturbing. Most are released during the heat of the summer when everyone is ready for a rain of fire and the joy of air conditioning.

Some of these movies are moving and perceptive, but the majority treat the end of the world as a bit of a lark. No matter how many people are killed off, little attention is paid to collateral damage. All the survivors are worthy and they're in for a thrilling adventure. When I see movies like these, I tend to identify with the hardy survivors and on some level assume that I'll be in their band should disaster actually strike.

While there are books that face oncoming disasters as mindlessly as most movies, it's harder to get this distance in most science fiction novels and short stories. SF authors spend a lot of time on world building. Their disaster settings are usually far more convincing than the average film's. As a reader, I am privy to the inner thoughts of the characters, and see directly into their hearts and minds. A skillful author will ensure that I feel the losses and can easily imagine myself in similar harrowing situations, even when I despise the people in the story or have little or nothing in common with them. Somehow, the plot and the people in Greg Bear's *Blood Music* and James Tiptree, Jr.'s "The Last Flight of Dr. Ain" have stayed with me while I've completely forgotten characters and plot variations of typical disaster movies. I've been waiting for the crazed computer takeover since reading Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" in my teens and Richard Cowper's "A Message to the King of Brobdingnag" has left me worried about experiments with crop yields ever since I read the story in a 1984 issue of *F&SF*. When Nancy Kress writes about the coming water wars or Connie Willis thrusts me in the middle of a plague, I find myself convinced, at least for a while, that the end is nigh.

If you want to have a nightmare before Christmas, forget about watching a disaster film or worrying about prophecies and ancient calendars. Go back to these devastating tales, pick up a novel that inspired an end-of-the-world movie, or read Jack McDevitt's *Moonfall*. You'll be giving yourself a gift that will last a lifetime.