

# The End of the Beginning

## *Environmental Apocalypse on the Cusp in Scott Fotheringham's The Rest is Silence and Nicolas Dickner's Apocalypse for Beginners*

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Scott Fotheringham's novel *The Rest is Silence* and Nicolas Dickner's novel *Apocalypse for Beginners* both mix coming-of-age narratives with environmental destruction through apocalyptic events. Similarly, concerns about global environmental destruction populate the bildungsroman in fiction from nuclear-era texts such as John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* to ongoing narratives such as Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam series. However, both Fotheringham's *The Rest is Silence* and Dickner's *Apocalypse for Beginners* integrate coming-of-age narratives with apocalyptic threats to the characters' environments that climax at the edge of a point-of-no-return and then subside without having completely eradicated the living environment beyond recognition. The two novels represent a rethinking of how apocalyptic threat effects the world: these texts reject the idea of immediate doom represented by, for example, fiction focused on nuclear destruction, and the notion "[t]hat there's no problem that can't be fixed with a good old end of the world" (Dickner 89).

*The Rest is Silence* and *Apocalypse for Beginners* are literary evidence that thinking about environmental apocalypse is coming of age: each novel indicates that while the end may still come, humanity must not give up hope in the face of myriad speculated threats or even the slow deterioration of the living world.

Concerns about a variety of dangers to continued human existence have surfaced in both speculative fiction and in reported global events (see Campbell; Quammen; West; Stewart; and Zimmerman). But despite these and many more fears, neither Fotheringham nor Dickner allow their fictional instances of apocalypse to destroy or fundamentally alter humanity as a whole. To be sure, their characters are changed by the events

of each narrative, but in both *The Rest is Silence* and *Apocalypse for Beginners*, apocalypse rears its ugly head then slows into repose. This paper argues that character adaptation as a response to environmental change is employed within both novels to demonstrate the potential for humans to mitigate imminent apocalyptic threat. In turn, the use of environment by humans in each text is adapted, and even undergoes its own coming-of-age as immediate crisis is averted: the future of the human race, though altered, is (at least temporarily) ensured through each rethinking of the notion of environment. Fotheringham and Dickner accomplish these essential imaginative shifts in part through speculative instances in their texts, but also in their characters' ability to overcome the challenges they face. As a

result, *The Rest is Silence* and *Apocalypse for Beginners* are important fictional texts that, in common parlance, critique the separation of human life and the environment. In their insistence that humans and the environment are co-constitutive, Fotheringham and Dickner demonstrate that the continued survival of each is intertwined.

This essay engages in ecocritique in the manner employed by Timothy Morton, billing "the term in a ... self-reflexive way. Ecocritique is critical and self-critical" (13). As Morton outlines,

[e]cocritique is permeated with considerations common to other areas in the humanities such as race, class, and gender, which it knows to be deeply intertwined with environmental issues ... it thoroughly examines how nature is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category. Ecocritique does not think that it is paradoxical to say, in the name of ecology itself: "down with nature." (13)

This essay will employ an ecocritical approach in pursuit of a better understanding of what we might mean by environment. By examining Fotheringham and Dickner's novels and their apocalyptic narratives, I will suggest how the term environment itself can be adapted: each narrative process

eclipses the polarity of humanity and nature in favour of a living environment in which the human is intimately implicated. Considering these textual examples will allow our understanding of environmental apocalypse to be cast anew: rather than completely destroying environmental conditions or excising humanity from the natural world, these texts enact a fundamental change—a Revelation of sorts—in maturing our critical conception of the environment, and of how human living in the world must adapt for the future.

### *Maturing Environment*

*The Rest is Silence* and *Apocalypse for Beginners* pit their narrators against awkward recollections of adolescence. In doing so they frame how these now-adult voices interacted and learned to interact more closely with their environments: the process of going through puberty is nothing

converge and Fotheringham reveals that Ben used to be Benny. Ben's belief that he can be a part of the environment rather than separate from it contrasts with Benny's earlier experience conducting graduate research in a bacterium lab in New York, which ultimately led her to unleash a highly-voracious, plastic-eating bacteria in an Upper East Side supermarket and flee urban North America for the plastic-free backwoods. In becoming Ben, Benny switches from an avowed, though thoroughly urban environmentalist, to someone attempting to be a part of the remote wilderness.

Conversely, in *Apocalypse for Beginners*, Mickey Bauermann does not meditate on the natural world versus human civilization, per se. Instead it's boy meets girl as teenaged Mickey becomes enthralled by the eccentric Hope Randall, whose family, member by member, has prophesized unique variations of the Apocalypse—each

threat to their surroundings shows how both characters are linked to their environments and are actively engaged in living interconnectedly with them. *Apocalypse for Beginners* does not employ conventional notions of the environment as synonymous with the natural world to drive its plot. Instead Dickner challenges us to see the socio-natural and co-constitutive character of ecological threats.

These texts trouble a dichotomous understanding of the relation between humans and the natural world, thereby complicating conceptions of the environment. By considering threats to both humanity and the natural world as inseparable, Dickner and Fotheringham echo much contemporary thought about ecological living, seen for instance in ways in which Timothy Morton advocates for a “think[ing] through ... [of] what we mean by the word environment itself” (3) by reminding us that “[e]nvironmentalism is a set of cultural and political responses to a crisis in humans' relationships with their surroundings” that are manifest in many ways (9). In their own fashion, Fotheringham and Dickner's texts demonstrate that we all, including the most enthusiastic environmentalists, live in and impact the world. That is, these works of fiction set up speculative narratives that employ a unique version of “crisis in humans' relationships with their surroundings” (Morton 9), but that take the implication further than nonfictional or critical work is able to by literally allowing their characters to persevere through adaptation to environmental conditions. In both cases, the original threat itself disappears through this realization of ecological symbiosis, however fraught. Essentially, both novels comment that humanity must be more self-critical about how it sees its processes and impacts on the world: we must not only realize that we are a part of the environment, but we must adapt to live with that knowledge in mind.

**“What this moment means to you....”**

Ben, the narrator of Fotheringham's novel, comments that “[f]or those left

## ***The Rest is Silence* and *Apocalypse for Beginners* pit their narrators against awkward recollections of adolescence ... the process of going through puberty is nothing if not a process of adapting to one's surroundings.**

if not a process of adapting to one's surroundings. Ben, the narrator of *The Rest is Silence*, returns as a man to the area near Middleton, Nova Scotia, where his “dad was born ... and had brought [him] ... as a kid” (20). Orphaned long ago by a mother who left and a father who subsequently commits suicide, Ben searches for home in the wilderness after fleeing the pressure of grad school in New York for the quiet of the Nova Scotian backwoods. As he settles in and adapts to his pocket of nature, Ben narrates how his childhood was lost, and begins to tell the story of a young woman named Benny to an old man named Art. As Ben struggles to adapt to his new surroundings and the text comes to a climax, narrative timelines

member eventually going mad as their unique date for the end of the world fails to bring about said doom. Mickey and Hope become fast (yet ostensibly unromantic) friends as Hope's mother becomes increasingly obsessed with her own apocalyptic predictions. But all (literally) begins to fall apart as Hope discovers her apocalyptic “date” and rushes to solve the riddle involved, departing first for the West Coast and a clue in Seattle, then hopping a plane to Japan as the trail leads on. For both Mickey and Hope this results in a fractured sense of place, where the physical and mental ties they have with their surroundings crumble: for instance, the stadium in which they met is destroyed. The

behind ... silence is insistent, impossible to ignore, like bats in the ceiling and the arms of trees scratching against your roof" (307). Silence is framed as a resounding noise—it becomes a seemingly audible element of Ben's environment that is at once a reminder of the past and a future void to fill. Fotheringham's title, *The Rest is Silence*, is a call to his reader to interpret and understand the events and absences played out in his text, and then to adapt that conclusion for his or her own future use, in a new context. The events in the novel, and their abrupt end, hold meaning and emotional resonance that is anything but quiet. Ben reflects on the tides of love he has endured, stating, "[y]ou're stabbed with a poison-tipped foil after all that thrust and parry, all that love and effort and pain, and you have nothing more to say" (307)—but that seeming aphony will ultimately be replaced by new sound, whether it be another human's voice or the proverbial movement of dust in the wind. Silence is not the only possible conclusion to this narrative, for Fotheringham is referencing (and, in his title, quoting) Hamlet's last words in that Shakespearean tragedy: just before succumbing to his wounds from Laertes' "envenomed" (Bevington 1115, 5.2.320, 324) sword point, the doomed prince says, "I do prophesy th' election lights / On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice. / So tell him, with th' occurments more or less / Which have solicited—the rest is silence" (1116, 5.2.357-360).

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For one thing, the folio has Hamlet add "O, o, o, o" after "silence," suggesting that "silence" is not the endpoint of speech or of action. While Dieter Mehl

suggests that "[t]here is no more to say" (Bevington "Troilus and Cressida" 492, 5.10.22) seems like a common end-theme in Shakespearean tragedies, he also argues that the "O, o, o, o" of the folio is key (Mehl 183).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is essential to note that the play itself does not end with Hamlet's words (see "Troilus and Cressida" as well).

In his article "The Rest is Not Silence," Maurice Charney comments that, "it is fairly conventional for the [Shakespearean] protagonist at his death to run out of time and to have a lot more to say than he can possibly fit in" (187). While Hamlet dies and goes silent, Fortinbras assumes his voice, and thus, the onus of what has not been said. Fortinbras is to rule instead of Hamlet (the heir) or another member of Hamlet's now-deceased Danish royal house, and Hamlet intends for Fortinbras to know the plot of his destruction not so that the Norwegian crown prince can act to avenge the doomed Danish prince, but so that he can learn of the events in order to adapt to a new environment and thus strengthen his own rule. In essence, Fortinbras now carries Hamlet's ability to speak on his own behalf (and on behalf of the realm). With Hamlet's final words, a choice is offered for a way forward—an option echoed in a similar reference to Hamlet's words made by Carl Jung in his note to Sigmund Freud ending their personal friendship: Jung writes, "[y]ou yourself are the best judge of what this moment means to

you. 'The rest is silence'" (The Freud/Jung Letters 257). Jung means, in part, that nothing more need be said about the absolute nature of this ending, but that

## inVoice

PORTIA PRIEGERT

i

mountains  
soured with bitterroot  
stumps at half mast

ii

barren logs  
float in biers, await  
their final rites –  
plywood and profit

iii

the wind  
tuneless  
without branches  
to pluck

Freud must take what he can from the experience and move on. Jung's use of Hamlet's words can easily be applied to Ben's environmentalist message to his audience, and Fotheringham's obvious call to the reader of *The Rest is Silence*. Fotheringham urges his readers to ask themselves: what does the potential end of humanity mean to them, and what will the slow destruction of the environment mean in time?

Fotheringham gives his readers an option near the end of the novel: Ben claims that "[w]e won't survive. That's no reason to stop trying though, no reason to stop caring. There's nothing else we can do ... some things won't be lost" (322). Superimposing Jung's prefacing words onto the novel's message suggests that Fotheringham is implying that while doom may eventually overcome his speculative world, while the narrative might end

with the reader's closing of the book, the reader now has the voice to speak about these events in her or his own context, to learn and grow as the real world changes.

### *Adapting to a Plastic World*

The process of voicing one's history, of narrating personal existence in a particular space and time, links narrative voice with narrative environment. In Dickner's novel, the singular source of narration is split as Hope Randall decamps from Mickey Bauermann's basement (a.k.a. The Bunker) in search of answers to her burgeoning prophetic obsession. The text itself formally adapts to this change as it begins to move between Hope's point of view and Mickey's as the former arrives in New York and the latter remains in Rivière-du-Loup. The narrative becomes plastic as the reader is forced between two different narrative timelines while still attempting, like the protagonists themselves, to retain the connections between them. As Hope and Mickey adjust to their respective changing environments, so too must the reader adapt to the diverging narrative texts.

Despite Mickey and Hope's narrative estrangement, Dickner's novel is careful to connect both characters to real-world locations: this realist mode essentially forces the reader to identify with the world he or she knows, despite the increasingly speculative arch of the story.<sup>2</sup> Like Fotheringham, Dickner voices a distinct message in his novel that is applicable beyond the text: human action is beholden to the limits of a given environment. Dickner begins this process by bringing the two teenagers down to earth in Rivière-du-Loup where they must find summer jobs and end up working at the Bauermann family's cement business. As the narratives split and Hope travels from place to place while Mickey continues on in situ, this realism is a perfect foil for the events that are out of place. In a sense, both *Apocalypse for Beginners* and *The Rest is Silence* anchor themselves so closely to the known, physical world because these settings

link their readers to the narratives at stake: when the incredible happens, the reader is therefore much more capable of adapting his or her imagination to include such an unexpected scenario.

In *The Rest is Silence*, the plasticity of narrative echoes a more tangible discussion of commercialized plastic production and pollution as the reader's real, present-day world is held close to the speculative events that occur. In Benny's New York based graduate laboratory, she has been manipulating the *Pseudomonas* bacteria in secret until she finally manufactures "vials of recombinant bacteria" (266). She spreads "the mud of cells ... [on] plastic soda bottles of every brand and size she

the world would be like without, say, birds or cars" (116-17). Fotheringham and Weisman fear that we are doomed to wander a world littered with "[d]ozens of Tim Hortons coffee cups and plastic lids in the ditch. Beer cans. Six-pack rings. Soda bottles and water bottles thrown from speeding car windows" (Fotheringham 118). This plastic waste will travel, piece by piece, to places such as the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre—which oceanographers have labelled "the Great Pacific Garbage Patch" (Weisman 152)—eventually decomposing into nurdles littering land and sea. However, while both writers display environmentalist agendas that comment on what is currently

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[can] find" (266) in a First Avenue food emporium. The next morning's result is a decimated soda aisle that sends her running from her crime (268). But Fotheringham's speculative idea of a plastic-eating bacteria does not seem so completely far-fetched, as plastics naturally break down into smaller components.

In *The World Without Us*, Alan Weisman speculates about what human contributions to the world would linger and what would decay should we vanish tomorrow. Weisman explains that plastics (and related materials) decompose naturally into component "cylinders about two millimeters high" called "nurdles... [which are] the raw materials of plastic production" (142). While the effect of Benny's mutated *Pseudomonas* is not a plague of nurdles, Fotheringham is clearly aware of Weisman's text: he even has the narrator Ben recall a "made up ... game [once played with his dad] ... called World Without, in which [they] imagined what

happening in the world, Weisman only pretends that humanity vanishes overnight; he does not appear to suggest that this could happen, and imagines it in order to discuss the heritage we would leave the earth. Fotheringham's novel inserts a more tangible aspect of doom than Weisman's thought experiment: as theorist Fredric Jameson says, dystopia is "imminent disaster ... waiting to come to pass in our own near future, which is fast-forwarded in the time of the novel" (*Seeds* 56). While Weisman wants to cut humanity out of the equation, Fotheringham's text actually speculates that the future could incorporate both human action and a continued environmental degradation, and is thus more applicable to our potentially dystopian near-future.

The act of removal is directly related to the development of dystopian elements in both Fotheringham and Dickner's texts: the attempted removal of plastics in *The Rest is Silence* troubles the real world of the reader with the

destruction of taken for granted plastic products such as “plastic collection bags and tubing ... the coating on high-voltage power lines ... [t]he nylon in gas tanks ... [and] most computers” (42-43) and it is only after Hope is gone that things start to get really uncomfortable in *Apocalypse for Beginners*. But the posited removals are not the focus of each novel. In *Apocalypse for Beginners*, both Mickey and Hope must survive alone and adapt to their environments before they can finally be together. In *The Rest is Silence*, Fotheringham’s creation of rampaging bacteria actually counters Weisman’s removal of humankind with a speculative (and ultimately futile) attempt at the removal of commercial plastics: after the release of mutated *Pseudomonas* (and in an ironic twist), Benny’s graduate supervisor, Melvin Leach, engineers “NuForm Plastix ... bottles...guaranteed never to biodegrade” (29). Rather than focusing on their chains of speculative outcomes, Fotheringham and Dickner devote the greater part of their texts to exploring how their characters adapt to each specific environment.

#### *Environmental Adaptations*

Speculative and environmentally threatening moments in each novel are of course also important factors in the narratives. But while Benny unleashes her bacteria, humanity adapts; likewise, Mickey and Hope survive their separation despite unbelievable events (such as people disappearing into thin air). Nonetheless, while the “End” does not occur in either text, the destruction of environment is a continuous process: rather than positing instantaneous destruction, the books resonate with contemporary theories of environmental concern that dovetail with what can be called a fear of slow apocalypse. In his use of the term “slow apocalypse,” critic Andrew McMurtry problematizes theories of a definite end to the world as we know it, asking, “[w]ere you expecting the sun to wink out, the heavens to open, the beast loose upon the earth? Or maybe you imagined a Ragnarok of more cosmopolitan origins: nuclear war,

bioengineered plagues, alien invasion, supernova” (par. 1). He goes on to say that while we seem to always expect an end of catastrophic proportions, this expectation is merely an act of ignoring what we know to be true—that our world has been slowly wasting away for dozens of years.

To be sure, “slow apocalypse” and environmentalism have not always been discussed in the same breath: a concern for the fate of humanity, progressing at any speed, is not always articulated as a concern for the degradation of the environment, and a concern for environmental decline can omit a focus on humans. Indeed, the environment has historically delivered its own mass extinction events to animal life on Earth.<sup>3</sup> By questioning what people mean when they use the term “environment,” science writer

because the scale of time involved is so much larger than the span of a lifetime or even generational memory. On the other, we are constantly experiencing a panoply of deteriorating environmental conditions.

Human impact on the environment has clearly been a part of ongoing critical discourse and has often been inflected by a distinctly apocalyptic tone. When it comes to this environment, this highly publicized commentary—in the vein of Davis Guggenheim’s now-famous film, “An Inconvenient Truth” (2006)—seems to neglect that the natural and human worlds are actually parts of the same whole.<sup>5</sup> Human pollution, for instance, is not affecting a separate environment. The problem is with the terminology itself: as critic William Cronon suggests, “[t]he time has come to rethink wilderness” since,

## Fotheringham and Dickner imagine events that could alter the state of both humanity and the natural environment, then deny those apocalyptic moments their complete arc of destruction.

David Quammen critiques the isolation of any of the minute factors contributing to what could ultimately be “the big one, paleontological in scope” (“Planet” 163). But Quammen’s “big one” does not necessarily refer to the result of a single event. He writes of the long view of time, of the paleontological view that categorizes five big events of mass biological extinction in the history of the planet: for example, he reminds us that “[a]bout 245 million years ago came the Permian extinction, the worst ever, claiming 95 percent of all known animal species and therefore almost wiping out the animal kingdom altogether” (162).<sup>4</sup> While causes for the Permian remain unclear, recent work suggests “multiple killers” (Hoffman 4) and estimates that “the extinction took place in [a period of at least] 100,000 years” (3). On the one hand, humanity has not experienced such destruction

“[f]ar from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation ... and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made” (69).<sup>6</sup> As Cronon concludes,

“[i]f wilderness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the task of struggling to live rightly in the world—not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both” (90).

The natural environment has long been a deadly force in the history of this planet without the help of humanity. But we humans, in our anthropocentricity, seem to consider ourselves as either the source of possible apocalypses or the



ROAD'S END. PARRY SOUND, ON. SPRING 2012. Darren Patrick.

focal recipients of a given apocalyptic blow. As Mickey highlights in *Apocalypse for Beginners*, we fear destruction from many things (231-32). Mickey's list is a varied amalgamation of both literature and popular culture, and he is cognizant that that which surrounds us is as potentially as threatening as it is comforting.

Keeping apocalyptic literature in mind, I would like to extract a corollary from Quammen's commentary that the natural world has precipitated the greatest biological extinctions in the history of the planet: apocalyptic fiction has generally presented the futility of human survival in the face of global apocalyptic events, thus framing the destruction of the living world in solely human terms. But, in his critique of environmentalism, Quammen comments that,

[t]hat clumsy, confused, and presumptuous formulation "the

environment" implies viewing air, water, soil, forests, rivers, swamps, deserts, and oceans as merely a milieu within which something important is set: human life, human history. But what's at issue in fact is not an environment; it's a living world. ("Planet" 163-64)

On the surface Fotheringham's *The Rest is Silence* seems to be making just this error: Ben narrates from the viewpoint of his foray into living directly off the land in the backwoods of Nova Scotia while he recollects his time (a former life, really) as the young woman Benny in a research laboratory in New York. "[H]uman life, human history" is ostensibly the focal importance in Ben's retelling.

However, at the edges, and increasingly interspersing the moments of quiet, the "living world" waits, changing Ben constantly. The least of these changes is how the frigid waters

of the Atlantic alter Benny's sex and literally bring Ben to the surface. Narrating Benny's story, Ben tells Art that,

[a]s soon as I jumped I knew it was over. My Rubicon, the cliff, the death sigh. It was the shock of the cold that changed me and made me what I am now. Like an oyster, my sex was changed by the cold water.... The moment she ended, just as Benny hit that cold, cold water, was the moment my life began. I have not forgotten what came before—how could I?—but I am no longer her. I am me. (295)

Ben is recounting a history shaped by the environment into which it is thrust, but it is necessary to realize that this is a history inseparably entangled with the natural, living world. Benny became Ben through an ongoing connection with environmental conditions, and

changed with them; his surroundings are not merely a stage for displaying that change, but essential to having produced it.

Just as Benny's change to Ben is inextricably interconnected with the characteristics and processes of the natural world, so is that change fittingly interconnected with the narrative process of the text. At one level, the narrative threads themselves split the novel into segments that finally converge in the telling of the moment when Benny hits the cold water: this revelation demonstrates that both narratives were entangled all along, just as human existence and the natural world are intricately connected. But Benny's transformation into Ben is also embedded in the process of the narrative in ways that can only be understood through a full knowledge of the text. Before the Ben sex change is revealed, small hints are dropped about Benny's transformation. For instance, on Ben's second encounter with Art, the latter says that "[his] body's just not what it used to be" (19), to which Ben replies, "I know what you mean" (19). The comment feels slightly out of place at this point in the narrative since the reader does not yet know that Ben and Benny are the same person. Thus it appears that Ben is awkwardly attempting to create commonalities between himself and Art. Only the reader of the latter part of the text (post-Revelation, as it were) knows that the commentary holds more weight: Benny's body and then Ben's body undergo changes through immersions in the living world that are not only physical. Feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti explains that "[t]he body, or the embodiment of the subject ... is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic ... and the sociological" (127). The bodily "subject is [thus] defined by many different variables: class, race, sex, age, nationality, culture overlap in defining and codifying the levels of our experience" (127). The bodily subject adapts to the conditions of its environment as a means of survival.

This adaptation is, of course, delayed when the subject believes her or himself to be removed from environmental processes. In *Apocalypse for Beginners*, Hope Randall is unable to act as she knows she should: despite the evidence that her mother has been driven mad by an obsession with her own prophecy, when Hope receives her own first sign of prophecy—she finds an entire bin of ramen noodles that "ha[s] the same expiry date ... 2001 17 JUL" (85)—she can no longer cope with the normal, or at least stereotypical, existence of suburban teens living in contemporary North America. She cannot even fall in love; she cannot rest until she has an answer. Hope searches the world for explanations until July 17, 2001 passes, at which point she is able to continue living in the world. Her body immediately reacts as she fully adapts to the living world and she sends Mickey evidence of this fact: at the age of 29, Hope experiences her first menstrual cycle and is "no longer a medical mystery" (252). Hope believes that she cannot perform femininity until her environment permits her, but by seeking to keep herself separate from the natural process of who she is, Hope delays coming to terms with who she is.

Similarly, in *The Rest is Silence*, the post-Atlantic Benny/Ben initially struggles with what s/he sees as a gendered role. Ben, newly changed by his environment, believes he has to perform masculinity instead of merely living. For example, Ben first meets Art at a community dance. The performative, polarized roles of masculinity and femininity are heavily leaned upon here: while Ben is dancing with his friend Jen, the gruff, deep-voiced Art taps him on the shoulder to announce that he is "cutting in" (36). But Ben, having only recently become physiologically male, reacts instinctively and automatically "reache[s] for [Art's] hands" (36) as if he were the one being asked to dance. While Art assumes that Ben reacts from sexual orientation, he is in fact acting as he might have as Benny: a life spent performing the culturally accepted female role leaves Ben instinctively over-emphasizing gendered cultural

expectations.<sup>7</sup> Clearly attempting to cover his crossover of gender cues, Ben says he "snorted, [and] pretend[ed] [he'd] been joking" (36), extending the performance further as he sits to the side afterwards as "[he] grunt[s] like a caveman" (36) upon being told that Art is "really quite sweet" (36). As Judith Butler says, "gender is a project that has cultural survival as its end" (*Gender* 139): Ben is deliberately and overtly masculinizing his response to match that of Art's hetero-centric attitude. By performing gender, Ben tries to enact change rather than living the change. But through sustained immersion into a living world in which he figures as a male with non-male genitalia, Ben becomes more comfortable with his hybridity, even entering into a relationship. As he says, "I laugh because what else is a guy with a cervix supposed to do" (313). His actions become less performative (and less unintentionally parodic) and more natural to his sense of self as he embodies the change his environmental conditions produced.

### *The Apocalypsis of Environment*

In thinking about the environment as a living world where humanity and nature intersect, we could speculate that humanity might adapt into some other variation more gentle to its

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## the outside

FRANK FRANCES

a swing forward  
out the window  
and into something  
breaking bough  
into something  
finding medicine  
in pain and poison

environment, more compatible with the natural, living world.<sup>8</sup> Instead of positing this evolution, Fotheringham and Dickner imagine events that could alter the state of both humanity and the natural environment, then deny those apocalyptic moments their complete arc of destruction. In both narratives, the decision not to create a dichotomy between the human and the natural world, or to destroy one over the other, irrevocably links humanity and the environment without ignoring the possibility that both are in danger of being destroyed. For instance, Dickner's moment—his contribution to a changed vision of how apocalypse might function beyond the text—envisions the destruction of an environment of the living, social world rather than the destruction of the natural world. When

reviewer Philip Womack critiques *Apocalypse for Beginners* by claiming that “[t]hings become implausible” (49), the implausibility is the point. First, personal apocalypse seems assured when Mickey goes to take an after-work dip in the pool that he and Hope used to frequent. Approaching the site, he knows that “[s]omething [is] not right—[he] sense[s] it even before rounding the corner of the arena and catching sight of the swimming pool” (196). The pool is being demolished and the destruction of this familiar cornerstone of his friendship takes further hope from Mickey: this loss of hope is intentional since Hope has literally disappeared. Next, Mickey discovers that the baseball stadium where he and Hope had met is “[a]blaze” (203) and not likely to be put out. Comfortable elements of his

and “struggle[s], drool[s], scratc[h]e[s], gnashe[s] her teeth, all the time emitting that inhuman groan” (209). As reviewer Ian McGillis explains, the novel attempts “shift[s] [that serve] a fluid melding of realism and fantasy, of interior and exterior landscapes.... When things go weird—as when a man steps into a porta-potty and never comes out—it’s all right, because our suspension of disbelief has been earned.” The zombification of Madame Sicotte is the ultimate moment in that speculative foray—at least in terms of potentially apocalyptic narratives—and also the moment that Mickey admits that “[e]verything [had been] unravelling since Hope had taken off” (209). The speculative moment puts Mickey’s living in tension with his surroundings as the environment itself is threatened.

The moment of Mickey’s encounter with Madame Sicotte is the moment in the novel where the potential environmental apocalypse permits Mickey to adapt to his changing surroundings. The novel does not end with a zombie apocalypse. Rather, the seemingly serious encounter fades from importance in the text. Both Mickey and his environment have survived this potential end instead of being destroyed by it: Mickey adapts as his surroundings do. To be sure, Dickner is not dealing explicitly with nature, the natural world, or environmentalism in his novel. However, the imaginative tools he employs to create an environment allows his readers to rethink the nature of the term environment itself. As speculation and reality intermingle, Mickey must adapt to events as they unfold. Through Mickey’s adaptation, Dickner not only employs an environment synchronous with its components, but demonstrates how human and environmental survival are interconnected.

### *The Revelation, or a Coming-of-Age*

Though both Dickner’s *Apocalypse for Beginners* and Fotheringham’s *The Rest is Silence* discuss world-ending events, neither sees an actual end of the world. Hope merely prophesizes that

## Understanding the environment as a socio-natural co-production does not abrogate humanity’s ecological responsibilities: indeed it brings them to the fore.

in Japan, Hope lives in a building “from the Edo period that ... survived the 1923 earthquake, the 1945 bombing raids and the urban renewal wave of the 1960s” (186)—as well as American napalm tests before Hiroshima (190).<sup>9</sup> The building has existed in an environment of various apocalyptic events, but always persevered: in this sense, both subject and environment are interconnected. Dickner adapts the potential of environmental apocalypse into a phenomenon that is not focused on affecting either that environment or its occupants, but that affects both. In doing so, Dickner combines the natural and the human into the idea of what an environment can be, and thus reworks our understanding of the term.

Dickner best demonstrates his adapted use of environment by pitting his characters against a process of speculative and potentially catastrophic moments as the novel slides further into “an increasing tolerance for the unlikely” (the title of chapter 66.) While

environment are changing with the disappearance of Hope, threatening his belief that he can properly live in these altered surroundings.

Dickner pushes personal apocalypse to the line of almost-apocalypse with an end-of-the-world-type of event as reality seems to break down to include the purely speculative. Mickey’s neighbour, Madame Sicotte, exhibits all the classic signs of a newly-made zombie as she “walk[s] in the middle of the street, looking distraught, her bathrobe half-open” (207). When Mickey speaks to her, she “slowly turn[s] her head in [Mickey’s] direction. Her face [is] ashen, her eyes red and the left side of her robe is streaked with blood. There [is] a gaping wound on her neck, a bite from a Rottweiler or something of that magnitude” (207). Upon being addressed, she “let[s] out a harsh groan” and “[swings] around ... [to move] toward [Mickey], dragging her feet” (208), then switches her path toward some paramedics who pull up,



the world will end on July 17, 2001, and Benny merely unleashes the bacterium. But the apocalypse itself never occurs in either text. Dickner focuses on apocalyptic fears, but his decision to break away from that moment where Madame Sicotte is staggering down the street at Mickey brings the text back to a sense of era and environment and not to an end-of-the-world event. Ian McGillis

in an asylum or suchlike” (9), life exists beyond that point of reckoning. Hope’s belated physiological maturation at 29 proves that the apocalypse (or, her particular apocalypse) will not take place. The same realization is at the heart of Ben’s musings at the end of *The Rest is Silence*. He understands that his release of the mutated *Pseudomonas* bacteria “will not stop our destruction

again) suspects that “[w]e [have] been expecting the end of the world for so long that it [is] now part of our DNA” (Dickner 232). Instead of internalizing apocalyptic potential, we need to internalize the idea that we are intricately interconnected with our surroundings. Rather than polarizing civilization and pristine wilderness, we must change our practices to reflect the fact that we are constantly living within the environment. We must embody the revelatory change that is implied by Dickner and Fotheringham’s speculations: the lessons of fiction like theirs must be adapted and put into practice beyond the imaginative world of the novel. As with Shakespeare’s Fortinbras, there is life beyond the text, beyond our fears of complete doom: let us not be silent, nor cease to adapt with our living world.

## At the end of both novels, hope is still possible because adaptation is the key for how the socio-natural world moves beyond disaster.

comments that “Dickner’s choice of period is crucial. The late 1980s and early ‘90s is an era that somehow feels farther back in time than it really is, so it’s salient to recall that today’s mid-to-late thirtysomethings were the last generation to grow up in the shadow of the Cold War.” Even Mickey realizes that “[he] grew up in a world obsessed by the apocalypse” (230). As McGillis explains, Dickner demonstrates that “we’re shown that while we fret about the world at large, the reality right in front of us erodes bit by bit.” Dickner clearly understands that environmental degradation is ongoing and directly affects us.

Similarly, Fotheringham reflects on the on-going nature of environmental degradation toward the end of *The Rest is Silence*. Ben, in commenting on his past as Benny growing up, makes the determination that “[o]ur heads have been in the sand since I was a little girl, when we first realized how good we had it and how we were screwing it all up. We knew what we were wreaking and it scared us, most of all because we couldn’t see any way of stopping it” (320). Ben’s message is environmentalist, but his words echo Hope’s fear of maturing; his language separates the subject from its actions instead of carrying that construction past the need for binary oppositions. While Hope fears maturation because “a Randall who outlived his or her end of the world would then experience a mental breakdown and ... usually end up

of the world” (320), but the opposite is true as well: the bacteria will not destroy the world. Instead, “[t]he world will continue to change, probably for the worse, but it remains a beautiful place to be. And there is hope, people hold on to hope, even the most pessimistic” (320).

At the end of both novels, hope is still possible because adaptation is the key for how the socio-natural world moves beyond disaster. To be sure, calamitous events have effected this world on such a large scale that entire populations have been wiped out. But both the natural world and humanity recover by adapting to the new environment and surviving. Human interaction with the natural environment, in the aggregate, certainly seems to be hastening potentially apocalyptic forces: for instance, David Quammen asserts that “[humankind’s] activities are causing the disintegration ... of natural ecosystems at a cataclysmic rate” (*Spillover* 40). Understanding the environment as a socio-natural co-production does not abrogate humanity’s ecological responsibilities: indeed it brings them to the fore. From this perspective, adaptation becomes a strategy with which to intervene in socio-ecological destruction in order to imagine more just and sustainable co-productions. We need to stop thinking that an apocalypse is inevitable—that the slate will be wiped clean and the remnants can begin anew. Mickey Bauermann, in his late-twenties funk (before finally hearing from Hope

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mehl agrees with John Russell Brown that “[w]e have no idea what the four O’s were intended to mean and still less notion of what Shakespeare thought about them” (Brown 28; Mehl 183). But whether the words indicate Hamlet’s suddenly inarticulate state, or merely point to the idea that “the rest is [not] silence,” clearly the sounds resonate for and extend Hamlet’s more conventionally accepted last words.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rest is Silence* essentially accomplishes the same thing with paratextual elements since Fotheringham “holds a PhD in molecular biology and genetics from Cornell University” (Savory) and the novel contains what amounts to a post-script with a mock peer-reviewed scientific paper entitled “Creation and Characterization of a Polyethylene Terephthalate-Digesting Mutant of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*” (323-24).

<sup>3</sup> The destruction of animal life can also be the result of decimated plant life: National Geographic writer Christine Dell’Amore comments on a recent article in the journal *Science* that theorizes “[the Permian] die-off had wiped out most life on Earth, including most land plants. The planet was baking, and life at the Equator struggled to survive. Plants gobble up carbon dioxide, which warms the planet. So without them, Earth became ‘like a runaway greenhouse—it [started] to get out of control’” (Dell’Amore; Wignall as qtd. in Dell’Amore).

<sup>4</sup> The other major extinctions are the Ordovician (439 million years ago), which saw the decimation of “roughly 85 percent of marine animal species” (Quammen “Planet” 162); the Devonian (367 million years ago); the Triassic (208 million years ago); and the

Cretaceous (or K-T event), which “ended the age of dinosaurs” (162-63).

<sup>5</sup> The success of “An Inconvenient Truth” has, perhaps unfairly, always been distorted for me by the fact that it shares a scene with its wildly speculative predecessor, the Hollywood blockbuster “The Day After Tomorrow” (2004): both contain the same aerial shot of the ice floes and shelves visible upon a specific approach to Antarctica. Nevertheless, whatever the source, the theme of rapidly melting ice caps is a valid consideration: even Fotheringham incorporates their destruction when Ben warns Art, “[y]our place will be underwater” (187).

<sup>6</sup> Cronon cites the formation of American national parks and the historical influence of Christian beliefs about the sublime as part of the system that created an idea of the natural world that is separate and meant to be kept pristine.

<sup>7</sup> Ben explains that his sex-determining gene sequence is damaged: with “[o]ne nucleotide changed ... [he] wound up with a vagina and a small uterus by default. [He] looked like a girl, so [his parents] raised [him] like a girl” (303). But the truth is that “[he] never felt like a girl” (303).

<sup>8</sup> Like, for example, our ocean-diving inheritors in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galápagos* or Jacques Cousteau’s “Life in a Billion

Years.” In Vonnegut’s vision, future humans resemble seals, and in Cousteau’s, “[a]n entirely new brand of amphibious human beings enters the sea: *Homo aquaticus*, able to resist pressures down to five thousand feet, to descend to this great depth freely, then later to surge to the surface with no decompression problem at all” (272).

<sup>9</sup> The character Merriam relates that, in one night the napalm bombing levelled “everything in forty square kilometres,” “killed a hundred thousand people” and “left a million homeless. In military jargon it’s called carpet bombing ... [and] flatten[s] the landscape down to carpet level” (190).

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