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# Trauma and the Ethics of Literary Culture in the Time of Pandemic: Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and Saleema Nawaz's *Songs for the End of the World*

WENDY ROY

IN THE DECADE BEFORE THE SPREAD and mutation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19, a number of literary representations of pandemics by Canadian authors imagined a pandemic and post-pandemic world. In Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013), the future apocalyptic *coup de grâce* is a human-engineered plague. Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) reveals a contemporary world devastated by a virulent strain of influenza, while Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) begins with the premise of a future disease of non-dreaming that leads to the murderous reoppression of Indigenous peoples. In Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018), an illness plaguing the world in 2145 is brought about through the reintroduction of a lost species. And Saleema Nawaz's *Songs for the End of the World* (2020) imagines a coronavirus pandemic much like the one actually experienced in 2019-22. Rather than focusing on the science of disease, all of these novels by women in or from Canada concentrate on human connections during and after a pandemic. Unlike the other books, though, *Station Eleven* and *Songs for the End of the World* present a realistic picture of an apocalyptic disease outbreak as something that can happen right now, without the need to imagine future scientific, technological, social, or environmental crises. More importantly, these novels bring together questions related to trauma, ethical behaviour, and literary culture. They emphasize written works as a way for humans to maintain their connections to one another and to take an ethical approach to the trauma of pandemic by creating communities and enabling communication across differences. At the same time, however, both books explore to a certain extent the potentially destructive effects

of literature during apocalyptic times. Whereas Mandel's novel examines how one of Christian culture's formative apocalyptic texts — the Book of Revelation — can be used to create a community that increases trauma for other individuals and groups, Nawaz's book raises questions about the ethics of assuming that written works and their flawed authors can help others to navigate a societal crisis.

Connections among trauma, ethics, and literature are not new. In their introduction to *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*, Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega trace these linkages to reactions in the 1980s against the moral "relativism" of some postmodernist theorists and, beginning in the 1990s, the use of psychological theories of trauma to study literature (7, 12). Early researchers such as Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer had facilitated the shift in meaning of the word *trauma* from the physical to the psychological by redefining it as "the inability to assimilate an unprecedented or overwhelming event by the usual mental mechanisms" (Ganteau and Onega 9), often resulting in an inability both to remember and to speak about the event. Ganteau and Onega argue that works of literary imagination can "give voice" to hidden and repressed trauma (15); at the same time, such works can explore ethical questions through "often-complex processes of negotiating moral obstacles" (Green 282). Corina Stan defines ethics, in *The Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in Twentieth-Century Literature*, as the development of community codes of conduct and of principles that enable collective life, including "practices that one refrains from . . . to avoid hurting others" (4, 9-10). This definition can be nuanced through reference to specific theories of ethical behaviour, such as utilitarian and contractual approaches to human relations, evident in Nawaz's novel and discussed in more detail later. Ganteau and Onega bring together trauma, ethics, and literary expression when they argue that, in conjunction, they exemplify "a crisis of understanding and history" along with "a paradox according to which trauma is known/expressed in the very impossibility of knowing/expressing itself" (19). An "ethical and traumatic moment" is evident in a number of genres of fiction, they argue, including novels about the Holocaust, war, and colonization, which have in common relationships among people and connections between personal and communal traumas, as well as invitations to reconsider ethical concerns (16, 18). Relationship and collectivity thus are keys to explorations of ethics and trauma in works of literature.

While these discussions focus on literatures about the past, my study attempts to expand this understanding to literatures of the future. Some preliminary work has already been done in this regard, including by Susan Watkins, who includes a brief section on haunting and trauma in her 2020 study *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction*. Watkins points out that the story of an apocalypse could be analyzed as “the ultimate traumatic narrative,” but doing so “might mean that we get stuck in an endlessly repeated cycle that can only refer nostalgically back to the pre-apocalyptic past” (104). Works of fiction such as those by Mandel and Nawaz represent catastrophe by referring to the apocalyptic present and the “pre-apocalyptic past” and, at the same time, by looking forward to the future and thus breaking out of that potentially destructive cycle. Their novels focus on trauma and ethics, making innovative intertextual use of literary works as a collective force and as a way of asking and trying to answer ethical questions during imagined pandemic and post-pandemic eras. These works suggest that the trauma of catastrophe is lessened when personal experiences are depicted in relation to the experiences of others, through words that are written, spoken, or sung, and that are experienced collectively.

As Marlene Goldman points out in her foundational study *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction*, the roots of apocalyptic thinking lie in the Christian bible. As it appears in the Revelation of St. John, apocalypse is the revelation of a purposeful end to the world as we know it through a series of plagues, floods, earthquakes, fires, and other catastrophic events, with the people chosen by God invited into “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21.1). However, in contemporary usage, the word *apocalypse* is applied to any event that kills a large number of humans, including not only pandemics but also nuclear and other global wars, environmental devastation, and technology gone awry.<sup>1</sup> Maximilian Feldner argues that features of the literary genre include “the occurrence of an apocalyptic event, the depiction of post-collapse society, and a narrative structure that connects and interlinks the pre-apocalyptic past with the postapocalyptic present” (167). Adding to and enriching this temporal definition, Watkins includes in her list of the shared characteristics of apocalyptic fiction by women writers an emphasis on “the value and preservation (broadly defined) of literate culture” as well as an exploration of “the destructive complicity [of] patriarchal and colonial enterprises” (“Future Shock” 120, 119). Goldman makes a related argument about Canadian apocalyptic fiction and its focus on

“the testimony of apocalypse’s traumatized victims” (18): “by graphically depicting the violence directed at women, children, minorities, and nature itself, the texts invite readers to consider the impact of apocalypse from the ‘different perspective’ of the victimized non-elect” (16). She concludes that such texts help to identify “political and social forces” at work in the contemporary world (17).

*Station Eleven* and *Songs for the End of the World* exemplify Goldman’s understanding of fiction that offers testimony about apocalyptic trauma, but as Watkins predicts these books focus on testifying through the creation and performance of written works, both real and imagined within the worlds of the novels. Nawaz imagines the first five months of a pandemic in which a song, two books of philosophy, and a novel play important roles in humans’ perceptions of their changing world and relationships, as well as in the ethical parameters of how they approach one another. Mandel envisions a post-pandemic, post-apocalyptic North America that is terrifying and yet hopeful in that the people who survive retain and revive a fascinating mix of popular- and high-culture texts, both historical and future-imaginary, including plays, comics, television shows, newspaper interviews, and poetry, as essential parts of their collective lives; at the same time, reversion to a conventionally apocalyptic narrative helps to forge an oppressive alternative community. Thus, in these novels, the ethical potential of literature for bringing people together and thereby lessening trauma is critiqued as well as celebrated.

Community is integral to the structure of Mandel’s novel, as is evident in its narrative sections and timelines. *Station Eleven* is set primarily during a virulent global pandemic caused by the “Georgia flu” (17), which kills almost everyone worldwide, and twenty years later, but there are also forays into the years before the flu and the intervening years since.<sup>2</sup> As Feldner suggests, this textual interchange between previous events and current experiences is typical of post-apocalyptic novels and allows the imagined world of the future to comment on the present and past.<sup>3</sup> In *Station Eleven*, the repeated temporal exchange also allows for a successive focalization on five major characters, who interact in sometimes essential and sometimes tangential ways. At the core is actor Arthur Leander, who dies in the first pages of the novel during a performance of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* on a Toronto stage on the day that the flu reaches North America. The other main characters are all connected to him: Miranda Carroll, his former wife; Clark Thompson, his best friend from university; Jeevan Chaudhary, the paparazzo turned

paramedic-in-training who tries to save him; and Kirsten Raymonde, the child actor with him on stage when he collapses. The interrupted and resumed stories of these characters epitomize a loose community around which the novel is structured.

Traumatic events are not described in detail in Mandel's novel, but apocalyptic trauma permeates the histories of all of the surviving characters, perhaps especially those of two children: Kirsten, and Arthur's son, Tyler, a non-focalizing but significant character.<sup>4</sup> Both suffer grievously from the deaths of others as a result of the flu or the social collapse following it. The inability of Kirsten to remember anything from the first year after the pandemic, including how she got a jagged scar on her cheek (267), is a classic expression of trauma: what happens is "so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes . . . , and so it falls out of our conscious memory" (Luckhurst, "Mixing Memory" 499). As for Tyler, "perhaps he'd had the misfortune of remembering everything" (Mandel 304). Also evident in the novel are contemporary notions of *apocalypse*: the word appears in newscasts in the early days of the flu (243), a character in Year Twenty dates the publication of an issue of a magazine to two weeks before "the apocalypse" (201), and multiple survivors compare their experiences with those in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic movies and books (21, 193, 244, 248, 256). However, because *Station Eleven* focuses only on the beginning of the global illness and then skips ahead fifteen to twenty years, there is not as much emphasis as in many post-apocalyptic novels and films on what Mandel's narrator calls the "first unspeakable years" (37), when people "had fought off ferals, buried their neighbours, . . . survived against unspeakable odds" (48).<sup>5</sup> As Feldner argues in "'Survival Is Insufficient': The Postapocalyptic Imagination of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*," her novel "sketches a post-apocalyptic world in which its inhabitants are familiar with struggle and violence but are not determined" by them (175). Most survivors are inspired instead by an impulse to re-establish community through enacting, remembering, and contributing to literary culture.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, the death of such culture, presented both literally and figuratively through Arthur's death during the performance of *King Lear*, appears to be quick and inevitable. However, despite the devastation of the subsequent epidemic, literary culture does not disappear. Instead, the second section of *Station Eleven* is titled "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and its first lines tell readers that twenty years after the col-

lapse Shakespeare's plays are still being produced or, rather, are being performed again. At age twenty-seven, Kirsten is the lead female actor in a "Travelling Symphony" and drama company that rehearses *King Lear* and then *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for upcoming performances.<sup>7</sup> The company stages plays in the few remaining communities below and between the Great Lakes in what used to be Michigan, reaching these outposts in caravans of pickup-truck bodies pulled by horses, in an echo of touring theatre companies in early Renaissance England.

Considering the relatively recent publication of *Station Eleven*, a surprising number of critical analyses examine its intertextual use of Shakespeare's plays. Some studies laud how these works provide hope and beauty for pandemic survivors. Feldner, for example, argues that *Station Eleven* "examines the possibility and necessity of cultural expression in a postapocalyptic setting, demonstrating the importance and value of art and memory even in strained circumstances" (166). Andrew Tate suggests even more pointedly that the novel's artistic works "are emblematic of a refusal to capitulate to despair or aggressive rejection of community" and instead suggest the possibility for "an ethical, cooperative version of society" (135, 137). This perspective seems to be validated by several passages in the novel. Readers learn that the touring company presents Shakespeare's plays because they are preferred by audiences for two apparent reasons. One is the similarity between this post-pandemic world and that of Shakespeare, who is described as "defined" by a plague that "closed the theatres again and again, death flickering over the landscape" (308, 57). The other is simply, as Kirsten's friend Dieter states, that "People want what was best about the world" (38). Philip Smith reminds readers in his analysis of *Station Eleven* that we should be "cautious in embracing this theory" because Shakespeare cannot be understood "outside of time and place" (298).<sup>8</sup> In addition, Smith argues, the use of historical literary works in this way suggests a "colonial agenda in that the essentialist Shakespeare has historically been mobilized as affirmation of British cultural and moral superiority in the wake of English imperial expansion" (298). His plays thus can be and have been critiqued for their dubious potential to bring civility, and with it the spectre of neocolonialism, to the far-flung communities within *Station Eleven*.

The extensive use of Shakespeare by the Travelling Symphony is in fact criticized *within* Mandel's novel.<sup>9</sup> One of the group's members hates Shakespeare's plays and argues both that what happened during his time

cannot be compared to what is happening now and that contemporary playwrights need to be encouraged to write about this new, changed world (288). This criticism suggests that the significance of dramatic works might lie not in the specific texts that the troupe presents but in how performances of familiar works generate collective experience. Members of the travelling company understand that literature and performance can be transformative and can build community. They revel in “camaraderie” despite “petty jealousies” and “simmering resentments,” including about some of their own ethical failings (47).<sup>10</sup> Although the troupe’s members sometimes have had to kill others to survive, characters such as Kirsten take an ethical stance toward these deaths, commemorating them by writing them permanently on their bodies in the form of tattoos of the weapons used in the deaths: in Kirsten’s case, a knife. This ethical approach to community extends to audience members. Members of the troupe are aware that what they are doing might be “difficult and dangerous,” but they believe it to be “noble” (119) because they are attempting to enrich lives, create community, and in the process mitigate the trauma that everyone has experienced. As the narrator notes, they may have lost “almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty. Twilight in the altered world, a performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in a parking lot” (57). Audience members have tears in their eyes at experiencing something outside “the tasks of survival” (59, 151). The focus in these passages is on the collective feeling engendered not just among the actors but also between actors and audience members, even when the latter, as in the passage above, are members of a “doomsday cult” (62).

The cult represents another example in the novel of community formed around a text, in this case the Book of Revelation.<sup>11</sup> Eschatology is a contrastingly destructive force in *Station Eleven* and a vector for unethical behaviour and continuing trauma when it is adopted by a man who calls himself a prophet (reminiscent of St. John) and who uses biblical words to oppress others in his recreation of a biblical patriarchal society. Since he survived the apocalypse, he believes that he must be one of the elect, and thus that he has a right to rule over others and take more than his share of scarce resources, including invading other communities and claiming multiple girls as his “brides.” Near the end of the novel, his identity is revealed: he is Tyler Leander. As a child survivor of the pandemic, he tried to diminish his own trauma by reading aloud passages about plagues from the Book of Revelation (18.8) to a



plane containing the bodies of people who were not allowed to disembark because some were infected with the flu (259-60). As an adult, he exerts power over others with “a combination of charisma, violence, and cherry-picked verses from the Book of Revelation” (280). Feldner argues that the character of the prophet suggests the potential “destructiveness of religious thoughts and actions” (172). More pointedly, the prophet’s way of thinking is presented in the novel as “contagious” (261), and his tyrannical and violent belief system is critiqued for its advocacy of individual rather than collective rule and of survival at all costs. As Kirsten says, “If you are the light, if your enemies are darkness, then there’s . . . nothing you can’t survive, because there’s nothing that you will not do” (139). One powerful person’s drive toward survival during times of crisis thus is presented as life threatening for other individuals and the health of other communities.

A contrasting notion of survival is emphasized through a work of popular culture that plays just as significant a role in *Station Eleven* as Shakespeare and the Christian bible. A line from an episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*, “*Because survival is insufficient*,” is stencilled on the travelling troupe’s lead caravan and tattooed in shortened form on Kirsten’s arm (58, 119).<sup>12</sup> The actors’ and musicians’ sense of community is enlarged not just by their mutual adoption of this motto, which authorizes the arduous and sometimes hazardous artistic work they have undertaken, but also through their continuing discussions about whether these words, spoken by a character who advocates a shortened life rather than a limited one, are banal or profound (119-20). Repeated references to this maxim also deliberately challenge post-apocalyptic novels and movies that posit humans after a world-changing event as traumatized beings focused only on individual survival, with Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* a trenchant example. In that 2006 novel, the main reference to literary works is to a memory of “the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water” (157-58), and magazines are used only to start a fire (175). In Mandel’s more recent apocalyptic road novel, in contrast, literary works from all points on the cultural continuum abound, and several characters collect intact literary works, sometimes establishing entire libraries.

Unlike the texts discussed above, some of these works are fictive — created by Mandel herself — and thus add another layer of imaginative textuality to *Station Eleven*. They include three types of popular works imagined as originating before the pandemic: the comic-book series

*Dr. Eleven*, an unauthorized publication of letters by Arthur published as *Dear V.*, and fan magazines collected by Kirsten. Each of these categories of literature, especially the comic series, generates community in unexpected ways.

The crucial importance of *Dr. Eleven* is evident in the fact that one of its two extant numbers, “Station Eleven,” is the title of Mandel’s novel. Descriptions of the process of creating the series, as well as passages from it, are interspersed as chapters throughout *Station Eleven*. The comic’s creator, Arthur’s ex-wife Miranda, considers it a graphic novel and a work of artistic expression; two chapters have survived the pandemic, even though she has not, because she had them printed in a limited run on archival paper. They have enduring significance in the post-apocalyptic world through Kirsten, who was given one set as a child by Arthur, has memorized their stories, and talks to members of the troupe about them (42). Daniel King argues in his study of “comics *künstlerroman*” that, for the Travelling Symphony, the comics function similarly to Shakespeare’s plays, “forming a social core that allows the group a critical cohesion” (18).<sup>13</sup> Discussion of the comics by the Symphony members is limited to a few passages and is thus much less significant for a sense of community than that of other intertexts, but what happens in the series is clearly meant to parallel the despair and longing evident throughout Mandel’s novel.

Miranda’s graphic narrative tells the story of Dr. Eleven, who is stranded in the far future in his own post-apocalyptic world, a malfunctioning artificial planet called Station Eleven. The retrospective chapter in which Miranda and Arthur’s marriage comes to an end concludes in a room whose walls are covered with drawings and story outlines; thus, the last line of the chapter, “Station Eleven is all around them” (107), refers not only to the paper on the walls but also to the sense of being trapped in an untenable situation that the comic-book setting evokes. This situation parallels that of the survivors of the pandemic thirty years later, as indicated by a sentence from the comic that is revised and repeated: “*I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth*” (42, 105, 214). King notes that, just as Dr. Eleven “finds himself stranded on a damaged and shrunken world,” so too the novel’s survivors “find their world similarly irreparably shrunken . . . and damaged” (19). They, too, long to be back in a past with electricity and airplanes and the internet and, more importantly, when their communities were intact and life was focused on more than survival.

*Dr. Eleven* elicits a life-saving form of community for Kirsten because Tyler was also given the same two numbers of the comic, which he read obsessively in the first weeks of the pandemic before he turned to the Book of Revelation. At the denouement of *Station Eleven*, Kirsten, hunted by Tyler and his men, temporarily disarms him and makes an important ally of one of his followers when she quotes from the series: “We dream of sunlight. . . . We long only for the world we were born into” (302). Ultimately, Kirsten’s vision of light and collaboration wins over Tyler’s vision of darkness and exploitation, since he is killed and she survives to rejoin other members of the Travelling Symphony. Standing over his body, Kirsten presses into his hand not his dog-eared New Testament but instead a page from his tattered copy of *Dr. Eleven* (304), emphasizing the fellow feeling that this narrative engenders, despite their enmity.

Another unexpectedly significant fictive intertextual category is celebrity gossip and, although some of its examples come from before the collapse, this genre also marks the beginning of post-pandemic writing. As Kirsten searches in abandoned houses for materials related to Arthur, including *Dear V.* and fan magazines, her friend August tells her that, “In an alternate universe, . . . you might’ve been in the tabloid pictures” (200).<sup>14</sup> As the lead actress in the troupe, she is undeniably a celebrity in this post-pandemic universe, and for this reason she is interviewed in Year Fifteen by the editor of a newspaper in a community through which she travels. The recently launched publication contains not only articles of practical use to townspeople but also excerpts from a library of books and periodicals from before the collapse collected by the editor. Carmen Méndez-García criticizes the fact that, echoing the performances of Shakespeare’s plays, canonical texts — including poems by Emily Dickinson and excerpts from a biography of Abraham Lincoln — are republished in the newspaper (123). However, this criticism fails to acknowledge that a major component of the publication is newly created “oral history” (Mandel 108), including the extensive interview with Kirsten. As with celebrities in our time, she is asked to talk not just about her art but also about her traumatic past, and to reflect on her present, including the communities through which she travels.<sup>15</sup>

The inclusion of her interview as seven chapters interspersed throughout the novel contradicts statements by critics such as King, who argues that “The only spark of creativity we see in the ‘new’ world of Mandel’s novel is an ill-fated attempt by one musician to write a new

play . . . which never gets past the first page” (19).<sup>16</sup> In addition to the newspaper, literary creativity *is* evident in *Station Eleven* both during and after the pandemic. In another community of two that Jeevan creates with his brother in a high-rise apartment during the first weeks of the outbreak, Frank Chaudhary continues to ghost-write a memoir that he has been contracted to produce, even though its subject is likely dead.<sup>17</sup> Twenty years later, the clarinetist of the Travelling Symphony announces that she wants to write a new play, “something modern, something that addressed this age in which they had somehow landed,” because “Survival might be insufficient” but “so was Shakespeare” (288). As King notes, her play remains a fragment, even briefly suspected to be a suicide note after she is kidnapped by the prophet (Mandel 140, 289). But she is not the only writer in the group. When August and Kirsten are separated from the others as a result of the prophet’s predations, August, who collects pre-collapse books of poetry and writes his own verse, comforts Kirsten with a newly composed poem that ends, “*If your soul left this earth I would follow and find you / Silent, my starship suspended in night*” (141). His writing invokes their mutual interest in pre-existing futuristic narratives such as *Star Trek* and *Dr. Eleven* and allows them to establish yet another small, supportive community.

Other texts help to link post-pandemic communities to one another. The newspapers containing Kirsten’s interview are read avidly and passed from hand to hand, and a trader brings three issues to a “Museum of Civilization” in an abandoned airport, now home to a village of survivors.<sup>18</sup> Here Arthur’s former friend Clark displays artifacts from the lost world — laptops, cellphones, credit cards, stiletto heels — including textual artifacts such as the issue of the *New York Times* containing Arthur’s obituary. And now the museum also displays this post-collapse newspaper. On the last pages, Clark thinks that, “If there are again . . . symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain?” (332). Kirsten has also left one of her two issues of *Dr. Eleven* with Clark so that it will survive even if she does not. Feldner argues that Mandel’s novel “demonstrates that our cultural activities lie at the core of what makes us human, even in the restricted and hardened circumstances of a postapocalyptic setting” (175). I argue, further, that *Station Eleven* suggests that literary works, both from the former “real” world and from the newly imagined one, are essential for creating community and ensuring not just collective survival but also collective enrichment.

Community is also essential to *Songs for the End of the World*. Nawaz's novel created a sensation when it was released in the spring-summer of 2020 because it is set during its year of publication and predicts a global pandemic occurring at the same time as the real pandemic of 2019-22. The book was released in paper form in August 2020, as had been planned, but the outbreak of COVID-19 led to its early release in electronic form that April. A "Publisher's Note" and an interview with Nawaz printed in the book indicate that the story was first drafted in 2013 (the year before publication of *Station Eleven*) and was revised for publication between then and 2019. Since Nawaz's novel is so new, as of the writing of this essay, there is very little critical analysis of it, except in reviews and interviews.

Although Nawaz implies that she was not influenced by *Station Eleven*, comparisons and contrasts between the two novels can be productive, not just because of their focus on fictional pandemics but also because of their similarities in narrative structure and reliance on intertexts. Like Mandel's novel, *Songs for the End of the World* focuses on a suite of interrelated characters, each of whose experiences forms one of the titular songs told during the time of ARAMIS, "Acute Respiratory and Muscular Inflammatory Syndrome" (20), a fictive deadly coronavirus believed to have originated in China. Community and relationship are presented as essential to the characters' survival. When the pandemic is just beginning to unfold, one of the protagonists, Sarah Bailey, tells her brother, Elliot Howe, "our lives have a way of getting bound up with those of the people we've known. Like heavenly bodies caught in one another's orbit" (16). Toward the end of the novel, Elliot remembers these words and realizes that, although initially he found them "horrifying," now he finds them a "comfort" (375). Part of that comfort is that relationships with others have helped him cope with the deaths of friends and the pandemic-induced conflict he has witnessed as a police officer. The focus of this novel is thus on interdependence, a concept Raffaella Baccolini pointed to in a presentation in 2021 to the international conference *Living in the End Times: Utopian and Dystopian Representations of Pandemics in Fiction, Film and Culture*. She argued that "fragmented, multiple points of view" in recent critical dystopias "stress the interconnection of characters" and are "generative of collective agency, transformation, and awareness." This narrative multiplicity is evident in *Songs for the End of the World*, an apocalyptic narrative that exhibits crossovers with the genre of critical dystopia.<sup>19</sup>

Like *Station Eleven*, Nawaz's novel is about the ethics of relationship, focusing on familial bonds and societal connections, in particular through the philosophy department of a fictional university in Massachusetts.<sup>20</sup> As well as Elliot and Sarah, whose parents teach at the university, characters focalized in successive chapters include Owen Grant, a novelist whose wife was a colleague of their parents; Keelan Gibbs, a former head of their philosophy department; Stu Jenkins, who studied there, and his wife, Emma Aslet; and Edith Fraser (later known by her birth name, Xiaolan), a current student. As with *Station Eleven* and other apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic texts, Nawaz's novel features an interchange between past and present, allowing for a gradual revelation of connections among the main characters and the introduction of secondary characters whose complex relationships are diagrammed on the inside covers. However, unlike Mandel's novel, the timeline of *Songs for the End of the World* ends in December 2020, just five months into the ongoing fictive pandemic. As the months progress, the interrelated trauma suffered by the characters is outlined: one is branded "patient zero" in the American outbreak and is relentlessly hounded online; others are forced to isolate and/or to watch and hold others as they die; still others contract the coronavirus themselves, become ill, and die.

*Songs for the End of the World* imagines a contemporary world in which people look to written, spoken, and sung words to develop a sense of community to manage this trauma. Unlike in Mandel's novel, however, there are only fleeting references to the roles of "real" films such as *Belle de Jour* (46), music such as Leonard Cohen's song "Hallelujah" (383) and Elliot Smith's posthumous album *From a Basement on the Hill* (349),<sup>21</sup> and novels by Virginia Woolf and André Gide (159). Instead, the novel's significant intertexts are those imagined as part of the narrative, all of which deal in a self-reflexive way with surviving a pandemic or other apocalyptic event. As trauma theorist Joshua Pederson argues, such texts might be embraced because "thinking or writing about one trauma might allow . . . victims of other calamities to speak out about their own experiences" (106). They might also allow survivors to see their hardships and dangers as shared rather than experienced alone.

Because *Songs for the End of the World* is set before major social collapse has occurred, the characters are shown interacting in person and at the same time trying to build community through contemporary technologies of communication. They telephone, text, and email one another; follow each other on social media; connect through internet

chat rooms; are interviewed for television; and watch others being interviewed. They also use older forms of communication: they keep diaries, write and receive letters, and read newspapers. A number of these private and public texts are embedded in the narrative, set off through differences in typeface and forming their own contributions to the fragmented, multivocal narration. However, the written communications that take on the most significance during the pandemic are a published novel, two philosophical treatises, and a song, which are described but for the most part not presented to readers. Although each is seized on as a way to survive both individually and collectively, each also brings with it specific ethical questions — not surprising, since their authors are all connected to a philosophy department. Perhaps significantly, as with Miranda in *Station Eleven*, most of the authors of these works do not themselves survive the pandemic.

In the first chapter of *Songs for the End of the World*, with Elliot in quarantine after direct contact with the virus, he recognizes “the value of having books on hand” (13). When he looks online, though, he finds that, “no matter which category he browsed,” the site suggests Owen’s novel *How to Avoid the Plague* (13). While this convergence might be interpreted as an indication of the formation of an online reading community, it is in fact a marketing strategy: the manager and employees of the publishing house want to increase sales of the book by cashing in on fears created by the pandemic. They even sell (and give to purchasers of the book) masks and gloves with the name of the novel emblazoned on them (146), and they put pressure on Owen to talk to the media about his eerily prescient novel.

The second chapter in Nawaz’s book, which documents Owen’s writing process eleven years earlier, raises additional ethical questions about both the book and its author. Stuck in a creative quagmire, engaged in yet another extramarital affair, Owen decides that what he needs is a “catastrophe” to unsettle his characters (44). His “imagined disaster in the near future” (49) is inspired by a crisis in his marriage about whether to conceive a child: his wife, who does not know about his serial infidelity, wants one, whereas he is vehemently opposed. The images that Owen conjures up when he thinks about having children are apocalyptic: “Children were like a plague upon the Earth, eating up everybody’s time and freedom” (49), and parenthood for him would be like “nuclear fallout” (51). These feelings inspire him in an unnerving way: he decides that the subject of his novel will be “[m]illions of kids dying in a pan-

demic” (51), with the protagonist a science teacher who has to figure out how to survive. The ethics of Owen and his book are thus implicitly questioned because of how they piggyback on personal betrayals and deny any hope for community building.

Nawaz has said that she was intrigued by the idea of putting an author-character in the “meta situation” of having his pandemic novel interpreted as prophetic of a subsequent outbreak (*Literary Café*), the situation that she herself occupies with COVID-19.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, descriptions of the mechanics of writing in *Songs for the End of the World* are triply self-reflective in that they outline actions by Owen, his main character, and Nawaz herself: researching sites such as the Centers for Disease Control, National Institutes of Health, and World Health Organization (*Songs* 48, 121; “Interview” 424-25). As the narrator notes of Owen, “If the novel was going to be as gripping and frightening as he imagined it, he had to get the details right about the risks of contagion and the safest way to avoid infection during a global pandemic” (*Songs* 48). The verisimilitude of this “meta situation” eventually gives his readers a false sense that Owen knows what pandemics are all about and thus a misleading idea that his words can help them to manage trauma and build community during ARAMIS.

The ethical void in Owen’s narrative is evident in its proposed adaptation by an interactive game company. At the start of the pandemic, before the danger of the disease is understood, Owen and members of the game studio meet to figure out how a player might win. Although in the book “[e]verybody dies,” the game designers want to give players “the illusion of control,” to allow them “to feel like their choices are meaningful, even if they’re not” (120). Owen tells them with confidence that the best way to survive a plague is to avoid community, to “go off somewhere away from other people” (120). However, the young developers want the macabre goal to be saving as many children as possible, with points taken off for inhumane or violent behaviour (122, 132). That means, of course, that the game will involve guns, presaging the burgeoning sales of guns during the impending ARAMIS outbreak (208-09) and, in the United States, during the real COVID-19 pandemic (*Morrow*). The ethics of adapting Owen’s novel in this way are critiqued within Nawaz’s book when one of the developers — the only woman — stands up and, with a “glare of loathing,” stalks out of the room (122). Rather than increasing community, Owen’s novel has been reimaged as just



another way for people to sequester themselves as they play at killing one another.<sup>23</sup>

As the pandemic progresses in *Songs for the End of the World*, Owen is the target of attempts ostensibly to turn his novel into a force for survival through widely publicized media interventions but in fact with the dubious goal of increasing sales of the novel. Though Owen has determined to isolate himself to ensure his own survival and thus avoids participating in public events, Sarah, an employee of the publishing house, convinces him to provide Q&A's on surviving a pandemic, contribute to video conference interviews with media outlets, and write a blog, all from the safety and seclusion of his apartment. Owen is in high demand as an interviewee because, during this era of so-called truthiness, fake news, and alternative facts, he is perceived to be just as qualified as — and perhaps more than — a scientific researcher in providing pandemic advice.<sup>24</sup> In a chilling echo of *Station Eleven*, he is “treated like a prophet” (171) by media outlets looking for “experts unbesmirched by the haughtiness of a white lab coat” (291-92). His personal ethical failings, as well as the questionable origins and outlines of his narrative, suggest that, like Tyler, Owen is a false prophet. Even within the novel, an observer calls him a “charlatan . . . peddling so-called pandemic expertise” (292), and Owen himself understands that he cannot “actually save anybody” (171). The unwarranted esteem in which his commentary is held indicates that attempts to use popular literary works as guides to prevent individual trauma and encourage collective action during a pandemic are doomed; writers of fiction such as Owen do not, in fact, have the expertise of those who wear lab coats, and they are so morally compromised and focused on their own existence that their works cannot inspire beneficial communal activities.

Other written works that become important during the coronavirus crisis in Nawaz's novel have explicitly ethical dimensions. *Ethics for End Times* and *The Survivalist's Code* are two philosophy texts previously published by Keelan, a professor of ethics at Lansdowne University. Once Owen drops out of contact,<sup>25</sup> these books render Keelan the interviewee of choice. They were “bestsellers compared to any average philosophy textbook,” and he understands that from a cynical perspective, sales are now “bound to get a bump with the current crisis and this spate of interviews” (310). Keelan is also aware that, “When philosophers are on the evening news, you can be sure society is in crisis” (302). In spite of this knowledge, he sometimes provides interview answers that

he knows to be sensationalist (290); his awareness of what he is doing implicitly challenges his own fitness as an expert.

Because of the ethical focus of his analysis, however, which asks key moral questions about the social and political world during such times, there is at least a possibility that it will do some collective good. In his interviews, Keelan puts forward both utilitarian and contractualist theories of the ethics of human relationships: he refers directly to John Stuart Mill, a proponent of utilitarianism, which advocates acting in a way that benefits the greatest number of people, and then he asks the contractualist question “what are our responsibilities to one another?” (234, 235).<sup>26</sup> Other important contemporary queries that he poses include whether governments should “uphold the principles of free speech, or censor scapegoating and false science that could lead to vigilantism and further disease transmission” (234). Keelan also refers to studies showing that, despite popular belief to the contrary, in times of crisis most people work for the common good, and those to be feared are elites who demand unwarranted authority “in the name of preventing chaos” (235). Even these statements do not go unchallenged, though; Elliot’s mother comments critically on them, noting that half of Keelan’s colleagues are “appalled” by his simplification of complex ideas such as utilitarianism, and the others are “jealous” of his notoriety. She then adds, “But at least he is not a novelist,” as Owen is (245). Thus, while Keelan might also be a “charlatan,” the implication is that at least his focus is on ethical questions essential to collective rather than just individual survival.<sup>27</sup>

A final pandemic text and related set of ethical questions in Nawaz’s novel is a song by the fictional musical group Dove Suite, led by Stu and Emma, who are expecting their first child. The band’s work has significance before the crisis for characters such as Edith, as she meditates on a line from a Dove Suite song about an isolated woman (58). Shortly thereafter, she is falsely labelled “patient zero” in North America, leading to internet vitriol directed at her as well as to the unwarranted persecution of Asian people across the continent. ARAMIS Girl, as she is called in the media, is pitied by members of Dove Suite (211). But ironically, at the instigation of Emma, the band engages in a destructive super-spreader event, a misguided benefit concert in Vancouver to mobilize community support for ARAMIS relief. During the concert, eight people die in a stampede, and the virus is spread into Canada. When Stu and Emma contract ARAMIS, he dies, and she awakens from a coma to discover that her baby girl has been delivered by C-section.

Initially immobilized by grief and guilt, she is unable to continue to produce her art.

One of her songs, though, eventually becomes a way for Emma and many other pandemic survivors to express their grief and begin the process of healing. Stu has been a primary lyricist for the band, previously writing songs such as “Empty Grave,” about trying to keep others alive (114). Emma is convinced by the two remaining bandmates, and by her need to express herself artistically in order to heal, to work with them to release a new single called “Song for the End of the World” (383).<sup>28</sup> The song might be one of the tracks recorded but not mixed before Stu’s death (348) but more likely is written by Emma, who steps into her apartment’s recording studio a month after her husband’s death with her baby in a carrier on her chest and “a melody already at work inside her heart” (351). The song is significant because of its near repetition in the title of Nawaz’s novel, in which the pluralization of the noun *song* suggests that there are multiple songs or stories to be told. Within the novel, Dove Suite’s musical work takes on collective force when it becomes the “anthem” for this pandemic generation, topping radio charts and being the most streamed track of the year. A commentator notes that, during times of intense suffering, humans as a group “look to art to show us how we can survive the pain” (383). “Song for the End of the World” is performed at funerals of those who die of ARAMIS and — in a new form of bodily textualization and narrativization — is tattooed on survivors. Readers have already learned about the tattoo that Emma acquired while she was pregnant to remind herself that she will continue to be an artist as well as a mother (222). Tattoos in Nawaz’s novel bring together the impetuses for the two types of tattoo in *Station Eleven*: to commemorate death and to express desire not just to survive but also to move forward. As the band members note, “If we’ve learned anything over the past year, it’s that sometimes a voice in the darkness can reach out and save you from feeling alone” (384). Thus, it is a song, rather than a novel or even philosophical studies of human behaviour during crises, that is the most ethically responsible text in managing individual trauma by relating it to the collective.

In Nawaz’s novel, textual artifacts provide sometimes questionable advice on how to live through a potentially apocalyptic trauma; ask and answer ethical questions about human behaviour during times of crisis; and provide “a voice in the darkness” that allows people to understand, as Elliot eventually does, that we cannot isolate ourselves emotionally

from others if we wish to survive. The novel's primary narrative ends with his thought that "what would save them" was evident "in every attempt to repair, cooperate, persevere. Communicate. Connect," followed by his comment, "Let's try" (417). But his ideas and remarks do not conclude *Songs for the End of the World*. Instead, the last two pages transcribe two different fictional intertexts that focus on human-to-human links. The first is a blog post that Sarah writes on Owen's behalf after his death from ARAMIS, ironically caused by his growing connection to her; the post acknowledges that "all we really have is each other" (418). The second is an excerpt from "A Song for the End of the World," in part about how human extinction might allow the survival of the rest of the planet's creatures and in part about human love. Although the lyrics note that this might be "*The very last great extinction*," they also proclaim that this is a song "*For all the lovers / Still to grieve*" (419). Readers of the novel can only imagine the contexts: for the blog post, a computer screen on which the post would be read; for the song, the sounds of the voice and accompanying music that would be vital to its emotional impact. In both cases, though, the emphasis is on how a community is created, either virtually or as people grieve together.

In her talk at a conference in 2021 on representations of pandemics in fiction and film, Elizabeth Outka discussed the effect of the influenza pandemic of 1918 on literary culture. She concluded by arguing that writers and critics need to understand what happens in the world as a result of pandemics in order "to write better stories, to envision a different way to meet the next outbreak lurching towards us all."<sup>29</sup> Nawaz has similarly claimed that she wanted to create a pandemic novel that challenges narratives in which "there's chaos, and society breaks down, and it's everyone for themselves. . . . We have inherited all of these ideas from Hollywood and dystopian fiction about how people will behave, and what kind of model does this give us in a real crisis?" ("*Songs*" 3). Her novel tries to emphasize, in contrast, that "the shared experience of living through a disaster can bring us closer" (3). As the description of Owen's experience makes clear, while novels such as Nawaz's and Mandel's cannot tell us how to survive a pandemic like COVID-19, they can gesture toward how we might mitigate the trauma by continually framing individual experiences in relation to those of others. Their books can be included among those that Roger Luckhurst identifies in *The Trauma Question* that "attempt to find a model of trauma that acknowledges yet seeks to *work through* the traumatic past, premising

communality not on preserving trauma but on transforming its legacy” (213). This transformation, through written works that connect the individual to the collective, is at the heart of novels by Mandel and Nawaz.

In the varied assemblage of early twenty-first century novels by Canadian women writers that focus on pandemics, *Station Eleven* and *Songs for the End of the World* stand out for their emphasis on the effects of literary and cultural works on human interactions during times of crisis. Some of those influences are ethically questionable, such as the use of the Book of Revelation to reinstate a violent and oppressive patriarchal community and the role of interactive video games in promoting gun culture. For the most part, though, Mandel’s novel presents works of literary culture as avenues to overcome the trauma of an apocalyptic, world-changing event and divert the focus from individual survivalism, while Nawaz’s novel posits such works as ways to understand the ethics of individual and collective human behaviour during a time of crisis. Both novels shine light on their own creation as fictions that not only provide witness to traumatic experiences but also emphasize human connectedness, hope, and generosity during apocalyptic times.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Non-realistic plagues such as those that create zombies can be placed in the category of *pandemics*. Andrew Tate offers a full discussion of the various events and developments that can be considered apocalyptic (14, 18).

<sup>2</sup> The flu is described using an image from another apocalyptic situation as having “exploded like a neutron bomb over the surface of the earth” (37).

<sup>3</sup> Carol T. Christ argues that the “contrapuntal narrative structure” of post-apocalyptic novels provides a “narrative richness” not otherwise possible in a ruined imagined future (152). Meanwhile, R.B. Gill argues that the “alternative worlds” of speculative fiction often “comment on this world — negatively to satirize its shortcomings, or positively to provide a model for emulation” (81).

<sup>4</sup> Miranda’s ultimate trauma is her death from the Georgia flu, whereas Jeevan’s is the suicide of his brother in its aftermath, and Clark’s is the presumed death of his lover. The traumatic stories of a number of minor characters are briefly outlined through their interviews with a newspaper editor in Year Fifteen (265-66).

<sup>5</sup> Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) is an example of a novel that verbalizes such “unspeakable years.” So, too, do Atwood’s trilogy and to a certain extent the novels by Dimaline and Lai. Feldner begins his essay by listing a number of other recent texts of this type, including those produced for film and television (165-66).

<sup>6</sup> I define the term *literary culture* as a body of texts written and then read individually by multiple members of a society, or experienced collectively when performed by others, which taken together have broad significance for that particular societal group. The term

encompasses a variety of texts, including not only novels but also plays, comics, songs, and newspaper articles.

<sup>7</sup> *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* are also mentioned as plays that the troupe performs.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Maurer echoes this discussion by pointing out that, because the productions in *Station Eleven* are based upon “twenty-first century understandings of Shakespeare” and “grounded in the material realities of [the] post-apocalyptic world,” they cannot “transcend cultural, historical and temporal limitations” (33). See also Conaway, Méndez-García, West, and Watkins, who comments that in *Station Eleven* Shakespeare’s plays are “adaptable, provisional and demotic (as they arguably were at time of first performance)” (*Contemporary* 184).

<sup>9</sup> Conaway’s 2021 essay, which I discovered in the late stages of revising this essay for publication, points to several of the novel’s “less than stellar endorsements of Shakespeare” (7). However, Conaway also argues for “the therapeutic value of culture” in Mandel’s novel, including works of popular culture as well as Shakespearean plays (7).

<sup>10</sup> One is Kirsten’s sexual infidelity (45), which appears as a faint echo of the repeated ethical failings of Arthur in the form of his own serial adulteries.

<sup>11</sup> West suggests that such tropes might be “ clichéd ” but argues that this narrative line indicates that societal collapse can be “welcomed as the arrival of the Rapture” (17-18).

<sup>12</sup> The line is from episode 122, “Survival Instinct,” which aired in September 1999. Maurer makes intriguing linkages between *Station Eleven* and *Star Trek: Voyager* by comparing their references to Shakespeare.

<sup>13</sup> King adds that because of “their inherent visual component the troupe can never fully do away with the comics themselves” (18).

<sup>14</sup> Some of the articles and photos that she collects are by Jeevan, and one chapter of Mandel’s novel consists entirely of excerpts from *Dear V*.

<sup>15</sup> Kirsten refuses to talk about the two knife tattoos on her wrist (132); she understands the permanence of written records, and she does not want to be remembered only for the deaths that they commemorate (268).

<sup>16</sup> This omission is repeated by Méndez-García, who states unequivocally that in *Station Eleven*, “nobody actually creates art” (116).

<sup>17</sup> Frank, who uses a wheelchair, decides several months into the pandemic to commit suicide, telling Jeevan, “I think there’s just survival out there. . . . I think you should go out there and try to survive” (183). Although this passage continues the novel’s meditations on survival, its traumatic and problematic representation of disability during apocalyptic times was critiqued by students in a class that I taught.

<sup>18</sup> Tyler lived in this airport as a child survivor.

<sup>19</sup> Baccolini and Tom Moylan define the term *critical dystopia* as the literary rendition of a world worse than our own that provides “ethical and political” warnings but maintains “a utopian impulse” and resists closure (1-2, 7). Dystopian and apocalyptic societies are intimately related in fiction because one often leads to the other.

<sup>20</sup> The novel puts much emphasis on children: having them (multiple times through donor sperm, the ethics of which are investigated through Elliot, a former sperm donor), adopting them (e.g., Edith, adopted from China), and trying to keep them safe.

<sup>21</sup> Mandel’s novel also references real songs: the excerpt from *Dear V* opens with an oblique reference to Cohen’s “Famous Blue Raincoat” (153), and in the early weeks of the pandemic Jeevan repeatedly sings R.E.M.’s upbeat “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)” (176).

<sup>22</sup> Although she was hailed as prescient for completing this novel just before the spread of COVID-19, Nawaz and her publishers acknowledged that the novel’s early release might be “perceived as an opportunistic marketing decision,” similar to the decisions regarding Owen’s novel (Lederman).

<sup>23</sup> This violence is paralleled by the interpersonal damage caused by Owen's affairs, which continues even after his divorce.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah is so influenced by Owen's fictional narrative that, when her young son becomes ill and vomits, she questions whether he has symptoms of the ARAMIS virus currently circulating or of the Xi-RV-5 virus that Owen invented (163).

<sup>25</sup> Owen sails a private yacht to the Bahamas with Sarah, an experienced sailor, and her son, evocatively named Noah.

<sup>26</sup> Mill's theory is outlined in *Utilitarianism*. Contractualism, as defined by T.M. Scanlon in *What We Owe to Each Other*, can be summarized as the concept that ethical actions are based upon our relationships with others and upon what we can justify to them. In the interview printed at the end of her book, Nawaz explicitly states that her novel explores the question "What do we owe to ourselves and to one another — and does that change if the other person is a family member, a friend, or a stranger?" ("Interview" 423).

<sup>27</sup> Keelan's essential integrity is confirmed when he contracts ARAMIS and dies in a hospital waiting room after trying to ensure the safety of his estranged daughter and her child.

<sup>28</sup> When it is excerpted at the end of the novel, the song is given the slightly expanded titled "A Song for the End of the World" (419).

<sup>29</sup> Outka evokes both zombie narratives and William Butler Yeats's 1919 post-Spanish flu poem "The Second Coming."

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