

The postapocalyptic strength of the Amish

Who survives when technology fails?

by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [August 2, 2017](#) issue

In Review



When the English Fall

By David Williams Algonquin Books
Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

Amid climate change, terrorism, a global refugee crisis, nuclear standoff, and democracies traveling vectors unknown, the appeal of postapocalyptic fiction is not hard to understand. “The world feels more precariously perched on the lip of the abyss than ever,” novelist Jason Heller wrote recently, “and facing those fears through fiction helps us deal with it.”

The characters on the edge of the abyss in David Williams’s debut novel wear coverings and suspenders. Set among the Amish of Lancaster County, the book explores a near future so imaginable that even those who roll their eyes at doomsaying—not to mention Amish-themed fiction—may find themselves brooding and watchful after living in its pages. Cathartic or not, postapocalyptic fiction is our culture’s handwriting on the wall. In this case, it’s in the script of an Amish farmer.

The apocalypse in *When the English Fall* arrives as a solar storm that knocks out the power grid, communications systems, and all the networks upon which so much of modern life depends. Williams’s plotline was inspired by a solar storm in 1859 known as the Carrington Event, the damage of which now seems positively quaint—it busted telegraph systems. Were such a storm to occur today, the scaffolds of advanced capitalism—including global communication, transportation networks, banking systems, and medical care—would fall like toothpicks. Along with them would fall the “English”—the Amish term for those who are not Amish. Buffered from harm by never having climbed very far up the scaffold of modernity, the Amish world would continue and become a safe place for the English to land.

The novel introduces Jacob and his family before the solar storm hits. The entries of Jacob’s journal convey the steady rhythms of his carpentry and farm work, the prayers that mark his days, the disturbingly erratic weather, and his immense and often pained love for his children. Jacob and Hannah’s prepubescent daughter, Sadie, has frightening seizures that wrack her body and that often leave her talking nonsense—except when her garbled thoughts form themselves into predictions of the future. As Sadie begins to fixate on talk of lights, darkness, and angel wings, she repeats the cryptic words, “the English fall!”

And on the night of the solar storm, the English do fall—out of a plane, when navigation instruments fail. “I could see both wings, bent back dark like a broken cross, and it was floating downward, downward, very slow,” Jacob writes. “It was very wrong. I began to pray.”

Jacob's simple yet elegant prayers thread through the novel, and they intensify as the effects of the solar storm become clear. The cataclysm unfolds quickly for the English, who are beholden to what philosopher Albert Borgmann calls the "device paradigm": the rule of technology that both promises liberation from toil and hides its processes from view. Only when a device is rendered useless do we notice—and need—the skills and practices it had erased.

The changes occur in slow motion for Amish families like Jacob's, whose agrarian skills, communal ties, and work ethic now offer a measure of protection. "Our community is, to me, what all the English had built was to him," writes Jacob of the non-Amish Mike, with whom he does business in his carpentry work. "But now, for him, all of that is gone."

But even the Amish are not immune from the dismantling of the social order. There are simply too many ligatures between their lives and those of the English around them. As all the goods that the English took for granted are disappearing, Mike and his thoroughly modern family show up on Jacob and Hannah's doorstep. The Amish family takes them in, schooling them in the ways of survival and community. "In this time, as everything we know falls apart, all we have to hold on to is our way," a church leader tells Jacob. "But what is our simple way, and all of our actions, if we cannot welcome the hungry? And be hospitable to the homeless stranger in our land? . . . We have no choice, but to be as Christ taught."

Being Christlike becomes an increasingly fraught enterprise. As in many a postapocalyptic tale, militias form and vigilante justice prevails. Signage and slogans appear: "Come and bring your guns . . . Rally to protect your families." When violence visits the Amish, including Jacob's family, they must decide whether a safety that is contingent upon their English friends' willingness to kill is perilous to their souls.

Williams's characters are faced with an intensified version of the dilemma that has shaped the Amish for centuries—how to be in the world but not of it. When the world crumbles, those who live at some remove are forced to name the ways they benefit from their residence in it. The apocalypse strips the English of their way of life, but it also robs the Amish protagonist of the comfort of his own "quiet in the land" narrative. Before the solar storm, Jacob writes, "Such a wild terrible mess, the world is now. I am glad that I am not in it." After the storm, he would be hard-pressed to make such a claim. The novel's ending offers one solution to the religious sectarian's

dilemma—one that is bleak, foreboding, and marked by a smudge of hope.

Writing fiction set in another culture, especially from a first-person perspective, takes a measure of courage and perhaps even hubris. You can read all you want about a close-cinched religious or ethnic group, but authenticity and accuracy always, to a degree, remain mirages shimmering in the distance. Overall, Williams, a teaching elder in the Presbyterian church, inhabits his Amish character convincingly. While there is no singular Amish man's voice, I have conversed with and edited enough of them to say that Williams strikes the right pitch in Jacob's sensible prose, descriptions of the natural world, and sly wit.

When things fall apart, authentic Christian faith is revealed.

There are glitches, though, not limited to misspelled family names and misplaced locations in Lancaster County. Jacob repeatedly speaks of "the Order," referring to his or another sect, in a manner foreign to Amish discourse. And his characterization of *rumspringa*, which means "running around," reflects English understandings of the practice more than Amish ones. Williams appears to assume that this era of an Amish teenager's life includes a heavy dose of worldly interactions. With the collapse of the English world, Jacob worries about his teenaged son—"How will he run around, if the English world is in tatters?"

In reality, according to Amish scholar Donald B. Kraybill, *rumspringa* is "best understood as the time when youth socialize with their peers." Often including volleyball games and hymn-sings with other Amish youth and slightly relaxed curfews, *rumspringa* isn't contingent on anything in the non-Amish world.

Additionally, Jacob's shame over capturing his interior life in his journal, which surfaces throughout his writing, is implausible. He writes that journaling—"this act I am doing right now in writing and remembering, worse yet in English"—was forbidden. Journaling is not off limits in any Amish community that I'm aware of, and when the Amish write, they write in English, not Pennsylvania Dutch, which is mostly an oral language.

Yet the larger successes of Williams's book—the construction of a plausible dystopia, gentle but not saintly characters, and a nuanced portrayal of faith—outweigh such errors. One of the most commendable aspects of the novel is his vision of religion in a postapocalyptic future, which diverges from the genre's frequent portrayal of faith as fanatical and brutish. In *World Made by Hand*, by James Howard Kunstler, set in a

small town in New York after the depletion of the oil fields and catastrophic climate change, a creepy religious sect led by Brother Jobe takes over the abandoned high school. And what could be creepier than the theocratic religion of Margaret Atwood's Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where women are treated as breeding livestock and in which Handmaids must listen to a tape of mangled beatitudes ("Blessed are the silent") while eating lunch?

In sketching an alternate view of postapocalyptic religion, Williams offers a sturdy example of what Menno Simons called "true evangelical faith." Although the Amish in the novel are somewhat idealized (is anyone truly as good as Jacob and Hannah?), Williams makes a strong case that when things fall apart, authentic Christian faith will reveal itself as both impetus and sustenance to care for others. In that sense, Williams suggests that when *apokalupsis* comes it will be true to the Greek meaning of the word: a disclosing of ultimate reality, an unveiling of the true work of Christ.

Amish characters have long resided in the lucrative space of Christian romance fiction, so their appearance in a genre frequented by cyborgs and misanthropes may seem a bit surprising. Critic Laura Miller claims that postapocalyptic fiction "runs on a current of nostalgia for an earlier age." In a review of Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Borne*, Miller suggests that in portraying the collapse of civilization and what follows, novelists tap into readers' frontier longings—their hidden desire to "reinvent society from the ground up." For all the nightmare scenarios they paint, these novelists allow readers to imagine themselves as the heroic, brave pioneers in days of yore. Taking her argument a train stop or two farther than nostalgia, Miller adds that "the postapocalyptic imagination is shot through with unacknowledged wish fulfillment."

That a longing for an idealized past would fuel a genre about a dystopian future may also seem counterintuitive. Yet anyone familiar with the frequent tropes of postapocalyptic fiction—postcollapse communities marked by mutual aid and the resurrection of trades, crafts, and all manner of do-it-yourself-ness—will recognize the truth of Miller's claim.

I won't wager a guess as to whether the fall of turbo capitalism would be, for the author or his readers, something of a dream come true. But readers may recognize themselves in Jacob's journal entry about how English people used to walk around "not even seeing each other, eyes down into their rectangles of light." Given our current cultural anomie and fragmentation, readers might agree that a near future in which near-Amish life is mandated by circumstance could be worse.

The question, then, is not why the Amish have shown up in a postapocalyptic novel. The question is what took them so long.

Read Elizabeth Palmer's [sidebar interview with Williams](#).

A version of this article appears in the August 2, print edition under the title “The Amish after the end.”