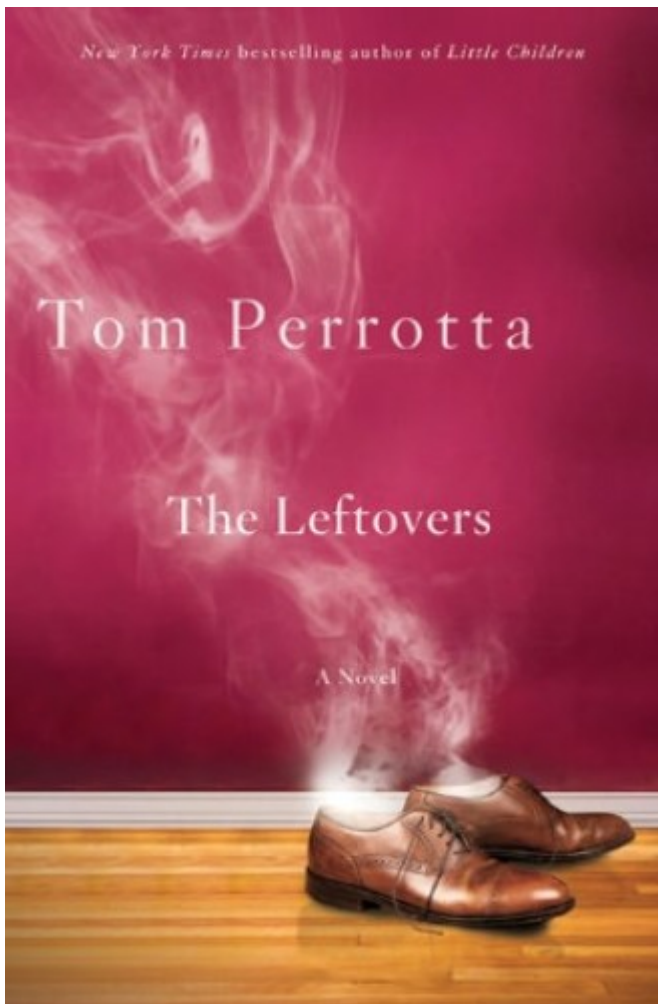


The Leftovers, by Tom Perrotta

reviewed by [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue

In Review



The Leftovers

By Tom Perrotta
St. Martin's Griffin

What if the Rapture really happened? This is the question Tom Perrotta takes up in his novel *The Leftovers*.

The novel opens with a retrospective description of the “Sudden Departure,” which happened a year or so before the prologue. One day, millions of people were just gone—*poof*. Residents of Mapleton, the Everytown, USA, suburb where the book takes place, disagree about whether the event was the biblical Rapture or something else. The Christians can’t help but notice “the diversity of the disappeared. Muslims and Buddhists were gone alongside Christians; gays, lesbians, and adulterers joined the ranks of what seemed unlikely to them to be a heavenly throng.”

If the Rapture were to occur in a fashion similar to what premillennial dispensationalists anticipate, my theology would be rocked by God intervening in the world in such an unquestionably supernatural way. My sense of self, justice and holiness would be shattered if certain outspoken fundamentalists left me behind.

But Perrotta doesn’t seem to be making any theological claims. The Sudden Departure is a given, a point of departure for an exploration of a startling collective loss. *The Leftovers* describes a community and a nation responding to the greatest of unknowns. After the event, many people are melancholy. Many are looking for answers. Others throw themselves into the life-affirming physicality of long-distance running and cycling. Still others plan civic events. Perhaps most interestingly, a number of them are drawn in by new religious movements that spring up in the wake of the Sudden Departure.

Kevin and Laurie Garvey and their children Tom and Jill form the emotional core of the story, and each engages the new cultural climate in different ways. Laurie, a lifelong agnostic, seems to be in shock and upends her existence in an attempt at understanding: she joins “The Guilty Remnant,” a silent organization that wears all-white clothing, smokes cigarettes sacramentally and seeks to remind the masses that God’s “judgment is upon us.” Kevin takes up jogging, becomes mayor of Mapleton and tries to help everyone move on. Tom connects with a “self-appointed healing prophet named Holy Wayne” after being impressed by Wayne’s seemingly mystical power and heartfelt concern for the suffering of others. Jill, whose best friend was spirited away just as they were in the midst of growing up and growing apart, feels misunderstood—unsurprising for a 15-year-old.

Perrotta ably populates Mapleton: Kevin’s softball team; Nora, who lost her husband and her two young children in the Departure; the conservative Christian pastor turned investigative reporter, digging up dirt on the disappeared to prove that this wasn’t the Rapture, that he wasn’t left behind. Everybody is affected, and everyone

has a story to tell.

The religious landscape that Perrotta draws exists largely in reaction to the Departure, but its elements are familiar enough. More than a decade after 9/11, Americans still see the effects of collective grief, guilt, confusion and ambivalence. We are too willing to demonize the other. We experience a certain nihilism: If we can be attacked, if everyone can just disappear, what is the point of anything? As Kevin Garvey reflects in the first chapter: “These days no one bothered much about the hole in the ozone layer or the pathos of a world without polar bears.”

The folks who get outside of their heads eventually, even with a seeming callousness, carry the moral weight of Perrotta’s story. At the outset, Kevin seems a bit too chipper, too willing to sweep everyone’s suffering under the rug. But when his daughter’s friend needs somewhere to stay indefinitely because her alcoholic mother’s disappearance in the Departure left her living with a leering stepfather, there is no question: “‘She shouldn’t live there,’ Jill told him. . . . ‘Okay,’ her father said, ‘Fair enough.’”

Is it common decency or family ties or an articulated theology or an espoused ethic that will save us? Is it belief in the right Savior at the right time, before the violence and the horsemen arrive? In Mapleton, the final battle isn’t between good and evil but between endless guilt and nascent hope. *The Leftovers* suggests that victory may lie simply in the mysterious ties that bind—and in the movement of grace in a thousand ways that are more subtle than the disappearing of millions.