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# “Something-we-can’t-see-is-causing-us-to-die” Books: Pandemics and Canadian Literature

« Quelque chose que nous ne pouvons pas voir nous fait mourir » – Pandémies et littérature canadienne

**Don Sparling**

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## Abstract

Pandemics have been a companion of Western literature ever since its beginnings in Ancient Greece three millennia ago. This article discusses the changing functions of literary pandemics over time, from a mechanism to set the plot going, through being a central character in the plot and a means of exploring human behaviour, to acting as a kind of “objective correlative” of society itself. In the course of this development, the agency behind pandemics moves from a divine being, to unknown and then natural causes, and finally to something disturbed in humanity itself. Against this background, the article explores the main features of the large body of pandemic-related Canadian fiction (fifty books) that were published in the period 1974–2021.

**Keywords:** pandemics, Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley

## Résumé

Les pandémies font partie de la littérature occidentale depuis ses débuts dans la Grèce antique il y a trois mille ans. Cet article traite de l'évolution des fonctions des pandémies dans la littérature au fil du temps – comme mécanisme de mise en marche de l'action, comme personnage central de cette action et comme l'un des moyens permettant d'explorer le comportement humain, d'agir comme une sorte de « corrélatif objectif » de la société elle-même. Au cours de ce développement, l'agent responsable des pandémies est d'abord un être divin, puis des causes inconnues, puis des causes naturelles, avant d'être identifié comme étant un élément détraqué dans l'humanité elle-même. Dans ce contexte, l'article explore les principales caractéristiques du vaste corpus de romans canadiens liés à une pandémie (cinquante livres) qui ont été publiés entre 1974 et 2021.

**Mots-clés :** pandémies, littérature canadienne, Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley



"Something we can't see is causing us to die" books. This is how books on pandemics were characterized in a BBC Radio interview with Canada's most famous living author, Margaret Atwood (Atwood 2020). It is a typically brilliant Atwood tag – witty, colloquial, like something you might hear in a schlocky horror film, just the kind of pop culture reference that Atwood delights in making. Yet at the same time, it is a clinically precise description of the central tension of these pandemic books: an alien "Other" that is set on killing "us," a whole community or society that finds itself helpless because the threat is invisible. In fact pandemic fiction is a kind of version of the typical murder mystery, with its many twists and turns of plot and general mayhem before the final resolution.

Pandemics and plagues in fiction, then, share elements with the who-done-it, though they don't necessarily play a central role in the story as it unfolds. Not infrequently, they serve as a mechanism for setting the story rolling. This is the case with the work that also set the whole Western literary tradition rolling, *The Iliad*. Of course the Trojan War itself began with Paris's abduction of Helena, but Homer's epic itself starts at a point where the whole enterprise has ground to a halt, laid low by "an evil plague." In this case we know who done it – Apollo – and the plague serves as a sign that something is desperately wrong, that some entity with power has been offended, that some aspect of the moral order has been ruptured. The same is true of the beginning of another literary work at the foundation of Western literature, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The play opens with suppliants seated round an altar at the palace doors, and Oedipus asking why they are there, lamenting. And the priest responds (in W.B. Yeats's splendid version of the text) "A blight has fallen upon the fruitful blossoms of the land, a blight upon flock and field and upon the bed of marriage – plague ravages the city" (Yeats, 370). Oedipus explains that he has already sent to Delphi to find out why this has happened, and so the plot begins to unfold. Plagues also play a not unimportant role in the work that is central to Western society itself – the Bible. Plagues crop up in several of its books, but two examples in particular stand out. First there are the ten plagues sent to scourge the Egyptians in the book of Exodus. Here "plague" is used in most cases in the sense of "natural disaster" – the kind of thing we still refer to in legal English as an act of God. But the last plague – the sudden death of all the Egyptian firstborn – is "plague" in the sense that concerns us here. And the second is in the book of Revelation, with its four savage "Horsemen of the Apocalypse," the fourth of whom, Death, on its pale horse, is given the power "to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with pestilence" (Rev. 6:8, ESV). In the Bible, then, as in the *Iliad* and *Oedipus Rex*, we are told who is behind the mysterious phenomenon of plague, and why it has been launched against humans. It is of divine origin, and meant to punish human transgression of some kind, whether an act by an individual or something more specific and general and widespread – sin, wickedness, human corruption.



A plague is a huge, irrational irruption into our daily life. People’s first reaction when such an event occurs is usually to think of practical concerns. Is there something I can take or do to counteract this? Should I self-isolate? Flee? Might it be a good idea to stock up on supplies? But this is often followed by a deeper response, to ask “why” – why is this happening? One possibility is to ascribe it to a supernatural being, whether beneficent or evil – in simple terms, God or the Devil. In ancient times this was the default position and of course it is one that still exists in one form or another, precisely because of the disorderly, random, mysterious, unknowable nature of pandemics. And also – something one should not forget – because they raise central questions of meaning and belief, which continue to be at the heart of philosophical and theological enquiry and practice. For almost fifty years one of the most popular comic strips in the United States and beyond has been *Hägar the Horrible*, the main character in which is a caricaturish, scruffy Viking warrior, complete with horned helmet and bushy beard. One of the classics in the series has only two frames. In the first, we see his Viking ship sinking in the midst of a raging storm, with dark clouds and flashing lightning and the rain pouring down. Hägar himself, stranded on a rock, is gazing helplessly into the heavens, arms outstretched and crying out “Why me?” And in the second frame a simple answer comes down from behind the clouds: “Why not?” This is American one-line comedy at its finest. But it is also the Book of Job in a nutshell. Why does human tragedy exist? What causes human suffering? And why, in particular, me – what have I done to deserve this?<sup>1</sup>

People are wired to seek answers. Pandemics are a powerful nexus of individual and group pain and loss, and as such quite naturally raise the question “why.” This is still true today, as is immediately obvious by a quick Web search for “COVID-19.” Many conservative, religiously inclined individuals, especially American Evangelical Protestants, try to understand the current pandemic via the Bible. “Does COVID-19 Fulfil Biblical Plague Prophecies?” “The Bible Reveals COVID-19 Is a Sign of the End Times” Or, more practically, “9 Bible Verses to Help Your Unique Situation During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” These may seem odd, and to some amusing, but they are not surprising. By nature, people seek meanings, explanations: we are averse to randomness, to the suggestion that there is chaos out there, to loss of control. The same rationale, of course, also means that pandemics are ideal Petri dishes for cultivating conspiracy theories: a large-scale event like this demands an explanation of a similar magnitude. Accordingly, the current pandemic has thrown up limitless numbers of grand explanations that have been invented, exploited, expanded on and accepted by people from Donald Trump through QAnon to millions of ordinary

1) Joe Biden, a deeply religious Roman Catholic and someone who has experienced two almost unbearable family tragedies, has had the Hagar comic strip framed and keeps it on his desk. See <https://www.dailycartoonist.com/index.php/2020/11/07/the-story-of-the-comic-strip-on-joe-bidens-desk/>



people, not only in America but round the world. There is also a third, more rational option – to turn to scientists for answers. But here, too, there is the choice of a wide range of explanations, in many cases contradictory, partly since in some areas the science offers more than one possible approach to dealing with the problem, and in others, COVID-19 being a very atypical virus, it is extremely difficult to uncover its specific features. Pandemics offer few authoritative answers, and provide plenty of room for doubt, confusion and personal belief.

From a functional point of view, plagues first appeared in literature as a means for setting the plot in action. A later device has been to use plagues to frame the action, the most famous example being Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which a group of seven young women and three young men retreat from Florence to a nearby villa in the countryside in order to escape the Black Death, and spend ten evenings there telling stories. A variation on this approach is to be found in Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death." Like the characters in the *Decameron*, those in Poe's short story flee to an isolated location to escape the plague. But Poe being Poe, the narrative, unlike the *Decameron*, does not end happily. Instead, the Red Death itself enters the story as a character, coming "like a thief in the night" to the abbey where all have fled: he appears at a ball the characters are attending, and "one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel" (Poe 490). Finally, in addition to launching and framing the action, plagues can also be an integral part of the fictional narrative, either as episodes or as a vehicle for the "message" of the work itself. I shall return to this last variant later.

First, however, it is important to stress a tectonic shift that has taken place in the past sixty years or so, one that has shaped our reaction to plagues and is of fundamental relevance to contemporary literary treatments of plagues and their reception. What has changed radically is the actual lived experience on the part of today's readers and authors of being at the mercy of dangerous contagious diseases. Putting it briefly, only a very small portion of the population in the developed world knows personally, emotionally, what it means to experience being at the mercy of "something we can't see that is causing us to die" or being left with some permanent handicap. The traditional triad of childhood diseases – measles, mumps, chicken pox, with all the dangers and disfigurement they brought – has virtually disappeared. Typhoid fever is a thing of the past, as is diphtheria. Tuberculosis is uncommon and largely treatable. Polio, which every summer brought death and life-long crippling, lost its grip on the public imagination with the creation of the first polio vaccine in 1955. This was a watershed, and the 1950s in general mark the beginning of a new era, one in which more and more vaccines began to be introduced for more and more diseases, and people came to take it for granted that they and their children were invulnerable, that infectious diseases were a thing of the past. In reality, of course,



that was only true for the developed world. Elsewhere – “out there somewhere” – the story was different. And still is. In 2019, for example, 2.1 million people died from tuberculosis worldwide. Malaria killed over 400,000. Cholera, which for many conjures up the 19th century and scenes set in slums, accounted for over 140,000 deaths.<sup>2</sup> As one commentator dryly put it, “These numbers don’t tend to make the news” (Wolfe 7).

What *has* often made the news, however, is the ominous appearance of potential new epidemic threats. To take the last 30 years or so, the second half of the eighties brought AIDS/HIV, the new millennium SARS, Ebola in 2013, Zika in 2015. All from what developed countries would view as “out there” – Africa, China, Brazil. And all more or less contained or relegated to the background. Even AIDS, which, although it has largely been contained in the developed world these days, still manages to account for perhaps as many as 1,000,000 deaths a year globally.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, these distant – and usually distanced – “mini” epidemics and pandemics have left an imprint in people’s minds: a vague, uneasy awareness of vulnerability.<sup>4</sup> The complexities of globalization have only heightened this awareness. Reflecting this sense of unease, even before the mysterious emergence of COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020 there was a growing body of fiction in which epidemics and pandemics play an important role. It is impossible to pin down precisely all the reasons for this, but certainly one is the increased interest in science fiction and fantasy among creative artists over the past few decades, both in literature and in film, as well as the increased topicality of the dystopian mode.<sup>5</sup> Pandemics are an ideal medium for the combination of these two.

To return briefly to the Classical and Biblical texts dealing with plagues mentioned at the beginning of this article, one feature they shared was a clear identification of the origin of these disasters – a divinity – and why: punishment for some transgression. Two thousand years later, for obvious reasons, this explanation was no longer entirely viable. So in the first great pandemic novel in the Western tradition – Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) – we see the emergence of a whole new model. *A Journal of the Plague Year* claims to be an eye-witness account

2) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282715/deaths-from-communicable-diseases-worldwide/>

3) <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/number-of-deaths-due-to-hiv-aids>

4) Perhaps less true of AIDS/HIV, where there is still a lingering and prejudicial impression among many that it is something that affects gays and drug addicts – not “normal people.”

5) Films are an ideal medium for the dystopian, with many leading directors producing masterpieces in the genre. To name only a few: David Cronenberg (*Videodrome*, 1985); Kinji Fukasaku (*Battle Royale*, 2000); Stanley Kubrick (*A Clockwork Orange*, 1971); George Lucas (*THX 1138*, 1971); Ridley Scott (*Blade Runner*, 1982); Steven Spielberg (*Artificial Intelligence*, 2001; *Minority Report*, 2002); Andrei Tarkovsky (*Stalker*, 1979); Denis Villeneuve (*Blade Runner 2049*, 2017); the Wachowskis (the *Matrix* films, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2021).



of "observations or memorials of the most remarkable occurrences, as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665" (Defoe 1). It is presented as a work of non-fiction, in effect a long piece of reportage, told by a perceptive observer who sticks to facts. This pretence is artfully enhanced by the structure of the book, which is strictly chronological, starting with the first rumours in the fall of 1664 of a plague in Holland, and ending as the Plague in London winds down eighteen months later, while the whole narrative is interspersed with mortality statistics taken from parish registers,<sup>6</sup> information on the locations of new, temporary cemeteries that were opened, and so on. God, however, is largely absent, at least from the narrator's point of view: only at the end does he attribute London's being delivered from the plague to "the immediate finger of God," who "cause[d] the fury of it to abate" (Defoe 331). But God is not there at its beginning: no cause, divine or otherwise, is suggested, and there is no answer to "why." The Plague simply ... appears, first in one household, then in a few more. It then retreats for a while before emerging again. Gradually it becomes an active participant in the story, taking on human-like characteristics – the plague is "a formidable enemy and it is armed with terrors that every man is not sufficiently fortified to resist or prepared to stand the shock against" (Defoe 319). Even the corpses take on life: "These breathed death in every place and upon everybody that came near them" (Defoe 260). The Plague and the corpses are of course real, but the Plague in particular is also a literary device, a character forcing the action, shrouded in mystery and ultimately unknowable.

In fact this remained true of plagues – that is, infectious diseases of all kinds – until the discovery and subsequent development of the germ theory of disease in the second half of the 19th century with the work of Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch and others and the "golden age" of bacteriology that followed, when the actual organisms causing specific diseases began to be identified. From the literary point of view, however, this was perhaps a loss, in that it was now difficult to present an epidemic itself as a focus, since the assumption was now that such epidemics, though having tragic consequences, were ultimately knowable and treatable. The logical shift was therefore to start regarding plagues as social phenomena – how they affected individuals and different social strata, how they could be mishandled. The *locus classicus* here is Henrik Ibsen's 1882 drama *An Enemy of the People*, in which the medical doctor in a small provincial Norwegian town discovers that the water in their newly opened spa is in fact infected. But his plan to expose this is thwarted when the whole town, fearing the blow to its economy if information about the contaminated spa water gets out, turns against him. Here, any potential epidemic would be rooted in scientific fact, its cause human hypocrisy and greed, its punishment economic ruin. We have travelled a long

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6) This is a kind of 18th-century precursor of the running tallies of Covid infections and deaths employed by today's television networks.



way from the epidemics of antiquity: now nature moves to the fore as the creator of pandemics.

It might seem, then, that epidemics as mysteries have served their purpose, and now lack the potential power they once had to fuel narrative fiction. But in the long historical march of literature, what goes out one door often comes back in a different guise through another. With Camus's *The Plague* (1947), an epidemic serves as a vehicle for creating a powerful text fueled by existentialist philosophy, and as the century moves on, more and more writers start incorporating epidemics and pandemics in their work, shaped by changes in literary taste and new fashions – a move away from realism, a huge swerve to science fiction and fantasy, a growing fin-de-siècle weariness, and perhaps above all the direction in which contemporary society is moving as a whole, the product and generator of a whole range of real fears relating to the future. In this process, plagues take on renewed literary generative force, with a new actor being added to their possible cause – humans. So we now have three possible explanations for how they come about: divine will, natural forces, and human action, whether deliberate or not.

With all this in mind, let me turn finally to Canadian literature. What I shall do is look at "Something-we-can't-see-is-causing-us-to-die" books published in Canada since the mid-1970s (see the Appendix at the end of this article), first making a broad survey and then dealing in more detail with three specific works. All the books in question are what would be considered "serious" works – a slippery word, admittedly, but one that most readers would recognize and employ. It is of course impossible to provide a definitive list of books in this category, but even a partial treatment will give some sense of what the field looks like, what patterns can be discerned. My research has shown that during the period in question, fifty books of this type were published, written in both English and French. This average of roughly one book per year is not particularly noteworthy; what is more very interesting, however, is what was published, and when. First, when. In the 1970s, two titles. In the 1980s, only one. In the 1990s, nine. In the first decade of the millennium, eleven. From 2010 to 2021, twenty-seven. In other words, an almost non-existent literary phenomenon at first, and from the 1990s major numbers, growing steadily and spiking in the past decade or so. Were this to be shown in graph form, it would put many current COVID-19 surges to shame. And second, what. The numbers just quoted start to take off in the 1990s, at a time when deaths from AIDS were surging. They rise in the new millenium, along with the appearance of SARS – the first coronavirus to attract widespread notice – and then shoot up ever more steeply in the past ten years, when Ebola and ZIKA appeared on the scene. This is not to claim that there is any strict correlation. But things do match up roughly. Of the fifteen AIDS/HIV books, for example, seven appeared in the 1990s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the Western world; most





take place in Canada and are rooted in immediate experience. Another seven were published in the past decade, and are more varied: one is set in South Africa, another involves a Vietnamese family, while others look back to the 1980s, or place the AIDS phenomenon in the wider context of fears and disjunctions and inequalities at the turn of the millennium. Another interesting category is historical fiction, books dealing with pandemics in the past – cholera, typhus, smallpox, various kinds of flu, including the Spanish flu of 1918. Surprisingly, six of the eight books in this category are by Francophone writers; one could argue that, for a culture that many of its members feel to be under threat, having overcome such pandemic challenges in the past has a strong symbolic force. Certainly another work in this historical fiction category, *Ravensong* (2017), by the Indigenous author Lee Maracle, fulfils this function. As Raven reminds the female protagonist, who is in despair at the devastation wrought by a flu epidemic on her family and community, “Death is transformative” (Maracle 73). But by far the most striking finding is that altogether twenty-one of the fifty titles – that is, over forty percent – deal with unknown viruses, puzzling new strains of viral diseases like flu or rabies, and unspecified “plagues” that threaten to ravage, are ravaging, or have ravaged the world. Welcome to the world of Class A pandemics and dystopian, apocalyptic novels. Not surprisingly, all but two of these appeared in the past twenty years. Clearly tales of pandemics find a wide audience nowadays – an indication that they are answering a need. After an absence of thirty or forty years, the developed world is once again faced with the unpleasant reality of epidemics, and death, a reality that locks in almost automatically with the increasing complexity and incomprehensibility of today’s world. This makes pandemic-related books highly topical – they match the stories on the daily news, whether coming from the world of science, the personal, lived experience of their audience, or the dark underground of conspiracy theories.

“Pandemic-related” is of course a very broad term, and a full exploration of this large body of Canadian fiction would necessitate a detailed analysis exceeding the confines of this article. Here I can only indicate some of its main features. First, the concerns giving impetus and energy to the individual works cover a very wide range. These include climate change, the rise in religious fundamentalism, male patriarchy, racism, technology, the oppression of minorities, the poisoning of the environment. One or more of any of the above concerns may be present in any given novel. Genre is a second area of interest, shared in some cases by a number of books. A few can clearly be placed in the science fiction category. Larissa Lai’s *The Tiger Flu* (2018), for example, features a group of parthenogenic women threatened by a mysterious flu sent into their midst to destroy them by the male-dominated Salt Water City. A wackier but still identifiably science fiction work is Emily Shultz’s *The Blondes* (2012), in which a strange, rabies-like disease breaks out in New York; it only affects female blondes



– CEOs, students, flight attendants, accountants – whom it turns into rabid killers. “Fantasy” is perhaps a more appropriate category for Rita Donovan’s *The Plague Saint* (2002), a time-travelling work in which the female protagonist is threatened by the plague and by rigid external control both in 21st-century Canada and 16th-century Renaissance Florence. *The Last Canadian* (1974), by William G. Heine, is an apocalyptic Cold War novel: the hero travels from northern Quebec across a North America devastated by a deadly, Soviet-released virus in order to link up with a US destroyer near Florida and save what is left of “civilization.” Five books by Daniel Kalla are straightforward thrillers, suspenseful, fast-paced stories in which the protagonists – doctors and/or scientists – are engaged in investigating and trying to halt rapidly spreading diseases, some launched deliberately, others by mistake.<sup>7</sup> From the point of genre, many books are realistic fiction – that is, they take place in a more or less recognizable contemporary world in which the characters are faced with having to cope in some way with a sudden natural phenomenon that completely disrupts their everyday life and threatens social cohesion. The various pandemic diseases are of course classically mysterious, but the focus of the novel is more on coping, on surviving, on bringing people together. These novels make up a motley crew – one, Megan Crew’s *The Way We Fall* (2012), is surely a first in the genre of juvenile apocalyptic fiction – but all are linked by an ominous realization of the possibility of the end of life as we know it. The Biblical “End Times” in a new mode – or not, depending on your beliefs.

Among all these varied works, three examples in particular stand out for their accomplishment and generic fluidity. The most recent of them, Kevin Chong’s novel *The Plague*, appeared in 2018, and is just what its name might suggest: a reworking of the 20th century’s iconic work of plague fiction, Albert Camus’s timeless novel of the same name. Set in a near-future Vancouver, it mirrors its original, with elements such as rats dying in huge numbers followed by other animals, the appearance of flu-like symptoms and plague-like swollen nodes, the imposition of quarantine, the slow dissolving of civil order. The central existential theme of Camus’s masterpiece also remains – heroism in the face of a situation in which there is no victory – but it is placed in a contemporary context and enriched with such themes as the rise of inequality and the demand for social justice. Both referencing the original text and moving into new territory, Chong manages to pull off a tricky but convincing balancing act.

Timothy Findley’s *Headhunter* appeared a generation earlier, in 1993. Findley’s inventive, risk-taking fictions, often dark and even painful, are marked by a highly personal style (one many critics labelled portentous), a deep compassion for all those – humans, animals, even imaginary creatures – who lack power, and the

7) Unusually for a writer of genre fiction, Kalla is himself a doctor, and one who actually had clinical experience in dealing with SARS in Vancouver in 2003.



controlled anger with which he depicts how they are exploited and violated. Though *Headhunter* was one of the very first in the long list of apocalyptic dystopian Canadian novels discussed here, it continues to resonate. Set in an eerily familiar Toronto at some future date, it depicts a city ravaged by a highly contagious coronavirus that spreads from starlings to humans. Moonmen – exterminators in their infection-proof clothing – roam the city spraying flocks of starlings, carting the bodies away and leaving behind a wasteland, while humans, too, are whisked away somewhere, splotchy and coughing, to die. Those who can, isolate themselves; those who can't, try to survive. Findley depicts a society run by individuals who are corrupt, morally barren, and ruthless in their willingness to rule through indirection and what we would now call "fake news" (it is not quite certain, for example, that the birds are in fact the real cause of the epidemic). At the centre of the novel is the sinister figure of Kurtz, who on the novel's first page literally escapes from a copy of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that is being read in the Toronto Public Library, and goes on to become the highly respected Dr Kurtz, Director of the city's main psychiatric hospital. From there he conducts despicable experiments aimed at brainwashing children in order to discover the key to acquiring the power to manipulate society at will. He is also linked to a circle of wealthy pedophiles who draw in many leading figures, and has control of many other shady channels of influence. This is strong stuff – as is the case in several of Findley's other works – and very chilling, though in the end a semblance of something "normal" has been tentatively restored. Nevertheless, there is a clear suggestion that this is provisional, and that "the horror, the horror," to quote Kurtz's last, enigmatic words in Conrad's novel, may at any time return.

And finally, to close the circle, Canada's literary trickster, Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale* is not pandemic fiction, but the world it depicts is a dystopia, and its poisonous, degraded environment is a feature shared by Atwood's three dystopian novels usually referred to as the *MaddAddam* trilogy – *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* itself (2013). All three are also apocalyptic pandemic novels, depicting a future in which features of our present world have been taken to an extreme: the increasing power of the state to control people's lives, the widening division between the rich and the poor, the rape of the natural world, the rapidly burgeoning ability of science and technology to transform the basic structures of that natural world and indeed of life itself. The pandemic that destroys civilization in the trilogy is created deliberately for this purpose by a scientist who sees humankind as wired to create misery and degrade the world. In their place he creates a new race designed to be free of humans' undesirable features, symbolic thinking included. In the end a handful of humans, by sheer chance, survives the pandemic; they move into an uncertain future with a small band of Crakers, the humanoid species designed by the scientist to replace them. Most would consider the trilogy a classic example



of dystopian science fiction. Atwood disagrees: "It is our world, except with a few twists [...] I have a big following among the biogeeks of this world. Nobody ever puts them in books. 'Finally! Someone understands us!'" (Atwood 2013). She has argued forcefully, and controversially, that it is instead what she prefers to term "speculative fiction," the difference as she sees it being that everything in the world she has created is feasible, the logical end-product of specific processes – social, cultural, and more importantly scientific and technological – that are well underway today.<sup>8</sup> Despite the seeming outlandishness of much in her world, and the light and at times witty tone of her narrative, this in effect makes her a prophet – something that distinguishes her work from the other dystopian fictions dealt with in this article. Atwood's typical detached, dry style – colloquial, at times jokey and quietly amused, the exact opposite of, for example, Timothy Findley's at times disturbing intensity – has more than once led readers to underrate her seriousness.<sup>9</sup> But she is at heart a moralist, and the trilogy's messages are abundantly clear.

George Orwell's *1984* is perhaps unique in the history of dystopias in its unremitting bleakness, with the last vestige of any hope of freedom or dignity for its protagonist utterly extinguished by the end. This is not the case with most of the Canadian pandemic dystopias produced in the last forty years: in fact virtually all of them end on a hopeful, albeit tentative and cautious, note. Among the Canadian dystopian novelists, Atwood and Findley are the leading exceptions: both *Headhunter* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy end ambiguously. In *Headhunter*, we have come through, but there is the suggestion that mankind is doomed to an endless series of journeys into greater and greater darkness. As for Atwood's trilogy, how is one supposed to feel about a future in which things are finally looking up – but one that has come into existence through the virtual annihilation of the human race and the relegation of its handful of survivors to an utterly minor, peripheral place in the ongoing world?

In the course of the long passage of pandemics through Western fiction in the past two and a half millennia, plagues and their manifestations have undergone an essential metamorphosis. Far from merely launching the action, and revealing the power of a divinity to punish transgressing humans, plagues have become a central

8) She clarifies her views on this distinction, and her well-publicized disagreement with Ursula Le Guin on this question, in the Introduction to *In Other Worlds* (pages 5–7).

9) In 1986 the American Embassy brought John Updike to Czechoslovakia for a lecture tour, in the course of which he spoke in Brno to a packed house in the Aula of our Faculty. After the talk he came to the English Department, where he spent an hour or so just chatting with us teachers. At one point, when he learned I was Canadian, the talk turned to *The Handmaid's Tale*, which had appeared only a few months previously. Updike said that it amused him as a piece of fiction, but that unfortunately Atwood really didn't understand American society. Back then this evaluation struck me as condescending. Now, looking at contemporary America, I feel it was simply profoundly wrong. Updike certainly understood a certain narrow stratum of east coast, middle-class American society and its mores. Atwood understood American society *en gros*, the beast itself. Her apocalyptic pandemic fictions should not be taken lightly.



part of the story itself, driving the narrative and serving as what one might term, in T. S. Eliot’s phrase, the “objective correlative” to the society that is being depicted – destructive, inhuman, evil. The transcendent has vanished. No longer do plagues emanate from an angry divinity, but – in one way or another – from humans themselves, or rather from what Northrop Frye has called “something psychotic in man himself” (Frye, 16). In much of contemporary pandemic fiction, plagues are humanity’s punishment for its own hubris, its desire to attain control and dominance – for, in effect, behaving as though it were a divinity. To quote the eponymous main character in a famous scene from one of America’s greatest comic strips, *Pogo*, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

## Appendix

### Pandemic-themed Canadian fiction: 1974–2021

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