BOOK REVIEW:

Remainders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline

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Bellamy, Brent Ryan. *Remainders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*. Wesleyan UP, 2021. ISBN 978-0819580320.

In *Remainders of the American Century*, Brent Ryan Bellamy wants to unearth what remains after an apocalypse and what those remnants say about the present state of United States culture and hegemony. The "remainders" in Bellamy's monograph are variously the things "left behind in the process of future reduction"; the "techniques of post-apocalyptic writing transmitted from text to text"; the "books that have gone unsold and unread [that] re-appear"; the "specific ideological leanings" of post-apocalyptic futures; and the rendering of "structures that make up the American century" (203). With these concepts of remainders framing his argument, Bellamy's project has three components. First, he argues that post-apocalyptic novels form a literary mode that elucidates cultural tensions; second, he seeks to establish a critical dictionary to analyze that mode; third, he presents case studies on how that mode is present in various post-apocalyptic works. Bellamy accomplishes these feats with aplomb, deepening the political engagement that one can have with post-apocalyptic literature while providing generative critical tools that can be used by future scholars to analyze, critique, and examine the archive of the post-apocalypse.

Bellamy divides *Remainders of the American Century* into two parts: "The Post-Apocalyptic Mode" and "The Contested Politics of US Decline". The first part establishes a critical toolkit of tropes, storyworld choices, and publishing decisions that constitutes the post-apocalyptic mode. The first

chapter uses four texts to establish four tropes – cataloguing, community formation, enclave building, and the last man – that have developed throughout post-apocalyptic literature published after the Golden Age of SF. In George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), for example, the protagonist, a PhD student, moves through a disease-ravaged America, cataloguing the changes of the world. This first trope allows Stewart to develop the world, but for Bellamy, cataloguing is also a technique that connects the post-apocalyptic world to the pre-apocalyptic world, thus signifying and determining what remains. The second trope Bellamy argues for is community formation. Using the various communities formed in Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow* (1955), Bellamy asserts that collectives of people in post-apocalyptic novels signify the varied and disparate responses to apocalypse that can occur, from religious extremism to utopian collectivity. With Walter M. Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), cataloguing *and* community formation by the monks synthesize into enclave building – the third trope. The final trope is the last man, which Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) establishes and inverts through its ending that re-reads the last man – a remaindered human being – as the hunter rather than the hunted. This trope, then, provides writers with a way to easily enact the fears of living after an apocalypse, although Bellamy sees the application of this trope throughout the novels he analyzes as being mobilized in a "non–self-critical way" (49). These four tropes, then, are the building blocks that authors writing in the post-apocalyptic mode use to either critically or *non*-critically develop their characters, plots, and storyworlds.

In Chapter 2, Bellamy argues that post-apocalyptic novels build storyworlds based on destruction. Through stripping various pre-apocalyptic materials from the storyworld, post-apocalyptic novels develop a form of future that is based on reduction rather than creation. Bellamy introduces the phrase "reduced futures" to describe this authorial technique. In creating a storyworld that has less in it than the real world, authors remove superfluous, extraneous, or unnecessary parts of the world in favor of futures where reduction emphasizes what remains. Bellamy uses Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) and Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978; 1990) as examples of future reduction. These novels reduce the future to gender or polity, and through that reduction, they exemplify the feminist turn and the fantasy resurgence that Fredric Jameson argues for in SF in the late 20th century. Tepper's world destruction focuses on creating a feudal society that is matriarchal rather than patriarchal, while King's apocalypse favors an investment into the world of fantastical elements that provide for the salvation of those who remain and for a polarity of political activity. In comparing these two novels, Bellamy establishes that "future reduction", or how a future is reduced through world destruction, is politically motivated, specifically with Tepper's feminist or King's Cold War influences. With this understanding, then, literary critics can use the storyworlds of post-apocalyptic novels as generative ground for understanding the contemporary politics of the authors.

Bellamy concludes the first part of the book with an assessment of the material culture of books as remainders of themselves. This argument is a step back from interpretation, pulling Bellamy's argument into the material and cultural creation of popular books. While this chapter might seem tangential to the main argument, it is important for understanding the cultural creation of the archive of post-apocalyptic literature. Bellamy illustrates how post-

apocalyptic literature bolstered midlist author profiles in the mid-20th century, but these midlist collectives were shuttered after legal proceedings forced publishers to reduce their publishing output. Once the midlist was winnowed, self-publishing writers and bestselling, traditionally published authors turned to SF, producing varied takes on multiple forms of apocalypse, each trying to outdo the other as they fought for an audience and for monetary return on their investments. These books as material culture became remainders of a publishing industry that is still in the midst – depending on your level of optimism – of an evolution or a decline.

Overall, Bellamy's argument in Part I stands or falls on his distinction between literary mode and literary genre. Literary modes, for Bellamy, can be "critically organized by their effects", whereas literary genres are usually connected by their "'web of resemblances'", using a distinction forwarded by Veronica Hollinger (6). Post-apocalyptic novels are not simply engaging each other in a generic contest to see who can best depict the destruction of the world; instead, each novel written in the post-apocalyptic mode can determine "cultural tremors that signal and make way for hegemonic change" (9). In other words, Bellamy is far more interested in what post-apocalyptic novels say about their politics than the conventions by which they achieve the apocalypse or how humanity survives. This definitional differentiation between genre and mode, then, is important because it gives Bellamy the critical tools to argue that his chosen archive of post-apocalyptic novels is more engaged in political action than in literary provocation. If this archive were a genre rather than a mode, then the texts would be more focused on developing and subverting tropes and motifs; instead, post-apocalyptic novels read as a mode that say more about US culture – and, specifically, its hegemonical decline – than about US literary conventions. Bellamy utilizes this literary distinction well, developing the arguments of Hollinger and other critics and outlining how novels written within the post-apocalyptic mode comment on American cultural tensions. Even though Bellamy's book might use more engagement with what those cultural implications *are*, the implementation of mode over genre successfully builds a critical toolkit that can engage with post-apocalyptic literature.

Part II provides four case studies of texts that exhibit and bring out the nuances of Bellamy's foundational critical work from Part I. The post-apocalyptic mode becomes the legacy of the American frontier in Chapter 4. Bellamy uses David Brin's *The Postman* (1985) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore* (1984) to show that the reduced and destroyed future of post-apocalyptic texts revitalize American hegemony on an untamed, imagined landscape. Bellamy argues that the "spatial configuration of post-apocalyptic storytelling nestles comfortably together with the remainder of the frontier myth" (129). In other words, post-apocalyptic texts utilize the myth of the frontier – from manifest destiny to the desire to tame the untamed – as a space in which to enact the story and its underlying politics. For example, in *The Postman*, this enactment is seen as the titular character crosses a post-apocalyptic America returning to the frontier mindset of grit, self-preservation, and adventure. The characters work to restore a United States that exhibits the alleged good in past America. The concept of the frontier is thus the path or landscape that allows this reconstitution of and reconciliation between old America and new post-apocalyptic America. Indeed, these connections between the frontier, manifest destiny, and the dream (or nightmare) of America

generate a strong beginning for scholars to look again at the use of the West in speculative fiction.

Tackling two books that centralize racial conceits in Chapter 5, Robert Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) and LeVar Burton's *Aftermath* (1997), Bellamy argues that "post-apocalyptic novels have their own unique criteria to determine who survives and what persists" (134). These "unique criteria" are the cultural and racial assumptions that authors bring into their novels. Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* attempts – and fails, according to Bellamy – to racially invert slavery. Black characters enslave white characters, but Heinlein fails because he does not target the questions of enslavement or race, but rather just victimizes his white characters. Burton, on the other hand, emphasizes a post-apocalyptic future that de-centers whiteness as the norm for its survivors. In *Aftermath*, Burton creates a eugenics-inspired world that favors the genes of darker-skinned people: the darker the skin, the greater rate of survival under the sun's more-powerful ultraviolet rays. Bellamy finds within this separation – the storyworld is segregated, but the characters are dedicated to a politics of diversity – a representation not only of a diverse cast engaging with the post-apocalyptic world, but also of the apocalypse itself fracturing from its definitive article ("the") into multiple apocalypses for various people depending on their race, class, social standing, or other identifying factor.

In the sixth chapter, Bellamy looks at Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Bellamy engages in a gendered critique that emphasizes the role (or, rather, the non-role) of the mother in the text. He reads the mother as a development of the "concept of the reproductive imperative" (155). The reproductive imperative is read through the image of the future child as argued for in Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). The heteropatriarchal thrust toward reproducing a culture through the envisioned child of the future – a child who will never be born because they exist in the never-present future, but the concept of whom always guides political decisions. The mother figure in McCarthy's novel thus becomes a remainder as Bellamy sees the mother's narrative as aborted yet haunting the narrative. Without the woman's existence, the boy would not exist, but she is never fully realized within the plot of the text. This aborted mother becomes the political activism that Bellamy reads out of the remainders: *The Road* "narrativizes the impossible desire for a patriarchy without women or mothers" (169). In other words, *The Road* provides a post-apocalyptic setting that advances the concept of survival as the *raison d'etre* for after an apocalypse, while removing the actual means for species survival: the womb.

The final chapter focuses on how energy and gas are removed from the storyworld in the post-apocalyptic mode. Instead of a future with flying cars, interstellar travel, or massive energy consumption, authors present readers with reduced futures in which mobility, power, and transportation are being minimized. In looking at four post-apocalyptic texts that utilize energy resources in different ways, Bellamy argues that energy should be seen as a social commodity rather than a material existence: how we use energy is constructed by the society in which we live. For example, in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), the detritus of the petrol regime persists as "memories or in the repurposing of old objects for new ends" (189). Bellamy cites three ways Mandel's storyworld creates remainders that help readers envision what the real world might look like in a post-petrol scenario: the

repurposing of an airplane hangar, the use of machines in innovative ways, and the loss of power and economic exchange due to a global pandemic that has wiped out most of the population. Within the texts on energy and gas, Bellamy goes further than in previous chapters by showing that the post-apocalyptic texts are offering possibilities of a post-capitalistic, post-petrol world, rather than just commenting on contemporary problems.

Even as Bellamy's engagements are generative and new, though, he seems to hesitate when making a specific argument regarding the regression of US hegemony. Although Bellamy highlights the decline of US political hegemony in his introduction and conclusion, this larger argument seems to fade in the rest of the book. In other words, his chapters provide excellent literary analysis, but they lack a clear, connective tissue that builds toward a larger argument. This hesitancy shouldn't necessarily fault the book, for *Remainders of the American Century* is a strong addition to the secondary literature, but it does leave the reader wanting more from each chapter. For example, in Bellamy's sixth chapter about *The Road*, he concludes by discussing how other post-apocalyptic texts, such as Octavia E. Butler's *Parables* duology (1993–1998), answer the gender questions he brings up, instead of connecting his analysis of *The Road* to what a patriarchy sans women means about the decline of US hegemony. That is, rather than interspersing his larger project into each chapter and drawing out his conclusion through his various smaller arguments, he prefers his readings to stand on their own. He does attempt to answer this critique in a footnote, acknowledging that "this book does not intend to settle" disputes about the decline of the American century (212n17), but a more detailed analysis of US decline throughout the book's case studies would have given this text a stronger cultural application.

In this way, the decline of US hegemony becomes itself a remainder in Bellamy's text. Instead of showing precisely what this decline is, he simply declares the decline *as* a decline, and post-apocalyptic novels as this unspecified decline's signifiers. Time will show how the decline occurs, perhaps, so Bellamy doesn't necessarily need to outline the specifics. He does not, after all, consider post-apocalyptic books prophetic, precisely, but instead reads them as fictional analyses of the consequences of contemporary crises (9–10). But the fact remains that the trope of US-in-decline is itself a remainder within Bellamy's text. Ultimately, Bellamy leaves it to readers to make their own connections about what this decline means. As such, the book's arguments stay with the reader, making them consider what a post-American apocalypse might look like and how they might survive it – if they haven't already.

Biography: Adam McLain is a MA/PhD student in the department of English at the University of Connecticut, studying dystopian literature, legal theory, and sexual justice. He has a BA in English from Brigham Young University and a Masters in theological studies from Harvard University.