

Segrest also highlights what was left unexplored. Rather than asking how slavery might devastate an individual's psyche, physicians treating newly freed African Americans discussed how their mental health might have been harmed by emancipation. What's more, these patients often came from counties in which extreme racial violence, including "whippings, assaults, and murders", was routine. Yet, in many cases, this history remained undocumented. Asylum psychiatry "maintained a vast silence about the bloodbath all around it", writes Segrest, just as it had previously been silent about the violence of slavery.

Lingering effects

Milledgeville underwent several name changes and ultimately became the Central State Hospital before the main building closed in 2010. In her final chapters, Segrest examines how, when such hospitals began to close in the 1980s, penal institutions took their place. As welfare programmes were starved, the US prison population spiked, with people of colour and people with mental illness disproportionately incarcerated. Today, 90% of US psychiatric-care beds are in jails and prisons. Psychiatry will not be able to escape "the after-life of slavery", she argues, until it confronts its culpability in mass incarceration.

A newcomer to the history of psychiatry, Segrest's approach is fresh and creative. She uses her imagination to flesh out the realities of life within the asylum walls. Describing Frances Edwards, a mother of seven taken to Milledgeville in 1856, Segrest imagines her arms feeling weirdly light and empty without her children, as her breasts "ached and leaked". Segrest also finds connections between topics not always identified as part of psychiatry's past. She calls attention to the high rates of infant mortality in the black community, exploring how such factors might have shaped – and still shape – black women's mental health.

Segrest's is one of several books in the past few years that have foregrounded discussions of race in the history of psychiatry and of asylums. Her impressionistic style and convoluted structure contrast sharply with the more rigorous work of historians such as Martin Summers in his 2019 *Madness in the City of Magnificent Intentions* and Wendy Gonaver in *The Peculiar Institution and the Making of Modern Psychiatry, 1840–1880* (2019). Segrest's mixture of fact and fiction can also be confusing.

But what is lost in clarity is perhaps gained in popular appeal. Uncomfortable reading at times, this valuable book helps to show how white supremacy shaped the definition and care of people with mental illness from the start, and how psychiatry remains in its shadow.

Mical Raz is a physician and historian of health policy at the University of Rochester, New York. e-mail: micalraz@rochester.edu

Preppers, bunkers and emaciated polar bears

How to live in the face of death – Mark O'Connell's personal journey. **By Caspar Henderson**

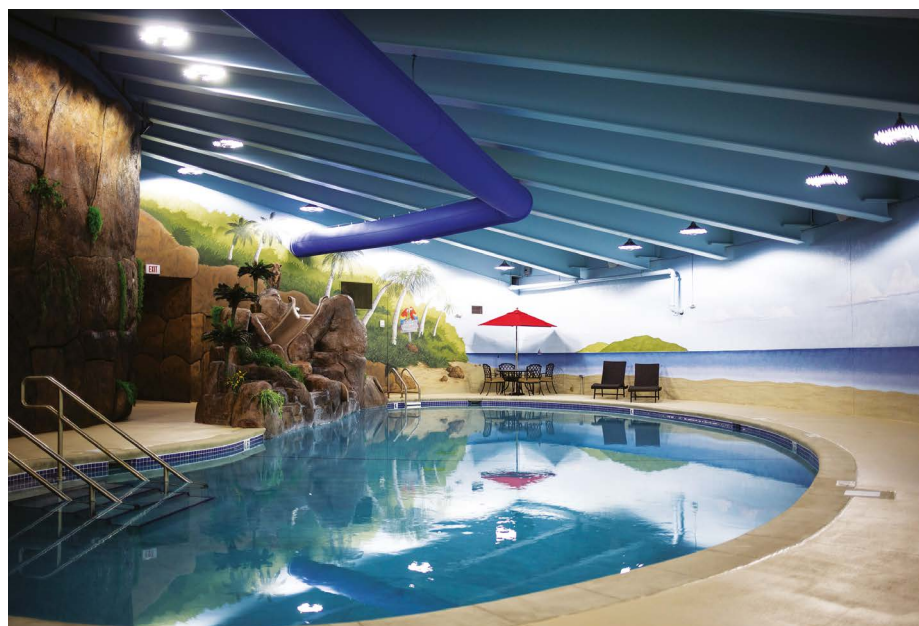
Are we facing the end of civilization, or even the planet? It's a question that attracted some serious scientific firepower even before the current pandemic. UK institutions such as the Centre for Existential Risk at the University of Cambridge and the Future of Humanity Institute at the University of Oxford are modelling the probabilities of various catastrophes, from a giant meteorite strike to a scenario in which criminals and psychopaths gain 'easy nukes' and incinerate a vulnerable world. Meanwhile, climate and Earth-systems scientists are amassing more evidence by the month that, barring rapid and profound reorganization in our societies, climate change will batter our world on at least the scale of a major war.

Rather than assessing the science itself, *Notes From An Apocalypse* explores how such threats affect individuals. Written before the COVID-19 crisis, it is an eerily prescient mix of confession, political critique, meditation and comic monologue on living in the face of death. It is the second such book from Mark O'Connell, the winner of the 2018 Wellcome Book Prize (for his first, *To Be A Machine*, which

tackled the philosophy that humanity can evolve beyond its limitations using science). As the scientific and political responses (or lack thereof) to threats ranging from global heating to plastic dominate the headlines, O'Connell probes deeper into our personal psyches. In a tone somewhere between those of writer Samuel Beckett, film-maker Woody Allen and poet W. B. Yeats, he asks what happens when we're faced with the prospect of both individual and global demise.

A successful literary journalist living in Dublin with his young family, O'Connell is obsessed with doom. He sets his computer home page to an online forum dedicated to discussing civilizational collapse, and compulsively checks his smartphone for YouTube clips of emaciated polar bears, when he should instead be watching cartoons with his son.

This fixation leads him into the shadowy worlds of 'preppers'. These self-styled survivalists stockpile stores and weapons, readying themselves for civilization's impending collapse, and feed endless online discussions about videos of the contents of their 'bug-out bags' – knapsacks containing items they



This converted nuclear missile vault in Glasco, Kansas, has a heated pool and water slide.

CHET STRANGE/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REXUS



Many former military bunkers, such as this one near Edgemont, South Dakota, are being repurposed into doomsday communities.

consider essential for the end-time. The clips strike O'Connell as apocalyptic variations of 'haul videos', in which young consumers lay out the treasures of a recent shopping binge, with Kevlar socks in place of Superga shoes, and athleisure swapped for military-grade cordage.

O'Connell hits the road, deploying his considerable gonzo journalism skills to seek out other doomsday obsessives, each caught up in their own dark, imagined futures. He visits high-end condos being built in a former weapons-storage facility in South Dakota that can withstand explosions of up to half a megatonne. He seeks out the luxury bolthole of Peter Thiel, billionaire entrepreneur and 'sovereign individual' – a person who controls vast resources and intends to redesign the government to suit their needs after collapse. Thiel is one of several Silicon Valley elites who have chosen to build their bunkers in New Zealand. And O'Connell attends a meeting of the Mars Society in Pasadena, California, where enthusiasts share dreams of a new, American-style frontier in the unspeakably harsh conditions on the red planet.

In each case, O'Connell skewers what he sees as a central psychopathology or distorted value system, even as he acknowledges his own uneasy fascination and near-complicity.

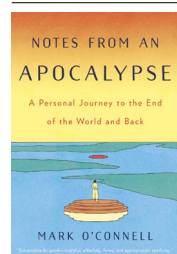
Preppers, he argues, are readying not for their fears but their fantasies; they contribute "nothing to the prevention or alleviation of suffering in others". Thiel and the would-be Mars colonizers imagine a world somehow beyond politics – and taxes – that is almost exclusively white and male.

The book's final two journeys explore a quieter response to the threat of catastrophe. O'Connell retreats to the Scottish Highlands with members of the Dark Mountain movement – artistic and mostly gentle souls who, knowing climate chaos is imminent, seek solace in reconnection with nature. Lastly, he takes part in an anti-stag party with a friend who is separating from his wife. They visit the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine, where a future imagined by the Soviets met its end. O'Connell is struck by the shards of "our own machine age" – shattered glass from broken

screens and a heap of old television sets with "ancient circuit boards greened with algae". He wonders if this might be a glimpse of our own future.

Back in Dublin, O'Connell finds he has lost his taste for cosmic nihilism. In the radiance, joy and hilarity of his kids – the way in which they connect with, rather than retreat from, the world – he finds inspiration to shift his focus from how our lives might end, to what makes them worth living.

Notes from an Apocalypse offers no scientific analysis of the existential threats we face or how we should respond. Instead, it illuminates the anxieties and delusions we share and oversights we commit, and shows how easily our fears (particularly when enabled by power, money and technology) can cause us to walk away from the disasters we create – to hide, flee, stockpile – just when we most need to engage. In this reflective, hilarious and disturbing page-turner, O'Connell makes a compelling case that connecting with nature and each other is the best way to calm our apocalyptic dread – and it might even increase our prospects of avoiding the worst.



Notes from an Apocalypse: A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back

Mark O'Connell
Doubleday (2020)

Caspar Henderson is a writer and journalist in Oxford, UK.

e-mail: caspar81@gmail.com