

## *Strange Labour*

Robert G. Penner, Regina: Radiant Press, 2020

*Strange Labour* is set in a world in which almost everyone, struck by a sudden 'visitation', has abandoned their ordinary lives to become mindless labourers in vast, labyrinthine diggings. (More precisely, it is set in the US. As with most fictions of apocalypse, the catastrophe may be global but the focus is national.). Humanity might well be finished, or about to become extinct in its present forms, but the imagination presenting us with this prospect, or inevitability, is very much alive, and sardonically conveying that even this can be arousing and enlivening, at least to create. (A bit later I will discuss what the novel itself does with imagining, and talking.). The writing is sharp and alert, vividly evocative, and the dialogues and monologues often witty.

*Strange Labour* spends a lot of time with Miranda and Dave, two of the small number of people who are immune to whatever it was that overcame everyone else. This side of the novel fits into the American male tradition of writing about the outdoors, with its tough or violent characters who make do, its sense of the harsh beauty of the country, its direct close description of actions, its return to what can be valued as fundamental – getting from place to place, finding food, finding a place to sleep: Ernest Hemingway, Thomas McGuane, Denis Johnston, Charles Portis, Cormac McCarthy. Once or twice Penner echoes McCarthy's tricks of style (for instance, 'The coagulate stars blotted out the void above them', 112). He does not follow McCarthy's relentless variation on one note, violence in *Blood Meridian*, sheer bleakness in *The Road*. He is attentive to the unpredictable, the unexpected chance met by the way, though the atmosphere does become bleaker as things wind down towards the end of the novel. He opens an ironic gap between what the characters are feeling and what might actually be happening, which I don't think happens in McCarthy – for instance, the unsettling ambivalence of Miranda's happiness at the very end of the novel.

### **'Sometimes the traveller just leaves' (179)**

*Strange Labour* is a combination of post-apocalyptic fiction and road trip novel. The road trip (or film, or song) can feature freedom from ties and exhibit the mad spectacle of America and its characters; in this case, free-wheeling wandering – always moving on - becomes abandonment, most painfully in the early episode in which Miranda leaves behind the helpless old people she has been caring for. The road trip in the context of the post apocalypse is the 'tour of the wilderness' that Gary Wolfe lists as one feature of the End of the World novel.<sup>1</sup> In this trope the central protagonist tours a wrecked and desolate America and experiences how motley groups of survivors are degenerating or are trying to remake something like civilization. The prevailing values, the spiritual resources, of our contemporary society – or their thinness or the total lack of them – are put under a harsh examination. This happens in *Amnesia Moon* (Jonathan Leithem), *Station Eleven* (Emily St John Mandel), and *The Road*, among recent examples, and in *Earth Abides* (George R. Stewart), among earlier texts.<sup>2</sup> By way of simplifying

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<sup>1</sup> See Gary K. Wolfe, 'The Remaking of Zero: Beginning at the End', *The End of the World*, edited Rabkin, Greenberg and Olander, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> *Earth Abides* (George R. Stewart) is discussed in chapter 2 of *Apocalypse in Crisis*.

formula, we could say that in the tour of the wilderness in many post-apocalyptic novels, those touring are simply or mainly observers and not a lot is happening inside them, because it is what they observe that is given the text's attention. (The father and son in *The Road* are an exception, but in that world there is nothing but degeneration and violence to be observed in the other humans they meet.) *Strange Labour* is different; Miranda and Dave have complex inwardness, and they are intelligent.

This matters because several of the groups they encounter are stereotypical. Roving violent bikers are glimpsed; the trio they spend some time with, Fubar, 'Smacksburg' and Evan, make for an extreme example of the degenerate violent ignorant wasted males often met with. ('There is nothing post-apocalyptic about violent men getting what they want, Dave', says Miranda (146); other angry men include Glen (116-117), Aaron (162), and Miranda's father as she sometimes remembers him.) The commune of genteel helpless middle-class professionals trying to keep up civilization, and appearances, are less usual, but their values are presented as hollow and cliched, hypocrisy failing to hide emptiness and violence.<sup>3</sup> The desperate closed community of religious fundamentalists Miranda stays with for a while late in her journey, after Dave's death, we have also met before, for instance in Thomas M. Disch's *The Genocides*. I think this stereotypical element is deliberate on Penner's part. It's not a parody of conventional post-apocalyptic novels. Rather it figures Penner's sense that our possibilities (or maybe I should say America's possibilities) are played out. We can't really expect to meet some new, clever imaginations of post-apocalyptic social possibility because the cleverness and imagination has gone out of the society they might be imagined to have survived.

Like many post-apocalyptic novels, *Strange Labour* faces the unheroic randomness of mass destruction and collapse, which means that epic heroism is excluded. There is no process that might bring brave and charismatic figures to the fore, or allow for collective, grassroots solidarity of the sort that Rebecca Solnit discusses in *A Paradise Built in Hell* in the context not of catastrophe but of localised disaster.<sup>4</sup> There is just a sudden rupture, a single moment in which the mass of people starts mindlessly walking while a random selection of those who will survive turn out to be immune to whatever has struck the vast majority. That's the catastrophe that changes everything. There is the mass of humans, effectively become one, without individuality or differentiation, and on the other side a few individuals who mostly coalesce into the types I have been claiming are stereotypes. The catastrophe is not explained in scientific or any other terms. It's a sudden, conclusive onset. The catastrophe is in a sense devised to expose, or to argue for, the poverty of the democracy, of ordinary people. The implication is that if you suddenly wipe out the vast majority (wipe their minds, in this case), those accidentally spared, as it were overlooked, will not have among them the knowledge or charisma or solidarity to restore purpose for longer than an interval. The premise is tendentious, and we should be suspicious of it, but what Penner is doing is pressing it to extremes: ok, if this is how we imagine apocalypse and its aftermath, let us go all the way with the simple conclusiveness of this image and what it arguably says about us. Dave:

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<sup>3</sup> Penner's contempt for these people is perhaps too obvious, but the episode is saved by the powerful monologues given to Lois (106-107) and Mel (109-110).

<sup>4</sup> Solnit's book is discussed together with other non-fictional accounts of disasters elsewhere in this Digital Archive. See 'The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster'.

'Pigs and bullets, that's our patrimony, feral pigs, endless bullets, and baseball caps. Have you ever stopped to think how many baseball caps are out there? In the stores and in the homes. We'll never run out. Our inheritance. The never-ending bounty of our civilization.' (57-58)

But there is an important qualification to be entered here, and this concerns Miranda and Dave, who are a good deal more interesting than the groups of survivors whom they encounter as they wander and drink and smoke dope, and Dave talks. (How they end up, and what conclusion or conclusions they reach, in several senses of the word, can be set aside for now.) They are interesting as a pair, in their conjunction. They are both ex-professionals, of the middle class, or so, at least, they claim; Dave was a union organizer (but he tells the people at The Tower he was a high-school math teacher: see 65 and 100). Miranda tells Dave she was an 'actuarial accountant' (one of the novel's passing surprises, and the irony of her being an actuary is clear enough). They don't much behave as we might expect middle-class professionals to behave, and as those they encounter in The Tower exaggeratedly behave. They drink and smoke dope, eat beans from cans, don't wash. Miranda says 'anyways'. I guess the implication is that the catastrophe has liberated them from gentility, though we have to remember that they have been (separately) on the road for a long time: time to slough off middle-class habits. Otherwise, they are different: Miranda is white, Dave is black; he is from the South, she is from the East and Midwest. She is laconic: 'I think slowly', she says, 'That's all. And not out loud.' (95). She can't be bothered arguing, or, sometimes, even listening, and this stands out because she meets a series of people who love the sound of their own voices (and you get the impression that this is something that Penner particularly hates about contemporary America, or contemporary American men), and her putdowns and refusals are refreshing. Dave is voluble, given to long witty daft riffs. Miranda sometimes tunes out Dave's riffs, but she tolerates them because he is not really trying to impose a point of view on her; in fact, he changes his mind, discards one forcefully riffed-on theory for another equally imaginative and eccentric, and, besides, several times discourses eloquently against discoursing - the human need, or illness, of talking (see for instance 63).

So Miranda and Dave make a complex diverse travelling society of two, and it is more interesting and creative than any of the communities or groups they encounter. Both are in different ways on the edge, not securely holding it together, or not really trying to, however. They do have purposes: Dave needs to find medicines for the seizures he suffers, and when it becomes clear that they are no longer made, he burns the notebooks he has been working on; Miranda is heading for her family home, but that comes to an end when she finds it and it is as deserted as she had expected it would be. They mostly observe: the natural landscape, desolate and often squalid, but rich, growing, and presenting vast panoramas with a touch of the sublime about them; the post-industrial landscape, huge wrecked workings that have so detached from life and purpose that they seem archaic. They don't have sex; it is barely even thought of. (Dave: 'Oh God, no, [...] Rebooting humanity. Starting over. Who would want that kind of pressure? All that heartbreak? Just the wine, thanks. And all the leftover pharmaceuticals.' (63) Nor is Miranda ever seriously threatened with rape, though we would expect this to come up in a violent post-apocalyptic world, especially as she is alone for the first part of the novel. We perhaps don't readily take in this blankness around both Dave and Miranda because they are warmly our central characters, and Miranda's laconic style combined with Dave's voluble style seems, so to speak, to cover the bases, or to give us a repertoire of ways to respond to the desolation. The survivors

they encounter don't offer much in the way of prospect, and their humanity has narrowed to a sort of caricature, so we resort to Miranda and Dave, and find plenty of humanity there. They are probably freer and more interesting persons than they were before the catastrophe. Their day to day driving and talking and drinking and eating (mostly) bad food is, however, both a liberation and a limitation, like a vacation or a party, but one that has gone on too long. But where are they to go and what else are they to do? They are heading for the same extinction as all those they meet. The novel's depiction of Miranda and Dave is often warm and funny, but it is carefully controlled. Clues as to what is happening to them and around them are glimpsed in passing: Miranda is tending the hens affectionately at one point, glimpsed eating chicken at another; that the trio, Evan, Fubar and Smacksburg murder those they rob is suggested after Dave and Miranda leave them and that they had no need to kill is made plain by Dave's later anecdote of being helped to rob the truckers by the truckers themselves; that Dave was shot by those sent to help him is, again, shown but not emphasised. The stories and fates of Dave and Miranda are dwarfed by the fertility of the almost deserted land and the dead vastness of ruined cities, factories and diggings. The end of the world means in most cases the end of humanity, but you have to make a novel of it by means of human characters; *Strange Labour* comes as close as any apocalyptic fiction to weighing humanity and its end.

In several apocalyptic novels, humanity is dying out because humans have become sterile and no children are being born, so the usual mitigation of mortality is absent. This is the situation with Brian Aldiss's *Greybeard* (1964) and P D James's *The Children of Men*. (1992). Here in *Strange Labour* the situation is even worse: if children are born, they are lost at puberty. Children are not affected by the condition that has taken over the mass of humanity till they reach a certain age, and then, inevitably, they are. The children who were alive when the catastrophe first struck were deserted by the adults who gathered in mindless walking crowds, and they either died or became feral. In this respect, this novel is like most apocalyptic novels in that it is about mortality: everyone dies, as in 'normal' life, only they all die at once in or as a consequence of the catastrophe. Most survivors are not having children. The zombified don't seem to have sex (the issue is disputed, 70-71); Dave and Miranda aren't interested ('Dave, with whom you are not together together', as Mel puts it to Miranda, 109). The last place Miranda stays for a while is Big Echo, a community of religious fundamentalists trying to defeat the inevitable by praying. There are children there; Miranda makes friends with some of them and tells them stories, as if to educate them about what life was once like. When one of them reaches puberty, and ceases to be human, she leaves.

### **Labour**

Is the catastrophe, with its zombification, combined with the dead end the unaffected have reached, and even Dave and Miranda have reached, the end for humanity? At last, in this commentary, it is necessary to turn to the nature of the catastrophe and what it means – which is where a lot of the more confident commentators start, to judge by the blurbs contributed to my edition of the novel. What questions should be asked of the novel's apocalyptic catastrophe and its aftermath? The way the catastrophe breaks in an instant should probably not be questioned; that sudden and final zombification has implications for the book's politics, as is suggested above, but it's a given. Then again, the immense work of earthmoving – digging a

denuded landscape into patterns of giant ditches – is efficiently supplied with fuel. Big trucks transport fuel from working refineries supplied by tankers. Should we ask how that could be organized, given that the masses engaged in the work, including those who drive the trucks, no longer talk or think? Perhaps not: it happens off stage, as it were.<sup>5</sup> The conclusion to draw is that the catastrophe exists as allegory, and we should no more ask how supplies for the digging are organized than we should ask how the Bower of Bliss in *The Faerie Queen* was planted and cultivated. *Strange Labour* is a realist fiction enclosing an allegory. The survivors, especially Miranda and Dave, live in a recognisable material universe, eating and talking and touring the newly flourishing countryside, the decaying cities and the diggings, which seem like a giant piece of land art; those taken by the catastrophe live in a different, allegorical universe in which practical conditions don't apply. After all, they are engaged in the diggings, and the diggings seem like a metaphor made actual.

Yet they are not exactly zombies, though the term is useful as a shorthand. They are blank rather than grotesque, they do not attack – or even seem to notice – unaffected humans. They work, and the novel as a whole is always observant about work – how it can be satisfying ('it was good work'), how it is often necessary (washing Dave's clothes when he has soiled himself in one of his seizures), how it is often drudgery, especially women's work ('There was always work to do, though for the women at least, it was not very interesting work', 169). The huge factories, workings, railway yards and bridges that now seem exiled from history and that arouse such awe are the relics of production; the novel's scorn is reserved for commodification and for the emptiness of consumption: 'all that dead desire and the strange forms into which it congealed' (Miranda spending the night in an IKEA store, 'a mausoleum', 51).

What is the image of the vast diggings and the strange labour that goes into them an allegory of, then? The work that happens elsewhere in the novel turns out to have been futile even when it was embraced as necessary and even given its ordinary, everyday quality (washing clothes, caring for the old). Perhaps the diggings stand for an aspect of modern life itself, something global, all-encompassing, all-engrossing – and completely futile. This would be, I suppose, the urge to profit and productivity for its own sake, GDP divorced from human use, and, in consequence, work reduced to serving this end, an end abstracted, severed, from daily reality so as to deprive the ostensible object of work of any practical point it might have (making cars that people drive, or checking accounts as Miranda perhaps did, or teaching maths as Dave says he did). Perhaps this interpretation of the possible meaning of the allegory is too detailed, not general enough, but the emphasis in the text is on strange labour, an immense, all-encompassing and uniform and pointless task that is being impressively accomplished. What is being performed is alienated labour. Labour is sucked into the work of digging, which becomes the one task for the mass of humanity, producing an awesome nullity and reproducing it, apparently, interminably. The work over which Eli the artist at The Tower has laboured turns out to be a kind of reflection or replica of the giant diggings (118). Staying alive, eating, having children, as human tasks (and pleasures) cease to matter for the diggers. In addition, staying alive, eating, having sex, satisfying curiosity or wanderlust by touring the land, cease to matter for those who escaped the condition that fell upon the diggers, because they have no future and because what the vast mass of people are working at is so dominant. The survivors, whom we mainly see, cannot

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<sup>5</sup> Dave shows Miranda how easy it is to take fuel from a tanker when you need some: 'I don't know what it is. I don't have a word for it, but it ain't robbing.' (135)

enjoy the benefits that usually accrue to survivors after a catastrophe and that can help to alleviate the trauma of catastrophe. They cannot enjoy release from obligations and duties, the life of exploring, eating and drinking (here, eating bad food and drinking vodka that tastes like acetone); and they cannot enjoy the contact with simple material realities and necessities that can come after all the paraphernalia of civilization have been swept away or, in this case, left as giant abandoned hulks. Their attempts to enjoy or explore or (in 'The Tower') rebuild civilization come across as futile. Reality has been sucked into the null zone that is the diggings, and the novel can't go there because the diggers, who can't talk or think but are harmless and passive, can't really take part in a narrative, not even to the degree that animals or (conventional) zombies could.

So, on this reading, the allegory as it works in the novel is a powerful one, and its power comes from its gradual effect on the human survivors, visible first in the empty stereotypicality of the people that Miranda and Dave encounter, and then in their own decline into repetition and despair. Dave becomes more and more subject to his seizures (for which he can no longer find medicine), is injured, and left in the forest by Miranda when she tries to get help. The help comes too late. Miranda stays for a while with the fundamentalists led by Aaron, himself the kind of religious dictator that recurs in post-apocalypse novels, 'his words battering them like a great wind' (169). It is her contact with the children of the group that draws her out of her laconic style for a while, then plunges her into despair. The children will inexorably become diggers. She sees it happen with one of them, and at the end of the novel has joined a group of the diggers as a kind of hanger-on.

As regards the novel's central image of strange labour, the huge diggings that those taken by the visitation work on mainly suggest lack of differentiation, sameness, nullity. The diggings can hardly enter into the action of the novel; those who work on them are out of contact and can't take part in a narrative. When characters like Dave and Miranda contemplate them, an enigmatic complication comes into view in their mazes, as if there might be differentiation and thence some meaning. Dave speculates wildly about the diggings as about the source of the visitation itself, but only by way of play. The reader is, arguably, thrown back on all the varieties of work that those who are immune to the visitation engage in – futile in the long run, but differentiated: useful, necessary, violent, suggestive of the position of women even in this post-apocalyptic world, abandoned. And the relics of industrial production, the vast grim ruined but persisting factories for instance, have an impressive power to haunt that the diggings lack. The diggings and the work of the diggers seem to work more as a kind of null point in the post-apocalyptic world than as a symbol of, say, alienated labour in ours.