# Children of the Apocalypse:

## Why Fictional Children Make Us Feel Better About the End of the World

by

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For my dad, who taught me how to read and write,

but also how to survive the apocalypse.

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*Abstract*

This thesis examines the characters of children in apocalyptic fiction and their role within - and relevance for - broader family and societal structures. Focusing on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), and Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020), I ask how these children function both in their respective novels and in the genre as a whole. I am interested specifically in their purpose beyond their typical roles as plot devices to amplify the stakes of survival for adult characters. What readerly emotions are evoked by these novels, and in what ways can we read them to help reckon with real-world experiences of climate change and anxieties about the future? What impact does remembering, telling, and creating stories about the past and the potential future have on readers on a societal level?

In an effort to answer these questions, I examine *The Road* in my first chapter in tandem with a chapter in *Critical Trauma Studies* by Amanda Wicks. Wicks' looks at the same novel through the lens of trauma and memory. I engage with her argument and expand it to focus on child characters specifically, looking at how the man in *The Road* is crippled by his memories of the past and how this contrasts his son's fresh look at the world, post-apocalypse. Wicks' focus on narration as a tool to remember, re-remember, and restructure is central to my argument.

My second chapter invokes the work of Dr. Murray Bowen, specifically his family systems theory and a few of its components: natural systems, differentiation of self, and societal emotional process/societal anxiety. I use these theories in tandem with close analysis of the three novels, taking a scholarly approach to texts that are often considered purely entertainment and escapist. I propose that the way in which McCarthy, Mandel, and Millet write their children and families is indicative of emotional processes that individual readers and society on a larger scale are experiencing in the present day.

In my third and fourth chapters, I return to literary analysis of all three apocalyptic novels, using Bowen's theories as well S.E. Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources theory to enhance my readings of *Station Eleven* and *A Children's Bible*. Examining the texts in chronological order of publication, I consider how authors have evolved in their interpretations of children as agents of change in apocalyptic landscapes. I argue that their role is a response to the anxiety their parents harbor about the future of the world. Their youth and lack of experience of the past allows them to move forward, while signaling change and hope for a better future to those who read these novels.

**key words**: apocalyptic fiction, children, memory, narration, escapism, Bowen family systems, societal emotional process

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*Short Titles*

*FE:* Kerr, Michael E., and Murray Bowen. *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory.*, W W Norton & Co, 1988.

*FTCP:* Bowen, Murray. *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. 1978. J. Aronson: Distributed by Scribner Book Companies, 1990.

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**Introduction**

We read to our children, at least my parents did, before they're even born. To read to a child before bed is synonymous with saying goodnight, I love you, I'm glad you exist and you're my responsibility. We want them to recognize our voices, to feel safe around us from the moment they enter the world, and these stories we read to them are meant to stick with them as they grow up in the form of hazy memories or fundamental moral lessons. These moral lessons function to refresh the adult memory too, and more importantly they reflect on the impulse to give structure to the past[1] — the desire to tell and retell stories to ourselves and our children. Why, then, if we desire these safe stories, do we read and write books that speculate at disaster?

Apocalyptic fiction reflects some of the deepest fears that humans hold for our own futures, working in a variety of ways to alleviate or encourage these fears. At the forefront of these novels is the story of the parent trying to give their child a better life than their own. For these parents, having recently experienced an apocalyptic event inevitably makes this struggle much more difficult than it would be in realistic fiction about the twenty-first century, and this distinction is central to why these stories are so pervasive. The stories ask us to consider how we would react in the face of catastrophe, what we would preserve, and who we would protect. The answer to the latter is, of course, the youngest generations, whose job it will be to revive society (or create a new, better one). I will use *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006), *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel (2014), and *A Children's Bible* by Lydia Millet (2014) as my primary texts, all three of which are twenty-first century examples of apocalyptic literature.

Woven into each story are questions about *how* the older generation can most effectively pass the correct knowledge, the correct stories and histories, on to the younger generation. It is easy to assume that the apocalyptic novel is one of escapism, allowing the reader to remove

[1] "Structuring impulse", as explained by Amanda Wicks, is more explicitly discussed in chapter one.

themselves from their current reality in favor of one much more dangerous, thinking, "Yes, it's bad here, but at least it could be worse." But are these the stories we want to read to our children before bed? What moral lessons can they take from that? Instead, this thesis will argue that the apocalyptic novel is, like the bedtime story, a love letter to our children, and an important theoretical study on how families and collectives function in the face of disaster. These families look different from book to book and author to author: the boy and his father in *The Road* are the smallest family but nevertheless demonstrate the same societal structures as the Traveling Symphony in *Station Eleven,* and Lydia Millet deconstructs traditional families and rebuilds them as groups of children protecting one another from a world their parents destroyed. All, while apocalyptic and exaggerated, are reflected in and perhaps indicative of the families and societal groups we live in as readers. These novels ask us to take a critical look at how our society exists as a whole and in smaller parts, and what would happen if and when something catastrophic happens — whether that is fulfillment of our fear of nuclear war, a culmination of climate crises, or a pandemic more totally destructive than the one we're facing right now.

## Methodology

In order to analyze what these children and their family structures do for their respective apocalypses and those who read about them, I will invoke family psychological theory and the concept of "societal emotional process" developed by Dr. Murray Bowen, Conservation of Resources theory as defined by S.E. Hobfoll, as well as more specific analyses of memory and morality as they function for real and fictional children. My aim is not a definitive scientific explanation for why apocalyptic fiction "works", or why we like to read it; rather, I aim to explore *why* authors so often employ children as central to the development of these novels. What is their function beyond symbolizing our hope for the future, for the next generation, for

life after our current realities? Did McCarthy, Mandel, Millet, and their contemporaries write these novels to warn us? To help us escape reality? To blame adults for current world problems, or to remind us that it could be worse? The family and trauma psychology add an additional angle that demonstrates not just why we like these novels as fiction but why they might be read as essential representations of contemporary fears and anxieties; that, even in a fictional catastrophic future, parent-child relationships mirror societal anxiety as a whole. Therefore, I will use the psychological theory as just that—theory—that will aid in my literary analysis of three apocalyptic novels.

In my first chapter, I will focus on McCarthy's *The Road,* beginning with the earliest of my three texts so that each may build effectively on the next. *The Road's* father and son are essential figures in the sphere of apocalyptic literature, and their archetypal forms make them the perfect duo onto which I will attempt to project family psychological concepts. Even more central to the novel is the idea of memory, which Amanda Wicks discusses in her *Critical Trauma Studies* chapter, "No Other Tale to Tell: Trauma and Acts of Forgetting In *The Road".* Memory and narration go hand in hand: this thesis will therefore begin by introducing *The Road* as an important junction at which the two intersect, clash, or work together to speculate about the future. This section will examine traumatic memories in the context of the quintessential apocalyptic journey to an elusive safe haven, highlighting how the boy acts as a moral compass for his father. It also explores the boy's book, which he carries everywhere, and the role this book plays as a physical representation of the past and moral guide for him.

My second chapter will delve into family psychology and trauma studies, giving background information and critical analysis of Bowen's work as it relates to the families in apocalyptic fiction. Bowen explains biological natural systems theory in detail, applying it to

family systems in a way not previously done in the field of psychology. He then writes eight concepts of his family psychology approach. Of these eight, I have selected two that are preoccupied with children as gravitational forces within the families and societies that surround them. The chapter will look into this selection of Bowen's concepts and theory as they relate to the family structures in contemporary apocalyptic literature: **natural systems theory**, in which Bowen introduces human emotional processes as categorically and functionally the same as any biological system; **self-differentiation,** the process by which children become individuals emotionally separate from their parents; and **societal emotional process**, the idea that our anxieties about the state of the world and uncertainties about the future are directly reflected in the way we raise our children. The latter two come directly from the group of Bowen's eight concepts, and I have selected them as I believe they are most applicable to the children in apocalyptic novels. Bowen's work comes from decades before *The Road* was written, let alone *Station Eleven* in 2014 and *A Children's Bible* in 2020. I will address the ways in which it is still useful to analyze these theories, but just as importantly, the ways in which these theories might no longer mesh with the way we view families and societal structures but can pave the way for new viewpoints.

My third chapter returns to literary analysis, this time illuminated by the psychological theory from chapter two. The chapter will examine Mandel's *Station Eleven* and its characters through the lens of Bowen's concepts, while also returning to the trope of children carrying books through apocalyptic terrain: two of the main children in Mandel's novel carry the same comic book, and I want to explore how this obsession with a world-within-a-world allows readers to examine their own attachment to fictional worlds. Mandel's novel plays with time and memory as well; therefore, I will build upon ideas from chapter one in this third chapter. Chapter

four exampines Millet's *A Children's Bible*. It is the most recent of my three texts and explores a climate crisis as its catastrophic event. Like the children in the previous two novels, one of the young boys has an obsession with a book, too. I will parse the moral lessons of all of these books, regardless of their other subject matter, and I will look at how this attachment is reflective of our own society. Each individual child's attachment to his or her book of choice is a relationship similar to that of society's with fiction, apocalyptic or otherwise: we use fiction as a guide, and it is through untrue stories that we can often uncover truths about ourselves.

In my conclusion, I will return to Bowen's societal emotional process to look at how, depending on our position within history, the anxieties passed from parent to child and generation to generation shift to reflect this position. I hope to illuminate the real and potential impact apocalyptic fiction can have as a genre, how reflective it is of our own world, and the roles of narration and memory in making it impactful.

## Chapter One: "Each the other's world entire"

In his first televised interview, in 2008, Cormac McCarthy responds suggestively to Oprah's question: "Is [*The Road*] a love story to your son?" McCarthy explains that, yes, his experience as a father of a young boy who was born into a different world than the one in which McCarthy grew up informed the novel's two main characters. On a trip with his four-year-old son a few years before the book's publication, he began to imagine the barren wasteland of the novel, feeling both grateful for his young son and terrified of the generational differences between them. The author recounts this in reply to Oprah's question: "If we had read this book twenty-five years ago, twenty years ago, it would have seemed futuristic. But something about it feels ominous and real". McCarthy grew up with very little, expressing to Oprah that, above all else, "you gotta have clothes and shoes." His ideology of freedom and self-sustainability is evident in his novels preceding *The Road* and most certainly in the novel itself, which introduces a unique writing style that reflects just how barren the landscape is and just how self-sufficient the characters have to be. One can go pages in *The Road* without encountering a comma: when they do appear, it is usually to indicate the minimal dialogue exchanged between the man and his son. Their apocalypse has stripped bare the landscape; McCarthy similarly strips bare his prose, removing punctuation so as to draw our attention to the utter lack of everything and everyone. Likewise, McCarthy's characters are simply named "the man" and "the boy", perhaps making space for the reader to map on their own parent-child relationship to the story and feel more connected. Additionally, their namelessness allows the reader to view the relationship as a universal archetype that, if traced, can be found throughout the genre of apocalyptic fiction whether they are parent-child duos, found families, or children caring for one another. Therefore,

I will begin my analysis with the father-son relationship in *The Road* to illuminate the complex role of children in apocalyptic literature.

In building *The Road's* context, McCarthy introduces the father and son duo traversing the burned-up world with the idea that not only has the world outside ended, but that the boy's birth as it coincided with the start of the apocalypse has forever altered the man's relationship with himself and the world. The boy, then, has never known anything but the destroyed world, living with only his father and only knowing their constant movement toward the indeterminate end of "south", where it is warmer and safer. McCarthy builds this effect in the first few pages, beginning a new day of walking toward their indeterminate end: "Then they set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light shuffling through the ash, *each the other's world entire*" [italics mine] (6).

I want to linger for a moment on the odd construction of language here. McCarthy's choice to invert "entire world," placing the adjective second to the noun and at the end of both the sentence and paragraph has the effect of making the world exist not around but within their relationship; the man is quite literally the boy's reason for existing as he would be dead without him, and the boy is the man's reason to keep going and metaphorically, in effect, a moral compass for him. I will engage with morality directly in later chapters; presently, I want to place the man and the boy firmly as archetypes in apocalyptic literature. Because the desolation of their environment is so complete, in contrast to the other two worlds in *Station Eleven* and *A Children's Bible,* McCarthy's novel is able to build these characters as totally reliant on one another both physically and emotionally.

Beginning with the man, he represents what is frequently depicted as the hero of the apocalypse, the lone survivor that managed not to die because of a combination of luck,

preparedness, and just the right moral code and emotional strength that allowed him to keep going when others might find it to all be too much. In this case, it is the boy's mother and the man's wife, who appears in dreams and memories from before she committed suicide, haunting the man in the story's present narrative. The man's character will become familiar to us: he has completely abandoned the concept of want, of desire, and of living for himself, instead keeping himself alive only so that his son will have a chance at survival. He clings to few possessions: a shopping cart with coats and blankets, a gun with two bullets, and the boy's book[2]—also nameless but a representation of the morality and stories the man deems important enough to keep as extra weight on their backs.

The boy will become another familiar character in the genre of apocalypse; but at the same time, each child written into an end-of-the-world story is both unique and universal. Each might be read to represent the author's own relationship with a child in their life, and is also applicable to each reader's personal experiences with children and as a child themselves. Thus whether or not one can relate to the man as a character, father, or survivalist, it is difficult not to relate to - or at least understand - the boy's wonder, to marvel at the intelligent and provocative questions he asks of the man throughout the novel and to feel emotionally tied to saving the boy's life more so than the man's. In other words, we can grapple with and even accept the man's death at the end of the novel, knowing that the boy has found others to take care of him. The boy is innocent against all odds, and purely so in that he has never seen the world before the apocalypse. And despite this, or perhaps *because* of this, the boy has an unyielding attachment to a simple set of morals: that they are and must remain "the good guys" (McCarthy 77).

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[2] The boy's book is analogous to the "Station Eleven" comic as well as "A Child's Bible", both of which we will encounter in subsequent chapters. But, like his character, his book is nameless, a blueprint for the named books that guide named children in *Station Eleven* and *A Children's Bible.*

As the "good guys", McCarthy's man and boy are "carrying the fire", a notion that resurfaces multiple times in the novel to encapsulate what makes the man and the boy different from the other characters they encounter on the road (83). The "fire" is all things hopeful; those who do not have it are the survivors, "bloodcults" who turned to murder and cannibalism when the world ended (16). As we will see repeatedly in different apocalyptic narratives, a child is fundamentally used to remind both the characters and other readers of these simple moral ideas. In asking the man, "are we still the good guys?", the boy is really reminding his father that he made this statement at one point, and that the boy is clinging to his every word (77). It brings him back to a center around which everything else is relatively right or wrong, using the boy as a blank slate onto whom he has the opportunity to impress these "good" or "bad" values.

Because of the "barren, silent, godless" nature of the world they inhabit, there is a double meaning in this notion of a blank slate: the boy's scope of knowledge and ability to understand his father's experiences is represented literally by their physical location (McCarthy 4). In other words, the lack of society around the last two remaining "good guys" gives the man a new perspective on what it means to be good, and allows—perhaps even forces—the reader to reevaluate their own reality as it stands in relation to this speculative one. The barren world of *The Road* is a space in which a thought experiment could take place: why does being morally good matter if no one is around to make judgements on it, or to be hurt should the man stray from what he knows to be right? The boy, having no frame of reference at this stage of the novel for what goodness will do for people aside from himself and his father, gives us the sense that these morals are almost innate. To remember the past in such a completely destroyed world is futile, but the desire to distinguish between good and bad remains; so too does an urgency to maintain goodness in the context of the father and son's relationship.

When McCarthy describes the man and the boy as "Each the other's world entire", he invites the reader to picture a world in which they have only one other person to take care of, to depend upon for social support and physical survival, and therefore without whom they would have no world at all. For the purposes of this analysis, I want to define one's "world" as a mindspace in which one experiences the world firsthand and hears narratives of other worlds before applying these two perspectives to develop a self and a system of beliefs[3]. The man lived in and experienced a pre-apocalypse world; he has memories of people he loved, spaces he inhabited, years and years of life to grieve each time he remembers this past. The boy, on the other hand, came into consciousness knowing only his father and a barren wasteland. Now, the boy becomes the man's only reason to keep going: his world entire.

In a chapter of *Critical Trauma Studies* entitled "No Other Tale to Tell: Trauma and Acts of Forgetting In *The Road",* Amanda Wicks discusses the effects of narration and time on memories, especially those which construct our personal worlds when we have experienced trauma. She posits that working through this trauma "becomes a narrativizing act, because the act of remembering and recounting structures *through* language what has occurred *beyond* language" (Wicks 135). Outside of an apocalyptic story, this narrativizing act may be one that soothes and helps heal the traumatized individual. When the trauma is continuous and unrelenting as in *The Road,* Wicks explains that the characters interact with traumatic memory differently "by considering traumatic memory as a dangerous connection to a damaged and damaging past that must be discarded" (Wicks 136). The man holds the philosophy that "the right dreams for a man in peril [are] dreams of peril and that all else [is] the call of languor and of death" (McCarthy 18). This could be read purely as a steadfast refusal to be delusional about the dangers around

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[3]Development of self here is not dissimilar to the concept of self-differentiation, which I will introduce in chapter two.

him, but I find that it furthers Wicks' argument, fitting precisely with the idea that to stop existing in this moment of continuous peril is to dwell on the past through narration. The man and the boy "have no time to pause and work through their memories of the apocalyptic event and the subsequent traumas it entailed"(Wicks 137), meaning that not only do they lack the luxury of free time in which to cope, talk, and heal, but they also lack the psychological means of doing so because the trauma is still ongoing.

Wicks' argument provides a new approach for readers of apocalyptic fictions, posing that we as humans, readers, and writers have a "structuring impulse", a desire and a need to write (over and over) about what might happen in the future, *if* we continue on our current path, *if* any number of our fears came true. She explains that while there are a number of functions within the apocalyptic narratives, "at the heart of the genre exists the inclination to comfort, criticize existing social and political structures, and make sense of the seemingly incomprehensible" (Wicks 140). Readers and creators of these stories are at the end of this process: they have imagined, criticized, and made sense of a terrifying irreality all within the neat confines of one story. On the contrary, the man and the boy have not yet exited the immediacy of their trauma. Wicks brings into play Henri Bergson's theory of time and the idea that "it is nearly impossible to think analytically in the midst of duration" (Wicks 144). The man and the boy exemplify this near impossibility because they have to keep moving on the road toward the south, otherwise they will die in the cold of the northern winter[4].

The man in particular suffers from both an inability to recount what is still occurring around him and a resurfacing of memories that he would rather forget. Most notably, these come to him in the form of his dead wife, with whom he argues about the boy's future and their role as

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[4]Bergson's *Time and Freewill* phrases the reality of this continual forward movement through and constantly in traumatic spaces when he states, “It is certainly possible to perceive in time, and in time only, a succession which is nothing but a succession, but not an addition, i.e. a succession which culminates in a sum” (Bergson, 78-79).

survivors in the post-apocalyptic world. He remembers flashes of her in the years and moments before she kills herself, but these "dreams of peril" come to him unsolicited and he does not have the time nor the capacity to process them. His inability to fully narrate these stories to the boy is portrayed in a way that emphasizes the impact these narratives then have on the reader: McCarthy's novel narrates a character that cannot himself narrate his experiences, and yet the "structuring impulse" makes us want to know, in narrative form, what he holds in his continuing duration of memory. But how can McCarthy create a traumatized character in such a way that readers still grasp what he does remember? I want to suggest that the boy is then a necessary tool that lets the man, regardless of memory and speech, continue on the road; the necessity is not just to keep the boy safe for the purpose of prolonging humanity, but to "carry the fire" by maintaining a true family structure with moral scaffolding holding it together.

Interrupting the man's enduring trauma and unremembering journey down the road are physical relics of the old world that, for a moment, bring him back to his pre-apocalypse memories. McCarthy places them along the road: a train, a semi-truck, even his childhood home, seeming to ask us: while the man remembers these things, what does the boy make of them? Physical relics such as these ask the reader to return to the idea of memory being finite and sometimes incommunicable given one's experiences of their apocalypse. While these relics would be purely nostalgic in a story focused around the adults, survivors able to recall the world before, the focus on children as receivers of this historical memory allows the reader to imagine those who have no experience with the world as we know it now, and yet are the future. This fact makes reading about these apocalypses comforting in our current society, allowing us to project these anxieties onto a fictional world.

McCarthy's man and boy encounter an old train that has been abandoned in a failed attempt to flee south. The boy finds the train first, a noteworthy fact in itself because of the boy's age in relation to the disaster; he has never seen a train save those in his book, or perhaps has heard how they look from his father. We are unsure of how he knows this, and his questions demonstrate a knowledge of basic morals and ability to process information separate from direct observation or explicit instruction from a parent. The man, too, displays a unique reflective ability on the world as he watches the boy explore:

> They went through the last of the cars and then walked up the rack to the locomotive and climbed up to the catwalk. Rust and scaling paint. They pushed into the cab and he blew away the ash from the engineer's seat and put the boy at the controls. The controls were very simple. Little to do but push the throttle forward. He made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasn’t sure what these might mean to the boy. After a while they just looked out through the silted glass to where the track curved away in the waste of weeds. If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same, That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again.
>
> Can we go, Papa?
>
> Yes. Of course we can. (McCarthy 180)

The reader is asked to picture the complete destruction of not only the landscape and the people but of ways of life. Modes of organized transportation signal working systems to the man and to readers who do not know life without them, but what do they mean to the boy? His role in this passage is to remind the man and the reader what "total destruction" really means for the future

of humankind. How can these train noises mean anything at all to the boy if he has no means of understanding the systems that created them? The man's following thoughts take the position that recollection and reminiscence are pointless as they will not help the boy stay alive in the next hours, days, or years. The novel continues to present encounters with, and questions about the old world that are handled much in the same manner, allowing the boy to ask, but ending with the hopeless realization that he will never understand and never benefit from them in his lifetime. He can be told that the train was probably moving south, that the controls he is playing with correspond to this movement directly, even picture his father and other people riding this imaginary train. But he has no visual memories of the pre-apocalypse landscape, has never seen other people save a few encounters with "bad guys" along the road, and therefore does not have the full capacity to understand the loss his father has experienced in losing this system. Nor is he burdened by his father's losses; the things he perceives as necessary for survival, both physically and emotionally, are finite and fewer than those of the man.

The boy cannot know what his father lost, and perhaps this makes it easier for the man to decide what he should attempt to explain versus what is best left in the old world. But apocalypses in other novels present us with children that complicate this clean break. Some are just old enough to maintain hazy memories, some experience catastrophic loss during their teenage years, still others are born post-apocalypse but into new societies that now grapple with how to educate them. For instance, *Station Eleven's* children have more access to information and more of a connection to the pre-apocalypse world; this makes it more difficult for parent and adult figures to work out what they should teach the children and what relics are better left in the past. One such conversation occurs twenty years after the novel's pandemic:

> "I don't know,", [Jeevan's] friend was saying now, "Does it still make sense to teach kids about the way things were?" His name was Michael, and he'd been a truck driver once. McKinley had a school, ten children who met daily in the largest motel room, and his eleven-year-old daughter had come home crying that afternoon, because the teacher had let slip that life expectancies were much longer before the Georgia Flu, that once sixty hadn't been considered particularly old, and she was scared, she didn't understand, it wasn't *fair*, she wanted to live as long as people used to. (Mandel 267)

Jeevan's wife goes on to say that she would want her kids to know about "those incredible things" they had— she asks, "I suppose the question is, does knowing these things make them more or less happy?" For the boy in *The Road*, the man is essentially asking himself this very question, though the nature of their apocalypse leaves him without fellow adults with whom to discuss what they should teach. Jeevan and the other *Station Eleven* adults (whom I will introduce in chapter three) are grappling with the fact that they are the last generation to remember these things firsthand, to have learned them through experience rather than myth or stories.

The desire to teach every part of their history is then perhaps another form of Wicks' "structuring impulse": it makes them feel more secure in their own experiences to recount the stories, restructure the trauma into digestible parts, but what differs here is best stated by the man: "If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same". In *Station Eleven*, perhaps what they know is not the same. While the adults know the world will never look like it once did, the children, who have never known it to look any different, have the ability to imagine a future for themselves that is an improvement on their current reality. It is in this instance that the

uncertainty about their future causes a disconnect between generations: pausing to work through the trauma, as Wicks tells us, might be the very thing that keeps the adults from moving forward. The children, however, have nearly a clean slate.

## Chapter Two: Bowen Family Systems Theory

Psychiatrist Murray Bowen's family systems theory approached the family, and its function in society, through a lens that included the family system as a part of biological and scientific systems. This view was new in the field, which overwhelmingly saw human systems as separate from animals and other natural systems. His work began at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, training in psychiatry from 1946 until he moved to the National Institute of Mental Health (hereafter N.I.M.H.) in Bethesda, Maryland in 1954. Here he began studying patients with schizophrenia and their families as a unit by having them live at the institute so that their dynamics could be examined as (and in) a group. This N. I. M. H. project marked the start of the research that influenced Bowen's delineation of the family systems theory, of which the eight concepts are still used in family therapy practice to this day. In "An Odyssey Toward Science", Bowen's epilogue to his 1988 book, *Family Evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory* written in tandem with Michael Kerr, Bowen described how his time at N.I.M.H. contributed to the development of the family systems theory. Bowen states that "existing systems theory did not fit well with the idea of the human as an evolutionary being…I fashioned a natural systems theory, designed to fit precisely with the principles of evolution and the human as an evolutionary being" (*FE* 360). Following his work at N.I.M.H., Bowen then moved to the Psychiatry Department at Georgetown University in 1959, where he worked and taught in the growing field of family therapy. From this point to the publication of *Family Evaluation* in 1988, Bowen (and students of his theory) focused on developing family systems as a scientific theory, eventually introducing and defining the concept of "societal regression" in the 1970s.

I want to emphasize the lack of connection between psychiatry and scientific theory prior to Bowen: his work pioneered the connection between the natural system and human emotion,

challenging the notion that human emotion was elevated above and separate from the scientific systems being studied outside of psychiatry. "Societal regression", also called "societal emotional process", takes the emotional system theory applied to the individual families in the N.I.M.H. studies and proposes that it can also explain trends in societal anxieties. Specifically, it has implications for societal anxiety about the future during a period of uncertainty or disaster and is reflected in the ways in which parents raise and treat their children. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on a selection of Bowen's concepts that correspond to the ideas raised by contemporary apocalyptic fiction: natural systems theory, differentiation of self, and societal emotional process[5]. These chosen concepts are applicable to apocalyptic children and families in the sense that they explain individual connections through one-on-one parent/child attachments, but also draw them out to explain how the micro-level functioning (or lack thereof) in a family system is both impacted by and representative of larger societal structures and emotional processes on the macro-level. Each relationship within these novels provides a concrete network of characters onto which readers might map their own experiences as a reader; alternatively or perhaps additionally, one could also map generational and societal structures onto these characters and the ways they react to their respective apocalyptic events. With this conversation between the individual and societal in mind, I will return to societal emotional process throughout the thesis because it provides the strongest connection between Bowen's considerably older theory and the psychological desire to read and write apocalyptic literature today.

The first, and perhaps most versatile, of Bowen's concepts is that of the natural system. He bases the theory on this premise:

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[5] For brevity, I will refer to natural systems, differentiation of self, and societal emotional process collectively as "Bowen's concepts". I recognize, however, that only the latter two are part of his published eight concepts, while natural systems theory is detailed separately.

> Throughout all of human history we have, for the most part, taught ourselves to view the human as a unique form of life on the planet, as a species whose behavior is governed by processes having little consistency with the processes that govern the behavior of the rest of the living things… we have also been inclined to regard the human as the most important form of life on Earth, the crowning achievement of God's creation. (*FE* 3)

On the contrary, however, Kerr says that Bowen's "family systems theory is based on the assumption that the human is a product of evolution and that human behavior is significantly regulated by the same natural processes that regulate the behavior of all other living things" (*FE* 3). This quote comes from the opening of "Toward A Natural Systems Theory", one of Kerr's many chapters within *Family Evaluation*. I point this out because the words do not come directly from Bowen; however, I will continue to refer to the work as authored by both of them because of their professional closeness: Kerr worked under Bowen and was a professor at the Bowen Family Center. Bowen's observations of patients with schizophrenia and their families, he proposed, was simply a microcosm of a natural process of psychology, and one that demonstrated how the family works as a unit. The schizophrenic, Bowen thought, was more or less a state of exaggerated emotion, and therefore the family unit as functional as an emotional unit (noting that "emotion" refers to those functions "that [are] governed by emotional reaction, feeling, and subjectivity") (*FE* 7). The time period in which Bowen and Kerr studied schizophrenia has left their references to it outdated and ill-informed for today's readers, but the study nevertheless draws valuable and interesting conclusions about family units and emotional processes.

Bowen's work drew, unsurprisingly, on that of Freud, using the Freudian notion of unconscious forces governing our conscious actions to posit that humans "have precious little autonomy from their environment. The thoughts, feelings, and behavior of each family member… both contribute to *and* reflect what is occurring in the family as a whole" (*FE* 9). I want to pause on the former sentence about people lacking autonomy from our environment. Perhaps the most important factor in an apocalyptic novel is the structuring of its environment. The authors of these stories must create not only a fictional world of relationship and emotional connections among characters, but must also establish a pre-apocalypse reality – a sequence of events that causes the fall - and imagine how humans might restructure society in the aftermath. Doing this type of work within a fictional world raises the question, as posed by literary critic Andrew Tate in his book on the genre: "Is it possible to imagine a future as anything more than a dispiritingly inevitable product of our wrecked present?" (Tate 129). In other words, does apocalyptic fiction have to be directly attached to our current anxieties to function in our society? Why is it that fiction about the future brings us closer to the truth than existing in the present does?

It is in the context of this question that natural systems theory allows us to dissect the role of children in these novels as essential parts of a whole emotional family unit. In this case the family unit may be traditional, like the man and the boy in *The Road*, but the definition functions broadly and could encompass the entire Traveling Symphony in *Station Eleven*; it also works doubly in *A Children's Bible* for the individual families vacationing together and the group of children as a whole who function as a unit apart from their delusional parents. Bowen uses biological theory to argue that parts of a whole "so mutually influence one another that there exist 'wholes'... that must be understood as entities in their own right" (*FE* 10).

It may seem obvious and perhaps rudimentary to apply biological parts and wholes as a metaphor to family units, but keep in mind that at the time of Bowen's earlier works, applying scientific systems to emotion was still very new. Kerr takes us through the history of systems thinking, going so far as to use the theory of universal gravitation: "Like all great scientists, Newton saw simplicity where others saw only clutter and detail. He saw a *process* where others had only seen content" and thus could track the planets with greater accuracy (*FE* 16). Kerr draws on this theory to point out that humans have always desired a distinction between process and content, and that by theorizing human emotion and psychological reactions as processes rather than just noting their occurrences (content), one will gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of how the family functions in society and how we in turn react to society.

While I find that this description borders on glorifying Bowen a bit too much by equating his theory to the discovery of gravitational fields, it does call attention to an important point about apocalyptic fiction: to analyze the potential future through imaginary worlds is to go through emotional *processes* with the characters and to put oneself (the reader) into these family systems and, in turn, larger societies. Without these narratives to do the imagining in such a cohesive manner, we would be left simply agonizing over rapidly rising sea levels and new record high temperatures without the mental spaces in which to process them.The narratives provide a mental space, apart from the fears we harbor in our real-world lives about the real and potential disasters we are facing, and it is in this mental space that we may process the hypothetical. The genre goes beyond escapism, though many discount these novels as such: we digest these characters, particularly and especially the children, to understand the infinitude of hypothetical disaster spaces we leave to future generations, and rely on the characters of children to act as moral checkpoints along the way. Are we leaving them something worth saving? Have

we instilled in them the right balance of anxiety for the future and trust that they can handle it? These are the questions that rise from the liminal spaces of these narratives and are handled explicitly in Bowen and Kerr's work. My aim in connecting the two is to use Bowen's ideas about processing emotions in relation to family and societal systems to navigate these very systems within apocalyptic novels and in the lives of those who read them.

Along these lines, I want to highlight another aspect of Kerr's chapter on natural systems: psychoanalytic theory as studying only the individual. The distinction between individuals and families segues well into thinking more specifically about families in an apocalyptic world rather than those in a 1950s schizophrenia study. Kerr is quick to emphasize the distinctions between Freudian psychoanalysis and Bowen natural systems theory, the most important being that the first focuses on the individual and the human while the latter is about the group and begins in nature. He describes the problem as being that "many psychoanalytic concepts appear to have been developed from ways of thinking that emphasize man's uniqueness as a form of life", and that the unconscious mind makes us act in animalistic ways (*FE* 20). Hence, he points out that, while humankind is unique in our ability to process, delay, and transform emotional reaction in ways that other species cannot, there are plenty of settings in which animals have demonstrated cooperation, even altruism, and plenty of others in which humans have been intentionally violent and brutal towards one another. A perfect example of this is the imagined apocalypse, in which, as we will see in chapter three, characters are required to abandon previous moral codes in favor of one that will help them and their families survive.

Moving away from natural systems for a moment, Bowen's concept of differentiation of self can be traced through the family systems in apocalyptic fiction, accounting for differences in upbringing, traumatic experiences, and belief systems as children grow up in apocalyptic

realities. The concept states that the human ability to simultaneously maintain individuality and complex social cohesion is what makes humankind uniquely capable of progress and communication. Kerr examines this idea through E. O. Wilson's properties of social organization: "*cohesiveness, altruism,* and *cooperativeness"* (*FE* 89). I will not devote too much time to dissecting these three points because it quickly becomes very nuanced; however, the chapter on differentiation of self brings up questions about how humans function as individuals within a natural system. Kerr elaborates: "Humans are preoccupied with kinship ties to a degree that is not possible in other social species. The capacity for this level of exchange appears to provide considerable motivation for cooperation" (*FE* 91). Because of this "motivation to cooperate", Kerr explains, family systems run the smoothest when every member of the family has developed self-differentiation: the ability to distinguish the self as an individual operating within a system, rather than defining the self only in relation to others. Bowen writes about it as the "differentiation-of-self scale", implying that it can change over time and is affected by a variety of factors. A lack of differentiation can come from a parent who projects their anxieties onto the child, making the child in turn become entirely dependent on the parent. I will trace levels of differentiation as presented by Tyler and Kirsten in *Station Eleven*, the group of children in *A Children's Bible,* and the boy in *The Road* in chapter three, looking in particular at the notion of adaptiveness to stress. Bowen's ideas go so far as to suggest that the more differentiated a child is from one's family, the more capable they are of managing stressful situations. If they are not well-differentiated from a parent or parental figure, a person struggles to "differentiate between thoughts and feelings", responding emotionally instead of rationally to their environment (*FE* 101).

Critics of Bowen's theory argue that this scale, while working on a theoretical level, has limitations when applied in research and used in therapy (Miller 454). For the purposes of my thesis, though, I will maintain that the theoretical uses prove beneficial: the essentials of self-differentiation tie back to the family system as a natural system and exemplify why we feel the need to write and read about families experiencing a narrative version of our own anxieties. Our "preoccupation with kinship ties", as Kerr puts it, is so strong that it is unsurprising to see the same preoccupation coupled with anxiety about what would happen if our individual selves and family groups were put into a high-stress situation such as an apocalypse. The children in these novels are essential because they put into an imagined world the anxieties we have about the "next generation". Again, the genre does more than help us escape: it depicts fictional people that let us see our real selves, families, and society from an outside perspective.

This anxiety returns us to the idea of societal regression: the idea that our individual and family-centered anxieties can be translated to a societal level, and that our anxieties about the future are directly translated into the way we treat future generations and depict them in literature. Bowen began his focus on societal regression—also called societal emotional process[6]—in the 1950s, following the thread that post World War Ⅱ, fear of the atomic bomb, coupled with general societal change throughout the country, caused an increase in anxiety. The most thorough work on societal emotional process comes a decade before *Family Evaluation* in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice,* originally published in 1978, hence the focus on the 1940s and 50s in this chapter. However, the concept feels shockingly accurate when applied to parental and societal anxieties today. After having studied families at N.I.M.H., Bowen writes:

[6] For the purpose of clarity, from this point forward I will only use the term "societal emotional process", unless specifically referring to a moment of regression that has occurred as a result of this process.

> Society's emotional reactiveness in dealing with societal problems is similar to the years of slow build-up of an emotional breakdown in a family. When the first symptom appears, the family either ignores it or does enough to relieve the immediate symptom… the process keeps repeating until the final breakdown, which is seen as having developed unexpectedly. (*FTCP* 273)

Here we see an example of how a family's emotional structure is replicated, a microcosm that when enlarged, fits onto a societal model in which each individual parent's anxiety about their own kid corresponds to older generations, anxious for what the future brings for the generation that is made up of their children. In the individual family model, each minute issue that gets ignored becomes an exponentially larger problem in its societal counterpart. This is when the apocalypse, real or imagined, appears: it is a result of generations of anxiety, inaction, and ignorance of the true threats looming over our heads.

Thus, cyclical ignorance of societal problems is arguably one of the most direct themes that apocalyptic fiction attempts to address. The above quotation likens society to individual families in that we do just enough to alleviate the problems we currently face; this does not bode well for future generations who must suffer the consequences. And these consequences come on seemingly unexpectedly, as do fictional apocalypses, but in reality have been building up each time a larger issue is patched with an incomplete bandage. These novels ask us to consider our current anxieties in relation to what they will potentially cause in the future, using constructed family systems to represent these anxieties. In this sense, the family groups with whom we spend the duration of an apocalyptic novel are microcosms for society as a whole, allowing the reader to project their own experiences onto these characters. What we would do to keep our families and groups together is tested in these situations; thus, we are able to see how the intense

stressors of an apocalyptic event cause these fictional characters to change their own values in order to keep themselves and their families safe.

## Chapter Three: "I have walked all my life through this tarnished world"

On January 25th, 2020, Emily St. John Mandel tweeted, "To all the distressed readers in my mentions: we're in agreement that it just wasn't a great week to start reading Station Eleven, and I don't like to think about the coronavirus either." *Station Eleven* was published in 2014, but, similar to the distressed readers in Mandel's twitter mentions, my first engagement with the novel and its apocalyptic flu outbreak was in a virtual classroom in early 2021.
Reading with this lived experience can make the novel hard to stomach at times, but, in other ways, it demonstrates how much worse a different virus could have been: Mandel's Georgia Flu came much more quickly, wiping out entire cities before most people even had a chance to learn how to isolate or socially distance. In this context, the speculative nature of the story has the effect of being almost comforting to read in the years after 2020. As Mandel was creating these characters, however, the types of societal anxiety that existed were not so drastically different as we might think: her writing and the novel's success reflects the very fact that people were and always are thinking about what might happen if the world as we know it suddenly ends. Just because we were not in the midst of a global pandemic like we are now, does not mean we were not ready to consider the likelihood of one. After all, society processes emotions in part by consuming literature that articulates and reflects the emotions. Therefore I propose that Bowen's societal emotional process theory, natural systems, and differentiation of self are valuable assets when analyzing the ways in which Mandel's *Station Eleven* characters navigate the aftermath of the flu. And, for those of us who read novels like *Station Eleven*, this application brings our reading beyond escapism: it asks us to think critically about how our family systems, and selves within them, reflect what will happen to the systems' youngest, most innocent, and perhaps strongest members.

Mandel's Kirsten Raymonde straddles the pre- and post-apocalyptic worlds, and she is extraordinary in both. She is a child actor alongside the famous Arthur Leander until, mid-performance, two simultaneous disasters strike: Arthur dies of a heart attack, and the Georgia Flu reaches a cataclysmic level, an immediate international emergency. Even in the novel's very first scene, Kirsten's role as a child is essential to *Station Eleven's* story as well as the story within it: a performance of *King Lear* (which would not traditionally feature an eight-year-old girl). Her importance as a child is two-fold in the first several pages, as she watches Lear, played by Arthur, die on-stage mere hours before the rest of the world—including Kirsten's parents—comes down with the Georgia Flu. We later learn that Arthur was an important figure in Kirsten's life, allowing her to spend time with him while they worked on *Lear.* Arthur's own connection to Kirsten is closer than that of his own son, and he gifts them both copies of "Station Eleven", a comic book written by his ex-wife. The two children have parallel yet notably different obsessions with the book, as a connection to Arthur and the pre-apocalypse world as well as an escape from reality. It appears that, before Arthur's death, Kirsten was well-differentiated from her parents in the sense that she worked as an actor in a professional production and was able to find companionship with Arthur, feeling safe and comfortable away from her family. For Kirsten, watching Arthur die on stage forces her into a state of rational thought, which because of her independence she is able to maintain rather than succumbing to pure emotion. In other words, she has the self-preservation skills, the ability to conserve social resources, because of her separation of emotional and rational thinking. Speaking with Jeevan, who attempts to save Arthur's life from the audience, Kirsten asks if Arthur is dead:

"Just now, he was doing the thing he loved best in the world."

Kirsten was quiet.

"My point is, if acting was the last thing he ever did, then the last thing he ever did was something that made him happy."

"Was that the last thing he ever did?" (Mandel 8)

Kirsten's response displays a unique maturity, and she follows it up by telling Jeevan that acting was "the thing [she loved] most in the world too" (8). But more importantly, her maturity in this scene reflects on the novel's audience, too; it provides us with a child that we believe will survive, whatever happens next. At this point, we, as readers, are still unaware of the flu itself, hence this introduction to Kirsten asks us to begin thinking about children in the context of disaster.

Before proceeding with detailed analysis of Station Eleven, I want to briefly address the concept of conservation of social resources. This notion stems from S. E. Hobfoll's theory of Conservation of Resources (hereafter COR), and is particularly interesting in the context of this novel for two reasons: First, because COR's use of the term "resource caravans" plays nicely with the literal caravans in which *Station Eleven's* characters travel; and second due to its definition of resources as more than just food, water, and shelter. Hobfoll's definition includes "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as the means for attainment of other objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies", meaning that the people, the family systems and individual relationships Kirsten has, are resources too (Hobfoll and Ford 563). Stress occurs in situations where our resources, or the ability to acquire them, has been threatened. Similar to how higher levels of self-differentiation lead to individual growth and ability to survive, more resources leads to lower levels of stress

and higher ability to maintain or re-gather resources in the face of loss (Hobfoll and Ford, 564). Kirsten's maturity and ability to maintain and regain resources as a child foreshadows her potential to survive once the apocalypse has been established in the narrative.

*Station Eleven* is written out of chronological order, and the next time we see Kirsten she is twenty years older, working on yet another production of *King Lear*. The novel's asynchronicity of narration is intentional and artful, conjuring scenes of the man in *The Road* as he is unwillingly throwing into moments of reflection and memory at rare moments of pause[7]. Back in *Station Eleven,* Kirsten is in her second production of *King Lear.* She lives with the Traveling Symphony, a close-knit group of actors and musicians who survived the destruction of the pandemic, finding one another and traversing what was once the midwestern United States to perform for the small towns made up of other survivors. Through flashbacks and interviews with a journalist for a post-apocalyptic newspaper, we learn slowly that Kirsten left Toronto on foot with her older brother. She explains, "I was eight. Nine, when we stopped walking. I can't remember the year we spent on the road, and I think that means I can't remember the worst of it" (Mandel 195). Her memories parallel the boy in *The Road* here, both being around eight years old and traveling on foot with an older guardian. Her lack of memory, too, fits with Wicks' notion that if one is actively experiencing trauma, there is no time to restructure these experiences into narration. As an adult, she cannot fulfill the journalist's structuring impulse with memories she does not possess. She views it, however, partially as a positive, reflecting once again her ability to go through the personal emotional processes of loss without remembering all of the details: most of her lived experience has been after the flu, and she holds the opinion that "the more you remember, the more you've lost" (Mandel 195). Because she has forgotten much

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[7]These moments of pause are often in his dreams: "The right dreams for a man in peril [are] the dreams of peril and that all else was the call of languor and death" (McCarthy 18).

of her traumatic experiences, losing her parents and eventually her brother, as well as seeing the immediate aftermath of the apocalypse on the road, her high level of self-differentiation seems to remain intact. She views herself as separate from her relationships likely due to the fact that so many of them were impermanent from an early age, and this allows her to join the Symphony while still recognizing that at any moment this new family may be taken from her.

Tyler, the son of actor Arthur Leander, is Kirsten's same age, yet grows up in a very different post-Georgia Flu world, and one that does not lend itself to a high level of self-differentiation. While Arthur is preparing to perform for the final time, Tyler is flying to Toronto from his home in Jerusalem with his mother, Elizabeth, on a plane that will never get there. Instead, they are rerouted to the Severn City Airport to avoid the flu. Tyler's character is opposite from Kirsten's from the start; for one, he behaves like the "typical" kid with whom readers are likely familiar. While Kirsten's first experiences of the apocalypse are Arthur's death and a trek on foot across two countries, we see Tyler "cross-legged on the floor… killing space aliens on a Nintendo console" (Mandel 235). He obsesses over his technology, numbing himself to the world because he is angry at Arthur and smothered by Elizabeth's parental anxiety. After a week, his Nintendo has died, but Tyler continues to isolate himself from others (though there are many other children in the airport). He sits alone, reading and rereading the comic book of "Station Eleven" or Elizabeth's copy of the New Testament. At this point it seems that Tyler has not had much opportunity to develop a self separate from his mother. He is only eight, just like Kirsten at this time in the storyline, and yet he seems to view himself only as an extension of his mother's thoughts and actions. Clark, an old friend of Arthur's also trapped in the airport, watches Tyler progress from a lonely kid to a scary one in this regard:

> 'Everything happens for a reason,' Tyler said. Clark hadn't noticed his approach. Tyler had been wandering the airport as of late, and he had a way of moving so quietly that he seemed to materialize out of nowhere. He spoke so rarely that it was easy to forget he was here. ‘That's what my mom said,’ he added when everyone stared at him. (Mandel 253)

Tyler’s repetition of the New Testament and his mother's teachings, as well as his antisocial behavior, represent the anxious parenting model that Bowen warns will lead to societal regression. The lack of differentiation from his mother, viewing himself as only a mouthpiece for her and her beliefs, mean that Tyler can only react emotionally to traumatic experiences. Therefore, as he grows up in a tumultuous and uncertain world, he lacks the capacity for more rational reactions. I want to call back Amanda Wicks and her notion of the "structuring impulse" here, this time to turn it on its head: Tyler's reading and rereading, telling and retelling of bible stories alters them every time he remembers them, but the combination of his lack of self-differentiation from Elizabeth (manifested in his obsession with the Bible, something he can share with her after she dies) and desire to add structure to a world where there is none culminates in what I call a *de*structive impulse. His desire to create narratives of the past that make meaning out of an indiscriminate enemy like the flu ultimately overcorrects, and his mis-interpretation of the Bible stories in combination with his use of "Station Eleven" breeds more disaster in the years to come.

Twenty years post-apocalypse, Tyler has assembled a cult of followers in the town of St. Deborah by the Water, where he is referred to only as "the prophet". Kirsten learns of this after leaving St. Deborah with the Symphony, when they find a young girl stowed away in their

caravan—she tells them she is "promised to the prophet" as his next wife. The girl is twelve years old, and tells the Symphony that Tyler "had a dream where God told him he was to repopulate the Earth" (Mandel 123). Societal emotional process is represented through time here, as Tyler has grown up first with Elizabeth's anxious and obsessive behaviors and now needs the emotional attachments of a cult-type following in order to feel safe in the post-apocalypse world. In his writings about societal emotional process, Bowen takes self-differentiation a step further to say that higher levels of individuality allow for a more cohesive societal whole; the more purely emotional reactions to trauma are, the more likely people are to follow one leader who tells them how to feel and live (i.e., a cult leader) (*FTCP* 279). In this sense, the fact that Tyler grows up in an uncertain atmosphere, where many people (including himself) have lost family members and social resource systems, enables him to create this "prophet" image. The young stowaway is a product of this environment: she was likely born to people who followed Tyler because they had no other means of social resources, and the community of St. Deborah gave them the resource system they lacked. The young girl promised to Tyler represents the aftermath of these initial emotional reactions to the apocalypse, where children who should have had a better childhood than their parents are instead reduced to pawns for the prophet to play with.

Kirsten and Tyler both own original copies of "Station Eleven" as gifts from Arthur, which they carry through their post-apocalypse lives as tokens of the old world, but also guidebooks for the new one. They are both products of their environments, living through different types of societal emotions because of who they grew up with, and because of this they read and interpret the comic in nearly opposite ways. Kirsten looks to the character of Dr. Eleven to guide her, feeling particularly attached to the phrase, "I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth" (Mandel 42). He lives on a space station, and

Kirsten looks to his loss of Earth and the way that it parallels her own society's loss of the world before the flu. And just as we turn to speculative narratives about the future to safely imagine what it might be like to lose everything, Kirsten turns to the imaginary life of Dr. Eleven to both help escape from her current reality and guide her through it. The book is in some ways her one concession to memory, an exception to her rule that the more you remember, the more you've lost. But more importantly, I am arguing that it underlines both Wicks' "structuring impulse" and Bowen's concept of societal emotional process: turning to art and storytelling to comfort herself and make sense of her experiences. However, she is also a child of the apocalypse that grows up without knowing exactly what the world was like when people had things like refrigerators and cars and computers, and feels the pull of people older than her who mourn these losses. The anxieties of the adults before her are unfamiliar to her, yet she feels the effects of them; similar to how the boy in *The Road* feels the effects of his father's trauma without being able to fully comprehend it. Both of these children carry a singular book with them for comfort but also for sanity, using the narratives to remind them about morals, about art, and about the importance of telling stories.

Tyler, on the other hand, interprets "Station Eleven" in order to fit his own agenda, which is, again, little more than a product of his upbringing and attachment to Elizabeth. He particularly loves "the Undersea", the comic's lowest caste of citizens who, after all of civilization has moved to the space station, live in "an interlinked network of vast fallout shelters under Station Eleven's oceans"(Mandel 83). Because he lacks self-differentiation, he reacts emotionally and sees himself as first an extension of his mother and later a mouthpiece for a higher power when he begins calling himself the prophet. He becomes obsessed with the Bible first, believing that he and the others in the Severn City Airport were saved for divine reasons, that the "saved"

survivors were "People who were good… people who weren't weak" (Mandel 260). He echoes the boy in *The Road* here, too, grappling with the concept of good versus bad when it is in reality more complicated than he has the capacity to understand. The boy, though, has the moral guidance of his father, and consumes the stories from him and from the book he carries in order to stay away from the truly evil people in their version of the apocalypse. *Station Eleven's* universe has more people and thus more of an opportunity to create mass hysteria with sweeping statements about good and evil.

Moral guidance, or lack thereof, plays a large role in Bowen's concept of societal emotional process, whether it comes from a child's book or a trusted parent. Characters turn to their own moral codes in a variety of forms to make sense of a sudden and total state of chaos, in an effort to create systems on which they can rely for survival. In *Station Eleven*, the anxiety of the years after the flu translates to heightened desires for stability and togetherness. While the Traveling Symphony harnessed this desire for togetherness to create a positive family group who raised Kirsten to understand her emotions and continue to develop a strong sense of morality, the same push for togetherness led Elizabeth and Tyler to join the "band of religious wanderers" that ultimately teach Tyler to become the prophet. In this case, the desire for both Bowen's "togetherness" and the social system resources as defined by COR theory are what cause Tyler to lose his morality and convince himself that he has a divine purpose. He chooses different lines from "Station Eleven" to guide him, culminating when he and Kirsten meet as adults, and he quotes: "you think you kneel before a man, but you kneel before the sunrise. We are the light moving over the surface of the waters, over the darkness of the undersea" (Mandel 302). He says this while holding her at gunpoint, moments before a boy of his own "Undersea" army revolts

and kills the prophet[8]. Tyler's twisted interpretation shows that children, in contrast to being pure embodiment of hope, have the potential to instead become corrupted by an apocalyptic event. The boy who kills Tyler continues the cycle again, fighting against an oppressive social order to do what he thinks is morally right.

Self-differentiation is increasingly complicated in Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible*, in which the children of many families come together at a vacation home and make a game out of guessing whose parents belong to which kids. Millet's characters and family dynamics hyperbolize the disconnect between the childrens' generation and their parents; however, the point is strongly made. As each child tries desperately to stay as far from their parents as possible, the reader learns the parents are displaying the kind of emotional reaction and attachment that Bowen warns will lead to anxiety and lower differentiation of self in children. The game the kids play seems to be a defense mechanism, keeping them safe from the emotional reactivity that would come with indulging their parents' misguided anxieties. There is an intentional role reversal in the way the children treat their parents. When the adults come to kiss their respective kids goodnight, Eve narrates "a sign went up on the door, PARENT FREE ZONE, and we spoke to them sternly in the morning" (Millet 6). Throughout, Millet incorporates language like "speaking sternly" or having to "herd" the parents, vocabulary we often hear adults use around younger children when speaking to fellow parents. Through Eve, who narrates the novel and like most of the other kids is in her mid-teens, we are able to see both the irony in this reversal and how important it is for the kids to keep themselves separate from their individual family groups as the catastrophe of the novel is made known. As an unprecedented storm floods

[8] The 2021 television miniseries, on which Mandel was a writer, show some of Tyler's "Undersea" dressed up as "Station Eleven" characters, using language directly from the comic that indicates his religious following uses a combination of the comic and the New Testament as their Bible. The imagery here is powerful in the visual format and reiterates the notion that societies, especially the children who never knew the old world, will create a new reality based on the anxieties of their predecessors.

their vacation home and takes out the rest of the world in a slow, climate-induced apocalypse, the parents become unable to cope with the loss of their comfortable lives, refusing to admit that they themselves created the climate crisis. It is at this point that the children must remain separate from their emotional reactions in order to survive, escaping to a nearby farm with intentions of starting over, of fixing what their parents broke.

**Chapter Four: "If you have a nice garden to live in, then you should never leave it"**

What happens when parents are so anchored in the past that they must be parented by their own children? Can children be self-differentiated enough to maintain rationality when their own parents start regressing back to childlike tendencies? The destructive tropical storms in *A Children's Bible* provide its families with a stage on which play out the potential answers to these questions, exemplifying Bowen's societal emotional process in real time as the children must become unattached from their parents in order to move into the future at the unrelenting pace which the impending apocalypse demands. *A Children's Bible* is narrated by a girl named Eve, who is around fourteen years old and has a younger brother, Jack. Her blatantly biblical name here makes her both a mother figure to Jack as the groups' parents begin to lose the ability to take care of them, as well as connecting her to Jack's obsession with understanding religion through his equivalent of a "Station Eleven" comic: an illustrated, kid-friendly version of the Bible. Millet draws our attention to the way in which he acquires it:

> Jack showed me the book he was reading. A mother had given it to him, he repeated.
>
> "*Which* mother?" I asked.
>
> Because it was called *A Child's Bible: Stories from the Old and New Testaments.*
>
> "It was the lady who… she wears flowery dresses?"
>
> The peasant mother. Who fell onto plants.
>
> "That lady gave you a *Bible?"* (Millet 43)

This interaction, beyond expressing Eve's disdain for the adults (the peasant mother actually turns out not to be anyone's mother at all), also illustrates an artful flipping of roles for parent and children in Millet's novel. Jack is young enough to view the book as just that: a children's book. Eve, though, finds it troubling that the Child's Bible came from one of the adults running

rampant through the vacation, expressing her concern in a manner akin to a parent questioning her kid about a book he brought home from one of his friends at school. It is through these types of interactions that Millet builds a unique family structure for her characters as well as a societal one, hyperbolizing the uselessness of the older generation in the face of a climate disaster in the way they offer off-key religious advice and insist that someone will come save them.

Jack and another younger boy, Shel, pair off from the group at the onset of the apocalyptic storm, collecting various animals to save as a part of their larger, though unintentional, goal of religious salvation. Like Tyler in *Station Eleven,* Jack latches onto his version of the Bible, given to him innocently by a member of the older generation. Where Tyler was morally misguided by his interpretation of the Bible, however, Jack finds guidance in this illustrated version; Tyler assumes those who died were meant to, while Jack takes it upon himself to save everyone, even the animals. Jack treats his Children's Bible much in the way that Kirsten treats her copy of the "Station Eleven" comic and the boy in *The Road* carries his book around: Eve notices that he brings it with him everywhere, flipping "through it so often it was getting shabby. He'd done the same with his first copy of the *Frog and Toad Treasury"* (Millet 82). He interprets the stories out loud and often, reminding the other children and the reader of his age, his innocence, and how beneficial both of these things are to surviving their apocalypse. His rereading is reminiscent of and yet distinctly different from from Tyler's readings of the Bible and "Station Eleven", as well as Kirsten's "Station Eleven" obsession and even the boy's book in *The Road*; Jack engages with the Bible but creates new, generative, and structured (as opposed to Tyler's *de*structiveness) religious diagrams and structures that work to help the group of children grapple with their new reality.

Bowen's self-differentiation becomes complicated in the case of *A Children's Bible* because of the choices the children make from the very beginning of the novel to remain separate from their family units. It is a choice, one frowned upon by many of the other older children, for Eve to spend so much time with her brother, openly expressing care for him and acting, for all intents and purposes, like a mother in all the areas where he lacks one. She pays excruciating attention to his book, the lessons it teaches him, and worries about how he interprets the Bible. While much of this comes from her own skepticism (about religion and about the intention of the woman who gave him the book), Eve's worry also comes from a place of purity: she loves him, knows he needs to be cared for, and has the oddly parental feeling that she owes him a better world than the one into which he's been born. She knows that, while the rest of them are grappling with removing any likeness to the parents for fear of letting an attachment to the "old world" be their downfall, Jack and Shel are young enough to start fresh, to reinterpret the picture Bible in a way that keeps future generations from making the same mistakes. Once again, the anxieties that we as readers feel about the future are mapped onto each character. The age difference between Jack and Eve gives her a parent-like anxiety about what he will grow up with, but this affects him positively because her anxiety has direction and specificity: she worries not that he might hear something he is too young innocent to understand, but that his innocence is his strength and that it might be corrupted by the selfishness and greed of the adult world. Eve's advanced self-differentiation echoes that of Kirsten in chapter three: she sees the difference between emotional reaction and rational problem-solving, knows that in order to keep Jack safe, the adult's emotional response to losing the world they know cannot infiltrate or corrupt Jack's creation of something new.

After the ocean has swallowed most of the habitable parts of the vacation home, the children relocate to a farm up the road, moving into its rich owner's cottage and meeting a group of Appalachian Trail "angels" (good samaritans who bring supplies to long-distance hikers). One of the mothers, who is pregnant, arrives, dies in childbirth, and leaves her older daughter with a baby to raise. The biblical allegory here is heavy-handed but effective, asking us to think critically about what it means to be an angel, what counts as a miracle, or if any of the apocalypse in the biblical sense can really be a rebirth if it causes this much pain to the characters to whom we have become attached over the first portion of the novel. It is in this context that I propose Millet's characters invite readers to share in their anxiety about the future in a way that is different from that of *The Road* or *Station Eleven*: while these two demonstrate children whose parents worry directly about their kids' futures as representatives of the future of humanity as a whole, *A Children's Bible's* parents only care about themselves, thereby putting the burden of societal anxiety on its youngest characters. Throughout the novel, this is expressed by Eve but more commonly using "we" in reference to all of the children, the use of which furthers a reader's ability to feel involved in the stakes of their survival and eerily close to their climate disaster and the resulting impacts.

I want to pause to focus on the in-betweenness of the trail angels in this context. Their role at the farm provides an adult presence that lets the children feel supported, but the children are so self-sufficient and, to return to Bowen's terms, differentiated from their parents, that they create new social and physical structures of survival without relying completely on the angels. Darla, one of the four angels, proclaims that Jack and Shel, who "were at a crucial moment in their ' childhood journey'", needed schooling lest the collapse of society as they knew it should "[inhibit] their social and educational development" (Millet 132). The children, though, still have

final say on this matter, echoing their condescending treatment of the parents when they decide to let the angels teach school: "The angels don't have enough to do… Could get antsy. Even destructive". Another responds, "Idle hands do the devil's work" (Millet 133). At this moment they are still treated firmly as adults, synonymous with dangerous and stupid, and need to be held on a tight leash. This interaction echoes a conversation between *The Road's* man and boy: the man,  exasperated with the boy, exclaims, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything", to which his son replies, "Yes I am… I am the one" (McCarthy 259). *A Children's Bible's* kids have internalized this already; they detached themselves from their parents when they realized how deeply entrenched the older generation is in the pre-apocalypse world. Once again Millet has reversed the adult-child roles in the novel, the hyperbole acting to highlight our own parental and societal anxiety. The words of the children echo not the children in our own lives as readers, but of adults, imbuing them with anxieties about how they might treat the world, what it might come to if they are not taught.

The school in the barn, however, lets the children learn biology, evolution, and poetry, though poetry class becomes a time for Jack to impart his wisdom about religion, as he's puzzled it out from his "picture Bible", as Eve calls it. Jack's new religion, though he does not necessarily mean to create one in the same way that Tyler builds his cult at St. Deborah, is nevertheless well-structured and shown by Millet through diagrams from his notebook:

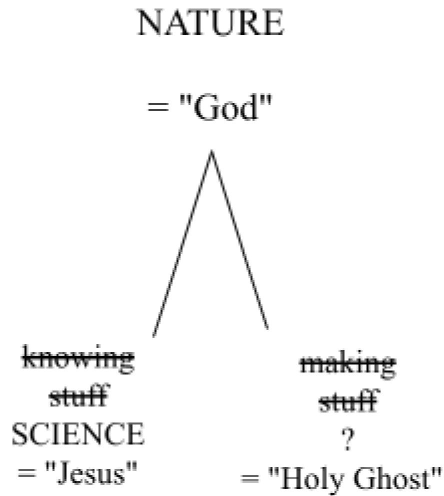


fig. 1 (Lydia Millet. *A Children's Bible*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020, p 142.)

Jack shows this diagram to his poetry class, to which Darla responds, "'That looks *very* creative, sweetie", firmly establishing herself as an evil adult for the remainder of the scene (143). Jack simplifies God, nature, and religion so effortlessly that it *is* endearing but, upon closer examination, his approach helps the older group reckon with their future of uncertainty–in turn letting the reader take comfort in shared anxieties about what our own future might look like in the face of climate change. *A Children's Bible's* apocalypse is not entire, not a nuclear wasteland nor a devastating plague but rather a continual onrush of water, literally, as sea levels rise and destructive storms take over land that was once safe. Jack, then, is not a hero of a speculated world far away from us but a little boy struggling with the realities of changing climate. He watches the people who were meant to raise him flicker and fade away in the face of danger, and once again we return to self-differentiation: he detaches emotionally from his parents out of necessity, and focuses on saving what matters to him, all the while being influenced by his own interpretation of the Bible. In his diagram (see figure 1) and throughout the novel, he conflates Nature with the God he reads about in his picture Bible. This particular dichotomy simplifies

God to be synonymous with Nature, replacing the Son and Holy Ghost with "knowing stuff" and "making stuff". Therefore, he explains to his makeshift poetry teacher as if it's obvious, God is a "code" for nature, Jesus is code for science, and his nine-year-old brain has not quite puzzled through what this implies for the Holy Ghost and "making stuff" (Millet 142). He likes to work with what he can see and touch, like the containers of bugs he carries around, and these concrete definitions of "knowing and making stuff" make tangible the Supernatural concepts of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Still, his differentiation from his parents' hyperbolic anxiety and inability to cope with change is evident in how creatively and calmly he reasons through these concepts. If the peasant mother, or his own, had provided more guidance than this, perhaps he would have ended up like Tyler, letting the Bible stories inform him about who to blame for the end of the world instead of how to salvage what he still can. Instead, he harnesses the Bible stories and reimagines them through a new lens, unobstructed by any real attachment to the pre-apocalypse world. Jack does not assume that he was chosen to survive, but maybe that is precisely why he is the perfect "prophet" for the rest of *A Children's Bible's* kids. The parents are too far gone, but Jack's new interpretation of the Bible could save the children from losing their futures to memories of the past.

*A Children's Bible* also challenges the overarching family structures seen in the apocalyptic genre's earlier novels, especially the archetype of the man and the boy I illustrate in chapter one. This thesis aims to examine the centrality of the child figure to apocalyptic novels, and *A Children's Bible* complicates this question by unabashedly centering an army of kids as its focus, casting every parent aside and highlighting how their anxieties serve to hurt the children should they remain too emotionally attached. It offers an interesting configuration of Hobfoll's social resource caravans, clearly introducing the children as a cohesive unit who exclusively rely

on one another in the face of crisis. And, just as Kirsten is able to separate her emotional and rational thinking at the time of Arthur's death and maintains this going into the post-apocalyptic world of *Station Eleven,* the children of *A Children's Bible* separate any emotional connection to their parents when disaster strikes, thinking of them only in terms of the rational ways in which they might save them from themselves (given that the parents are prone to drinking, laying around, and ignoring the vacation house quite literally crumbling around them). Rational, too, is the children's mature understanding that the parents are responsible for climate change, caught up in an endless cycle of worrying about and ignoring the consequences of their inaction, and therefore unable to move forward into the post-apocalypse world in light of these truths. This is not to say that the children are not emotional *towards* the parents; after a fire destroys the Garden-of-Eden barn and the crew returns to erect a grave for the pregnant mother, the two generations engage in a last-ditch effort to understand one another:

> "Do you blame *us?"* asked a mother. Pathetic-sounding.
>
> "We blame you for everything," Jen said evenly.
>
> "I don't blame you," said Sukey… "You were just stupid. And lazy."
>
> …
>
> "You gave up the world," said David.
>
> "You let them turn it all to shit," said Low.
>
> …
>
> "I hate to disappoint you, but we don't have that much power," said a father.
>
> …
>
> "But what could we have *done*, really?"

"Fight," said Rafe. "Did you ever fight?"

"Or did you do just exactly what you wanted?" said Jen. "Always?" (Millet 193)

Fear of being blamed, it seems, is exactly where parental anxiety stems from, in both Bowen's psychological and the novel's artistic sense. The parents drive the children away with all of their misguided worrying, and when they really need the younger generation to dig them out of their hole, they find that they never had much power to begin with, over the children or over the world.

The group moves to one of the richest kids' conveniently placed Long Island mansions soon after, and Jack's bible stories seems to have really come true this time: they plant vegetables, build a fortress-like wall to keep out the less fortunate apocalypse survivors, and establish rules. The children can adapt easily to these rules *because* they remain unattached to their parents and can see rationally. They work as a seamless unit, always in the best interest of the group. As emblematic of hope for the future as they are for their parents, the realities of this are harsher for the older generation. The parents begin to drift away without the world they once knew to hold their delusions steady. One of the boys, Terry, tells them,

"Much as we rely on you to sustain the needs of our material existence from a financial standpoint, so you, in turn, have relied on the sociocultural order. And that order, as we all know, has recently been egregiously disrupted." (Millet 213)

The parents cannot remove themselves from the past. The story of *A Children's Bible* is one of cyclical ignorance coming to a head, extending the themes of *The Road* and *Station*

*Eleven*. The adult's reaction to the trauma is one of pure emotion, and the resulting behavior is eerily zombie-like, or perhaps reminiscent of Tyler's cult. For the parents, Eve remarks that "time had turned fluid" (Millet 219). Time, as Henri Bergson explains it, is pure duration, and for the adults this duration is continuous. Jack expresses that for him the trauma, as for all the children, was finite, asking, "What happens at the end?... After the chaos time? It wasn't in my book. But *all* books should have a real ending" (Millet 223). Their chaos time is over, and order has been re-established, but this is not so for the zombie parents, drifting around reliving the horrific disappearance of their comfortable lives. The things they long for are trivial yet comparable to *The Road's* man, who lives out his apocalypse dreaming of the people and things he has lost, or Tyler's mother Elizabeth, who dies convincing herself and her son that their survival made them god-like. The children are adaptable, malleable, still determined to be the "good guys", as the boy in *The Road* worries so much about. What they represent in the apocalyptic novel is more than just hope for a better future, it is the resiliency of youth, a reflection on how we idealize, sometimes to a fault, how preciously innocent our younger generations are.

## Conclusion

In light of how children in apocalyptic novels might make us feel and think about the future, what, in addition to an escape from the present, do these novels and their embedded family systems provide? How do each of these children in their respective apocalypses make sense of, or complicate, the notion that we rely on them to represent, create, and salvage the future? In a 2017 educational study, David Rousell engages with speculative fiction as a "creative research method that opened up spaces for children and young people to think and act differently in relation to climate change" (Rousell et al., 660). While this thesis has dealt with three apocalypses of varying relation to the current climate crisis, I draw on Rousell's study in closing to suggest the importance of these novels beyond escapism. Rousell's work also parallels this thesis, combining literature with theory about how our minds work with the texts in different spaces.

Rousell's study, titled "Children of an Earth to Come", asks children to write their own speculative fictions within the context of the *Climate Change and Me* educational project. Unsurprisingly, they make themselves the heroes of their own stories, often giving their child characters superpowers to deal with more fantastical futures than those of *The Road*, *Station Eleven,* or *A Children's Bible:* they use these powers to fight mutated wildlife, cyborgs, and other potential consequences of climate disasters. These imaginings, though, are not what the adult authors of this thesis's three texts do, and this distinction is vital. Adult authors use their child characters as moral guides and compasses for the adult characters of their novels. As I have detailed in analysis of each text, children like Kirsten, the boy, and Jack provide the adults in the novels and the adult readers of these texts with moral reminders and guides. If the adults do not want to save themselves, as Millet hyperbolizes with the adults in *A Children's Bible*, then the

children give the reader, if not the adult characters, hope for a better future. And in this imagined future, the children have the morals and the strength to fight, if not cyborgs, then realities of their post-apocalypse worlds that are at least as terrifying.

While I will not engage deeply with the geophilosophy invoked in Rousell's study, I do want to note the specifics of what Jasmyne, the study's seventh grade co-author whose story the article dissects, writes for her character and her speculated future. Jasmyne's heroic children possess abilities like mind control, infinite control of their own emotions, shapeshifting, and most interestingly, controlling time, matter, and darkness (Rousell et al. 667). A child controlling time, a concept which novels like *The Road* and *Station Eleven* grapple with and manipulate, gives the child the ability to literally control what the novels, through flashbacks and non-chronological narration, attempt to complicate. Children in these novels have the potential to restructure or completely reinvent the pre-apocalypse worlds their parents lived in. When children like Jasmyne write their own versions, they give the youngest generation the power to harness these things, and her authorship adds a new perspective that our adult authors lack in creating these characters. I do not mean to suggest that the novels I work with in this thesis would be in any way better with science-fiction and superheroes; they do important work in a different genre and realm. However, comparing the work of Jasmyne to the role of the characters of children in these novels gives further insight into what generations obsess over.

To return again to Bowen family systems theory, the children characters are able to, if they are not too tied to the pre-apocalypse world, easily structure a new way of existence that allows them to function within the world as if there were never a past to begin with. As I have examined above, differentiation-of-self from parents is a tool that allows for this detachment in the face of disaster in a way that connection to the past and complete emotional reliance on

parents does not. Bowen theory examines the processing of trauma within family structures, and in conversation with his theory, I have written on the processing of current realities along with the characters in apocalyptic novels as a way to reckon with the future as we might imagine it. Bowen's societal emotional process, then, is precisely that process which the characters in these novels go through, and those of us who choose to read them go through this process within the safe confines of the novel. In this way the work *is* certainly a form of escapism, and for some readers that is where its work stops. But in applying this concept of societal emotional process, one projects individual family processes on a societal scale, the implications of the novels branch into aspects of life beyond reading for pleasure.

As each child in these novels has their book that they carry with them, we carry these stories of potential futures with us. This thesis has covered the role of children as characters, archetypes, and markers of morality in apocalyptic literature. It speculates at the value of applying family psychology to these fictional characters and the impact these applications have on how we might read this literature beyond enjoyment, entertainment, or escapism. Further research in this area would benefit from a focus on other, more recent novels, particularly those that follow the vein of David Rousell's study on children writing their own work. An internal focus on how the children react, rather than just the parents, would provide a valuable insight into other aspects of apocalyptic fiction.

In this thesis, I have sought to demonstrate how and why these children, as characters within their respective fictional worlds and as representative of the youngest generations existing in current society, are returned to and obsessed over within apocalyptic novels. In incorporating Bowen family systems and other psychological approaches to the child within the family, I hope that my thesis emphasizes the interdisciplinarity and academic weight of this genre, and perhaps

most importantly, its weight as a vehicle for the anxiety parents, children, and society as a whole may feel about the future.

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