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Imagining the end of the world: Writing the polycrisis through zombie fiction

Abstract:
This article examines zombie fiction as a subgenre of horror and considers its relationship to the broader category of speculative fiction. It argues that zombie stories can provide writers with an appropriate metaphor to address the *polycrisis*, noting the challenges of scope and scale often raised in writing climate fiction and adequately addressing grand challenges. It observes how, unlike other monster stories, zombie narratives reflect a change in the story world and in turn focus on the nature and adaptability of humanity within a state of existential crisis. This work draws on academic literature and narratives within the zombie genre (across several mediums), as well as climate fiction, to create a parallel between these two modes of storytelling. Finally, the author provides a reflection on how he applies these ideas within his forthcoming novel, *The Garden*.

Biographical note:
Seth Robinson is a writer, producer and academic based in Naarm/Melbourne. He is the author of *Welcome to Bellevue* (2019), the first full-length novel in Grattan Street Press's original fiction collection. His work has featured in *Kill Your Darlings*, *Meniscus*, *The Saturday Paper*, and *Aurealis*, among others. Seth is a guest reviewer on Radio National's *The Bookshelf*. He currently sits on the board of *Going Down Swinging* and is the creator of *Unfolded*: a podcast he co-hosts with Tony Birch. In 2025 he was a recipient of the Felix Meyer Scholarship for creative writing.

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Zombie, climate, polycrisis, fiction

Introduction

Zombies have groaned and shuffled their way across our pages and cinema screens for more than half a century, claiming their place in the contemporary creative zeitgeist. But the history of this particular monster – and its capacity for critiquing systems of power – goes back much further to the islands of the Caribbean and the legacy of colonialism. As with most monsters their popularity is cyclical, but over the past year the zombie horde has returned with a vengeance. Audiences have seen the return of *The Last of Us* (2023–present) to our TV screens, new spinoff series of *The Walking Dead (2023-Present),* and the recent release of *28 Years Later* (2025), a collaboration between Alex Garland and Danny Boyle that has brought cinemagoers back to the shores of the UK post-infection, which we previously saw in *28 Weeks Later* (2007) and *28 Days Later* (2002). While many of these works draw on well-established story worlds, it is worth considering: Why now? What is it about the contemporary era that has drawn us back to the living dead? Or perhaps more broadly speaking, "Why are we so fixated on things that frighten us?"

This is a question often asked of Stephen King, the godfather of modern horror, by readers who feel he owes them an explanation for their lost hours of sleep. It is a topic he addresses in the afterword his 2024 collection, *You Like it Darker*:

> Francisco Goya did an etching, which showed himself surrounded by fantastical creatures as he dozed, and called it "The sleep of reason produces monsters." I have always thought such sleep and such monsters are a necessary component of sanity. Check out the first line of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. She says it well.
>
> Horror stories are best appreciated by those who are compassionate and empathetic. A paradox, but a true one. I believe it is the unimaginative among us, those incapable of appreciating the dark side of make-believe who have been responsible for most of the world's woes. In stories of the supernatural and paranormal, I have tried especially hard to show the real world as it is, and to tell the truth about the America I know and love. Some of those truths are ugly, but as the poem says, scars become beauty marks when there is love. (King, 2024, p. 473)

It is easy to envision monsters lurking at the edges of a rational mind, the half-formed thoughts and darkest parts of the psyche waiting for us in the shadows of our own subconscious. But if we are to believe King, or Goya, the monsters are already there. There is evil in the world. For the most part it is a very human evil, and unfortunately real life has a tendency to be both stranger and more violent than fiction. We see it manifest in specific instances (look no further than the nightly news), but also in the grand challenges – complex, interconnected issues such as climate change or extreme socio-economic inequality – which we face as a society. But what if engaging with monsters such as the zombie, and telling their stories, could be a vehicle for not only understanding our world but imagining a better one?

Stories of the supernatural are most often considered a subgenre of horror, which, along with the genres of fantasy and science fiction, might be broadly encapsulated within the realm of speculative fiction. These are all genres that can be defined as “What if?” fiction, wherein a story world evolves from the author interrogating or tweaking an element of the real world to make it fantastical. It is a tool King himself notes he has employed over the years: “What if vampires invaded a small New England village? (Salem's Lot) What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog? (Cujo)” (King, 2000, p. 117). This invocation of the real shapes the world of the speculative. In the case of monster stories, they can be viewed as a reflection of the context in which they were produced. The slow, shuffling zombies of George Romero’s films are often discussed as a critique of capitalist consumerism (Shaviro, 2017, p. 8). Vampires have a long history of resurgence when questions around human desire and sexuality are prevalent (Rydman, 1990, p. 45). Frankenstein’s monster was born from a time of scientific revolution, a period that also saw clashes with religious doctrine, as well as questions of humanity’s relationship with creation and the responsibility we bear for the products of our work (Byrd & Paquette, 2023). These monsters are manifestations of societal critique, embodiments of those fears that dominated the discourse at that time.

What monsters might our imaginations conjure into the present? In most cases the monsters of yesteryear are still relevant, a fact that is confronting in its own right. We continue to see stories of vampires in the post-Me Too era as coercive relationships, sexual abuse, and men’s violence against women remains a key issue. Frankenstein’s monster has migrated from the Arctic wastes to the realm of the digital, just as the rise of Artificial Intelligence forces us to consider the same questions about creation and responsibility. Even monsters of the fantasy genre like the dragon – serpentine bodies coiled around their hoarded treasure, their greed and ambition scorching the earth – have an obvious contemporary parallel in the billionaire class. In an Australian context, we might imagine some of our own monsters: a coal-bodied troll, or perhaps an enraged lake monster driven from the polluted waters of its home. The Children of the Corn may creep up in the dead of the night, dressed in candy-striped private school blazers, iPad in hand, exhaling vape mist as they croon, “Hello, Mother”. Or perhaps one might risk setting foot inside one of the empty houses that fill our cities, to feel the give of the rotting boards beneath our feet, breathe in the black mould and asbestos, and hear the whispers of the ten thousand homeless renters who passed – fleetingly – beneath its roof.

These are conjurations born from the troubles of the present. As we look to the future, however, it is not the fear of these issues in singularity which looms over us, but a terror of them in combination: the *polycrisis*, a term that has come to describe the increasingly complex and interrelated challenges of the modern era (Lawrence et al., 2024). On the world stage we see a period of violence and political upheaval playing out in multiple theatres. In Australia, unaffordable housing and a cost-of-living crisis have resulted in an uncertain future for the next generation, and all of this is playing out in a world where anthropogenic climate change has done irreversible harm. Addressing this last point has, on its own, proven a major hurdle for creative writers, who have found that the storytelling modes of the novel and the short story are rarely able to address the scope of such a crisis (Ghosh, 2016). How then might writers tell

stories that can address the scope of not only climate change, but that address the increasing complexity and interconnectedness of the grand challenges?

This paper considers this creative challenge and explores how the zombie might offer a monstrous metaphor that fits our changing world, considering how these stories may serve to inform our thinking around adaptation and a more hopeful future. It draws on examples of creative case studies and reflects on my own writing practice and the approach I took to writing my forthcoming novel *The Garden.*

The challenge of writing the polycrisis

In 2016 Amitav Ghosh published *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable,* wherein he suggested that there was a failure of imagination in the work of authors and the literary establishment in addressing climate change (p. 5). Since then, there has been a significant evolution in the way climate fiction is both written and received, but there are challenges that remain within the genre. In his 2017 essay, "Writing on the Precipice," author James Bradley addressed the difficulties felt by authors of climate fiction. In part, this was to do with the problem of addressing the scope of climate change – which extends both spatially and temporally beyond the realms of individual experience – as well as the challenges of producing creative work within a capitalist context.

> Not only must we confront the inhuman scale of the transformation that is taking place around us, its temporal, physical and moral enormity, we must find ways of making sense of its complexity and interconnectedness. We must begin to find new ways of representing its effects, new imaginative and lexical vocabularies capable of naming and describing concepts and experiences that exceed the human. We must learn to talk about grief without being overwhelmed by it or descending into bathos. We must find ways of recording and memorialising what is being lost, of resisting not just the assumptions of hypercapitalism but the amnesia it induces, the constant Year Zero of a post-fact society. And perhaps most importantly, we must find ways to communicate ideas that are not just uncomfortable and frightening but actively difficult to comprehend because they demand we accept the ideas and ideologies that structure our world are, as Marx had it, no more solid than air. (Bradley, 2017)

Bradley illustrates the challenges of imagination and comprehension inherent in writing about climate change, but he also makes it clear that this challenge comes not only from the complexity of the crisis, but also from the human context within which climate change is taking place. It is here that it becomes important to define the idea of the polycrisis, a term that has been growing in popularity among commentators over the last three years. This was the focus of Lawrence et al. in their 2024 paper, "Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement," in which they defined global polycrisis as "the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects" (p. 2). Lawrence et al. place a focus on the mechanisms and cascading effects of multiple crises which have the capacity to disrupt entire systems. They demonstrate these connections using the case studies of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia conflict and climate change:

> By focusing on crises within and across systems, our approach highlights a crucial feature of polycrises: that the conjoined harms of multiple crises are different from, and generally worse than, the harms each crisis would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected (Lawrence et al., 2022, p. 2). What may appear to be separate crises in different systems in fact exacerbate and reshape one another to form a conjoined polycrisis that must be understood and addressed as a whole. (Lawrence et al., 2024, p. 3)

At the time of writing, conflict is escalating in the Middle East, with Israel and Iran now exchanging missile strikes. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine continues, as do protests and unrest across the United States. In Australia, house prices are once again expected to spike in what has already been deemed a crisis of affordability. These are all challenges that both play out within and exacerbate the climate crisis. It was recently reported in *The Guardian* that the carbon emissions of Israel's war on Gaza exceed that of many countries (Lakhani, 2025). In viewing these challenges as parts of an interconnected whole, it becomes clear that – as is the case with economic, political or scientific responses to these challenges – creative works that wish to enter into this discourse must therefore acknowledge the complexity and interconnectedness of the polycrisis, as well as the systemic and structural failings that have led to its perpetuation. Works of fiction have a unique opportunity to present imagined solutions to such challenges. But what kind of stories might fulfil this function?

In the opening pages of this paper I wrote about monsters as embodiments of those fears that sit outside the firelight of our understanding. But that is not all they are. In most stories the monster appears as the nemesis character to one form of the heroic archetype who overcomes the beast. We see this in the story of Saint George slaying the dragon, Van Helsing and Dracula, or even the Winchester brothers of *Supernatural* (2005-2020) who have gone toe to toe with the entire roster of boogiemen. These heroes often capitalise on one or more of a long list of monstrous allergies – holy water or sunlight, iron or silver, even garlic or salt – in order to banish, exorcise or vanquish whatever evil is terrorising the townsfolk. The monsters of our stories play by certain rules and they are defeated as the human heroes come to understand what makes them tick and which convenient seasoning or item from the cutlery drawer will send them on their way. These stories are iterations of *the hero's journey* – popularised by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (2008) – and provide us with a sense of reassurance: no matter what lurks in the shadows, it can be defeated. We speak the problem and solution in the same breath. However, these stories are examples of narratives that struggle to a create a problem or solution of a scope that fits the polycrisis. In a 2022 article for *The Guardian*, author Bri Lee discussed how traditional storytelling models – such as the hero's journey – were inadequate for understanding the scale of the existential threats we face as a result of climate change, suggesting that "there is no hero we can collectively anoint to fly into the sky and fix things for us. There is also no single villain" (Lee, 2022). Monster stories are often a replication of this exact structure of the lone saviour delivering the innocent from evil. This is, in many ways, a flaw within the genre, wherein an easily identifiable monster allows the reader to lapse into an "us versus them" mentality (Dvoskina, 2025, p. 108), in which the line between good and evil, humanity and monstrosity is clear cut, and the solution is a simple silver bullet.

This story isn't enough for the polycrisis. If creatives are to address a challenge this complex and interconnected, the story that is required in response must be equally nuanced. We, as readers and writers, might need to rethink our relationship with monstrosity and how – or in fact, *if* – it might be vanquished. It is here that the opportunity of the zombie narrative emerges, as both a monster story that is able to reflect the nature of the polycrisis, as well as, perhaps, a pathway to thinking about forms of adaptation.

The potential of the zombie apocalypse

In her 2017 collection, *Zombie Theory: A Reader,* Sarah Juliet Lauro presents a series of essays on the origins, cultural relevance, and modern interpretations of the zombie genre. In her foreword, "Wander and Wonder in Zombieland," she provides an insight into the genre's history, positioning the contemporary zombie – which she notes some scholars suggest is an "American monster" – in relation to its origins as the Haitian *zombi* and the legacy of colonisation and slavery within the Caribbean (p. ix). She discusses how its evolution was sparked by Hollywood's interest in the potential of the zombie as a monster with no identifiable copyright attached to it, unlike the literary legacies of *Dracula* (1897) and *Frankenstein* (1831)*,* which allowed for the "reproduction and revision of the zombie's narrative" (p. x). This malleability is, perhaps, one reason why the zombie has remained so well established within the creative canon. Lauro states that "the zombie was *never* just one thing. Inherently dual – both living and dead – the zombie dwells in contradiction ever more than most monsters" (p. ix). There is a multiplicity to the zombie. Their very existence is an uncanny defiance of our human conceptions of life and death. Within this liminal space there is room for interpretation that is predominantly seen in their physicality and their narrative origin story. They might emerge from the gates of hell as a form of supernatural or divine retribution. Just as likely, they may be the result of human folly – often bioweapons – or as a vehicle for the natural world to strike back at humanity's hubris, as demonstrated by the Cordyceps zombies in *The Last of Us* (2023–present). Through these manifestations they act as a critique reflective of society's ills, whether that be consumerism, ecocide or the barbarism of human behaviour itself. This final point is important because in many zombie stories – notable examples including *The Last of Us, The Walking Dead* (2003) and *28 Years Later* (2025) – we see the zombies themselves become an environmental hazard, with the narrative focus placed on the human protagonists, their survival, communities and the conflicts that arise between them in the new world. In many instances it is indeed the humans who prove the greatest danger. In his chapter "Zombies are Everywhere: The Many Adaptations of a Subgenre," Álvaro Hattnher notes:

> In a significant number of narratives, an individual or group of individuals face the consequences of a world overrun by the undead. In this sense, a recurring theme involves forms of interaction among humans. It is important to note here that often the threat of the undead remains in the background. The true enemy may be within the group, infected by the selfishness, fear, and mistrust that catalyze its disintegration, putting the survivors against each other. (Hattnher, 2017, p. 375)

By placing our human behaviours and communities in a world defined by existential threat, we see humanity in a Hobbesian state of nature (2017), which allows for this conflict between groups or individuals. This idea is at the core of Mariya Dvoskina's 2025 essay, "Kiss of the Cordy: Why are Humans the Scariest Monsters?" wherein she discusses representations of human monstrosity in *The Last of Us* (2023–present). Dvoskina illustrates how *The Last of Us* moves beyond the "us and them" mentality of other monster stories and, rather, challenges viewers/players to consider how good people might behave monstrously. Using the examples of Ellie and Joel – the story's protagonists who are both capable of great violence – Dvoskina notes that we continue to root for them because we experience the world through their lens. This in turn becomes problematic, as "the more we dehumanize others, the more we can justify our own morally questionable actions" (Dvoskina, 2025, p. 111). Monstrosity, she suggests, can be likened to the frog: boiled alive in slowly heating water.

This understanding of human behaviour within the altered story world as a defining feature of the zombie genre allows us to consider the narratives in relation to the polycrisis and the systemic challenges that define it. In "Contagious Allegories: George Romero" – part of the *Zombie Theory* collection (2017) – Steven Shaviro discusses Romero's films *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), highlighting how the zombie is "a nearly perfect allegory for the inner logic of capitalism" (2017, p.9). Shaviro argues:

> They can be regarded both as monstrous symptoms of a violent, manipulative, exploitative society and as potential remedies for its ills – all this by virtue of their apocalyptically destructive, yet oddly innocuous, counterviolence. They frighten us with their categorical rapacity, yet allure us by offering the base, insidious pleasure of ambiguity, complicity, and magical revenge. (2017, p. 9)

Like Lauro, Shaviro paints a picture of duality: zombies being both the result of and the solution to the systems, institutions and structures that have proven exploitative of both the planet and humanity. In considering the definition of polycrisis provided by Lawrence et al. as the causal entanglement of issues resulting in systemic failure, it is possible to draw a connection between global capitalism and the polycrisis, as alluded to by Bradley (2017). What becomes the key focus of critique, then, is the "host system" in which we reside, or more broadly speaking the way we live now. This is an idea that is touched on by Clint Wesley Jones in his discussion of the apocalyptic genre, and the idea of *dystopian hope*, a concept which "resonates with consumers as escapist *and* renders catastrophic futures *as desirable*, as the only way to 'reset' civilization so that we (the survivors) can right the wrongs of society" (Jones, 2025, p. 3). The zombie apocalypse offers a perfect narrative device in fulfilling this function. It is an un-ignorable existential threat which reshapes the very world we live in. From the moment of the first scratch or bite – Day Zero – the world as we know it is gone. However as Jones notes, there is an escapist element within the realm of dystopian hope, an idea that there might be a way back to the way it was before, or something better:

> The problem with contemporary apocalyptic storytelling is that stories often trade on the same trope – with the end of civilization as we currently understand it, there's the

> possibility for something better. Once the apocalypse happens, if we can just weather the post-apocalyptic landscape for a couple of years, then we can rebuild society and build it back better than it was. All we need is a little time and the right plucky group of survivors to remake the world. (Jones, 2025, p. 6)

Jones's critique of dystopian hope is important because the idea that we might simply return to the way the world was before is what reduces these narratives to the realm of escapism and indeed moves them back into the territory of the hero's journey arc, with the return to the old world – or the potential of a zombie cure – fulfilling the function of *the ultimate boon* (a latter stage of the Campbellian monomyth). While this might act as a reasonable critique of the systemic drivers of the polycrisis, if we are to move beyond the territory of critique and into the realm of an imagined future beyond the polycrisis, creatives must consider a form of narrative that deals with the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

Imagination versus zombification

Within the duality of the zombie there is another key theme which is worthy of note: the relationship between body and mind. This connection, or possibly the disconnection between the two, serves as a mechanism for illustrating the loss of humanity present within the genre, as raised by Dvoskina above. It is this transformation that lies at the heart of the fear triggered by the zombie: What does it mean to lose one's humanity?

Within the field of philosophy, the zombie has been employed by many thinkers as a device used to "illuminate problems about consciousness and its relation to the physical world" (Kirk, 2023). Much of this discourse centres on the probability of the existence of the zombie and the logical implications for such a concept. In the context of creative work, it opens us up to an interesting proposition: What are we reduced to if our body is separated from our mind? Or perhaps: What remains of our mind if our body is transformed? This question, and the essential relationship between our consciousness and our humanity, is again raised by Dvoskina when she describes a scene in *The Last of Us* (2023–present) when Tess is overrun by a horde of cordyceps and in her final moments is kissed by one of the infected. This moment – both challenging and unsettling – offers a suggestion that something of the human remains in the zombie (Dvoskina, 2025). As viewers, we are suddenly forced to consider which might be a worse fate: to lose our consciousness and humanity entirely, or to remain present but without agency, trapped inside the monster.

Many monsters come as a result of transformation. The vampire, the werewolf and the zombie all reflect a loss of humanity, but the zombie goes further. While most of the monsters of page and screen reflect a shadow version of humanity, the zombie is the husk. It is an illustration of what it means to lose our sense of self. There have been many interpretations of the zombie that play with this idea. Romero's consumer zombies are one example, as are the "fevered" in Ling Ma's 2018 novel, *Severance,* who spend their un-afterlives locked in farcical repetitions of the mundane tasks that fixated them in life, a more mundane version of the Cordyceps's kiss. Right now, there is an ad for an electric Kia on Australian TV that amalgamates these two ideas. Romeroesque zombies push rusted lawn mowers and deliver mouldy pizzas, providing

an obstacle course for the silent "zombie-proof" Kia. At one point it passes beneath a graffitied sign suggesting that viewers "live a little" (Kia, 2025). It may offer an easy chuckle, but once again the duality of the zombie is present: a genre historically critical of consumerism, hijacked to sell cars.

In the afterword for *You Like it Darker* (2024), King makes mention of a quote from Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*: "No live organism can continue for long to exist under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream" (Jackson, 1959, p. 1). I imagine the zombie is the end point of Jackson's brutal, absolute reality. Zombification takes place when we lose creativity, connection, empathy and thought. Zombies are the savaged remains of humanity when we cease to ask questions or to imagine other worlds. Zombies are silent and complicit in atrocity. They are apathetic, even in the face of annihilation. In the face of the polycrisis, this is the zombie, perhaps one more aligned with the philosophical model, that might be the most frightening. They have not been ejected from hell, or infected by a mind-rotting virus or fungus, but they have rejected critical thinking and deferred responsibility.

As is the case with the zombie apocalypse itself, we might view the zombie genre as both critique and curative. There is an opportunity to consider what the zombie narrative itself might teach us. In Ma's *Severance* – which saw a particular spike in popularity following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – there is a passage that reflects this potential:

> It's like we're in this horror movie, Todd said. Like a zombie or a vampire flick.
>
> Bob thought about this, scratching his sling. He frowned. Well, no. Vampire and zombie narratives are completely different.
>
> How are they different? Evan asked, winking at Janelle, who swatted his arm to stop him from egging Bob on.
>
> Bob looked back and forth between them. He smiled benignly. Excellent question, Evan. With vampire narrative, the danger lies in the villain's intentions, his underlying character. There are good vampires and there are bad vampires. Think of *Interview with the Vampire.*
>
> Or even *Twilight.* These are character narratives.
>
> Now, on the other hand, he continued, let's think about the zombie narrative. It's not about a specific villain. One zombie can be easily killed, but a hundred zombies is another issue. Only amassed do they really pose a threat. This narrative, then, is not about an individual entity, per se, but about an abstract force: the force of the mob, of mob mentality. Perhaps it's better known these days as the hive mind. You can't see it. You can't forecast it. It strikes at any time, whenever, wherever, like a natural disaster, a hurricane, an earthquake.
>
> Let us apply this, Bob said, to our situation. Let us familiarize ourselves with the fevered.

> Wait, I interjected. What are you saying? Because number one, the fevered aren't zombies. They don't attack us or try to eat us. They don't do anything to us. If anything, we do more harm to them.
>
> I surprised myself when I spoke. It was rare that I did. But having spoken, I felt short of breath, nauseated. Everyone looked at me.
>
> Bob gave me a look. Candace. When you wake up in a fictitious world, your only frame of reference is fiction. (Ma, 2018, p. 29)

Within this passage we see the coalescing of two ideas. The first is a distinction between the zombie (horde) as form of cataclysmic force and other monsters who operate as individuals within their story worlds. The second, however, is perhaps the more important within this context as it demonstrates how works of fiction allow both readers and writers the opportunity to consider ideas outside the realm of understanding and comfort, to use those stories as a catalyst to engage in the critical thinking that has been lost through our own zombification. Indeed, the very act of storytelling, of articulating those fears and considering our future in relation to our own world, is an essential step in addressing the polycrisis. This is discussed by philosopher Danielle Celermajer in her book *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future,* which she wrote in response to the Black Summer bushfires of 2019–2020.

> But it is only fantastical thinking that has you believe silence will stop the dreaded future from coming to pass. I'd hazard a guess that wrapping words around our still-amorphous feelings, and giving voice to the ones we already know we harbour, might be a corner piece in the puzzle of learning how to live in this world. If we are to have any chance of mitigating that dreaded future, difficult actions lie before us. Speaking the feared future, and being present with each other to how desperately we do not want it, it may give us the clarity and resolve we need to act. And if or when it is too late for such actions, if there is no more to be done to prevent that future, honesty will be the only solid ground on which to stand. To stand and hold on to each other. (Celermajer, 2021, pp. 23–24)

What we require, in the face of the monsters and the polycrisis alike, is the same imagination that conjured them. Creators need to not only engage with the challenges of the polycrisis and critique their structural causes, but the capacity to sit in the discomfort and uncertainty inherent within these changing paradigms. With this might come an ability to imagine how we might adapt and evolve in the face of calamity. This is the foundation of *radical hope*, an idea defined by philosopher Jonathan Lear as a hope "that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it" (as cited in Bradley, 2020). This is a concept that James Bradley has unpacked and applied to climate change in detail, in his essay "The Library at the End of the World".

> Like deep adaptation, radical hope is a psychological practice as well as a political position. It requires us to accept the past is gone, and that the political and cultural assumptions that once shaped our world no longer hold true. It demands we learn to

> live with uncertainty and grief, and to face up to the reality of loss. But it also demands what Lear describes as “imaginative excellence”, a deliberate fostering of the flexibility and courage necessary to “facilitate a creative and appropriate response to the world’s challenges” that will enable us to envision new alliances and open up new possibilities, even in the face of catastrophe. (Bradley, 2020)

The concept of radical hope offers creators an important counter to the idea of dystopian hope, which focuses on critique, escapism, and a return to what came before. Radical hope offers an opportunity to consider that we might maintain a sense of agency and an ability to adapt in the face of uncertainty, in line with the thinking raised by Celermajer (2021). In the world of the zombie apocalypse, this often means characters undertaking a journey to find a place for themselves that offers a sense of community and sanctuary. This is sometimes achieved through a blending of genres and the embedding of a coming-of-age narrative – or bildungsroman – within the world of the zombie apocalypse. A young protagonist undertakes this journey either alone or often in the presence of a protector/mentor. Examples of this can be seen in *The Last of Us* – both in the video games and their TV adaptation (2023–present) – and the recent release of *28 Years Later* (2025), in which we see the 12-year-old protagonist, Spike, undertake a rite-of-passage journey first with his father and then later as a carer for his mother. This idea of merging the zombie genre with a coming-of-age story becomes especially interesting when viewed through the lens of Sara Tanderup Linkis’s work in “Across World and Volumes: Serial Space in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*” (2021). Linkis examines story worlds in young adult literature and makes a distinction between *place* as an environment of security and *space* as an area of freedom and openness that the young adult enters in order to trigger growth (Linkis, 2021). We see a very literal interpretation of this in Spike’s journey in *28 Years Later*, as he leaves the community of their island with his father and journeys to the mainland (2025). In thinking about Linkis’s ideas in the context of the zombie genre, it quickly becomes apparent that there is no real opportunity to return to safety, or the “real world,” as is the traditional ending of this hero’s journey. Due to the changed nature of the world affected by the zombie apocalypse, the young protagonists of these stories are forced to exist in a continual space of uncertainty, wherein they must adapt and grow in the face of existential threat. This might be viewed as a metaphor for how we, as writers, readers, and humans must continue to adapt in the face of the polycrisis. We must maintain a sense of radical hope in the face of an uncertain future, to adapt and to challenge the fear and apathy that allowed the polycrisis to form.

Fear and apathy: My work in *The Garden*

This question – of how to write fiction that addresses the polycrisis – has been a driving force for both my critical and creative research, and in the development of own writing practice. It is an idea I explore in my forthcoming novel, *The Garden*, a story about coming of age at the end of the world. When Melbourne – which has long been crumbling in the face of the polycrisis – is finally overrun by a horde of zombie “Paperfaces,” my protagonists – a 17-year-old boy named Eddie, and Grace, a woman in her early twenties with supernatural healing abilities – flee the city. They seek shelter at the Garden, a community – built on the ruins of a winery – led by Otto, an academic turned tyrant.

In writing *The Garden,* my first thought was that this was a book about fear and my own feelings in the face of these mounting existential crises. I felt overwhelmed by the cumulative nature of the polycrisis and the acceleration towards events that once would have existed in a distant imaginary. This feeling of cumulative dread and the associated fear is something I manifested in *The Garden* through the creation of the Paperfaces.

The Garden begins with a version of the traditional Zero Day, which, as noted by Jones often serves as the inciting incident for the zombie narrative, with many stories (*The Last of Us* being an exception; 2023–present) focusing on the days and weeks "in the immediate aftermath of a post-apocalyptic world" (Jones, 2025, p. 6). Within *The Garden,* I have diverged from this model as the protagonists already have knowledge of the Paperfaces, and questions remain as to whether they exist or are an urban legend. This was an intentional choice, designed to illustrate the decline of society – which I have referred to through the book as the Crumble – and the spread of misinformation, both of which might be viewed as both symptoms of and contributors to the polycrisis. One of the themes that recurs throughout the narrative of *The Garden* is how this cumulative effect went unaddressed not only by those in power, but by the broader populous. Many of the events presented on the timeline are alluded to in conversation, however it is made clear that it was the emergence of the Itch – my version of the supernatural zombie virus – and the Paperfaces that resulted in the final breakdown of an already damaged society.

The Paperfaces themselves draw upon many of the traditional elements of the zombie genre. In the case of *The Garden,* I wanted to build upon this mythology, both in terms of thinking about the relationship between capitalism and creative production, as well as through the creation of an intertextual, shared universe connection. *The Garden*'s characters are aware of stories within the zombie genre and their associated themes, such as the ecological commentary present in *The Last of Us* (2023–present) or the critique of capitalist consumerism present in Romero's Living Dead films. These films are then used as a reference point by Eddie and his friends in their own discussions of the crumbling world. The Paperfaces also draw on Shaviro's work (2017) and the idea of a *magical vengeance* being inflicted upon my story world, positioning the Itch and the Paperfaces as a paranormal response or punishment for humanity's failures and apathy.

A key influence in my thinking about the zombie narrative within this project was in reading the work of John Frow, especially *Character and Person* wherein he defines character as "an operation within social assemblage" (Frow, 2014, p. vi). I wanted to consider how I could create an environment defined by existential fear. The Paperfaces serve as a manifestation of this fear, while the community of the Garden is my depiction of a social assemblage that came to exist within this context – a microcosm or allegory for my own thinking about contemporary society – wherein I could illustrate the extremity of human behaviour and monstrosity. However, in developing my creative work, I realised it was necessary to distil my feelings of fear down further. In the case of *The Garden,* this became about addressing anxieties and questions I had regarding feelings of apathy and complicity in thinking about my own creative practice and my engagement with the broader world. I realised that, for me, both this research

and the accompanying novel were about understanding and reconciling that tension between the desire to pursue a creative career and my own ethical drive to engage with the polycrisis. The acts of writing and creation bring me joy. It is a practice that enriches my life, but at the same time there remains a sense of guilt, a self-recrimination that perhaps I am engaged in a pursuit that might be viewed as frivolous or self-indulgent. Would my energies be better spent engaging in a more practical form of activism, or pursuing a career in the policy or technology sectors that might offer a more concrete outcome? This chain of thinking is tied deeply to another element of my research practice, which considers the function of the writer in society more broadly. I have written on this separately, however a recurring theme within research interviews that I have conducted with practicing writers is how this very need for writers to fulfil a specific function and be productive reflects the capitalist environment within which we are creating work. This, in turn, ties in with the discussion of this paper, and my understanding of the zombie genre as being a critique of the system and drivers of the polycrisis. This meant I was able to produce a creative work that aligns with my own sense of ethics and desire to engage in this discourse. Ultimately, I decided that it was that sense of agency and radical hope in the face of despair that I wanted to manifest in *The Garden.* These feelings of fear, apathy and uncertainty, all of which might contribute to the paralysis or zombification of the individual in the face of the polycrisis, become a point of reflection for Eddie throughout the narrative.

In creating the Paperfaces, I drew deeply on Lauro's discussion of the duality of the zombie. This duality was something that I placed at the core of my thinking about how I was choosing to address the polycrisis in my own creative practice. I realised that the Paperfaces were not a homogenous vision of a looming, unnamed fear, but quite a specific one. Their bodies, dry, cracked and flammable, are reflective of an Australian landscape that has been affected by climate change and has become an environment primed for severe weather events (their name and visual representation is drawn from the paperbark tree). Their monstrous, inhuman nature is reflective of the violence we so often see as escalation beyond civil discourse, and their voicelessness – the Itch causes its victims vocal cords to disintegrate – reflects the silence I feel is inherent in that perceived sense of complicity.

In order to navigate this world, I then returned to that idea of a coming-of-age story, and how a young man might transition into adulthood within this environment. This became the driver for my protagonist, Eddie Addison. Eddie sits firmly at the centre of *The Garden,* serving as the story's narrator. We understand the world through his eyes, learning about its history and the context of what is happening around him as he does. Eddie's experience is the key vehicle for understanding of the ideas of fear, complicity and the uncertainty that surround the actions of the individual living in the age of the polycrisis. There is action that plays out in *The Garden* around Eddie which we only ever learn of second-hand while he lives out an arc that is seemingly independent from some of the other key characters.

Eddie's perspective presents a reading of *The Garden* that is essentially a bildungsroman. I drew heavily on ideas from Campbell's hero's journey, as well as Linkis's (2021) work on space versus place, seeking to demonstrate how the zombie genre offers an opportunity for creative tension with the expectations normally set by these narrative structures. In Eddie's

case, there is no real option for return and completion of the final stage of the traditional hero's journey, as we witness the burning and destruction of Melbourne in the final pages of the book. Rather, the bulk of Eddie's development takes place within the Garden itself, the other world which merges space and place in the possibility a new home and redefined sense of community. This is one of the mechanisms through which I have attempted to highlight the creative pressure within the form, focusing on the capacity for growth and the building of agency while Eddie remains in space, with the potential to re-anchor and develop a new sense of security with a found family and community. Eddie's bildungsroman also provides an opportunity to play with the balance between radical hope and uncertainty, as it creates a parallel between the uncertainty of what comes next for the characters and the world in the face of such grand challenges, with a more natural sense of the uncertainty that occurs on the cusp of adulthood. Eddie goes through the traditional steps in a coming of age, however his experience remains incomplete with the omission of the return to his home and the *ordinary world* with the *divine knowledge* or boon (which serve as key stages in the traditional hero's journey). Rather, he continues to exist in a state of uncertainty. He is forced to continually adapt as he crosses the threshold into adulthood, a citizen of a new world that cannot return to the way it was before.

Conclusion

It is easy to feel overwhelmed in the face of calamity. As we write, and as we read, it is clear that the world is burning. But how do we, as artists, respond to that? Is it a case of giving into apathy and fear, of grim acceptance that there is little we can do to save our home, or do we veer blindly into the realm of denial, of screaming our resistance, and clinging onto the way things were before?

Our stories have always shaped the way we connect, and the way we understand the world. How we perceive fiction has a deep connection to the ways in which we shape our reality. The polycrisis offers a challenge for the ways we tell stories and imagine our futures, but it is not insurmountable. By considering the possibilities of genre fiction, of stories such as that of the zombie, or how we might draw on creative formats and multi-genre narratives, we might create stories that not only serve as a metaphor for the polycrisis but that allow us to imagine how we might adapt and continue to face an uncertain, calamitous future with a sense of radical hope.

This was my goal in the writing of my novel, *The Garden.* My hope it is that this work is a space where my reader and I have entered a state of "speaking the feared future, and being present with each other to how desperately we do not want it," and that "it may give us the clarity and resolve to act" (Celermajer, 2021, pp. 23–24). My novel ends with the characters finding themselves in a moment of uncertainty. Their future remains unknown, but action is required, nonetheless. There is no absolute salvation present. Indeed, the final chapters consist almost solely of destruction, but – and again, I find myself thinking about the Australian landscape here – in the wake of destruction there is the possibility for renewal.

I hope that by writing stories such as this, by embracing the darkness that exists within our monster stories – particularly those of the zombie – that we might halt our own transformation into the husks of humanity, and the endless shuffle towards our doom.

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