

How We Died

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TERMINAL VISIONS: The Literature of Last Things. By W. Warren Wagar. Indiana University Press. 288 pp. \$24.50.

A HISTORY OF THE END OF THE WORLD. By Yuri Rubinsky and Ian Wiseman. William Morrow & Company/Quill. 192 pp. \$13. Paper \$6.

The 1970s brought the idea of Armageddon back into fashion, as the Vietnam War, the energy crises, Iran's repudiation of progress Western-style, and the Ayatollah's minions kicking our people around shook our serene certainty that America was number one. Public figures, notoriously ignorant of history, began to moan that Americans were now doubting themselves for the first time ever. Actually, this was merely the first big doubting since World War II: there were abundant doubts during the 1930s, of course.

All the same, with the Reagan Administration evidently spoiling for "limited" nuclear war, the end of the world as we know it seems very near at hand. It's consoling, in a perverse way, to be reminded that we are not the first human beings to feel confronted by doomsday. As these two books remind us, the idea of the end of the world has a long history.

W. Warren Wagar's *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things* is a serious study of eschatological fiction, drawing on some 300 books in English and French. Although Wagar glances at non-Western and biblical works, he is most interested in books published since

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). More particularly, he concentrates on what he calls "speculative literature," which most of us know as science fiction.

Wagar sees a fundamental shift around 1914 in the fictional causes of the end of the world. Before the Great War, God, nature and the cosmos bring the world to an end. But after the war, people themselves were increasingly seen as agents of destruction. Twentieth-century fiction of the apocalypse is a literature of wars, revolutions and, as the century grows older, scientific miscalculation, with environmental catastrophe coming in as a motif after about 1965.

Clearly and confidently written, *Terminal Visions* is the work of a mature scholar. For Wagar, books on the end of the world function to warn society that it is going off in the wrong direction. World endings, therefore, are heralds of renewal as well as warnings of doom. Nowadays, he writes, our civilization is falling apart, destroying itself from within with the "chaos of Coca-Cola, fundamentalist Islam, suburban shopping malls, starving East Africans, Eurocommunism, and H-bombs crouching in their silos. . . ." Realizing that present-day fears of the end of the world are merely part of a long tradition, Wagar musters a wan hope that something better is on the way for mankind.

For all its insight, this book is oddly bleak and dull, as though the writing were an exercise through which the author avoids saying directly what is on his mind. A difference of taste also dampened my enthusiasm, since much of the book is an analysis of science fiction, notably that of the great British writer J.G. Ballard, and I am not a lover of science fiction.

The touch of weariness in this book is

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partially explained in Wagar's "Personal Preface." In the early 1970s, that time of turmoil, Wagar, nearing 40, experienced personal and career crises. Teetering on the brink of middle age, he found that his academic world had turned sour, in precisely what way he does not say. He concluded that he lived in "a credicidal civilization." I take this phrase to mean a society in which nothing is sacred, which is just what some of us liked about that time. Wagar nourished his distress and buried himself in science fiction. A decade later, he has produced something of a terminal vision of his own.

A History of the End of the World, by Yuri Rubinsky and Ian Wiseman, is completely different. My soft-cover copy looks like a fat comic book. Rubinsky and Wiseman are journalists, and their book is profusely and irreverently illustrated right down to the table of contents, and it is peppered with one-liners. Despite its gloomy subject, this immensely entertaining encyclopedia of ends is anything but portentous.

I fell into step with Rubinsky and Wiseman immediately. "History," they say in what they call their invocation, "is the joint creation of people angry, courageous, determined, dreaming, foolish, funny, hearing voices, impractical, in mobs, insecure, inspired, jealous, lazy, lustful, powerful, seeing visions, self-righteous, strong, stubborn, stupid, tired, zealous, right or wrong . . . [they are] makers of history just as we are—are more like us than unlike." The chapters are arranged in a straightforward, chronological manner, with two thirds of this sprightly book given over to ends of the world from the pre-science-fiction era. The Garden of Eden, Gilgamesh, the Flood, the endless wars of the Hindus, Daniel's apocalypse, the Black Death and Nostradamus's prophecies are a few of the subjects presented in a page or two. The discussion of Amerindian end-of-the-world myths is particularly intriguing—for with the coming of white settlers the Amerindian world really *did* come to an end. By the time we get to J. G. Ballard, the idea of the end of the world has lost its sting. The book ends with an "extroduction" titled "Everyone Has Always Said: This Time It Could Really Happen," which suggests that, for the authors, our present fears are no more definitive than those of our forebears.

Yet for all the upbeat tempo of their chronicle, Rubinsky and Wiseman join Wagar in second thoughts about the fire this time. They recognize that nuclear war really could annihilate civilization, and they speak of several other ways we might do ourselves in: chemical and biological warfare, pesticides, radioactive wastes, fluorocarbons, even computers. This razzmatazz discussion of the idea of the end of the world ends on an ambivalent note that is even less optimistic than that of the world-weary academic, who at least sees in the end of his world the promise of something better the next time around. □
