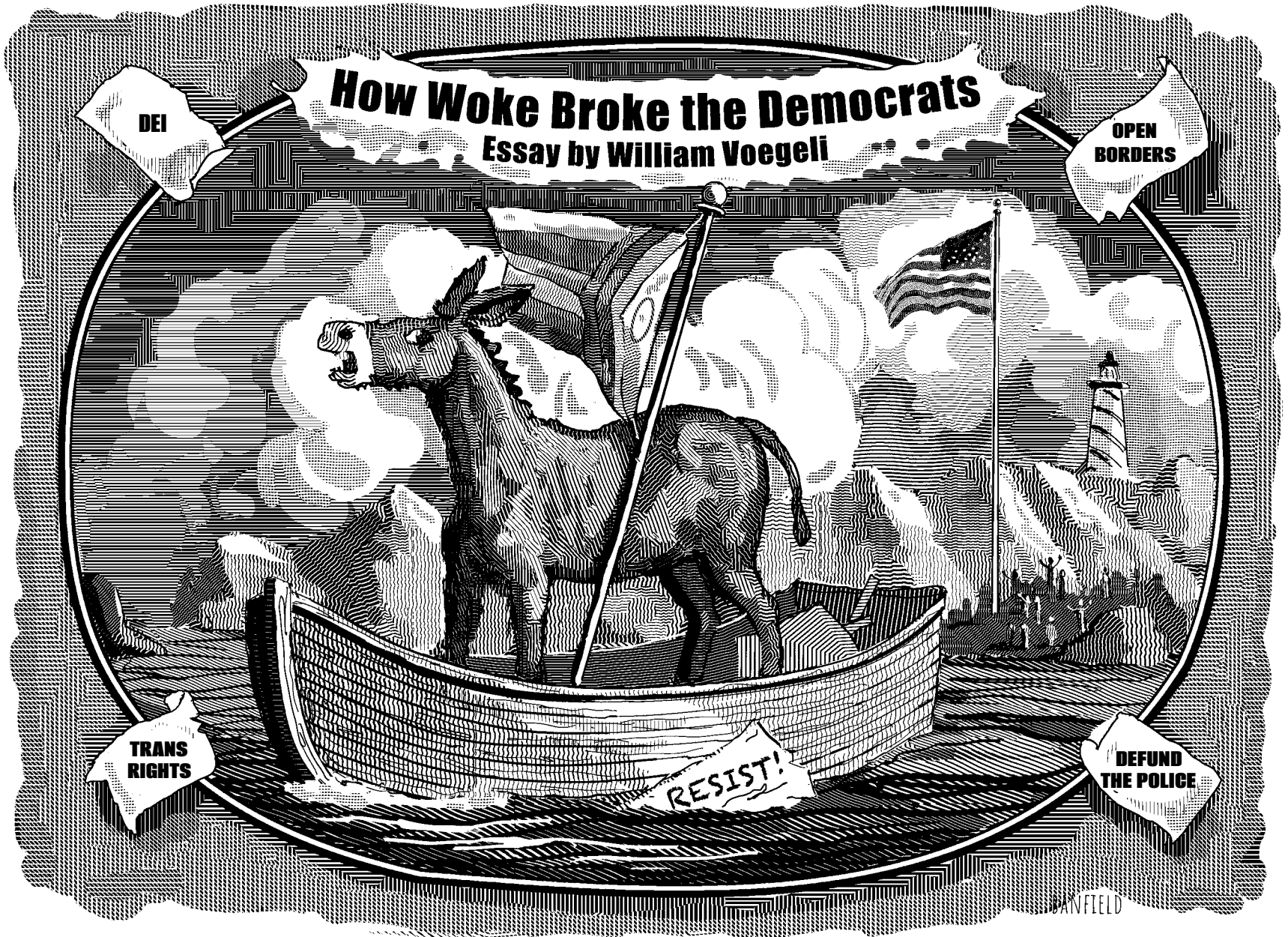


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Book Review by Kyle Smith

EVE OF DESTRUCTION

Everything Must Go: The Stories We Tell about the End of the World, by Dorian Lynskey.
Pantheon, 512 pages, \$32



DORIAN LYNKEY'S *EVERYTHING MUST GO: The Stories We Tell about the End of the World* is an exhaustive look at the enduring appeal of works about how civilization might end, from the Book of Revelation to *12 Monkeys*, *The Matrix*, *I Am Legend*, and whatever extinction-level event Hollywood next brings to screens. ("Extinction-level event," by the way, is a phrase popularized by the 1998 blockbuster *Deep Impact*, starring Robert Duvall and Téa Leoni, about what happens as Earth prepares to receive an asteroid the size of Texas.)

A writer and podcaster whose previous books include *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs* (2011) and *The Ministry of Truth: A Biography of George Orwell's 1984* (2019), Lynskey seems to have pored over hundreds of books, many of them obscure, and watched nearly as many movies and TV shows to shape this definitive account. "There is always enough misery and

mayhem in the world to support a claim that it is the end of days," he writes. The seismologist Charles Francis Richter noted that when the Gospel records that "there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places" (Luke 21:11), Jesus wasn't exactly going out on a limb: "Assuredly, no safer forecast was ever made."

Catastrophism is the obverse of utopianism, a fantasy with which human imagination can never part. The Bible neatly covers both obsessions: Armageddon and the Millennium—a thousand years of blissful rule by Christ. When the traveling Baptist preacher William Miller calculated, using Daniel 8:14 as a source, that the Second Coming would occur in "about 1843," he became a sensation. The appearance of the Great Comet of 1843 in February seemed like a promising warm-up act, but the main attraction never appeared. October 22, 1844, became known as "the Great Disappoint-

ment" when the Millerites conceded error. It wasn't the end of the world as they knew it—and they felt awful: "Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted," said one disillusioned Millerite.

DOOMSDAY STORIES HAVE ALWAYS been with us, and always will be, though the method of destruction keeps changing according to fashion (the zombie emerged in the popular imagination when George A. Romero beckoned him forth in 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*). There are so many disaster scenarios cycling in and out of vogue through history that the book divides them into acts of God plus seven other categories such as "The Bomb," "Machines," "Pandemic," and "Climate." There's also a chapter on generalized social "Collapse," one on "Impact" (which leads to a technical discussion of the differences between meteors, meteoroids, and asteroids), and one on "The Last Man,"



which isn't a sudden disaster but a reflection on what happens when the world population reaches one. (For dramatic purposes, such stories almost always feature more than one person, right on up to the 2010s Will Forte sitcom *The Last Man on Earth*, whose protagonist kept running into other humans.) Mary Shelley popularized the final-person scenario in her 1826 novel *The Last Man*, just as she is credited with giving birth to science fiction with *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* in 1818.

Even talents as varied as Isaac Newton and Bob Dylan saw the end of the world as imminent. Newton worked for 50 years on a tract called *Observations Upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John* that was published only after his death. As Lynskey points out, the world *will* end, so *someone* is going to be proven right, though the gloating will be limited when we all go up in flames, water, ice, or what have you. There are any number of ways it could happen. It could even happen all at once. This book is not for those with a fearful or gloomy disposition.

EXCEPT, HOWEVER, THOSE FOR WHOM gloom about extinction overlaps with giddiness. Lynskey shows how many of our most ardent catastrophists—J.G. Ballard, Kurt Vonnegut, Stephen King—have admitted attraction to the idea of planetary renewal via mass death. (You'd think the smell alone would be a persuasive argument against.) Vonnegut wrote in *Timequake* (1997), "Let us be perfectly frank for a change. For practically everybody, the end of the world can't come soon enough."

Much rarer is the sensibility of David Brin, author of the 1985 post-apocalyptic novel *The Postman* (made into a famously failed Kevin Costner movie in 1997), whose work was imbued with a sense of appreciation for the world we live in right now: we simply do not sufficiently appreciate how much of the miraculous lives in the ordinary, such as (back then) mail delivery. "Most post-holocaust novels are little-boy wish fantasies about running amok in a world without rules," Brin later said.

Lynskey maintains a neutral to jocular tone throughout most of *Everything Must Go*, but as we get to the most recent forecasts of the end times, which tend to center on either overpopulation or the always-imminent "climate emergency," he turns a bit more grave, and even defensive, suggesting we shouldn't ignore the forecasts of *these* prophets, almost all of them on the political left. There is a taste question here, alluded to by Stanley Kubrick when, following *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), he considered making a movie about overpopulation. "Do you realize that in 2020 there will be no room on earth for all the people to stand?" he mused. "The really sophisticated worriers are worried about that."

THE MOST CELEBRATED OF THIS SUPPOSEDLY brilliant crew was the spectacularly erroneous neo-Malthusian Paul Ehrlich ("Sometime in the next 15 years, the end will come," he promised in 1970), who boldly accepted a bet in 1980 by the techno-optimist economist Julian Simon about the future price of any five precious metals chosen by Ehrlich, which under his catastrophic-scarcity theory would necessarily become more expensive. Prices instead fell across the board. Lynskey

sniffs, "Simon was lucky because commodity prices were unusually high in 1980 and Ehrlich had a weak grasp of economics."

The most sophisticated of the sophisticated see climate change and overpopulation working in tandem to hasten our mass demise. For Lynskey, the 1973 Charlton Heston flick *Soylent Green*, which pictured a 2022 New York City (population 40,000,000) as a "smoggy, sweltering, desperate shanty town" is "a remarkably far-sighted movie about climate change." Yet any long-time resident of New York City will tell you that the place is considerably cleaner and more pleasant than it was in 1973.

To Lynskey, no climate-change prophecy is ever wrong, merely premature; he occasionally sounds like a Millerite re-calculating the future arrival date of Armageddon. Why, after mocking so many doomsayers, does he include only two glancing mentions of the leading alarmist of our age, Al Gore, whose film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) won an Oscar for its sci-fi speculation, warning that the planet would be doomed in ten years unless a "drastic" reversal of course were taken? Lynskey seems entirely to have forgotten that Gore, a Nobel Prize winner, was taken far more seriously than nearly all of the dozens of (other) nuts and cranks whose wrong predictions get detailed, multi-page summaries. Reaching the end, one feels a bit worn out by the endless zombie-march of unearthed factoids. A greater effort to make sense of it all would have been welcome. But then again, it's always a good time to panic.

Kyle Smith is the film critic of The Wall Street Journal.

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