

WHEN THE ENGLISH FALL

x x x x x

The Root of Apocalypse:
An essay by David Williams

Questions for Discussion





THE ROOT OF APOCALYPSE

x x x x x

*An essay by
David Williams*

I would get a bit of a snicker whenever I'd tell friends what I was writing.

“What kind of book is it?” they'd ask.

“Postapocalyptic Amish fiction,” I'd say.

And there'd come that smile and the familiar shake of a head that seemed to be the politest way to note that I'm a little “touched.”

But if you have a sense of who the Amish are and what the word *apocalypse* means, it becomes a little clearer.

I first seriously encountered Amish culture in my religious studies program at the University of Virginia and was fascinated by this remarkable, unique community. The Amish are primordial Baptists, the Protestant equivalent of one of those strange prehistoric fish you find in deep ocean waters. Since immigrating to the United States from Switzerland back in the 1860s, the lives of the Old Order Amish have remained remarkably static. In most communities, they still speak *Deitsch*, which isn't Dutch but a variant of old Swiss German. Because they've chosen to reject the world and live in simple community, they do not engage with most modern technology.

Daily life for the Amish today looks much like it did back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It's plain, involving family farming and older, manual crafts. It all feels very much like the world of the Little House books, peculiarly transposed into our modern era. No cars, no lights, no motorboats, not a single luxury, as they sang on *Gilligan's Island*. This is how they have chosen to live, independent of our increasingly interconnected industrial society. They call all people who aren't Amish "the English." Sure, we may be Scottish or French or Korean or Guatemalan. But to the Amish, we are all English, an echo of their Germanic separation from their English-speaking neighbors.

The Amish world is governed by some very different principles than ours. Three are key. There is *hochmut*, which describes human pride, arrogance, and selfishness. There is *demut*, which involves humility and humbleness. And there's

gelassenheit, or nonviolent spiritual detachment. You do not grasp, or seek your own advancement. You maintain a gentle contentment with whatever lot you are given. The Amish see these principles as a way to live the apocalyptic life taught by Jesus, uncompromised by the distractions of our cluttered, grasping world.

Here is where our stories about the Amish and our stories of apocalypse come together. The word *apocalypse* does not mean destruction. ἀποκάλυψις means, in the Greek from which we received that word, an “unveiling,” a “making clear.” Apocalypses, as a genre, are about stripping away all of the fluff and pretense and getting down to what matters.

That is what draws us English to apocalyptic literature. We sense, somehow, that most of the madness of our modern lives is unnecessary, our stresses and rushing about all faintly superfluous. So we tell ourselves stories of what it would be like if we had to get back to basics, if we had to rebuild after something immense rocked our complex, delicate world.

It was reflection on our fragility that stirred the vision for my novel *When the English Fall*. Years ago, on a beautiful, warm autumn day, I went for my lunchtime walk, taking the time to allow my mind to wander. That morning, being both a pastor and an avid reader of things scientific, I’d encountered an article about the Carrington Event. The Carrington Event was the single largest solar storm in modern history. It was 1859, early in the industrial era, and an immense blast of charged particles from our sun plowed into the earth. It blew out telegraph systems, delivered electric shocks to people

who touched metal objects, and caused auroras so brilliant in the continental United States that people came outside in the dead of night thinking the sun had risen.

If that happened now? It would be catastrophic, a crippling and potentially fatal blow to our technology-dependent civilization. What would the world look like after such a thing? Commerce would be strangled. Communications, silenced. I walked and reflected on the paradoxical frailty of our technological power, and suddenly another image came into my mind. It was a vignette, a fragment of a reverie, one that had come from another fallow moment.

I had been driving my family home from a trip to western Maryland, back from what we call “the house in the country.” The minivan was warm and quiet, the family lulled to sleep by the drone of the road. My mind was on autopilot, the familiar highway rolling by, and I was lost in a daydream. As we approached a perfect bucolic hillside, I visualized an Amish man and his daughter sitting there together, watching us drive by. I imagined the girl asking her father about us and the gentle conversation that might have followed. What would he tell her about us? About our differences? About our lives, in their wild rush of busyness and movement, as fleeting as mayflies? That little vignette hung in my mind, a seed of something, returning whenever we would pass that place in the road.

That lunchtime, as I walked and meditated, the two images connected.

The Amish community, untouched by a global calamity.

Our society, a fragmented ruin, within which the Amish would carry on. Yet the Amish, for all of their efforts at separateness, would not be unaffected. The collateral damage of the technological collapse would spill out across those boundaries and touch their lives in ways that no willful separation could avoid.

What would the Amish do, I wondered, when we English fell?

And from that wondering, this apocalyptic story took form, told through the journal entries of that imagined Amish man on a hillside. It reveals, or so I hope, a little about who we are as human beings and how fundamentally connected we are no matter our beliefs—Amish, English, all of us.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

x x x x x

1. A substantial inspiration for the crippling solar storm in the novel is the very real 1859 “Carrington Event.” That equally massive coronal mass ejection was the largest in recent history, and is likely to occur again. If such an event were to take place, what impact would that have on you and the community where you live?

2. In the community Jacob and Hannah fled, Hannah’s loss of her child and subsequent infertility were viewed as divine punishment for an infraction or lack of faith. In a counterpoint to that perspective, the settlement in which Jacob lives approaches major storms—and even the disastrous fall of the

English—as events to be faithfully and patiently endured. How does that tension reflect your understanding of human suffering and struggle?

3. In an otherwise bluntly realistic story, Sadie provides the single element of magical realism. How does her character inform the development of the narrative? Does the paranormal or mystic nature of her character mesh with the flow of the story?

4. Early in the book, Jacob is clearly struggling with Sadie’s “illness,” which seems a blending of schizotypal disorders and seizure disorders. In writing about mental illness, it’s easy to romanticize it or approach the struggles of those living with mental illness in ways that don’t show the real impacts on individuals and families. How does the literary treatment of Sadie’s prophetic “peculiarity” play against this dynamic?

5. There is a strong tendency in conventional storytelling to idealize Amish communities, seeing them through a pastel lens that seems to oversimplify their lives. Do Jacob and his family ring true to you?

6. Jacob’s relationship with Mike provides his primary connection with the world of the English. Mike’s struggles—with a dysfunctional family relationship, a diet of endless profit-media anger, and with his own health—present a very different way of life from the one lived in Jacob’s community. How

does this juxtaposition illuminate the differences between our contemporary culture and Amish folkways?

7. As an epistolary novel, the entire book is presented from a single perspective and tone. What are the advantages to this approach to storytelling? What are the limitations or challenges?

8. Jacob's responses to the crisis he and his community endure are radically shaped by his Christian faith—which, given that he is Amish, should not come as a surprise to the reader. How did his explicit engagement with his faith as he journaled affect your reading?

9. Much of Amish life is oriented around avoiding actions that are *hochmut* (pride/hubris) and encouraging actions that are *demut* (humility/selflessness). How does that approach to individual and communal life compare to our culture? What impacts does that ethos have on the decisions made during the course of the novel?

10. For most of the book, the violence and horror remains carefully out of sight, far away from Jacob's community. While this is an intentional choice on the part of the author, how did this affect the development of tension within the story?

11. In his description of his "running-around," or *rumspringa*, Jacob describes his encounter with our world as "dizzying."

Given the explosive pace of technological change and societal self-understanding, do you ever get that feeling yourself?

12. Jacob's father gifted him a pistol. Among the Amish, fire-arm ownership is common, and guns are used to hunt and slaughter livestock. How do Jacob's reflections on his gun and the ultimately Chekhovian use of that pistol in the story illuminate differences between the Amish and our English culture?

13. Jacob has a complex relationship with Bishop Schrock, whose hardness reminds him of the cold relationship he had with his father's community. How does that relationship evolve in light of the crisis facing their community? How does Jacob's sense of Asa Schrock's identity reflect the ways we project our expectations onto those around us?

14. At several points in the story, Jacob and others share the saying that "the sword has no handle." This reflects the pacifist understanding that cultures based on violence as a means of control ultimately harm themselves. Can a society exist while simultaneously setting aside all forms of coercive power? Why or why not?

15. Faced with the choice of remaining where they are and benefiting from the protection of neighboring militia, or leaving to preserve the integrity of their radically pacifist lifestyle, the Amish in *When the English Fall* choose the latter. How did you react to this decision?

16. The conclusion of the book is ambiguous by design, leaving the ultimate fate of the community open-ended. How do you feel about the choice to end the narrative without a definitive sense of the fate of Jacob and his family?

JOSEPH LEBLANC



David Williams, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church, lives in Northern Virginia with his wife and sons. His stories and articles have appeared in publications as diverse as *Omni*, the *Christian Century*, and *Wired*. He is the author of one previous book, *The Believer's Guide to the Multiverse*, an exploration of theology and the cosmos. *When the English Fall* is his first novel.