

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE END OF THE WORLD

(on Don McKellar's *Last Night*)

by Paula Kelly

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Our ideas about the end of the world are often neatly summed up in one word: Apocalypse.

It's a word with heft, brimming with religious resonance. In the *Book of Revelation*, Apocalypse refers to the day of judgement when good trumps evil once and for all, and the world as we know it will be overthrown, then recreated all over again as a new heaven and earth.

Today, we equate Apocalypse with asteroids slamming into the planet, viral plagues spreading around the globe, alien invasions and that 20<sup>th</sup> century invention, nuclear devastation.

And yet the original Greek root of apocalypse (*Apokálypsis*) refers to something much subtler, to "a lifting of the veil" or, put another way, "to uncover" or "to reveal." This meaning applies equally to shattering discoveries of cosmic significance or a simple revelation of truth—as when the veil is lifted and we see the same thing we saw before, but with much greater clarity. Sounds like the premise for a movie.

Yes, inevitably, we come to the movies, where simple truths mix happily with half-baked lies and cynical manipulation of the senses. The subject of apocalypse has become a favourite cinematic trope, perhaps because it deals with the Ultimate Conflict between humankind and forces beyond our control, even if they were unleashed by forces within our control to begin with. And conflict is, of course, the essence of drama, the spine of a story, the beat of a scene. Where would filmmakers be without conflict?

There is an entire page of Wikipedia devoted to a cinematic sub-genre known as Domsday films, with more than 90 movies listed from *When World Collide* (1951) to 2008's *The Happening*, directed with the usual messianic fervour by M. Night Shyamalan. I hadn't even realized that a Domsday genre existed. Apparently it speaks to our obsession with trying to grasp ideas beyond human comprehension, like standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon without a guard rail or sending particles hurtling around a 16-mile long accelerator and then smashing them together. We want to figure out how the world began, which seems reasonable, but we also can't stop picturing how it might end.

In terms of events responsible for the earth's final hour, Don McKellar's first feature film *Last Night* doesn't offer a single clue. The filmmaker follows a group of characters around in the final hours before the cataclysm, the nature of which is never described. McKellar is more interested in how people decide to spend their last night on earth, not how things managed to get to this point. But that doesn't matter really—we have imaginations and we have the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21st centuries to help fuel them. So it's a matter of *que sera sera*, and the characters of *Last Night* are just going to have to deal with it. And amazingly, that's what they do. They go about the business of living, loving, working, arguing, having sex, and screwing up, the way people do all the time.

Take one of the early scenes for example. Don McKellar, playing the lovably low-key Patrick Wheeler, is late for Christmas dinner with his family. When he arrives, they've already started opening their gifts, which are actually childhood memorabilia carefully selected and individually wrapped by his mother. "We couldn't wait forever," she tells him, the first of many statements that vibrate in the context of what forever now means. Forever has shrunk to a few short hours, and Don McKellar's sister Jennifer (played by Sarah Polley) still finds time to remind Patrick to throw his wrapping in a garbage bag specially provided for that purpose. Patrick's mother, on the other hand, is more upset at his tardiness for Christmas dinner, to which her son carefully responds: "Number one, it's not really Christmas, and Number two, it's the end of the world at midnight, and I've been a little preoccupied with that." When the family sits down finally, plates loaded down with turkey and trimmings, Patrick's father says grace with no trace of irony: "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful."

Having seen more than my fair share of movies about the end of the world, I can tell you that this notion of ordinary people meeting the demise of the planet with a sort of quiet stoicism, resignation and even dignity is fairly unique. Recent entries into the doomsday genre like *Independence Day*, *War of the Worlds* and *Armageddon* find human beings (read Americans) unleashing weapons of unimaginable force against fate or God or aliens, whatever the case may be. Big on budget, bombast and bravado, these are the films that say: touch my veil and I'll blow you to kingdom come, wherever the hell that is.

But perhaps one of the films which left on me the most indelible images of mankind railing against fate is a low-budget surprise called *Miracle Mile*. In this movie, a rumour of the coming apocalypse grows to a roar and a roar becomes utter chaos on the streets of L.A., sweeping mild-mannered Harry Washello (Anthony Edwards) and his lover Julie (Mare Winningham) into a maelstrom of human terror and despair. With only two hours left to escape (even less time than in *Last Night*) before the nuclear missiles arrive, the unlucky pair scramble desperately to find a car, a working elevator, each other, a helicopter, *and* a helicopter pilot, all the while trying to dodge gunfire, mayhem, riots and finally, the nuclear strike itself.

In the midst of the blast, the helicopter goes down in the ocean and water immediately begins to fill up the cabin. But the plucky Julie still doesn't give up—she didn't plan to go out this way. She starts trying to get out the window, until Anthony Edwards gently reminds her that there's no point in escape to the surface because there's *nothing up there*. It's the kind of common sense moment when his character is closest to Don McKellar's Patrick in *Last Night*.

I remember being told once about a certain response to panic, which is to get more and more and more calm, to the point of becoming catatonic. I think that's what Patrick is like in the opening scenes of *Last Night*. After he meets Sandra (Oh), however, he starts to thaw out a little, he starts to care, even though there's a strong sense of too little, much too late. In one scene toward the end of the film, he tries hard to tell Sandra Oh something about himself, something personal, but she gets impatient. "You'd better hurry up. Tell me something to make me love you," she says. It's the closest he'll ever get again to a meaningful relationship.

Finally, inevitably, the clock strikes midnight and most of the characters in *Last Night* are where they planned to be, acting out their final impulses, without screaming or shouting or waving fists in the air. Is this a "Canadian" vision of the Apocalypse? I'm not sure, but in shifting his focus from flag waving leaders who make the decisions, to ordinary people with no choice but to persevere, Don McKellar offers an alternative ending that I, for one, prefer.