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Writing into the apocalypse - an examination of the method of writing into the dark within the context of post-apocalyptic fiction: An exegesis

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Carousel

A novel

– and –

Writing into the apocalypse - an examination of the method of writing into the dark within the context of post-apocalyptic fiction

An exegesis

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Faculty of Education and Arts
School of Communication and Arts
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This Creative Writing thesis consists of an original novel, titled Carousel, and an exegesis examining the practice-led method of writing without a narrative plan.

Carousel explores the lives of four young adult characters who find themselves trapped inside a giant shopping complex in post-apocalyptic Perth. A central creative decision that informed the process of writing Carousel was to write without knowledge of the narrative destination. Within this research, I have termed this practice ‘writing into the dark’.

The initial focus of the exegesis is to define and explore what it means to write into the dark. Here the exegesis utilises writing theory from authors including Margaret Atwood, Maurice Blanchot and Alice Flaherty, alongside interview material from writers such as Stephen King, Katherine Heyman and John Marsden, to analyse this creative method and distinguish it from other writing practices such as working to a predetermined narrative plan.

Following this, the method of writing into the dark is examined within the specific parameters of selected post-apocalyptic literature by Cormac McCarthy, Justin Cronin and Douglas Coupland. Here the exegesis speculates that a link may exist between the challenges of writing within the post-apocalyptic genre and the adoption of an ‘into the dark’ writing process.

Finally, the exegesis provides an insight into the specific details of my own creative processes in writing Carousel. This section sheds further light on the possible relationship between the process of writing into the dark and the post-apocalyptic genre.
The declaration page
is not included in this version of the thesis
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Writing into the apocalypse – an examination of the method of writing into
the dark within the context of post-apocalyptic fiction.

Many successful authors choose to write without a predetermined narrative plan. Instead these authors embrace uncertainty and the creative unknown, effectively writing into the dark. The rationale informing the writing into the dark method has been explored by theorists such as Margaret Atwood, Maurice Blanchot and Alice Flaherty and discussed by popular writers including Stephen King, Katherine Heyman and Cormac McCarthy.

This research will further examine the writing into the dark method by analysing it within the context of selected post-apocalyptic literature. This is a literary genre with a solid readership where recent commercial successes such as Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006), Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake (2003) and Justin Cronin’s The Passage (2010), following on from seminal texts such as Z for Zachariah by Robert C. O’Brien (1974) and On The Beach by Nevil Shute (1957), have consolidated its cultural significance.

The unique parameters of post-apocalyptic fiction ask something specific of the writer. In many cases this genre requires characters to undertake a process of exploration and discovery as they experience a profoundly transformed world for the first time. Evocatively depicting these ‘blank slate’ (Cole, 2011, p. 9) environments is one of the central challenges of the genre. For some authors, creating the dynamic of discovery, instability and uncertainty associated with the post-apocalyptic blank slate is inherently connected to the process of writing into the dark. Working without a narrative plan channels the author’s uncertainty onto the page, creating a parallel process of discovery among writer, character, and eventually reader.

My research will explore this connection, examining the writing methods of three authors: Cormac McCarthy, Justin Cronin and Douglas Coupland, with a focus on their respective post-apocalyptic novels: The Road, The Passage and Girlfriend in a
Coma (1998). In addition to this I will discuss my own processes in writing the post-apocalyptic novel Carousel (2015).

To begin, I define and examine the writing into the dark process. Here I focus on several key works of writing theory including Margaret Atwood’s Negotiating with the Dead (2003), Annie Dillard’s The Writing Life (1990) and Stephen King’s On Writing (2002). To produce a comprehensive overview of this practice the analysis also contains observations from authors, approaches to other creative mediums such as screenwriting, the physiological and psychological processes informing an into the dark writing practice, and the alternate practice of writing to a predetermined narrative plan. The analysis also draws on the comprehensive body of creative theory offered by Blanchot in texts such as The Space of Literature (1955).

I also elaborate upon the particular challenges represented by the post-apocalyptic genre. This chapter covers a broad spectrum of subgenres, character traits, thematic preoccupations and characteristics of setting in order to accurately identify what makes post-apocalyptic fiction unique, and the implications this has for the writer writing into the dark.

This analysis reveals McCarthy as a writer who chooses to work into the dark, Cronin as a writer who works to a predetermined plan, and Coupland as a writer who has utilised both processes during his career. Examining these contrasting approaches offers insight into the potential relationship between writing into the dark and post-apocalyptic fiction. It addresses the question of whether writing without a predetermined plan can aid the writer in meeting the demands of this genre and illuminates key elements of the writing into the dark process.

Finally I examine the process I used to write the post-apocalyptic novel Carousel. I identify and examine how specific elements of the work were influenced by a writing into the dark practice, reveal my approach to the editing and revision process, and discuss how the post-apocalyptic genre was implicated in these practices.
My overall aim is to assess writing into the dark as a creative method and determine whether it may be suited to certain writing challenges, such as those found within post-apocalyptic literature.

**Writing into the dark as a method**

Seeking to define and homogenize the processes that inform the creation of a novel seems inherently problematic. Creative writing is a broad practice reliant on intangible elements such as invention and individuality. Creative writing manuals, such as Strunk & White’s *The Elements of Style* (1935) and *A Creative Writing Handbook* (Neale, ed, 2009), offer advice on issues such as style, writing routines and career progression, but often struggle to provide a definitive approach to the practice of imagination and creation. Writing theory from authors such as Atwood, Dillard and King can be more useful in examining the processes informing creative writing; however, even this analysis can be problematic given each novelist has their individual practice, and there is no guarantee that these practices even remain consistent for a writer from one work to the next.

However, if we take a narrower view of creative writing practice and look at how writers approach the most basic and integral issue of developing a narrative, it does become possible to identify two oppositional practices. That is, novelists choose, either within the context of a single novel or part thereof, or across all of their work, to write either with or without a narrative plan.

Writing with a plan involves devising a narrative structure, often including specific details on plot, character, setting, and point of view, prior to writing the sentences and paragraphs that make the draft of a manuscript. Again, different writers approach this with differing levels of detail. Some outline a very basic skeleton of narrative events, others establish comprehensive and specific details before beginning the first draft.
In contrast to this are writers who begin writing without having an established narrative plan. These writers effectively work into the unknown, or the dark, discovering and creating narrative and character during the process of writing. This doesn’t necessarily mean there is total uncertainty about narrative destination or character journey – again, this is dependent on the individual writer – however, the choice of writing in uncertainty, as opposed to structure, is a fundamental distinction that may (or may not) have broader influences on the creative outcome. To effectively distinguish this practice it is important to stress that the writer is physically writing the sentences of their manuscript whilst in this darkness, not undertaking other creative practices such as planning or sketching or otherwise.

This process of writing into the dark is examined in several works of writing theory. In Negotiating with the Dead Atwood discusses the act of immersing the self in the writing of a novel. She asked several novelists what this feels like for them, and their responses allude to a creative darkness on several occasions.

One said it was like walking into a labyrinth, without knowing what monster might be inside; another said it was like groping through a tunnel; another said it was like being in a cave – she could see daylight through the opening, but she herself was in darkness. Another said it was like being under water, in a lake or ocean. Another said it was like being in a completely dark room, feeling her way: she had to rearrange the furniture in the dark, and then when it was all arranged a light would come on. Another said it was like wading through a deep river, at dawn or twilight (Atwood, 2003, p. xxii)

Whether in the form of a maze-like structure, a hidden riverbed or a cave or tunnel, darkness here seems to be strongly associated with uncertainty. In describing these sensations, these unidentified writers suggest that uncertainty is not a block or flaw, but rather central to their writing processes.
Atwood herself speaks of ‘an inability to see one’s way forward,’ (2003, p. xxii) due to this darkness, consolidating the idea that, for many writers, this isn’t a problem, as much as an inevitable part of a process whereby ‘the act of going forward [will] eventually bring about the condition for vision,’ (Atwood, p. xxii). Again, the important factor here is that this process occurs during the writing of a novel, rather than as part of a predetermined plan. For Atwood, ‘writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light’ (2003, p. xxii), suggesting that this darkness contains something integral to the writing process.

Dillard expresses a similar dynamic between writer and text in *The Writing Life*. She compares the process of writing a novel to that of climbing a ladder, whereby the writer’s view is obstructed until they reach the top and can ‘see over the roof, or over the clouds’ (Dillard, p. 19). Again there is mention of the writer eventually being able to see the work in front of them, but (again) this only happens as a consequence of the writing. Prior to this, and for the majority of the writing process, Dillard suggests that, ‘you climb steadily, doing your job in the dark’ (p. 19).

Dillard also explores the issue of vision, raising the important question of whether the writer who has a vision for a novel is still writing in the dark. However, for Dillard, vision does not refer to the ability to see ahead; rather, it is ‘the work’s intellectual structure and aesthetic surface. It is a chip of the mind, a pleasing intellectual object’ (p. 56). She admits that this vision of the object will change and evolve, but states that this ‘change will not alter the vision or its deep structures’ (p. 56). Vision, in this context, is not synonymous with direction, rather a sense of the work, or its emotional core.

Still, Dillard’s mention of vision implies that the writer is never writing completely into the dark, rather to a vision (or sense of the work) that will remain intact from start to finish. However, she also goes on to say that the writer ‘cannot fill in the vision,’ or ‘even bring the vision to light’ (p. 56). For Dillard, as soon as there are words on the page, this vision has been superseded by a more powerful process.
The vision is simply ‘a set of mental relationships, a coherent series of formal possibilities.’ Once the writer begins to fill pages it is ‘no longer a vision: it is paper’ (p. 57). In saying this Dillard suggests that it is possible for certain writers to be writing into the dark, irrespective of whether a novel was initiated with a specific creative vision.

Stephen King also expresses something akin to writing into the dark in On Writing. Speaking of his own processes, King uses the analogy of stories being like fossils for the writer to dig up. The notion that a story can be discovered, rather than planned, has parallels to both Atwood's illumination of the dark and Dillard’s climbing of the ladder. However for King, writing into the dark is also closely tied to character: ‘I often have an idea of what the outcome may be, but have never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things their way’ (King, 2002, p. 161).

Thus, for King, writing into the dark is a mechanism that allows his characters to drive the narrative via the decisions they are seen to make. One could argue that this dynamic between character and narrative could be applied during the planning of a novel, but, at least for King, uncertainty seems to be a key element in his process. This point is reiterated when he speaks of the unpredictability of his narrative destinations: ‘[i]n some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however, it’s something I never expected. For a suspense novelist, this is a great thing,’ (King, 2002, p. 161). This mention of genre is significant. King's suggestion that his writing process facilitates a trait of the genre, in this case suspense, is something I examine later in relation to post-apocalyptic fiction.

In Navigating the Dark Woods of Fiction Katherine Heyman (2103) examines her writing processes within the framework of her short story ‘Woods for the Trees’. Here she talks about the effect of not knowing, nor being able to articulate, key elements of a work prior to beginning the writing. Like Atwood and Dillard, Heyman suggests that mystery and unknowing are important factors in the creative process.
Articulation, indeed, should come only through the process of creation. That is, we understand the why of the call – why this character and not another – once we have pursued it. Because, I would suggest, the mystery is critical to the process of creative unknowing, and creative unknowing is the alchemical ingredient of fiction. It isn’t enough to map out a path through the dark woods of fiction. In order to fully engage with the act of creation that fiction requires, it is necessary to first be utterly lost. (Heyman, 2013, p. 63)

Being lost in these ‘dark woods of fiction’ is a strong analogy for writing into the dark. It confirms a perspective that, for some writers, understanding and articulation of a creative work can only occur once the writing has been initiated. That is, writing into the dark is a process of discovery whereby the writer begins to understand what they are writing, as they write. This introduces the notion of creative unknowing, which I return to in the following section on post-apocalyptic fiction.

The notion of the writer being lost features prominently in Blanchot’s extensive analysis of the writing process. In The Space of Literature Blanchot explores the challenge of remaining connected to the work throughout the writing process. He compares the writer’s environment to ‘an enclave, a preserve within space, airless and without light’ (p. 54). For Blanchot, such environments are unavoidable due to the way the writing is initiated.

Kathryn Owler states that ‘for Blanchot, writing requires an inspired leap into the unknown’ (p. 2); a stage Blanchot terms ‘the other night’ (p. 162). ‘The other night’ finds the writer in a position of darkness where they have ‘lost all clarity’ (Owler p. 2); ‘[t]he experience is purely nocturnal, it is the very experience of night’ (Blanchot, p. 162). For Blanchot, the writer negotiates this challenge ‘through an inexplicable maneuver’ (p. 54). Owler unpacks this maneuver as simply the writer continuing to write: ‘the writer must keep writing in order to save him or herself from the realm of dissolution, find a path forward and come to know themselves again’ (p. 2).
Interestingly Blanchot also mentions a stage prior to ‘the other night’, something he terms ‘the first night’ (p. 162). However ‘the first night’ seems to describe a sensation rather than a specific planning process. Blanchot describes ‘the first night’ as ‘welcoming’ (p. 162); a sensation experienced whereby ‘[t]he writer is as yet reassured; meaning is still firmly in their sights’ (Owler, p. 3). This appears synonymous with Dillard’s descriptions of vision; something intangible, a sensation swiftly engulfed and substituted once the writer begins writing.

The processes described by Blanchot, Heyman, King, Dillard and Atwood, and the alternative practice of writing to a predetermined narrative plan, are defined by Don Fry in Writing Your Way: Creating a Writing Process That Works for You (2012). During the drafting stage of writing a novel Fry categorises writers as either planners or plungers. Planners create a plan and follow it; Plungers discover what they want to say by typing’ (Fry, 2012, p. 27). According to Fry, plungers often skip the step of organizing and ‘start typing to decide what to say. Plungers organize by drafting’ (Fry, 2012, p. 27). In this sense plunging is akin to writing into the dark. Whilst it may be argued that these definitions are too generalised, together they provide a useful frame of reference for the enigmatic process of creative writing.

The presence of both a planned and unplanned approach places the novel in an interesting position in relation to other narrative mediums. Screenwriting, for instance, is associated with a high degree of planning. The economics of the cinema industry, the highly collaborative processes involved in making screen texts and the focus on brevity place much external pressure on the screenwriter to conform to established narrative formulas. Fry’s plunging is generally considered a dangerous process within these parameters. The planning methodology is ingrained in screenwriting manuals such as Linda Seger’s Making a Good Script Great (2010) where she says most screenwriters ‘work out their stories and characters very carefully before starting to write a script. The more time spent planning a script, the faster it gets written’ (p. 13).
In screenwriting discourse there are several steps to planning a screenplay. Development documents such as synopses, outlines and treatments are completed, forcing the writer to create and consolidate information on elements including character, plot and sub-plots, narrative structure and style. One element of screenwriting methodology that is particularly prevalent relates to narrative destination. Determining how a script will end is considered a vital step by screenwriting theorists such as Seger, Richard Walter and Syd Field, one that Field states should be taken very early in the writing process: ‘[t]he ending is the first thing you must know before you begin writing’ (2005, p. 91). Field’s statement, largely mirrored within screenwriting circles, puts the process of screenwriting in complete opposition to the practice of writing into the dark. Interestingly, of determining the ending within the writing process, Field also states: ‘[y]ou can do that maybe in a novel, or play, but not in a screenplay’ (p. 91).

There has also been psychological and physiological research into these contrasting creative practices. Neurologist Alice Flaherty (2005) explores the nature of creativity in detail in *The Midnight Disease*. In a chapter titled ‘Literary Focus and Drive’, Flaherty analyses the creative writing process from psychological, cognitive and neurological perspectives. Her findings further distinguish the planning and plunging methods.

Flaherty discusses how a Freudian model divides creativity into primary and secondary processes of thought: ‘Primary-process thought is concrete, emotion driven, visual rather than verbal, associative and irrational’ (Flaherty, 2005, p. 60), whereas secondary-process thought is ‘less emotionally charged, language based and logical’ (p. 60). Similarly, ‘cognitive psychologists offer theories of creativity that recast the primary-secondary dichotomy as being between divergent and convergent thinking,’ (p. 62). In this respect Flaherty states that ‘divergent thinking, which shares much with primary-process thought, produces a number of solutions to a poorly defined problem’ (p. 62), whilst ‘convergent thinking, roughly analogous to the secondary process, uses all the information available to solve a well-defined problem’ (p. 62). Neurologically Flaherty believes that these contrasting approaches mirror the relationship between the right and left sides of
the brain, whereby ‘the interaction between left and right brain is yet another process that is reminiscent of the interaction between Freud’s primary- and secondary-process thought, and between the modern creativity coach’s divergent and convergent thinking.’ (p. 71).

Flaherty’s research offers a scientific basis to the presence of oppositional approaches to creative writing. There may be a parallel between writing into the dark and both primary-process thought and divergent thinking, and writing to a plan and secondary-process thought and convergent thinking. Writing into the dark is effectively providing ‘solutions’ or narrative events, in relation to an unknown (or, at least, unforeseen) or developing ‘problem’, whilst writing to a plan defines this ‘problem’ or narrative destination from the outset, making the process of finding ‘solutions’ more direct.

However, neurological research also suggests that these processes cannot ever be fully separated: ‘All of these schools converge on the prediction that interaction or alternation between the two modes of thought or hemispheres fosters creativity. And the theories parallel the standard literary model in which a creative writer alternates between generating text and editing’ (Flaherty, 2005, p. 71). Thus Flaherty suggests the writer utilizes both certainty and uncertainty in creating their work. In what order this occurs, or to what percentage, isn’t something she explores.

If we shift focus to the writers themselves, we can find several established authors who discuss the rationale informing their approach to writing narrative. Australian novelist John Marsden reveals the creative processes informing much of his writing in Marsden on Marsden (2000). This book tracks Marsden’s early career, providing insight into the creation of several of his novels, including the Tomorrow, When the War Began (1993) series. Marsden admits to basing much of the content in his novels on real encounters and events. Given he predominantly writes Young Adult fiction, this means a lot of content comes from his experiences as a secondary school teacher. He also acknowledges the importance of research in
writing some of his novels, including finding out about guns and explosives for the 
*Tomorrow, When the War Began* series.

However, despite the need for research, people and events to inform his writing, Marden still appears to write into the dark in relation to narrative destination. Referring to *Letters from the Inside* (1992), he admits to ‘not knowing what the ending would be until I was halfway through’ (Marsden, 2000, p. 54), stating that ‘it always amazes me how the unconscious mind can be so far ahead of the conscious. My conscious mind didn’t know in which direction the story was going; but my unconscious mind did’ (p. 54). This suggests that when the writer’s conscious mind is in the dark, often placed there intentionally, the unconscious takes over and moves the story forward until the inevitable narrative destination is revealed. Regarding his novel *Winter* (2000), Marsden reveals he started with a sentence, putting this into a computer and ‘seeing what happens’ (2000, p. 96).

Marsden also reveals a similar perspective on character to that expressed by King. On several occasions he reveals how, for him, a story ‘writes itself’ once he discovers the voice of his characters. In this case ‘voice’ refers to inner and outer dialogue – elements that, for many writers, are often developed whilst writing. Of course, the notion of a story ‘writing itself’ is an expression rather than a reality. At no stage do King, Marsden or others relinquish authorship of their work. Their admission is more about how their knowledge of character gives the work trajectory and confidence. Whilst they may not know, or choose to know, the narrative destination, they do know how their characters see the world and react to the world. It is via these reactions or decisions that their narratives gain a trajectory that may feel subconscious or subliminal.

Gillian Flynn’s writing process appears similar to both King’s and Marsden’s. Whilst her thriller *Gone Girl* has been praised for its careful and tense plotting, Flynn’s writing process appears fluid and unplanned. According to Carpenter, ‘None of her books has been meticulously plotted from the start, extraordinary given the twists and turns in *Gone Girl*. Instead, Flynn writes a long, loose and painful first draft and then begins to see her way, rewriting and cutting’ (2014, p.
10). In an interview with Carpenter, Flynn reveals that ‘[o]ften the surprises in Gone Girl work because I surprised myself too’ (2014).

Suggesting that this method is not limited to contemporary writers, Ernest Hemingway reveals a preference for writing into the dark in Ernest Hemingway On Writing (Phillips, 2004). In a chapter on working habits, Phillips includes a third person exchange written by Hemingway as follows:

Mice: Do you know what is going to happen when you write a story?
Y.C.: Almost never. I start to make it up and have happen what would have to happen as it goes along. (2004, p. 41)

Hemmingway provides insight into his writing processes via this fictional interview, and again we find a lack of narrative direction being utilised by the writer as a creative tool.

To King, Heyman, Marsden, Flynn and Hemingway we can add Cormac McCarthy who, Richard Helm reveals, ‘never fully plots out his novels - "That would be death" - but writes in constant pursuit of perfection’ (Helm, 2007), thereby joining a list of writers who, to varying degrees, purposefully choose to write into the dark.

In contrast, we can also identify many writers who utilise a plan when approaching their creative writing. Fry categorises these writers as Planners, suggesting that they devise a narrative plan before starting and stick to this framework throughout the narrative process. To fully understand and define writing into the dark, the process of writing to a plan requires further investigation.

Whilst King and Flynn utilise uncertainty in creating their thrillers and mysteries, Elizabeth George takes a much more structured approach to her writing within the same genres. In an interview with Kathy Pohl in 2007, George admits to having ‘developed a complicated process to demystify writing’ (p. 20). This process is largely focused on pre-writing planning: ‘When I begin a mystery, I know the killer,
the victim and the motive. From that, I develop what I call an expanded story idea. It answers all the questions of who, what, when, where and why’ (cited in Pohl, 2007, p. 21). George reveals a similarly structured approach to character, effectively listing them down and clarifying how each is linked to the planned narrative. Similarly, relating to setting, she reveals, ‘I never write about a place I haven’t been to’ (2007, p. 21). Together these processes illustrate a significant level of pre-writing planning, which illuminates the way for George once she begins to write her initial draft.

Justin Cronin is another successful contemporary writer who comes under Fry’s label of a Planner. In an interview relating to the first instalment of his post-apocalyptic trilogy The Passage, Cronin admits, ‘I’m not a writer who sits down and says, “Let’s see what the angels say today.” I’m very much a planner,’ (cited in Harrison, 2010). Whilst the nature of this planning does not seem as structured as that of a writer such as George, there is still the presence of a clear narrative outline. ‘There’s an outline for each of the books that I adhere to pretty closely, but I’m not averse to taking it in a new direction, as long as I can get it back to where I need it to go’ (cited in Hardie, 2012). In this sense Cronin’s narrative is guided to its destination during the process of drafting by his predetermined outline, which he is willing to stray from but to which he must always return. Cronin’s method will be expanded upon later.

There are two key points to be made in summarising what it is to write into the dark. Firstly, there is the eschewing of any significant narrative planning prior to commencement of the writing. As Cronin and George illustrate, there can be varying degrees of planning, but it appears that the point of writing into the dark is to avoid anything more than a starting point. In doing so the writer actively places himself or herself in a position of darkness and creative unknowing. The narrative destination remains uncertain for much, sometimes all, of the first draft.

Secondly, the practice of writing into the dark differs from the practice of creating into the dark. The later is a broad description that, for the writer, may include various practices such as narrative planning, character breakdowns and brainstorming – all of which may be undertaken in uncertainty. Writing into the
dark involves physically writing the sentences and paragraphs of the first draft
whist uncertain about many characteristics of the work, most notably the narrative
destination.

The following section introduces and examines the genre of post-apocalyptic
literature. I use this genre to provide a framework for a deeper analysis of the
writing into the dark method.

The post-apocalyptic blank slate

As with any genre, post-apocalyptic fiction has distinctive characteristics that
distinguish it from other literature. In this section I outline these characteristics to
develop a platform for this analysis of writing methods. Once the broader traits of
the genre are established, I will focus on certain specific characteristics of post-
apocalyptic fiction that I believe have a connection to the process of writing into
the dark. This analysis focuses on Justin Cronin, Cormac McCarthy and Douglas
Coupland, as well as considering some others who have written within the genre,
such as John Marsden, Nevil Shute, Stephen King and Margaret Atwood.

To understand and situate post-apocalyptic literature it is useful to examine the
surrounding genres. In many respects post-apocalyptic literature is, paradoxically,
both broad and specific. Whilst it doesn’t offer the wide parameters of the fantasy,
thriller or science fiction genres, it often borrows from each of these in relation to
setting and tone. Broadness like this, alongside an emphasis on the future and the
inclusion of elements that can be considered fantastical, also aligns post-
apocalyptic fiction with what Atwood terms ‘speculative fiction’. ‘Some use
speculative fiction as an umbrella covering science fiction and all its hyphenated
forms – science-fiction fantasy and so forth’ (Atwood, 2012, p. 61). Atwood’s
defining characteristics for speculative fiction relate specifically to setting:

SF novels of course can set themselves in parallel imagined realities,
or long ago, and/or on planets far away. But all of these locations
have something in common: they don’t exist, and their non-existence is of a different order than the non-existence of the realistic novel’s Bobs and Carols and Teds and Alices. (p. 61)

The deserted, futuristic wastelands depicted in *The Road* and, at times, *The Passage* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*, would comfortably align with this characteristic.

A more recently prevalent genre is the disaster or post-disaster. These texts are defined by John Stephens as futuristic fiction set ‘after the world as we know it has been destroyed by cataclysmic disaster, usually caused by human actions’ (1992, p. 126). Elizabeth Braithwaite argues that the trigger for these disasters has shifted from nuclear, for texts published during the Cold War, to more recently ‘consider other types of disaster, such as ecological crises’ (2005, p. 50). There are strong similarities here between the post-disaster and the post-apocalyptic, but perhaps one point of difference can be found in terms of scale; that is, Braithwaite’s description of disaster as ‘ecological crises’ seems too modest for events that result in an apocalypse. Whilst disaster fiction may contain narrative events that affect a large part of the globe, the apocalyptic text assumes the effect to be global and definitive: ‘In all of these end-of-the-world scenarios, whatever triggers the apocalypse tends to affect the entire Earth more or less simultaneously. The fear of modernity in all these narratives is specifically a fear of global modernity’ (Cantor, 2013, p. 29). There is also, perhaps, a differential relating to theme. Stephens notes that ‘the purpose of the [post-disaster] genre is to issue a warning about destructive tendencies in human behavior’ (1992, p. 126). Several theorists argue, as I do shortly, that post-apocalyptic fiction often has a different thematic focus.

Certain sub-genres of fantasy also have links to post-apocalyptic literature. Low Fantasy is set in what Nicola Alter terms the ‘primary world’ (2011, p. 2). Alter describes this setting as ‘the real world as we know it’ (p. 2). This contrasts the more traditional sub-genre of High Fantasy where the writer undertakes a ‘process of devising and constructing an imaginary world’ (Alter, P. 1). Many post-apocalyptic texts situate close to Low Fantasy in relation to setting. Post-apocalyptic worlds are tangible and, although transformed, at least have their
origins within the real world. However, they do not generally contain the characteristic presence of the supernatural, paranormal or magical found in fantasy genres.

Some further, and unexpected, intertextuality can be found with the genre of the Western. Paul Cantor suggests that key attributes provided by the Western such as ‘an image of frontier existence, of living on the edge, of seeing what it is like to manage without a settled government, of facing the challenge of protecting oneself and one’s family on one’s own, of learning the meaning of independence and self-reliance’ (2013, p. 32), can also be found in the themes of many post-apocalyptic texts. He attributes this in part to a cultural shift where, as the Western wanes in popularity, ‘Zombie tales and other apocalyptic scenarios turn out to be a way of imaginatively reopening the frontier in twenty-first century popular culture’ (2013, p. 33). This connection is specifically prevalent within McCarthy’s work and is examined further within the following section.

Unsurprisingly, a genre close to post-apocalyptic fiction is apocalyptic fiction. James Berger states that ‘apocalyptic writing takes us after the end, shows us the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath’ (1999, p. 5-6). Thus apocalyptic literature requires the presence of an event that effectively ends civilization. The characteristics of this event may be varied – from nuclear to viral, from extra terrestrial to natural disaster – so long as the results are cataclysmic.

There is also significant research on the theological basis for apocalyptic events. Many have noted the biblical focus on the apocalypse, specifically from the ‘Book of Revelation’. Rather than analyse this background, I discuss what some consider a more contemporary perspective on the apocalypse. In Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction, Lois Zamora states that ‘our modern sense of apocalypse is less religious than historical’ (1989, p. 1). Zamora states that modern apocalyptic fiction is influenced by ‘events of recent history, whether nuclear or ecological or demographic, which suggest all too clearly our ample capacities for self-destruction’ (p. 1), rather than events of a
religious origin. However, despite this shift away from a focus on a theological apocalypse, Zamora admits that the motivation and thematic focus for writers working within the genre has likely remained consistent: ‘Novelists who use apocalyptic elements, like the biblical apocalyptists, are often critical of the present political, social, spiritual practices, and their fiction entertains the means to oppose and overcome them’ (1989, p. 3).

While apocalyptic fiction focuses on the cataclysmic event, post-apocalyptic fiction focuses on its aftermath. Temporally the proximity of the narrative to the cataclysmic event can vary. In the case of McCarthy’s The Road, the proximity is relatively close, leaving the primary focus on immediate and ongoing survival. For much of Cronin’s The Passage, more time has passed, placing the focus on the development of new civilizations. Whilst in Girlfriend in a Coma the proximity to the event is even closer than it is in The Road, but of a different nature, facilitating a more existential focus from Coupland. I elaborate on each of these scenarios later.

The presence of characters that survive the cataclysmic event and are faced with the challenges of staying alive and rebuilding a society is seen by Atwood to be a contradiction. Even though most would consider her novels Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood post-apocalyptic, Atwood considers them speculative fiction because ‘in a true apocalypse everything on Earth is destroyed, whereas in these two books the only element that is annihilated is the human race, or most of it’ (Atwood, 2012, p. 93).

Seeking a ‘true’ definition of apocalypse and the specific number of survivors required to meet it seems inherently problematic. The presence of survivors is necessary for the writer to create character and narrative - without survivors there are no characters. However, Atwood raises an important point. Many of the key post-apocalyptic novels of recent times, including The Road and Oryx and Crake, eschew a traditional and theological definition of the apocalypse in relation to what and who remains after the apocalyptic event. In these texts ‘the end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces and describes the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither
does the text itself. In nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains after the end’ (Berger, 1999, p. 5). Again, perhaps these texts, and Berger’s explanation, are closer to Zamora’s modern sense of the apocalypse. Having something remain also permits the theme of starting over that is present within much post-apocalyptic literature.

Whilst the Western genre is traditionally marked by character tropes such as the cowboy and Native American Indian, and the science fiction genre by characters depicted in patriarchal gender roles, the surviving characters in post-apocalyptic fiction appear much more varied. In The Road we find a father and son journeying across a bleak, post-apocalyptic landscape toward the ocean. In O’Brien’s Z for Zachariah, teenage female Ann is the sole survivor until the older, male antagonist John arrives. Interestingly, Ann is depicted as extremely capable irrespective of age and gender, perhaps laying the foundation for future young and strong female characters such as Ellie and Katniss in the hybrid post-apocalyptic texts of Marsden’s Tomorrow, When the War Began and The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008). A similarly resourceful female character is found in The Passage in the form of Alicia; however, the focus of the story is a vulnerable, young girl named Amy, and the most prevalent protagonists in this multi-narrative text are middle-aged males, Wolgast and Peter. Different again are Coupland’s characters in Girlfriend in a Coma; all young to middle-aged adults of varying genders, none of whom are particularly resourceful or dominant.

Setting is perhaps the most readily identifiable element of post-apocalyptic fiction. Whilst typically science fiction or fantasy are situated in imaginary worlds, and genres such as the thriller are firmly planted in existing or historical worlds, post-apocalyptic fiction hovers evocatively in the middle ground. The worlds of these texts have been altered irrevocably by a cataclysmic event, which infuses the settings with considerable strangeness. Yet it is often the case in post-apocalyptic fiction that some familiarity, or elements of the previous world, remains.

Katherine Snyder suggests that this dynamic is key to the success of the genre. ‘These cautionary tales of the future work by evoking an uncanny sense of the
simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these brave new worlds’ (Snyder, 2011, p. 470). In her analysis of *Oryx and Crake*, Snyder identifies examples of this conflicting presentation of setting:

Oryx and Crake begins with Snowman waking before dawn to a sunrise that is both strange and familiar, or perhaps strange because it is familiar… Something “deadly” has happened here, but what? And when? The reader, like Snowman, opens her eyes upon an uncanny world whose origins are insistently present but unreadable… (Snyder, 2011, p. 477)

In this case the image of a sunrise is familiar, but Atwood’s description of it, or the way her character Snowman experiences it, is unusual, and thus, as Snyder suggests, something about it remains out of reach or ‘unreadable’. For Snyder this is associated with a larger dynamic whereby the genre ‘offers a particular and explicit challenge to its readers’ sense of the temporal distance separating the fictional mise-en-scene from the contemporary real world,’ (2011, p. 470). This relationship between reader, writer and text is tied to the notion of discovery, which in turn may have connections to the process of writing into the dark. This is something I return to later.

McCarthy’s setting in *The Road* is located on the very edge of total destruction and strangeness. The suggested nuclear event that precedes his narrative has effectively stripped the Earth of much that is recognizable. His descriptions are of a grey and bleak landscape void of distinguishable or recognisable features. Even the most basic visual markers of day and night are blurred due to the weakness of the sun and opacity of the air. McCarthy’s settings gain much strangeness via this constant twilight.

However, even within this strangeness there are still pockets of familiarity. Towards the end of the narrative the father and son reach their destination, the ocean. Whilst it is also scarred by destruction (there are shipwrecked boats and no clear horizon) it remains strongly familiar for the reader. This is also the case
when the characters find a basement, sealed off and full of supplies – there is corned beef, a checkerboard and toothpaste – and when they venture into the remains of towns where houses and streets are in heavy decay but what remains is again described as familiar.

Perhaps one of the more noteworthy examples of familiarity in *The Road* is examined by Brian Donnelly in “*Coke Is It!*: Placing Coca-Cola in McCarthy’s *The Road* (2010). Early in the novel the father and son find and enjoy an intact can of Coca-Cola in the wreck of a supermarket. Donnelly describes this moment as ‘a dramatic collision between the worlds of the pre- and post- apocalypse, precipitating a gesture of nostalgic reminiscence while it invites the reader to envisage the post-apocalyptic scenario of a world without the ubiquitous soft drink’ (2010, p. 70). As well as providing another pertinent example of the relationship between familiarity and strangeness, this also introduces the issues of memory and imagination as they exist within post-apocalyptic fiction.

Berger suggests that within post-apocalyptic literature ‘the writer and the reader must be in both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world and then paradoxically ‘remembering’ the world as it was’ (1999, p. 6). This is a unique challenge for both reader and writer. Genres such as fantasy or science fiction may rely on significant leaps of imagination. Others, such as the historical drama (or indeed any novel that explores a period that previously existed) may call upon the writer’s and reader’s memory. The dynamic is, of course, not as simple as this binary suggests. The writer or reader of the fantasy may well draw from memory, just as the writer and reader of the historical drama are free to imagine. However, in relying so heavily and continuously on both processes, post-apocalyptic literature gains much of its interest and distinction.

Petter Skult examines the nature of place within post-apocalyptic fiction. Skult differentiates between ‘place’ and ‘space’ in that ‘place’ refers to ‘an actual, real-world locality, often with a referent proper name, like the city of London,’ (Skult, 2014, p. 2), whereas space is ‘metaphorical’ (p. 3), broad, and yet to be defined – Skult uses the scientific definition of ‘the universe and everything that exists within
it’ (p. 3). He suggests that the absence and transformation of ‘place’ into ‘space’ in post-apocalyptic texts results in significant ‘ontological gaps’ (Palmer, 2004) for the reader. Skult states that Palmer’s ontological gaps refer to ‘a lack of knowledge about something within a fictional world’ (p. 3). Skult admits that these gaps ‘permeate all fiction’, but suggests they are ‘particularly significant for a genre such as the post-apocalyptic’ (p. 3) due to the destruction and transformation of place.

Post-apocalyptic environments characterised by this lack of place are tied to Joshua Cole’s ‘notion of the “blank slate”’ (2011, p. 9). Cole suggests that, despite the potential for pockets of familiarity, the primary focus of post-apocalyptic fiction is upon worlds that have been redefined by cataclysm. For Cole this places both reader and writer in a unique position; ‘herein lies one of the primary appeals of post-apocalyptic fiction: narratives that are set in the aftermath of catastrophe allow readers and writers alike to envision the world as a blank slate,’ (2011, p. 10).

A blank slate can be defined as ‘something that has yet to be marked, determined, or developed’ (“Blank slate – definition,” n.d.); a definition analogous to Skult’s notion of space. Cole suggests that, in literature, apocalyptic events have the unique ability to return the world to this unmarked state. He speaks of worlds being literally ‘wiped clean’ (2011, p. 10), stripped of their characteristics by cataclysm, with language redefined in the process. Cantor states that modern technology is a primary victim during the apocalypse, as are consumer products for Donnelly, whilst Atwood speaks of settings being leveled by total destruction. Others, such as Snyder, argue that some familiarity always remains within post-apocalyptic settings, but she also suggests that, in the context of these transformed worlds, recognizable objects (such as Donnelly’s Coca-Cola) often become strange because they are familiar. In this respect, the post-apocalyptic is not empty, rather depleted of physical, social and cultural markers. Cole suggests that working with settings that are blank in this very specific way requires a kind of reimagining on the behalf of the writer. As I will elaborate upon shortly, this appears different to the speculative and futuristic imagining required in fantasy and science fiction.
Importantly, a post-apocalyptic blank slate seems to be as much psychological as it is physical. Just as settings are reimagined and discovered within post-apocalyptic literature, so are cultural and social norms. In *Post-Apocalypse Now* Marc Donner (2003) suggests that the ‘particularly vigorous upsurge in the production of post-apocalyptic works’ is potentially linked to this fantasy of starting over. ‘Perhaps we think that we would be better people or create better societies if we got a chance to start over’ (p. 53). Cantor elaborates on this fantasy in his analysis of the post-apocalyptic television series *Falling Skies*. After the destruction of Earth by invading aliens the surviving characters of *Falling Skies* ‘have lost their material possessions and the security that institutions give them, but they have regained their independence and self-reliance,’ (p. 28). Donner ties these material possessions and institutions to a bleak version of the American dream, stating that they are ‘at best distractions from, and at worst obstacles to, their true happiness and sense of fulfillment’ (p. 27). Brenna Clarke Gray (2011) summarises this perspective in an interview with Coupland. She states that ‘some apocalypse theorists suggest that apocalypse is by nature hopeful, because it’s an end, but it’s also a beginning of whatever’s next – that thing we can’t see into is implied in the idea of an apocalypse’ (p. 269). Thus for Donner, Cantor and Clarke Gray, the post-apocalyptic blank slate provides as much opportunity as it does terror.

It would be difficult to argue that the world described by McCarthy in *The Road* provides much of an avenue to true happiness and fulfillment. However, there could be strong arguments made for this being the case for characters in other post-apocalyptic texts, such as *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Here the apocalypse serves as a kind of moral awakening to the characters on the direction of their lives.

The openness and uncertainty associated with Cole’s notion of the writer envisioning the world as a blank slate is where I believe the post-apocalyptic genre shares a connection to the method of writing into the dark. For the writer there is a strong presence of creative unknowing when depicting a blank slate environment. My suggestion, as explained in the following paragraphs, is that the genre often encourages the writer to discover and depict these environments, alongside their characters and reader, whilst writing the manuscript.
Every genre asks the writer to create a world for their characters. A primary distinction between genres such as fantasy and science fiction, and genres such as historical drama or thriller, is that, in the former, this task is freer of restrictions imposed by the existing world. The world of the fantasy can exist wherever and however the writer chooses. Atwood states that the only real requirement of the broader speculative fiction category is that the world must be ‘mappable’ (2012, p. 73). That is, once it is conceived, there exist rules and boundaries as in any world. In this respect one could argue that speculative fiction, and many of its offshoots, without an existing world to draw upon, encourages the writer to work into the dark. It is important to say encourages here, rather than requires. There are examples of writers who utilise a plan when devising setting, narrative and characters for speculative fiction. Within the context of this research Cronin provides a primary example.

What I explore from here is my belief that post-apocalyptic fiction encourages the adoption of a writing into the dark method even further than science fiction and fantasy. Again, this is a genre where a new world must be created. As I have established, these worlds are defined by a high degree of strangeness; that is, they require extensive creation and mapping from the writer. However, I think there is another element to post-apocalyptic fiction that shapes the writer’s method even further: the characters are frequently in a position of ignorance about the world, and the ensuing narrative is at least partly focused on its discovery by these characters.

I have established that genres such as science fiction and fantasy have strong connections to post-apocalyptic literature on several levels. However, one interesting point of distinction is that within these genres the worlds depicted have generally existed for some time at the start of the narrative. The writer enters the world shortly before, or during, a point of drama, but writes of a world and of characters that have existed for some time. An obvious exception to this dynamic within science fiction would include exploration narratives such as Star Trek whereby the characters journey through space, exploring worlds that have yet to
be discovered. However, even within this type of structure the characters have an established (if confined) world within the space craft, and it is often the case that exploration of an unfamiliar planet leads to a meeting with inhabitants who have existed in these environments for some time. Confined to Earth, and characterised by recent destruction and transformation, the post-apocalyptic genre often doesn’t facilitate significant pre-existing knowledge of the world from its characters.

I have also mentioned that the proximity to the cataclysmic event varies within post-apocalyptic fiction. In some cases the new world is in its infancy, in others it has existed for a period of time. However, rarely has enough time passed for a world to gain a strong sense of Skult’s ‘place’, or Atwood’s ‘mappability’. Even in Cronin’s The Passage, where, at one point, almost a century has passed since the cataclysm, much of the world remains unknown to his characters. This, in conjunction with the nature of cataclysm itself, with its widespread destruction of, amongst other things, historical markers and communication devices, leaves characters largely ignorant about the world they now inhabit. The combination of these elements results in a consistent dynamic within post-apocalyptic fiction whereby characters involve themselves in a process of re-discovering the world around them. I would argue that this process encourages the writer to embrace a position of darkness throughout the writing of the narrative.

**Focus texts**

In the previous section I identified several key characteristics of post-apocalyptic fiction. Of most relevance to the method of writing into the dark is the notion of the post-apocalyptic blank slate. Put simply, this refers to the environment remaining after the apocalypse. Several theorists describe this environment as a unique mix of the strange and the familiar, with an emphasis on discovery and, at times, starting over.

This analysis suggests that, in depicting these post-apocalyptic blank slates, the writer is encouraged to write into the dark. In order to affirm this connection I
now identify the occurrence of blank slates within selected post-apocalyptic fiction. This may be certain sections of a novel, such as within Cronin’s *The Passage*, or the entire work, as with McCarthy’s *The Road*. Part of this process will be to expand on the nature of these environments, answering questions such as: What degree of destruction of the old world is required to create a blank slate? How long have the characters existed in the new environment? How much of the new world is known to the characters and how much is discovered during the narrative? Is an element of freedom or an opportunity to start over born out of these new circumstances?

I then compare writer’s depictions of post-apocalyptic blank slates with their overall propensity to write into the dark. This analysis will draw from a body of interview material in which Cronin, McCarthy and Coupland discuss their writing practices, specifically those relating to Fry’s categories of planning or plunging.

This section aims to answer questions such as: Does a focus on a blank slate environment alter the writer’s propensity to write into the dark? What happens when a plunger such as McCarthy writes other genres? Can a planner such as Cronin still be considered to be writing into the dark, albeit on a smaller, more specific scale? To what level are narrative complexity, narrative point of view and linearity implicated in these dynamics?

*The Road – Cormac McCarthy*

McCarthy never fully details the apocalypse in *The Road*. The narrative begins with the characters, father and son, on a journey through post-apocalyptic North America, and ends shortly after they reach their destination of the southern coastline. Flashbacks to the apocalyptic event, or the time preceding this, are fleeting and fragmented, offering the reader little exposition of the event. In a review of *The Road* Jonna Semeiks (2007) speculates on the little detail we are given.
We never learn what catastrophe has struck the world, but the ashes, the incinerated woods, the human bodies melted into the roads, the complete extinction of all species, the single sentence devoted to the signal event – "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" – point clearly to nuclear holocaust. (p. 317)

The proximity of the narrative to what Semeiks terms the ‘signal event’ is also unclear. At the beginning of the novel the father reveals that he is uncertain of the month. ‘He thought the month was October but he wasn’t sure. He hadn’t kept a calendar for years’ (McCarthy, 2007, p. 2). This suggestion of several years passing since the cataclysmic event is expanded upon later in the narrative.

In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. (p. 28)

Later again, McCarthy confirms this passing of time when detailing the disappearance of wildlife. ‘Once in those early years he’d wakened in a barren wood and lay listening to flocks of migratory birds overhead in that bitter dark’ (p. 55). Collectively these extracts reveal uncertainty about the time passed since the undisclosed cataclysmic event. A number of years has passed, but not enough for of any kind of rebuilding.

Despite having existed in this new world for several years, the father has little concept of where they are on the continent, nor what may lie ahead of them. They carry and use a map during their journey, which proves useful in directing them south. Certain houses and larger infrastructure such as highways and bridges have survived the apocalypse. However, such remains don’t seem to inhibit the overall presence of a post-apocalyptic blank slate environment. The remains have been
transformed from Skult’s ‘places’ to vague and desolate ‘spaces’ requiring discovery and definition.

Of most note is the discovery of the farmhouse in which the father grew up. Initially this discovery is full of memory and nostalgia. The father has a distant memory of the house and, very briefly, a bridge is built between the old world and the new. However, at the moment when we might expect the strongest connection to be made, as father and son enter his old bedroom, McCarthy reconfirms that the old world has passed. ‘He pushed open the closet door half expecting to find his childhood things. Raw cold daylight fell through from the roof. Grey as his heart,’ (2007, p. 26). Rather than familiar, the closet is now foreign and transformed.

Overall, the world inhabited by father and son in The Road is desolate in the extreme, described by Semeiks as ‘a post-apocalyptic landscape of ashes, relentless cold, silence and terrifying emptiness. The only colors are grey and black’ (2007). Nature seems to have been hit the hardest in McCarthy’s environment. Along with the birds, flora and other fauna has been all but stripped from the world. What remains are shells of towns and cities, with no life but for a scatterings of starved humans. Civilization isn’t quite eliminated by McCarthy in The Road, but that which remains is largely unrecognizable in its transformation.

This is confirmed by regular examples where McCarthy describes the world in a primary way, as if from a starting point of nothing. Terse passages of description such as, ‘Barren, silent, godless’ (p. 2) and ‘Cold. Desolate. Birdless’ (p. 230), are used to depict a sweep of landscape, or the ocean, offering the reader little sense of ‘place’ (Skult, 2014) and a constant sense of Palmer’s ‘ontological gaps’. Extended descriptions are more lyrical, establishing a poetic quality within the novel, and hinting at a wider thematic exploration of an Earth stripped bare and experienced at an emotional distance. For example:

The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing
black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals
trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. (p. 138)

Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see
how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous
counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste,
hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence. (p. 293)

The lack of proper nouns and the emphasis on ‘space’ (Skult, 2014) in these
extracts, results in an environment representative of Cole’s post-apocalyptic blank
slate. The world may not be physically empty, but it is largely void of familiarity
and meaning. Inger-Anne Softing (2013) states that ‘place is no longer a vehicle of
cultural specificity; there is no diversity, neither in terms of culture nor in terms of
natural variation, to stamp its identity on the landscape; everywhere is the same
(p. 706).

The father and son in McCarthy’s narrative are effectively discovering this world as
they journey through it. Reaching a mountain pass, the pair are offered a rare vista
of landscape:

Just beyond the high gap in the mountains they stood and looked out
over the great gulf to the south where the country as far as they
could see was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing
out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing
downcountry through the waste. (2007, p. 13)

This moment is mirrored throughout The Road, whereby the landscape has been
altered to a point where mystery and the unexpected are constant. In some cases
structures such as cities, bunkers and highways remain; in others they don’t. This
brings its own instability as the discovery also becomes about what may or may
not still exist. As mentioned, the characters carry a tattered map that they refer to
at several stages. However, as the following passage illustrates, the apocalypse has
transformed many of its features.
These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads.
Why are they the state roads?
Because they used to belong to the states.
But there’s not any more states?
No.
What happened to them?
I don’t know exactly. That’s a good question.
(P. 43–44)

The notion of a post-apocalyptic blank slate in *The Road* does not only exist in relation to landscape, but also to cultural markers such as language and music. At one point the father makes a flute for the son from a piece of cane: “The boy took it wordlessly. After a while he fell back and after a while the man could hear him playing. A formless music for the ages to come’ (McCarthy, 2007, p. 81). For McCarthy’s characters a void now exists where music once did. The son’s notes come out of blankness and are defined by this. For him, music is discovered. For his father it is transformed and rediscovered.

Semeiks analyses the loss of language in the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*:

In fact, language might well go the way it goes in *The Road*: used almost entirely as a tool for survival, like a scavenged bottle for water. The boy does not want to hear stories. In one of the more haunting passages of the book, the father thinks about the disappearance of language: “The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat.... The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.” (2007)

As suggested here, there is little use for much existing language in McCarthy’s environment. The decimation of civilization and environment has swallowed much
of the detail of the previous world, and with that detail inevitably follows the language associated with it. What remains are simple exchanges of language between the father and son such as “carrying the fire” and “the good guys”, used by McCarthy to distinguish good from evil within the survivors of the apocalypse.

Donner suggests that there is a degree of freedom and fantasy to post-apocalyptic fiction associated with the opportunity it presents for humanity to start over. Relating to The Road, father and son have freedom in the sense that they do not have jobs, can walk highways and go into places that we might normally expect to be restricted, and are not bound by a governing law. Examples of this range from taking shelter and supplies from another’s hidden bunker, to the father shooting a cannibal attacking his son, to the looting of Coca-Cola in the remains of a supermarket. However, the emphasis on basic physical survival is so great in The Road that these liberties never become a defining factor of the text.

In many respects the level of desolation in The Road is just too great for any meaningful suggestion of humanity starting over or the rebuilding of a new society. The focus is placed squarely on survival. The closest things to social grouping in The Road are the nomadic tribes of cannibal survivors. However, there is no sense that these characters are attempting to start over or develop a new society. They are driven by primeval survival and little else. Like the father and son they are constantly on the move, not stopping to settle any particular place. Within The Road the act of cannibalism also strongly inhibits the development of any progressive social structure.

In terms of writing method, the post-apocalyptic genre provides an ideal platform for McCarthy to practice his philosophy of ‘never fully plot[ting] out his novels’ (Helm, 2007). The meandering and exploratory nature of his characters’ journey, with its backtracking, false alarms and unpredictability, appears strongly defined by both process and genre. McCarthy was asked, ‘Did you know where it was going to end, or did it end itself?’ His answer was, ‘No. I had no idea where it was going’ (“Oprah’s exclusive interview with Cormac McCarthy,” n.d.). This methodology appears to be reflected in within the novel’s narrative structure.
Early in the novel, for example, the father explores a petrol station for supplies. McCarthy takes the reader on an initial search through the service bay. It proves fruitless and ends with the father using a phone to curiously dial the long since disconnected number of his father’s house. This scene is followed by:

A quarter mile down the road he stopped and looked back. We’re not thinking, he said. We have to go back. He pushed the cart off the road and tilted it over where it could not be seen and they left their packs and went back to the station. (2007, p. 5)

Nothing dramatic happens as a result of the father’s decision to return to the station. He collects the remnants of oil from all the bottles in the building to come up with a ‘half quart’ (2007, p. 6) to take with them to fuel their lamp. While it is impossible to know whether or not McCarthy planned this narrative event prior to its drafting, its ambiguity and arbitrariness are indicative of a writing into the dark method whereby unpredictability is embraced, with both character and writer inching their way forward, rather than driving directly toward a predetermined event.

The petrol station scene is one of many similar moments in The Road. The father is regularly uncertain of what path to take and when he does make a decision, this often results in something that is narratively understated. When significant narrative events do happen, such as encounters with other characters, or the discovery of food, this occurs in an unexpected manner, often without foreshadowing, as in this extract, where a hidden survivor attacks the father and son:

They wheeled the cart through the back streets and across the railroad tracks and came into the main road again at the far edge of town. As they passed the last of the wooden buildings something whistled past his head and clattered off the street and broke up
against the wall of the block building on the other side. (2007, p. 281)

Given what we know about McCarthy’s disregard for pre-plotting, these sections could represent synergy between an aspect of genre and method, or the post-apocalyptic blank slate and writing into the dark. The synergy may be effective because depicting a world that requires discovery seems to mirror the position of the writer in darkness.

Of course, this observation raises the question of whether McCarthy’s non-post-apocalyptic novels have a similar approach to narrative. If we consider an earlier novel, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), there are many narrative parallels to be found.

As in *The Road*, the central characters in *All the Pretty Horses*, young Texans John and Billy, spend the majority of the narrative journeying from a place of familiarity into the unknown. In this case the unknown is 1940s Mexico. While Mexico has, of course, been discovered and settled by this time, for McCarthy’s characters (from Texas), both land and people are foreign: ‘McCarthy utilises the convention of the Western in which the Mexican is stereotypically alien and inscrutably unknowable’ (Carr, 2007, p. 32).

Thus, a major focus of *All the Pretty Horses* is the characters’ discovery of this ‘new’ world. This discovery informs McCarthy’s description of setting in the following passages:

They rode side by side spaced out apart upon the broad gravel plain curving away along the edge of the brushland upriver. They rode without speaking and they took in the look of the new country. A hawk in the top of a mesquite dropped down and flew low along the vega and rose again into a tree a half mile to the east. When they had past it flew back again. (2002, p. 50)
At just dark they benched out on a gravel shelf and made their camp and that night they heard what they’d none heard before, three long howls to the southwest and all afterwards a silence. (2002, p. 61)

Days to come they rode through the mountains and they crossed at a barren windgap and sat the horses among the rocks and looked out over the country to the south where the last shadows were running over the land before the wind and the sun to the west lay blood red among the shelving clouds and the distant cordilleras ranged down the terminals of the sky to fade from pale to pale of blue and then to nothing at all. (2002, p. 60)

In the end they gave their names and spelled them and the gerente put them in his book and then they rose and shook hands and walked out in the early darkness where the moon was rising and the cattle were calling and the yellow squares of windowlight gave warmth and shape to an alien world. (2002, p. 97)

Each of these passages is indicative of foreign eyes discovering a new world. Skult’s notion of ‘space’ comes through strongly throughout. There are no place names; instead the environment is unfamiliar and largely barren.

Narrative events occur in a similarly organic, understated and, at times, unexpected way in All the Pretty Horses. The following paragraph depicts a major narrative event, the first contact between John and Billy and the Mexican cattle workers:

By noon they were on the plain riding through grass of a kind they’d not seen before. The path of the driven cattle lay through the grass like a place where water had run and by midafternoon they could see the herd before them moving west and within an hour they’d caught them up. (McCarthy, 2002, p. 95)
As in *The Road* this type of event flows without escalation or emphasis. Narrative predictability is rare in McCarthy’s work and there is never the sense that anything has been pre-determined. Stephen King spoke of letting his characters determine where the narrative is taken. This dynamic between character and narrative seems active in both *The Road* and *All the Pretty Horses*. The Texans’ decisions are logical and determined by simple goals such as hunger and the need for work. If it is not these needs that shape McCarthy’s narrative, then it is chance, in the form of a storm or the discovery of the Mexican stock workers.

What is interesting about the relationship between *The Road* and *All the Pretty Horses*, and potentially several other of McCarthy’s novels such as *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) is that the later are considered Westerns. Cantor identified significant thematic similarities between the Western and the post-apocalyptic genres, suggesting that post-apocalyptic literature is a way of ‘reopening the frontier’ (p. 33) where issues of survival, independence and a lack of government are once again in focus.

Historically, in relation to North America, the frontier can be defined as ‘the edge of land where people live and have built towns, beyond which the country is wild and unknown,’ ("Frontier – definition," n.d.). In contemporary public discourse the noun *frontier* is often used to label the limit of knowledge in a certain field, or the edge of the unknown. In relation to frontier theory, Softing (2013) states that ‘the concept of the frontier also reminds us of the way in which the environment makes an impact on human beings’ (p. 709).

For Cantor, the frontier exists in post-apocalyptic fiction as it does in the Western. Characters such as the father and son in *The Road* journey into a wild and unknown environment, characterised by isolation, a focus on survival and a depiction of society whereby rules and social structures no longer exist. This is an important point of difference between the Western and the post-apocalyptic, and other genres. While many genres may facilitate the exploration and discovery of
new environments, the presence of the frontier in Western and post-apocalyptic literature often results in a greater focus on uncertainty, danger and discovery.

*The Road* offers a good example of the potential relationship between Cole’s post-apocalyptic blank slate and the method of writing into the dark. McCarthy’s contributions to the Western genre, also characterised by discovery of new environments, appears to affirm this connection further. Cronin’s method relating to *The Passage* offers a contrasting viewpoint.

**The Passage – Justin Cronin**

*The Passage* spans a greater time period than many other post-apocalyptic novels, including *The Road* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*. The narrative begins prior to the apocalypse, tracking the discovery of a virus and the subsequent attempt by the government to develop it as a way to prolong life. Cronin then details an outbreak of the virus and its spread through infected vampire-like humans called ‘virals’. We follow the characters Amy and Wolgast as they flee a progression of virals across North America that wipes out most of the population. The narrative then leaps forward to explore the plight of the ‘last city’, Philadelphia, as the remaining children are taken westward on trains. The narrative then jumps forward again to ninety-two years after the outbreak, and the remainder (and majority) of *The Passage* explores the lives of the descendants of those children who took the trains leaving Philadelphia.

This structure provides a useful platform to examine the presence of the post-apocalyptic blank slate. The initial sections confirm that the characteristics associated with a blank slate – the transformation of ‘place’ into ‘space’, the loss of language, culture and technology, the notion of discovery, the opportunity to start over – are not as prevalent in apocalyptic or pre-apocalyptic environments as they are in the post-apocalyptic.
There are passages in the pre-apocalypse section that hint at some of these characteristics. Wolgast’s perspective on Texas speaks of ‘windblown nothingness’ and ‘faceless subdivisions’ (p. 29) and the world moving toward an inevitable end. Cronin takes a similar approach when describing the place where Amy’s mother, Jeanette, worked in Iowa, prior to Amy’s conception:

[A] diner everyone called the Box, because it looked like one: like a big chrome shoe box sitting off the country road, backed by fields of corn and beans, nothing else around for miles except a self-serve car wash. (p. 3)

There is a sense of desolation here, but the sense of ‘place’ also remains strong. This relationship to the blank slate remains distant during the section of The Passage that covers the apocalypse itself. This section, titled ‘The Year of Zero’, explores the survival of Amy and Wolgast in an isolated mountain cabin while the rest of the continent is destroyed by the virals and the weapons used to fight them. As the following two extracts indicate, this section depicts a world in rapid transition.

Wolgast smelled smoke one afternoon as he was working in the yard; by morning the air was thickened with acrid haze. He climbed to the roof to look out but saw only the trees and the lake, the mountains rolling away. He had no way of knowing how close the fires were. The wind could blow the smoke, he knew, for hundreds of miles. (p. 228)

A rush of wind shook the cabin, and then, with a concussive thump, the windows burst inward and Wolgast felt himself lifted off the floor and hurled back across the room. (p. 241)

The drama and instability suggested in this section coincide with a strong sense of isolation and unknowing. Wolgast’s limited knowledge about the progression of the virus is initially gathered via some newspapers from a store near the mountain,
then later via a character named Bob who finds Amy and Wolgast's cabin during the early stages of infection. Bob reveals Seattle's fate: ‘Same thing as everywhere else. Everybody’s sick, dying, ripping each other to shreds, the Army shows up, then poof, the place goes up in smoke’ (p. 238). Aside from this, the characters’ overall position is one of ignorance.

The world off the mountain had become a memory, remoter by the day. He’d never managed to get the generator working – he’d hoped to use the shortwave – and had long since stopped trying. If what was happening was what he thought was happening, he reasoned, they were better off not knowing. (P. 228-229)

Growing ignorance of the ‘outside’ world can be seen as the first step towards the type of blank slate found in The Road. However, at this stage in The Passage, the existing world still reaches the isolated setting of the mountain cabin strongly enough, via memory, media and other characters, to inhibit any further development of Cole’s definition of the blank slate. A sense of ‘place’ is still present, both on the mountain itself, which is as yet only slightly transformed by the apocalypse, and via mention of cities such as Seattle and Chicago. The cabin itself has cultural markers such as board games (Monopoly) and books (20,000 Leagues Under the Sea). Cronin’s world is in transition, but has not yet transformed.

In section four, ninety-two years after the viral outbreak, we see instances of a fully developed post-apocalyptic blank slate. This section starts similarly to ‘The Year of Zero’, with the descendants of the survivors isolated within a walled mountain community that protects them from the virals still roaming the remainder of the continent. Consequently, the community is insular, with little knowledge of the outside world. This ignorance originates directly from apocalyptic destruction, but, interestingly, a depiction of the rest of the world as a blank slate does not eventuate until the narrative moves outside of the ‘mapped’ walls of the community.
Circumstances see a small group of survivors, including Amy, (who has not aged since ‘The Year of Zero’ due to a viral anomaly), venture away from the community in search of the facility in Colorado where Amy was administered with the virus prior to the outbreak. The characters are guided by old maps, as are the father and son in *The Road*, but what they encounter along the way is an unfamiliar and largely transformed world.

Cronin names this land outside of the community the ‘Darklands’ which, for his characters, reflects its mystery and danger. The emphasis on discovery begins almost immediately with landscapes that are vacant and barren, vastly different to their mountain home:

The mountains fell away behind them; by half-day, they were deep in open desert. The roadway was little more than a suggestion, but they could still follow its course, tracing the bulge it made in the hardpan, through a landscape of scattered boulders and strange, stunted trees, beneath a boiling sun and a limitless sky of bleached color. The breeze hadn’t so much died as collapsed; the air so motionless it seemed to hum, the heat vibrating around them like an insect’s wings. Everything in the landscape looked both close and far away, the sense of perspective distorted by the immeasurable horizon. (p. 59)

Through the eyes of his characters, led now by new protagonist Peter, this passage does not simply describe a desert, but rather depicts the discovery of one. The apocalypse has altered the landscape from what would be normally associated with a desert. The highway is absorbed by the sand, weathered car wreckage is dotted throughout, the fauna has morphed, and ‘the only living creatures seem to be lizards, which are everywhere, and spiders, huge hairy ones the size of your hands’ (p. 518). But its major transformative effect is upon the survivors. Due to their isolation in the mountain community and lack of historical records, they have little knowledge of anything like a desert. Thus Cronin’s characters experience the desert from a position of blankness; its dangers only gradually become apparent:
'How easy would it be, Peter thought, to get turned around in such a place, to wander aimlessly until darkness fell’ (p. 509).

This dynamic is mirrored when the characters encounter man-made structures such as a hidden army bunker. Inside the bunker Peter attempts to find a point of reference for what he sees: ‘The room reminded him of a library, only the books were crates, and the crates contained not words but weapons’ (p. 513). This is not to say that one would necessarily expect a character to be familiar with an army bunker; however, in this instance the level of ignorance and, hence, discovery experienced by the characters is significant. Exploration of the bunker continues via another character, Sara’s, diary:

Michael and Caleb are going to try to fix one of the Humvees, which is a kind of car (Cronin, p. 524).

I came across a crate in the third room marked Human Remains Pouch and when I opened it and saw what was there I realized that they were bags the army used to put dead soldiers in (p. 517).

[Hollis] held up a bottle of whiskey he’d found in one of the desks in the office. It tasted a little like shine and felt the same’ (p. 518).

The notion of ignorance and discovery are present in each of these extracts. Cronin’s aging post-apocalyptic world has many remnants of the past, but so much time has passed that his characters are frequently in the dark as to their function and history.

The remains of exterior structures offer a similar scope for discovery and reimagining. Below is dialogue that takes place while the characters traverse a highway toward the remains of Las Vegas:

The highway had all but disappeared, its course vanished under waves of cracked, pale earth.
“Caleb, where the hell are we?”
Caleb was twisting the map this way and that. He arched his neck and shouted to Alicia. “Do you see the 215?”
“What’s the 215?”
“Another highway, like this one! We should be crossing it!”
“I didn't even know we were on a highway!”
(p. 519)

As in *The Road*, language in *The Passage* is also altered as a result of the blank slate. While the loss of language in *The Passage* is perhaps less noticeable – again the presence of larger communities may be implicated here – new nouns and phrases still emerge. The characters have various names for the infected humans: ‘virals’, ‘jumps’, ‘dracs’; none use the established literary reference ‘vampires’. A new expletive, ‘flyers’, is common among characters such as Peter from the walled mountain community, replacing forgotten expletives of the past. Certain geographical places are also renamed in the sections preceding and during the initial outbreak, whereby (for example) uninfected states are grouped together under the title ‘Central Quarantine Zone’.

Along with ignorance and discovery, Donner associates depictions of the post-apocalyptic blank slate with the notion of society starting over. The extreme level of desolation and the paucity of survivors inhibited this characteristic in *The Road*. However, there are several significant pockets of survivors in *The Passage*, facilitating explorations of the rebuilding of small societies, with only passed-down memory and survival instincts to guide them. An example of this in *The Passage* is found preceding ‘The Darklands’ in the section titled ‘The Haven’ in which Cronin’s characters encounter another civilization born out of the post-apocalyptic environment. Centered around an isolated and abandoned prison, this civilization does not seek to replicate what has come before, but rather is selected and defined by the circumstances of the post-outbreak world: ‘the surrounding wilderness being too inhospitable – forming in fact, a kind of natural barrier – they had chosen to remain and eke out an existence from the desert landscape,’ (p. 552).
The discovered settlement has a hierarchy, rules and structures; eventually it is revealed that a dark and violent ritual underpins the inhabitants’ safety, but of most note is that this is a civilization started from the blankness resulting from the apocalypse. ‘The first settlers had been a group of refugees from Las Vegas who had come there in the last days of the war’ (p. 552). What these refugees found was an abandoned state prison. Rather than use the facility for its original design, it was reimagined as a shelter, with a water source, land for livestock and crops, even clothing; ‘The prison had provided much of what they needed, right down to the orange jumpsuits nearly everyone still wore’ (p. 553). In this respect the apocalypse, and the time passed since, has transformed the prison from ‘place’ (Desert Wells State Penitentiary) to ‘space’. This settlement is vastly different from the walled mountain community from which Peter and company originated and the militarized settlements depicted later in The Passage, but each is defined by the new circumstances of the world and a starting point of social and cultural blankness.

The presence and absence of the blank slate in The Passage solidifies its relationship to the post-apocalyptic genre. While tonal qualities of the blank slate, such as isolation and darkness, may exist prior to or during, the apocalypse, it appears that more significant elements, such as the transformation of ‘place’ into ‘space’, the notion of discovery and the opportunity to start over, are prevalent only after the apocalypse. The Passage also illustrates that this blank slate may exist both shortly after the cataclysmic event, as within The Road, and also many years later. In many respects the notion of starting over may be facilitated by the passing of time.

The significant leap into the future that occurs in The Passage questions the distinction between post-apocalyptic literature and science fiction. I argue there is a difference between the environments presented in these genres. Despite parallels relating to the development of new civilizations, of The Passage Cronin himself states that ‘in some ways it moves [into] being world-building science fiction,’ (cited in Buchsbaum, 2010); the post-apocalyptic narrative retains its difference by being forever marked by the apocalyptic event. The key
characteristics associated with this event, such as desolation, loss of population, culture and history, and the focus on survival are intrinsic to its thematic preoccupations. By contrast, the science fiction genre, often missing this type of event (or temporally and narratively removed from it), generally has a different thematic focus, such as technological advancement and galactic exploration. If science fiction is firmly focused on the future, the post-apocalyptic text remains defined by the past.

Earlier in this it was established that Cronin prefers to plan his narrative, though he will occasionally stray from the plan, ‘as long as [he] can get it back to where [he] need[s] it to go’ (cited in Hardie, 2012). In interviews about The Passage and his other novels, Cronin offers further detail on this process, stating that he approaches the writing process in two distinct steps. First comes visualization, whereby he imagines and devises the details of his characters and narrative before any writing is done. Of the trilogy beginning with The Passage, Cronin reveals:

When I started writing the first one, I did an extremely detailed outline for book one, and what functioned as executive summary for books two and three, including the major plot points, the scenes I knew I would get to in books two and three. (cited in VanDerWerff, 2012)

Cronin also confirms a full knowledge of the narrative destination: ‘I don’t write anything until I know exactly how it ends’ (cited in VanDerWerff, 2012). Similarly, in relation to character, Cronin is careful to establish some key traits for each, before setting out:

One is knowing what their secret is. What’s the one thing that character is not telling anybody?... And then giving them real contradictions that actual people possess, which gives them a kind of full human dignity. (cited in Buchsbaum, 2010)
He also uses this method on a day-to-day basis. 'When I’m at the keyboard is not when I’m inventing anything' (cited in Charney, 2012). Rather, Cronin will do his creating prior to each day's writing. 'I do a lot of my thinking while exercising, I try not to think too much while at the computer. My actual writing time is sentence time, trying to move things forward' (cited in Patrick, 2010). In saying this, Cronin makes an interesting distinction between his creative processes. Writing sentences is obviously still a creative process, but, for Cronin, kept separate from other more conceptual processes such as inventing character and narrative. His comments also reaffirm the distinction between creating into the dark and writing into the dark.

These processes are also underpinned by a focus on research. In the case of The Passage this involved gaining background knowledge in many areas: ‘from the civil war in Sierra Leone to how to hotwire a diesel locomotive, on to guns, power generation, post-industrial civilization’ (cited in Patrick, 2010). The research process also included travelling through the landscapes where the story was to be set: ‘I travelled every mile of the geography in the book. It’s all completely authentic, from distances and times to names of towns and the order of the casinos’ (2010).

Overall, Cronin's approach appears markedly different from McCarthy's method of writing without a known destination. However, as established, the post-apocalyptic blank slate is still evident in The Passage. This questions the strength of connection between the depiction of blank slates and the method of writing into the dark. That is, how much (if at all) does depicting a blank slate environment encourage or require the writer to work into the dark? For McCarthy, the two elements seem inherently connected, but Cronin successfully depicts the blank slate from a position of knowledge, rather than intentional uncertainty.

There are several factors to consider in this relationship. Unlike the linear journey of father and son within The Road, there is significant structural complexity in Cronin’s novel. The Passage has multiple characters and narrative threads, and large shifts in time, geography and point of view. These elements are tied to a
desire by Cronin to ‘lead a group of characters, but also the histories of these characters all to a single place in a single moment’ (cited in VanDerWerff, 2012). The difficulty of achieving this ‘convergence’ (2012) is not lost on Cronin: ‘It was extremely challenging to do’ (2012). For Cronin, guiding each character and narrative thread to this predetermined narrative ‘moment’ required a high level of planning. He speaks of outlines, character breakdowns and using whiteboards ‘to map things out without physical impedance’ (cited in Charney, 2012). For a novel as large and complex as The Passage, knowledge of the narrative destination creates both security and difficulty.

Narrative point of view should also be taken into account. Cronin describes The Passage as being written ‘in a close third. It always radiates from the mind of one character, with certain technical adjustments, so the world you’re getting at that moment is their impression of it’ (cited in Buchsbaum, 2010). McCarthy also utilises a close or limited third person point of view in The Road; however, this remains always the father’s until the very end of the novel and his death, when it becomes a distanced, omniscient third person point of view for the final pages. Cronin’s ‘close third’ offers access to the thoughts and perspective of dozens of characters during The Passage. These accounts are also not fleeting; they are developed and maintained to an extent that has Cronin admitting ‘[t]here are essentially no secondary characters in The Passage’ (cited in Buchsbaum, 2010). Again, the challenge of executing this, along with vast narrative time spans involved, suggests why Cronin’s research and planning may have been so important.

So, how do we assess depictions of the post-apocalyptic blank slate in Cronin’s work? I suggest that, while Cronin is aware of his narrative destination, and has undertaken significant research on many relevant topics, in successfully depicting certain elements of the post-apocalyptic blank slate some writing into the dark appears apparent. For Cronin this occurs in his depiction of transformed landscapes and settlements, and the discovery of these environments by characters from a position of unfamiliarity.
In his interview with Cronin, Buchsbaum comments on the success of his ‘reimagining’ within *The Passage*: ‘I told Cronin how impressed I was with how completely he reimagined our nation after its destruction. More than descriptions of places, he’s mapped what kinds of culture survived, too’ (2010). Cronin’s response suggests that this was one area of his writing that perhaps was not directly associated to research or planning. “There was nothing systematic about it,” he confessed when I asked him how that had come about’ (cited in Buchsbaum, 2010). This statement seems in opposition to Cronin’s wider writing method and is perhaps confirmation that certain challenges within the creative process, in this case those integral to depictions of post-apocalyptic blank slates, may benefit from some unplanned writing.

Cronin’s comments on the unconscious mind also reaffirm the importance of the creative freedom that can be associated with writing into the dark.

I believe that creativity requires a form of auto-hypnosis in order to work. You need to put your mind in a state where the unconscious mind, where all the interesting connections are made, where metaphor is built, you have to be able to lift that dream state closer to your waking state. Otherwise, the book is just building an engine, not creating something interesting. (cited in Charney, 2012)

Douglas Coupland’s method in writing his post-apocalyptic novel *Girlfriend in a Coma* offers an interesting counterpoint to Cronin’s process for *The Passage* and McCarthy’s process for *The Road*. *Girlfriend in a Coma* has significant narrative complexity, following multiple characters across pre- and post-apocalyptic Vancouver. In achieving this, Coupland presents a less established version of a post-apocalyptic blank slate. Given Coupland’s evolving writing processes at the time, further light is shed on the potential relationship between the blank slate and the method of writing into the dark. The novel’s lighter tone and focus on a young adult demographic also have strong parallels to my own novel, *Carousel*, offering a suitable introduction to the final, exegetical section of this analysis.
Girlfriend in a Coma – Douglas Coupland

Coupland’s Girlfriend in a Coma also explores events before, during and after a cataclysmic event. In this instance, the event involves the population of the world abruptly falling into sleep, and then death. The only survivors are a group of high school friends who grew up together in suburban Vancouver. The pre-apocalypse narrative of Girlfriend in a Coma is lengthy and centres on teenager Karen who falls into a seventeen-year coma. During this time she gives birth to her boyfriend Richard’s child, Megan. Richard and friends grow into middle age before Karen finally awakens and the cataclysmic event occurs.

Again, the depiction of the world as a blank slate isn’t present prior to the apocalypse. The focus is on comatose Karen and the lives of her friends negotiating adulthood in the 1970s and 80s. There is an emotional blankness to this section as, for large stretches, the characters’ lives lack meaning or direction. However, there is a strong distinction between this and Cole’s post-apocalyptic blank slate in that, prior to the apocalypse, the characters are not situated in a place of ignorance, nor given the opportunity to discover the world anew or start over. In contrast, they are acutely aware of the society around them, as illustrated by this statement from the character, Linus:

“...[Y]ou know, from what I’ve seen, at twenty you know you’re not going to be a rock star... By twenty-five, you know you’re not going to be a dentist or a professional... And by thirty, a darkness starts moving in – you wonder if you’re ever going to be fulfilled, let alone wealthy or successful... By thirty-five, you know, basically, what you’re going to be doing for the rest of your life...” (Coupland, p. 82)

This observation is reflective of the characters’ collective desire to understand and define the evolving society in which they live. They may be existentially lost, but they are very aware of this feeling, and of the world around them.

Once initiated, the apocalypse in Girlfriend in a Coma is a swift one. People across
North America and Canada, and, we assume, the remainder of the world, simply drop into sleep and never wake up. There is some chaos associated with this: cars crash as drivers doze; Karen’s mother Lois falls asleep in a ransacked supermarket; the hospital in which Wendy works is overrun by ‘sleepers’ (Coupland, p. 187); Megan’s boyfriend, Skitter, arms himself, ‘pockets brimming with handguns’ (p. 193), and kills a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer. However, these events are only detailed briefly and, before long, Karen ‘sees’ the final human, outside of their circle, fall asleep: ‘She lies down on the deck and closes her eyes and sleeps. And that’s that. She is the last person. The world is over now. Our time begins’ (p. 208).

Any depictions of a blank slate environment during these sections are fleeting and blurred by proximity to the pre-apocalypse world. The characters’ emotional states also seem to prohibit any thought of starting over. Despite viewing a vista of the city, described by Coupland as ‘a glinting damaged sheet of pewter, with fires burning like acetylene pearls fallen from a broken choker’ (p. 205), the characters remain numb, showing no ‘signs of mourning; they are still shell-shocked’ (p. 205).

From here Coupland’s narrative leaps forward one year. The point of view alters from an omniscient third, to first person from the perspective of Jared, the ghost of a former school friend. *Girlfriend in a Coma* is non-linear and actually begins in first person with Jared, speaking after the apocalypse, effectively introducing the story to come. Part of this introduction includes the following description of the post-apocalyptic environment, one year after the cataclysmic event:

> It is above all a silent place with no engines or voices or music. Theatre screens fray and unravel like overworn shirts. Endless cars and trucks and minivans sit on road shoulders harboring cargos of rotted skeletons. Homes across the world collapse and fall inward on themselves; pianos, couches, and microwaves tumble through floors, exposing money and love notes hidden in floorboards. (Coupland, 1999, p. 4)

Coupland continues, describing the world, firstly, on a domestic scale:

> Suburban streets such as those where I grew up are dissolving
inside rangy and shaggy overgrown plants; vines unfurl across roads now undriven by Camaros. Tennis rackets silently unstring inside dark dry closets. Ten million pictures fall from ten million walls; road signs blister and rust. Hungry dogs roam in packs. (p. 5)

Then with a larger view:

Cathedrals fall as readily as banks; car assembly lines as readily as supermarkets. Lightless sunken submarines lumber to the ocean’s bottom to spend the next billion years collecting silt. In cities the snow sits unplowed; jukeboxes sit silent; chalkboards stand forever erased. Computer databases lie untapped while power cables float from aluminum towers like long thin hairs. (p. 5)

Each of these descriptions elicits the transformation that is characteristic of a post-apocalyptic blank slate. However, due to the ‘gentle’ nature of the cataclysmic event, the desolation within the post-apocalyptic environment is not full-scale, as within The Road, nor is the environment altered by time to the extent of The Passage. Instead the destruction is gradual and the process is an active part of the post-apocalyptic environment whereby a city, and world, stopped in an instant, is left to slowly crumble. As Boyle-Taylor suggests, the results of maintaining such a close proximity to the cataclysmic event are noteworthy: ‘Coupland situates his apocalypse in the present time, refusing to project a futuristic scenario on the reader, forcing a confrontation of earthly devastation within the present day limitations and options for solutions’ (2011). In this way Coupland’s post-apocalyptic environment is akin to a wax museum, whereby the ‘old world’ remains on display, a constant reminder of the way the characters used to live and a ubiquitous challenge to their plans for the future.

Coupland retains a sense of Skult’s ‘place’ right throughout the post-apocalyptic section of Girlfriend in a Coma. Vancouver is abandoned and crumbling, but still familiar and recognizable to the characters. The characters frequent the same streets, malls and neighbourhoods as they did prior to the apocalypse, continue to entertain themselves with recreational drugs and videos, and retain the casual urban slang that defines their communication. Without desolation, ‘space’ or
discovery, *Girlfriend in a Coma* doesn’t offer a fully realised depiction of the post-apocalyptic blank slate. In fact, its connection to the blank slate can only really be found in relation to the notion of starting over.

The interpretation of the apocalypse as an opportunity, rather than an end, is common among post-apocalyptic theorists who suggest that an ‘apocalypse is by nature hopeful, because it’s an end, but it’s also a beginning of whatever’s next — that thing we can’t see into is implied in the idea of an apocalypse,’ (Gray, 2011, p. 269). In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, opportunity is the ability to start over from a moment or situation of sociological blankness in the world. According to McGill: ‘The apocalypse in *Girlfriend in a Coma* is the simulacrum that exposes the truth of its characters’ lives. By allowing his characters to survive the apocalypse, Coupland gives them the chance to stage a revolution’ (2000, p. 271). Greenberg considers the nature of this revolution to be ‘spiritual-political’ (Greenberg, 2010, p. 21), and the motivation to carry it out is prefaced in the pre-apocalyptic section of the novel, where Coupland’s characters struggle with ‘their self-absorbed and directionless lives’ (Greenberg, 2010, p. 21). The cataclysmic event in *Girlfriend in a Coma* halts the trajectory of those lives and provides a blank canvas for them to begin anew. Their jobs no longer exist, nor do issues of finance, social hierarchy and consumerism that were central to their lives prior to the apocalypse. Alive and seemingly free from danger, the characters are finally at liberty to live their lives as they chose, albeit within other, new, parameters.

To a small extent their actions are anarchic. The youngest survivor, Megan, is rebellious and carefree: ‘She drives over a crunchy skeleton on Stevens Drive as though it were merely a fallen branch; lighting a cigarette, she throws the lit match into the nearest house, not even sticking around to watch it burn’ (Coupland, 1999, p. 226). But, on the whole, their behavior is much more mundane. Jared describes his friends as, ‘slumped around Karen’s fireplace watching an endless string of videos, the floor clogged with Kleenex boxes and margarine tubs overflowing with diamonds and emeralds, rings and gold bullion – a parody of wealth’ (p. 211). The characters’ apathetic reaction to the apocalypse in *Girlfriend in a Coma* has been noted by Jefferson:
They find a generator and use it to watch videos. They venture out for food and pharmaceutical drugs. They waste their opportunity to rebuild the world, never once asking what was wrong and why they were singled out to survive. (Jefferson, 2001, p. 509)

This description is mirrored by Mike Snider who states that, ‘the characters forage through deserted supermarkets and video stores for canned food and videocassettes to pass the time’ (1998). The contrast between this, and the desperate behavior of the characters in both the *The Road* and *The Passage* is significant. There is no violence or struggle for food and shelter as depicted in *The Road*, nor is there any adoption of new routines as depicted in *The Passage*.

Triggered by Jared, by the end of the novel the characters have become aware of their behavior and ‘achieve some semblance of revolutionary recognition’ (McGill, 2000, p. 271). Linus states, ‘Our lives have remained static – even after we lost everything in the world – shit: the world itself. Isn’t that sick? All that we've been through and we watch videos, eat junk food, pop pills, and blow things up’ (Coupland, 1999, p. 258). Having made this realization, the characters are given a second chance by Jared, with Karen falling back into a coma and her friends shifting back in time; challenged to ‘not fall into the deathly complacency that caused the end in the first place,’ (Greenberg, 2010, p. 29). The characters’ response to this challenge is not included within *Girlfriend in a Coma*, but their lack of meaningful response to the apocalyptic challenge still resonates.

Here is the irony of Coupland’s approach to the post-apocalyptic blank slate: despite the opportunity to start over provided by the apocalypse in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, his characters remain inactive and behave much the same way as they did prior: ‘By living only for immediate pleasure and convenience, they never wonder what they could have done to prevent the cataclysm’ (Jefferson, 2001, p. 509). This suggests that perhaps the blank slate is as much about offering the opportunity to start over, as is the case in both *The Passage* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*, as it is the
action of starting over. However, this characteristic may also be connected to Coupland’s writing processes.

Coupland’s writing method is not as clearly defined as Cronin’s or McCarthy’s in relation to planning or plunging. He admits to embracing the unknown in relation to the narrative destination of some of his novels. He says that, for many of his novels, he ‘actually [doesn’t] know where [they are] going to end up,’ adding that ‘there is that kind of delight in the unknown’ (cited in Clarke Grey, 2011). This is supported in the following statement, regarding all of his writing, in which Coupland reveals that he ‘always write[s] in one direction. I never go back and cut and paste. I never insert something. That’s part of the game. That’s part of the rules. You can’t invent a new character and insert them’ (2011). This doesn’t necessarily preclude narrative planning, but does sound more like writing into the dark.

However, there are elements of Coupland’s writing processes that seem to contradict this method. In several interviews he speaks of knowing the ending or destination. To Clarke Grey he states, ‘In most cases, I know where I’m going’ (2011), before then listing some exceptions. In a more recent interview with Lindsay Baker of The Observer, Coupland also speaks of working within a framework where the narrative destination is clear: ‘With Worst. Person. Ever. I knew where it started and where it had to end, but I threw Raymond as many curveballs as I could along the way. He’s like the coyote in the Road Runner cartoons’ (2013). This offers an example of a more hybrid approach to the writing process. It suggests that whilst Coupland initiated the writing of Worst. Person. Ever. (2013) with knowledge of the narrative destination, he kept the 'body' of the novel open and uncertain to create sustained conflict.

Coupland’s specific process in writing Girlfriend in a Coma is explored in an interview with Julie Wheelwright. Again, rather than being a straightforward example of planning or plunging, the process is more complicated. ‘Coupland says that his last novel, Girlfriend in a Coma, was his last written as a young person, and the last to be constructed from notebooks full of intricate observations’
(Wheelwright, 2000). It’s interesting to look at what Coupland then substituted for this process. The two novels following *Girlfriend in a Coma* are *Miss Wyoming* (2000) and *All Families are Psychotic* (2001). In an interview with Clarke Grey, Coupland revealed that he didn’t know the narrative destination when writing *All Families are Psychotic*. His comments on writing *Miss Wyoming* suggest a similar process: ‘with ‘Miss Wyoming’ there’s not a single note for it. Now it all just comes out of my head, and because it comes out of my head I think it’s a bit more emotionally driven than artifactually or environmentally driven’ (“Miss Wyoming (novel),” n.d.).

The apparent shift in writing method at this point in Coupland’s career towards a plunging approach gives some context to the processes informing the creation of *Girlfriend in a Coma*. In identifying the use of notebooks and observations as a distinguishing feature of his early writing method, Coupland’s statements pose the question of whether this is akin to working from a narrative plan. Or whether, because these observations do not necessarily reveal the narrative destination, there is still an element of writing into the dark possible within the process.

Lucy Neave (2012) analyses the contrasting writing methods of several novelists in *Teaching writing process*. Neave mentions Helen Garner as a writer who relies on the unconscious mind during her work. Both Marsden and Cronin reference the unconscious mind as vehicle for writing in uncertainty. However, Neave also says that ‘Garner relies on a notebook to accumulate sufficient detail, and uses the mass of notes as the bedrock on which she builds her books’ (p. 6). Within the paradigm of planning or plunging these methods may appear contradictory, but perhaps they are more reflective of the broadness required in defining a practice such as writing into the dark. I have identified the difference between *working* into the dark, as a broad and widely adopted creative practice that may involve various approaches such as planning, sketching and imagining, and *writing* into the dark, which refers to the physical act of writing sentences and paragraphs. However, what Garner’s and Coupland’s methods question is what practices constitute planning. Neave suggests that ‘conscious, deliberate acts’ such as Garner’s simply ‘allow [her] to
operate in other domains or spheres, such as within imagined worlds’ (p. 6). That is, they help position or prepare the writer to write into the dark.

*Girlfriend in a Coma*’s relationship to the post-apocalyptic blank slate offers a contrasting insight on this topic. The only significant element of the post-apocalyptic blank slate present in *Girlfriend in a Coma* is the opportunity to start over. But, in this case, there is no real sense of the characters discovering a new world. This was a defining trait of both *The Road* and *The Passage*, and, in both cases, may reflect or parallel the process of writing into the dark.

There are several factors that inhibit Coupland from exploring this new-world element of the blank slate. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the apocalypse is not as destructive or dangerous as it is in other post-apocalyptic literature, meaning that the characters don’t need to flee for survival or venture far for essentials such as food and shelter. Also, as mentioned earlier, after the apocalypse the characters are apathetic and consumer-driven. This is integral to Coupland’s thematic explorations of identity, consumerism and existentialism; however, a side effect of this apathy is that the characters lack the motivation to explore, rarely venturing out of the house except to places of familiarity such as the supermarket.

But, in addition to these factors, it may be possible that writing from a bank of pre-existing notes, rather than from blankness, may have inhibited Coupland’s ability to explore this discovery of a new world. Of course, the content of Coupland’s notebook can only be speculated; however, his mention of ‘intricate observations’ (Wheelwright, 2000) is noteworthy. We can assume that Coupland’s observations are about the existing world around him. Using these as a guide or ‘bedrock’ (Neave, p. 6) for the writing of a post-apocalyptic novel seems problematic. Can observations about the existing world be relevant and useful to the writer depicting a world transformed by cataclysm? On the surface, the answer to this might be no; however, Coupland clearly proves otherwise in successfully writing *Girlfriend in a Coma*. I suggest that this is connected to the novel’s eschewing of the post-apocalyptic blank slate. The lack of transformation in Coupland’s environment, together with the character’s lack of motivation for discovery,
enables him to focus on the existing environment of suburban Vancouver, and perhaps expand upon some of the content of his notebooks.

The topic of Coupland’s notebooks raises the issue of temporality, that is, when the process of writing into the dark actually begins. To determine this I return to the distinction between *working* into the dark and *writing* into the dark, whereby *working* can involve various creative processes, including note making, but *writing* into the dark refers to writing the sentences and paragraphs of a first draft manuscript.

This analysis of *Girlfriend in a Coma* suggests that, of all of the characteristics within the post-apocalyptic blank slate, perhaps the discovery of a new world has the strongest connection to the process of writing into the dark. There is a powerful relationship between McCarthy's writing method and the focus on discovery of transformed and unfamiliar worlds within *The Road*. And the moments of discovery such as the desert or highway that form part of Cronin's reimagining in *The Passage* seemed to offer him the best opportunity to stray from, or at least fill the voids within, his narrative plan.

These observations, indeed all previous observations on writers’ creative processes, can only be based on available interview material and literary criticism, and thus contain a degree of speculation. It remains difficult to ascertain exactly how a writer creates a specific novel and how closely the processes involved in this creation are linked to the outcomes in the text. So, in order to better contextualize this analysis, and perhaps offer a deeper level of insight into writing processes, I will examine my own post-apocalyptic novel *Carousel*.

*Carousel* – Brendan Ritchie

I would like to preface this analysis by briefly outlining the journey of *Carousel* from manuscript to publication. *Carousel* was first drafted during the winter of 2012, redrafted under the guidance of my PhD supervisor, Dr. Marcella Polain,
before being accepted for publication late in 2013. During the subsequent twelve months it was redrafted a second time, this time in relation to feedback from the publisher. At the completion of this draft the manuscript was copy-edited and formatted for publication. Publication took place in April 2015.

The majority of the following analysis will focus on my experience in writing the first draft manuscript. I adopted an into the dark process when writing this manuscript. This analysis provides an opportunity for me to reveal my rationale in choosing this writing method, the extent of my unknowing in relation to key elements such as character and narrative, and the relationship between my writing method and the depictions of the post apocalyptic blank slate in *Carousel*.

I also use the overall process of creating *Carousel* to discuss some of the broader implications of writing into the dark. Redrafting is a vital step in the writer’s creative process. Undertaking this process with *Carousel* reveals some of the benefits and pitfalls of writing into the dark. It also helps situate the practice within the wider creative process, and confirm the creativity ingrained in the redrafting process.

These insights may prove valuable in assessing some of the key observations made so far in my research on writing processes and the post-apocalyptic genre.

The text of *Carousel* I will refer to throughout this analysis is the version as published in 2015.

The premise and narrative of *Carousel* are much closer to Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma* than more traditional post-apocalyptic novels such as *The Road* or *Z for Zachariah*. In *Carousel* four young-adult survivors, narrator Nox, Canadian twins Taylor and Lizzy, and teenager Rocky, are trapped in a large shopping complex that has sheltered them from an undisclosed apocalyptic event. Additional survivors emerge during the narrative, but the focus is how these initial four characters adapt to living in the centre, and, eventually, how they come to escape.
Carousel begins with Nox meeting Taylor and Lizzy inside the centre, just prior to the apocalyptic event. They explore the centre and find it open, yet abandoned. They make a brief attempt to leave, find all the doors locked, then wait for somebody to arrive and let them out. From here the narrative jumps forward seven months to depict Nox, Taylor, Lizzy, and Rocky now living in the centre, still unable to escape and with no idea of what has happened in the outside world.

The cataclysmic event is described in Carousel as follows: ‘[t]he doors shuddered outward and the light outside went black. As if somebody hit the switch on some giant vacuum’ (Ritchie, p. 332), and occurs just after Nox arrives at the centre. Despite the majority of Carousel being set within the years immediately following this event, its effect on the setting inhabited by the characters is minimal. The centre and its inhabitants are effectively sheltered from the cataclysm outside. Similar to Coupland’s depiction of post-cataclysmic Vancouver in Girlfriend in a Coma, the environment is largely unchanged and preserved, retaining a sense of Skult’s ‘place’ throughout. Any physical transformation is minimal and generally comes as a result of time passing or a lack of maintenance.

This is in stark contrast to the desolation and transformation depicted in The Road and The Passage. Importantly, this characteristic is a key aspect of the post-apocalyptic blank slates in both of the novels. For the characters it creates a significant degree of unfamiliarity, as much of what they have known to exist has changed or been forgotten. Additionally, it places a great emphasis on survival, which triggers travel to find food, safety and other survivors. It is within this travel that the notion of discovery is often found.

Despite the more static nature of the setting in Carousel, the notion of discovery still exists in certain sections. There are several reasons why this is the case in Carousel as opposed to Girlfriend in a Coma. Firstly, the characters in Carousel are largely unfamiliar with the shopping centre setting. They are also unaware of the nature of their imprisonment and the details of what has happened outside. In Girlfriend in a Coma Coupland’s characters are Vancouver natives, thus the environment retains its familiarity for them even after the cataclysmic event.
Similarly the descendants of the apocalyptic survivors in *The Passage* are familiar with every inch of their walled mountain compounds. In contrast to this, only one of the four main characters in *Carousel* is familiar with the centre prior to their imprisonment. Rocky had a job in the centre’s Target store and, thus, has a knowledge of the setting initially surpassing that of Nox, Taylor and Lizzy. However, Rocky’s knowledge is rarely a defining force in *Carousel*. He is younger than the others and is generally happy to follow, rather than lead. Nox lived in another area of Perth and had rarely been to the centre, while Taylor and Lizzy are Canadian and were on their first visit to the centre when imprisoned. Overall, much of the centre is unknown to most of the characters until they discover it during the narrative.

In *The Road* and *The Passage* the presence of ‘ontological gaps’ (Palmer) or ‘a lack of knowledge about something within a fictional world’ (Skult, p. 3) were synonymous with desolation and the transformation of ‘place’ into ‘space’. Their presence in *Carousel* appears less about the environment, rather the mystery of the characters’ circumstances. As mentioned, the characters do not know why they have been placed in the centre, nor what exactly has happened outside that is stopping anybody from arriving to let them out. In *The Road* and *The Passage* discovery was fuelled by the need to survive; in *Carousel* it is largely motivated by the need for answers.

The result of this motivation is that the notion of discovery of ‘new’ environments still takes place in specific sections of *Carousel*. In *Carousel* ‘new’ is not necessarily physically new or transformed, as within *The Road* or *The Passage*, but, rather emotionally, tonally or semiotically transformed.

For a large section of *Carousel* the characters, led by Taylor, undertake a methodical process of checking the many exterior doors in the centre in the hope that one of them may open and offer the potential for escape. Eventually Taylor and Rocky do find a door that opens and the four characters discover an indoor car park. The denotations of this everyday setting have been altered by the cataclysmic event, thus it requires discovery by the characters.
The car park is dark and Nox’s initial discovery comes via his non-visual senses. ‘I inhaled cautiously. The smell was a new one. Not fresh, but with a kind of life we didn’t have in the centre. Maybe it was the lack of air conditioning. A sudden chill ran across my shoulders. The air was cool’ (Ritchie, 2015, p. 65). The characters then explore the space via torchlight: ‘[w]e scanned the area in front of us. Concrete floors ran into brick walls broken only by the labels of stores in the centre’ (p. 65), before finding a ramp to a lower level and a roller door that is locked.

While not scarred by destruction nor unrecognizable, the emptiness of the car park, along with its darkness, smell and silence, confirm its post-apocalyptic transition. The discovery associated with this transition continues as Rocky finds a solitary car parked on the lower level. ‘He was standing still with his torch fixed on something. We followed his light across the car park. Lizzy inhaled beside me. There was a car parked in the corner’ (Ritchie, 2015, P. 67). Again, this otherwise banal detail, a car parked inside a car park, becomes something else altogether, something highly charged. The characters have not seen a car since their arrival, it is the only vehicle in the car park and it is parked haphazardly across several car bays:

I slowly circled the car looking for dust or dirt or something that would tell us if it had been parked there for a while. The body was clean, but not shiny and gave nothing away. I noticed Rocky had a hand on the bonnet. I placed mine beside his. The steel was cool to touch. (p. 68)

A similar dynamic exists later in Carousel when Nox and Taylor discover a way to access a section of the centre’s roof via a weather-damaged area in the cinema. Initially this setting offers an example of the freedom sometimes associated with post-apocalyptic environments, where characters are able to access and, on this occasion, discover areas that may have otherwise been restricted. This is Nox’s initial description:
We edged our way along the channel of steel that was the cinema roof. Behind us was another roof marking the end of the projection booths and the start of something higher. On our right was a long, sheer wall running maybe ten metres up to another roof. On our left were a series of massive air conditioning units fenced off with steel and jutting upward, blocking any view of what was beyond them. Several of these were weathered badly and I wondered if they were even operational, or just relics of a previous cooling system. (p. 216)

During a later trip to the roof, this time at night, the characters discover a small vista of suburban landscape that is illustrative of the transformation in post-apocalyptic Perth outside of the centre.

Suburban Perth was vast and black as it spread quietly away to the west. Yet amid the darkness there were small scatterings of light. The glow of a hidden porch. Blue light from a petrol station or card yard. An intersection with traffic lights turning from green to red, awaiting cars that never arrive. The pockets seemed random. Some clustered together, others distant and lonely. Carousel wasn’t the only place that was somehow still on the grid. (P. 294-295)

Although subtle, this discovery confirms several key elements of the post-apocalyptic environment in Carousel. There is the sudden loss of population akin to both The Road and The Passage; there is the intact, yet abandoned infrastructure similar to that found within Girlfriend in a Coma, and there is the unusual delegation of electricity to small, specific areas. The latter is perhaps the most unique characteristic in Carousel. Electricity is present in both The Passage and Girlfriend in a Coma, but it is explained by surviving solar installations and diesel generators respectively. In Carousel the source of the electricity remains as an ‘ontological gap’ (Palmer) throughout.
In the final chapter of Carousel, Taylor, Lizzy and Nox finally manage to exit the centre via a door inside Target. This moment is noteworthy in relation to the post-apocalyptic blank slate as it offers the only full view of the outside world. Having been restricted to the centre for the entirety of the novel, characters and readers have no idea what lies on the other side of the exit. The characters see:

The horizon.
It was messy, flat and suburban, like any other day I had seen in Perth.
The three of us stared at it across the vacant car park. An empty highway divided the centre from the brick and tiles of the surrounding suburbs. Everything looked quiet and gentle. (p. 348)

The familiarity of what they see in the distance is shadowed by the strangeness of the foreground, with its ‘vacant car park’ and ‘empty highway’. Snyder identifies this ‘simultaneous familiarity and strangeness’ (2011, p. 470) as a key characteristic of the post-apocalyptic genre. In combination with the mysterious rumbling noises the characters can hear (p. 349) the environment outside the centre has an instability reflective of post-apocalyptic transformation.

When combined with the discovery of the car park and roof, and other settings in the centre that have been made either physically or semiotically unfamiliar by the cataclysmic event, such as the storeroom of a food outlet and a video surveillance office, the discovery of a new world that is central to the post-apocalyptic blank slate is present throughout Carousel. This occurs despite the existence of ‘place’, the confined location, and the ease of access to food and shelter.

Carousel also explores the notion of starting over. Donner and Cantor suggest that part of the appeal of the post-apocalyptic genre is the opportunity it presents for society to start over. This was a strong element physically, socially and culturally in The Passage, and existentially in Girlfriend in a Coma; however, the extent of the desolation kept it from having a significant presence in The Road. Within the physical parameters of Carousel, the notion of starting over can be seen both
socially, as the characters gradually develop a quasi-community in the centre, and personally, in Nox’s transformation into an artist.

In *Carousel* the attempts to find an exit from the centre are not constant. During the significant time between these ventures the characters effectively develop a small and hybrid community. They establish living quarters:

> Our makeshift lounge-room in JB Hi-Fi seemed to expand by the week. We now had a variety of couches forming a large u-shape facing our favourite flatscreen. There were two glowing space heaters beaming up at us from in front of the screen, and a big square coffee table from Freedom, floating like a messy, urban island in the middle. It was strewn with a constant supply of DVDs, magazines, books, snack foods and dinner plates. (P. 110-111)

There is also the gradual development of a garden area beneath the open dome. This is initiated in an amateur fashion, but becomes central to the characters’ survival and wellbeing (p. 110). Gardening becomes a specific focus for Taylor, almost akin to a profession in this new world. ‘She grew flowers and succulents and weird looking plants I’d never seen before. She wasn’t just gardening to keep us alive. The dome was a place of life now and Taylor gravitated there whenever she could’ (p. 303).

In addition to the living quarters in JB Hi-Fi and the garden in the dome, there are places where the characters convene for meals (such as the Pure ‘n’ Natural island), store their rubbish (Big W), and gather for social drinking (Liquor Central). Together these elements have a strong sense of the reinvented and transformed communities and social structures mentioned by Cantor and Donner in relation to the post-apocalyptic fantasy of starting over.

The characters of Carousel also develop new routines born out of the circumstances of their new environment. Taylor and Lizzy name one of these routines ‘trolley shopping’, whereby they gather together trolley loads of clothing
from throughout the centre to then ‘drag over a couple of movie standees and some mirrors and set up a makeshift change area’ (p. 47). They then browse leisurely through the trolleys with ‘music and magazines, and breaks for smoothies and snacks’ (p. 47), taking the effort and travel out of shopping in such a large centre.

With no mobile networks working in the centre the characters use radios as their communication devices. Generally associated with conveying information as opposed to hosting conversation, the radios challenge the way characters, particularly Taylor and Lizzy, are used to speaking. ‘Radios weren’t really designed for Taylor and Lizzy’s kind of rapid-fire, mindless chatter. There was a delay that provided an opportunity to shape questions and answers. Plus the act of pressing a button to speak placed an inherent importance on the message’ (Ritchie, 2015, p. 135). Language is also partially altered in Carousel, as it is in The Road, The Passage and Girlfriend in a Coma, with new words such as ‘gnomed’, referring to the propping open of toilet doors with garden gnomes.

Semeiks suggests that there is little use for proper nouns in The Road due to the desolation and bareness of the post-apocalyptic environment – many things simply no longer exist and their names are thus lost from language. The Passage also depicts a loss of language, in this case due to the large time spans covered in the narrative, however Cronin incorporates new nouns to describe things and places that the apocalypse has created. This was also my rationale in Carousel. Language is not lost, rather expanded upon to fully depict the post-apocalyptic environment, events and emotions.

In Girlfriend in a Coma, the notion of starting over was explored by Coupland in relation to the specific direction of his characters’ lives. There are parallels here to the opportunity offered to Nox in Carousel. While Coupland’s characters choose not to change, and this is central to his exploration of generational apathy in Girlfriend in a Coma, Nox does appear to ‘start over’ in several key areas. It is revealed that, prior to arriving in the centre, Nox’s life lacked any significant trajectory: ‘I had graduated with average grades and an arts degree and started work in an
independent stationery store. Suddenly it was like there was no future to discuss. I was just twenty-two but it was as if I had arrived at a destination’ (p. 31). Nox has artistic aspirations stemming from his time at university but has yet to begin his journey toward these. The circumstances of the world and, paradoxically, his imprisonment in the centre gradually provide him with the impetus and opportunity to begin this journey.

Initially his progress is slow. He spends time reading classic novels and autobiographies by established artists. This then flows into occasional writing of his own, and then into a regular practice.

I was writing regularly. Churning out poetry full of thinly veiled explorations of entrapment and confinement. I had also started, and abandoned, several novellas based on my angsty teenage years, my first year at university, or anything else that I could take from something I was reading and adapt to fit my own history. (P. 107-108)

Initially Nox keeps the writing secret, but, as he grows in confidence, he begins to share some of the work with Lizzy and embrace his new persona. In conjunction with this new focus on writing, his appearance also starts to evolve. This is a conscious decision by Nox: ‘I also started exploring the clothes I was wearing on long ventures throughout the centre’ (Ritchie, 2015, p. 108). The clothing options are abundant in a large centre such as Carousel so it is noteworthy that Nox begins to adopt a new style, rather than continuing to wear the type of clothing he is accustomed to. Late in the novel, when he is packing clothes for an expected escape, Nox speaks of this progression of style: ‘The hoodies and jeans of my initial months had morphed into slim chinos and dark pullovers’ (p. 287). In this way, the transition in Nox’s clothing externalizes his internal transition from store attendant to writer. I acknowledge this depiction supports a stereotypical view of artists as being deliberately fashionable, and has limited cultural weight. However, within the context of Carousel, the notion that the apocalypse facilitates Nox’s transition or ‘starting over’ is noteworthy.
Cantor suggests that often a big part of starting over in post-apocalyptic environments results from freedom from material possessions. For Nox, trapped in a giant shopping centre, this is not the case. His unrestricted access to certain material possessions, such as the books he studies and the clothes he begins to wear, facilitates his starting over, rather than hinders it.

Surviving the apocalypse with established artists Taylor and Lizzy also has a big influence on Nox’s reinvention. As well as being confident and diligent artists themselves, Taylor and Lizzy actively encourage Nox to embrace his newfound identity. During a conversation between Taylor and Nox, relating to the possibility of escape, Taylor encourages Nox to hold onto his new identity, irrespective of what happens:

“But if we do get out, the Nox you are in here, with the writing and the haircuts and the leather jackets. That Nox doesn’t need to stay here. It’s not determined by this place, or by me or by Lizzy, or anything else. If that’s you, then that’s you, Nox. The apocalypse is irrelevant,” she said. (p. 314)

This is a challenge Nox focuses on during much of the later part of the narrative. He is fixated on writing well and writing enough to be considered a writer. ‘I was writing in Carousel for a lot of reasons. To fill the days, to have a focus. But also to be a writer’ (p. 250). To Nox, being considered a writer in himself, and by Taylor and Lizzy, and whomever else may exist in the world, is important, as it confirms he has reinvented himself, or started over. He articulates his concerns about this on several occasions: ‘[m]ainly I worried about whether I would be different to the person I was when I arrived’ (p. 286).

My purpose in identifying these elements of the post-apocalyptic blank slate in Carousel is to investigate any link they may have to my writing method. For Carousel, this method was writing into the dark. Before writing the first line of the manuscript I knew very little of what it would come to include. Put simply, I had
what Dillard might consider a vision for a novel about a young-adult character, most likely male, who would somehow be trapped inside the Carousel Shopping Complex with two semi-famous musicians. All backstory, character traits, narrative arcs and additional characters were created during the writing process.

In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood details the sensations experienced by several writers as they start a new novel. One writer claims it is akin to ‘walking into a labyrinth, without knowing what monster might be inside’ (2003, p. xxii). This is an apt description of my experience in starting *Carousel*. The labyrinth felt both physical, in relation to the cavernous and unfamiliar setting, and structural, relating to what would happen (the narrative events) in this setting and circumstance. The notion of a ‘monster’ is also relevant. For the majority of my time writing *Carousel*, even during the early redrafting process, I was uncertain as to what ‘evil’, if any, was responsible for both the state of the world and the characters’ imprisonment.

For Stephen King, the best answer to the question of how the writer starts with blankness and finishes with a novel lies with the characters. Rather than initiate the manuscript with any specific knowledge of what the characters are doing in the centre or how they came to be there, I decided to experience this mystery with them, or specifically, with the narrator Nox. My rationale was to try to channel Nox’s uncertainty onto the page. So, in the first scene, where Nox is trying to confirm where he is and what is happening, I was asking myself the same questions.

King also discusses writers relinquishing control to their characters, allowing them to ‘do things their way’ (King, 2002, p. 161). This dynamic is perhaps more symbolic than literal. Even the writer writing into the dark maintains control over many creative elements such as imagery, pacing and tone. I think that King’s suggestion is more closely related to character motivation. Once a character has an established goal or motivation, whether it relates to their broader life, or more specifically to a particular scene, then this goal can be used by the writer to determine that character’s actions and effectively drive the narrative. In *Carousel* I
didn't feel like I relinquished control to Nox, rather than I placed myself in his ignorance and let his motivations guide me forward. At the start of the manuscript, and reoccurring throughout, his goals assisted in finding answers to the nature of their imprisonment.

My writing process remained consistent as I progressed through the manuscript. Of course, I became more knowledgeable of the world of the characters as I created it, but the sensation of not knowing what lay ahead, nor seeking to establish this, was constant throughout. Some of the major narrative moments that I did not know would occur until I was writing them include the 'de-gnoming' in Nox's bathroom, the discovery of the Fiesta in the car park and the plane flying over the dome.

Part of my rationale might also be related to connecting with the reader. Alter discusses the disconnect between the writer and reader in relation to reader-response theory:

[w]hen writing, a writer will (usually) know what is going to happen next and will have a clear view of how their imaginary world looks and feels. However, this state of being removes them from the unknowing and alien perspective of the reader (P. 4-5)

In choosing not to know what is going to happen next, I situated myself closer to the perspective of the reader. While, for me, this decision was inadvertent, it does align with Alter's suggestion that 'writers are engaged in the constant game of trying to imagine and re-read their work from the perspective of a potential readership' (p. 4).

Flaherty discusses the cognitive psychologists' theory that creativity can occur as a result of both divergent and convergent thinking, in that divergent thinking ‘produces a number of solutions to a poorly defined problem’ (2005, p. 60), and convergent thinking ‘uses all the information available to solve a well-defined problem’ (p. 62). Reading this, it struck me that writing into the dark is analogous
to having a poorly defined problem. In literature I suggest that this ‘problem’ relates to the narrative arc.

At this point it is necessary to differentiate between what the writer knows and what he or she chooses to reveal to the reader. For instance, the mystery writer, using the previously mentioned example of Elizabeth George, may have completely defined their ‘problem’, but have chosen to reveal this only gradually to the reader to enhance suspense and interest. What I am referring to in relation to *Carousel* and divergent thinking are instances where the writer chooses not to fully define the problem or narrative arc prior to writing, and then what occurs when they start to write various solutions to this problem of poorly defined narrative arc as part of their first draft manuscript. In *Carousel*, the unplanned narrative events of the de-gnoming, the Fiesta and the plane are examples of this dynamic.

Having placed the characters in the darkness of *Carousel*, writing the de-gnoming and the discovery of the Fiesta was my way of attempting to solve the problems of the narrative arc. These included: the presence of other survivors, the scope and nature of the cataclysm, the reason behind the characters’ sheltering, the logistics of the centre with its locked doors, availability of electricity and lack of communication networks. Both the de-gnoming and the discovery of the Fiesta trigger the eventual discovery of other survivors, which in turn offers insight into the larger ‘problems’ of the apocalypse, imprisonment and survival. Importantly, though, neither of these events offers a direct solution, or even a pathway toward one. The problem of the characters’ existence in the centre is further illuminated, but answers still elude both writer and reader.

In my analysis of *The Road* I identified a passage where father and son search a petrol station for food and supplies, then return to the station moments later when the father decides their initial search lacked full diligence. The return visit to the petrol station yielded a few extra items, but, at least narratively, nothing further. I speculated here that McCarthy’s unplanned writing process was behind the narrative elusiveness and apparent arbitrariness of this scene. There was no sense
of trajectory or foreshadowing, rather a feeling that McCarthy was writing his way through the work, trying to find solutions for a larger, undefined problem.

There may be parallels here to the plane scene in Carousel. I arrived at this narrative event in the same way as I did many others. It occurs quite abruptly: ‘[w]e were still picking away at the meal when the sky deepened to navy and a triple-seven jet flew over’ (Ritchie, 2015, p. 203), and the characters are left to make sense of it in the aftermath. However, unlike the de-gnoming and the discovery of the Fiesta, the event of the plane flying over the dome does not trigger or foreshadow any significant future events. The plane flying over is an example of a possible ‘solution’ that did not assist me in eventually defining and exploring the narrative arc, as did the de-gnoming and Fiesta.

I am not suggesting that this is indicative of flawed writing, nor that the success of any particular narrative moment is determined only by its function within the greater narrative. There are less obvious benefits related to pacing, narrative texture, tonal qualities, the effect of externalized narrative events on a character’s internal world, and the illusion of reality. What is interesting is how problematic it might be to write into the manuscript these arbitrary narrative events when working to a plan. There is a lack of cul-de-sac events within the complicated and carefully woven narrative structure of The Passage. The act of planning emphasises the function of each scene within the larger narrative. I can imagine that an idea for an innocuous return to a petrol station or an unresolved plane sighting may be edited from a narrative plan before being written, with any potential benefits lost before being explored.

As mentioned, setting was one of the few details I began with. I knew that the characters would be trapped in Carousel Shopping Complex, which is located in Cannington, an eastern suburb of Perth, Western Australia. For some of the writers I discuss, there is a relationship between setting and research. George revealed that she ‘would never write about a place [she hadn’t] been to’ (cited in Pohl, 2007, p. 21), while Cronin revealed he ‘travelled every mile of the geography’ (cited in Patrick, 2010) depicted in The Passage. For George and Cronin researching the
setting is part of the planning process. In this way they gather information and
detail about a setting and use this to inform their depiction of it.

While I have been to Carousel Shopping Complex on a few occasions, my limited
knowledge of the setting was never a defining factor in my creative process. The
novel does not attempt to offer an authentic depiction of the real centre. Many of
the shops are invented or fictionalized. The layout of the centre in the novel has
some parallels to the real centre, in relation to the entrance, cinema and islands,
but these are drawn from my vague memories of the place, rather than research.
There is another complex, Garden City Shopping Centre, with which I am more
familiar. However, rather than use my knowledge of Garden City, I chose to set the
manuscript in Carousel because I am unfamiliar with it.

Too much familiarity with setting felt restrictive and in conflict with the into the
dark method. An even greater sense of freedom might come from inventing a
completely fictional shopping centre. However, I was opposed to this for several
reasons. In relation to genre, to create a completely fictionalised setting situated
the idea closer to science fiction than the post-apocalyptic. Earlier I suggested that
the line between these genres was often fine, but that post-apocalyptic settings
were forever defined by the apocalyptic event and often retained a small degree of
familiarity. Utilizing my vague memory of Carousel Shopping Complex offered me
the required amount of familiarity. I also liked the social reputation of the centre as
slightly rough, as Cannington is ‘lower-middle-class’ ("Cannington, Western
Australia,” n.d.), and is located on the outskirts of Perth, a geographically isolated
city in its own right.

My approach to narrative destination in Carousel was perhaps the most defining
aspect of my writing process. During the writing, the narrative destination
remained largely unclear to me until the final pages. At some point during writing I
began to visualise the characters finally escaping the centre, but I was unsure how
this would happen, and whether this would be the final narrative destination, or
whether their journey would continue outside. It was not until I arrived at the
Target store with Nox that I realized the remaining trio exiting the store, via
Rocky’s original keys, was where and how the narrative would end. Perhaps the strongest admission I can make about my process in writing *Carousel* was that I did not know Rocky would have a card to exit the centre until Nox knelt at his bed on page three hundred and thirty-five.

It is important to contextualize my writing process within the framework of earlier observations on the discovery of a new world. In my analysis of work by McCarthy, Cronin and Coupland, I suggested that there were certain circumstances, often found within post-apocalyptic fiction, that seemed to encourage a writing into the dark practice. *Carousel* also contains several sections where, despite the enclosed and restricted nature of the setting, the characters discover a ‘new’ environment such as a car park, cinema roof or the exterior of the centre.

The question this raises is whether the experience of writing these sections was any different to others where the notion of discovery in the narrative was less apparent. Having considered this question carefully, I can claim that there was synergy between my practice of working into the dark and the writing of these moments of discovery. The impossibility of my knowing what these environments would be like after an apocalypse – that is, how they may have transformed, and how they may have remained the same – offered me significant freedom to maintain the required plausible ignorance in characters that is so central to post-apocalyptic scenarios. Within this context, writing into the dark felt natural, organic, as if no other practice could facilitate my requirements so completely.

The act of discovering these things while writing also seemed to encourage vivid sensory exploration, in that I needed to establish smell, touch and sound in order to confirm that which was visual. During their discovery of the car park, Nox describes how all of his senses react to the new environment, beginning with smell and touch: ‘I inhaled cautiously. The smell was a new one. Not fresh, but with a kind of life we didn’t have in the centre. Maybe it was the lack of air conditioning. A sudden chill ran across my back. The air was cool!’ (65). Outside, on the roof, the sensory discovery is lead by sound: ‘Taylor tilted her head up and listened. I followed. We sat there for a long while, listening hard to the silence around us...
There were the obvious absences – things we should have been hearing but weren’t. Traffic. Industry. People.’ (P. 219-220).

Overall, writing into the dark within these specific parameters was a dynamic and energizing experience.

**Conclusion**

I will conclude this essay with some reflections on the wider repercussions of adopting a writing into the dark method during the creation of *Carousel*. The redrafting process has highlighted many things that are linked to this method. Some, I believe, are positive characteristics of the novel, such as dramatic tension and inventiveness; others, such as logic problems and narrative continuity, have been problematic and required significant attention and reworking.

A significant issue I addressed during redrafting related to Rocky’s arrival at the centre after the cataclysmic event. When writing the first draft, Rocky’s presence in the centre raised question after question and, rather than answer these, I tried to utilise this to build on the overall mystery. While I think my own uncertainty about this was effective in creating tension and conflict within the first draft, I was inevitably forced to consolidate some of Rocky’s backstory.

The survival of Nox, Taylor, Lizzy and Rachel is explained during the novel by their presence within the centre during the cataclysmic event. The centre provides a kind of barrier to the forces that led to the disappearance of the population outside. However, my depiction of Rocky’s arrival in the first draft manuscript had him outside the centre during the cataclysm, and thus unprotected.

There is another character, Peter Mistry, who was also outside the centre during this time. Peter’s survival is linked to a suggestion in *Carousel* that artists were consciously sheltered from the apocalypse by an undisclosed figure or organisation. The survival of Nox, Taylor and Lizzy aligns with this suggestion, and
the discovery of artwork inside Peter’s car suggests that he too may have been an artist who was sheltered, albeit somewhere other than Carousel. During their nighttime visit to the cinema roof, the characters discover ‘small scatterings of light’ (p. 295) in the surrounding suburbs, suggesting that perhaps there are other places that may have offered artists shelter from the cataclysm. Rachel can be accounted for in this scenario as she was plausibly inside the centre cleaning when the event occurred. However, for Rocky, who was outside and never confirmed as being an artist, or even artistic, this logic fell away.

I made this realisation while writing the first draft manuscript, but decided to keep writing, rather than stop and amend the details of Rocky’s arrival. As I wrote on, I found that the mystery surrounding Rocky’s arrival was useful in channeling the uncertainty experienced by the other characters. I felt that the details of Rocky’s arrival at the centre would be connected to their eventual escape, but I wasn’t sure how. I decided to maintain this uncertainty as long as possible because of the narrative tension it was providing. This resulted in my earlier admission that I did not know about Rocky’s security card prior to writing the scene in which Nox finds it.

The final revelation of the existence of Rocky’s card suggests that he actively decided to remain silent about it and stay with the others in the centre in the face of his illness and eventual death. Given Rocky’s youth and the extraordinary circumstances in which he finds himself, I don’t think there is a serious problem with his behavior or motivation. However, there are some holes in the logic of his arrival. For instance, if Rocky was on his way to work that morning, there would be others in the same situation. Carousel is a large centre with many employees. As this isn’t the case in Carousel, it must be assumed that Rocky was heading to work much earlier than is his normal routine. As this is out of character for Rocky, I needed to establish a plausible reason for him to want to arrive early. I found this in the character of Geri, a friend of Rocky, who works as a cleaner in the centre.

She is first mentioned during the discovery of Rachel, as Rocky reveals his hopes that maybe Geri will enter the centre, also. This doesn’t eventuate, but later Rocky
admits to having had a casual, intimate relationship with Geri. While redrafting, I decided that Geri was the most plausible reason for Rocky to arrive at work early, so expanded upon the scene to include a revelation from Rocky that he arrived at work early on the day of the cataclysm to meet Geri. When she didn’t arrive, he entered the centre alone, eventually meeting Nox and the others.

This explained Rocky’s early arrival to work, but not his survival during the cataclysmic event. I could have altered some earlier scenes to have him enter Carousel just before the event, having only waited briefly for Geri. But I decided to keep the chronology of the first draft, and justify his survival by being right outside the centre, as there was a protective field around the centre, extending to the area immediately outside of the building. This may be deemed a convenient contrivance, but I think there are benefits to having Rocky ‘experience’ the cataclysm differently to the others. It provides another possibility for the cause of his illness – perhaps it is due to some form of radiation exposure – and also helps explain his reluctance to reveal his security key and help the others leave the centre. I don’t reveal much of what Rocky saw during the moment of cataclysm, but like the idea that it may have haunted him enough to not want to leave the centre under any circumstances – even if that meant facing his death.

By continuing to write into the dark and creating characters such as Geri, I believe I was subconsciously creating solutions to the problems I had initiated early in the writing. Whilst these solutions only became apparent during the redrafting process, I think this reaffirms Heyman’s suggestion that sometimes the writer only ‘understand[s] the why of the call, why this character and not another, once [they] have pursued it’ (2013, p. 63).

The first draft manuscript also contained problems relating to Rachel. Primarily, there was the logic issue of her children surviving outside the centre. When writing Rachel’s initial scenes, I had not considered whether or not she should have children. However, during her early characterisation, I felt that being a single mother enhanced her depiction in a particular and useful way. Thus, when questioned by Nox about her home life, Rachel reveals that she does have children
to support, and that they are at home, awaiting her return from work. This worked as a mechanism of characterisation, and it made for plausible and interesting dialogue, but it has logic issues similar to Rocky's arrival. If Rachel's children survived the cataclysm, despite not being sheltered by the centre, then it seems logical that others would have also. If this were the case, then the lack of people coming to Carousel in search of food, shelter and other survivors during the long period of their imprisonment seems hard to believe.

During redrafting, my solution to this was to alter Rachel's backstory so that her children were with her ex-husband when the cataclysm occurred and disappeared with the remainder of the population. In the first draft, the presence of Rachel's children was directly linked to her motivation to leave the centre after being stuck inside overnight. Having the children disappear may diminish this motivation; however, I remain satisfied that there is still a strong enough justification for her to leave; Nox speculates that she may have been driven by the slim chance of reuniting with her children or by fear of being stuck inside Carousel indefinitely.

The first draft manuscript also failed to explain why Rachel did not come into contact with the other characters for almost a year. This seems implausible given the regularity of Rachel's visits and the proximity of her cleaning to the areas of Carousel occupied by the others. My solution to this in subsequent drafts was to have Rachel cleaning in another area of the centre up until just prior to meeting the others (when she decides to shift her duties to the western side of the centre for convenience and warmth, and because, in an empty centre, the cleaning work is arbitrary anyway). I also decided that Rachel had noticed the other characters prior to their meeting, but chosen not to approach them. This adds to Rachel's particular character (as a loner) and also suggests that she may have had contact with other 'sheltered' artists outside Carousel and so was not as curious about them as she may have otherwise been.

The redrafted changes to Rachel were not complicated, nor particularly defining; however, subtle shifts can be powerful, and the need to make changes does illustrate how the into the dark method can result in various problems during
drafting that can’t be completely corrected in the redrafting. When depicting the ‘de-gnomings’ during the first draft I was unsure of the perpetrator. The idea of a cleaning lady still attending to the centre seemed interesting, so I wrote Rachel’s arrival and tried to deal with any narrative problems it created as I continued writing. I was able to provide motivation for her continuing the cleaning (via her parole conditions) and a plausible reason for her survival (being on shift during the cataclysm). However, problems relating to timing and backstory remained until addressed as well as possible in redrafting. Overall, I don’t think the issues created by Rachel’s inclusion in *Carousel* overshadow the benefits. I’m not even sure that the importance of characters woven into the fabric of a novel can be assessed in a black and white fashion. However, the redrafting involved in clarifying and consolidating Rachel’s presence in *Carousel* provides a good example of the tangled narrative web that writing into the dark can produce.

There were also narrative threads created in the first draft that did not have clear solutions. Earlier I mentioned the event of the plane flying over while the characters were beneath the dome. This is an event without strong logic in the story world. It raises unanswered questions such as: Who is aboard the plane? Why is it from Canada? Why does it fly across when it does, many months after their arrival? Why aren’t there others? As previously stated, the plane scene was unplanned and written without stopping to consider the narrative ramifications. During redrafting I realised that *Carousel* did not have the scope to provide answers to these questions. That being the case, I had to decide between deleting the scene or including it as a prelude to events that may be explored in a sequel. Given the already open ending to the narrative, and the suggestion that the characters were about to head to the airport, I decided that keeping the plane event was a valid creative decision.

It was also necessary to map out the chronology of narrative events in *Carousel* during redrafting. Writing into the dark meant that I did not have an intended duration for the characters’ stay in the centre. This meant that, when mentioning time frames and seasons in the early drafts, I was often loose with chronology. Initially, there was mention of multiple Christmases being spent in the centre, and
a description of Carousel being a ‘boarded up fortress for almost two years.’
Mapping the actual chronology of the events in the manner below revealed that I had overstated the duration of their stay.

(Ritchie, 2014, Figure 1.0)

It is interesting to think how, for a writer like Cronin, this type of diagram may have performed an entirely different function in his writing. For me, it is a way of correcting the chronology of an existing draft; for Cronin it may be part of a planning process intended to guide his writing from page one.

I used a similar approach to research in Carousel. Rather than visit the centre or access maps and floor plans, I decided to maintain a degree of ignorance in order to channel the characters’ uncertainty while writing. I wanted the centre to feel cavernous and disorientating for much of the narrative and was conscious that too much knowledge of the centre might negate my ability to depict it in this way. Whilst I feel this worked for me in this instance, I am not suggesting that pre-writing research is restrictive in all circumstances. Many writers, including Cronin,
speak of the potential for research to inspire and for the writer to uncover possibilities for plot, character and setting that they may not have otherwise considered. What I suggest, though, is that the decision not to research a particular element of a manuscript, prior to initiating the writing, as can be the case for authors writing into the dark, should be considered a creative decision, as opposed to always being seen as flawed process or oversight.

Genre is also implicated in any discussion regarding research. It would, for example, be problematic to write historical fiction without any pre-writing research. Conversely, a genre such as fantasy is often less dependent upon research due to the creative freedoms it offers. Again, post-apocalyptic fiction situates somewhere in the middle ground in this regard; however, as The Road illustrates, it does facilitate explorations of worlds that are a long way removed from the ones we currently know.

As with the chronological mapping, my research for Carousel was done retrospective of the first draft manuscript. There were events and descriptions that I needed to ensure were depicted accurately. Two examples of this were the state of decomposition of Peter’s body when discovered by Nox, and the science behind Nox’s creation of the radio broadcast mechanism. While the retrospective research enabled me to clarify these elements, I admit that a prior knowledge may have opened up creative possibilities during the writing of them that I did not consider at the time. A question that my particular experience in writing Carousel does not answer is: can research in areas such as place, time or profession, prior to writing, be creatively beneficial whilst presenting no barrier to a writing into the dark method, where a central issue or darkness relates to narrative destination?

Carousel is my first novel. It remains to be seen whether my experiences in writing it will be repeated. I have tried not to oversimplify my representation of the processes of redrafting and editing. These processes are inherently creative and go much further than simply clarifying and focusing the work. In her scientific analysis of creativity, Flaherty suggests that creativity is fostered within the relationship between writing and editing:
All of these schools converge on the prediction that interaction or alternation between the two modes of thought or hemispheres fosters creativity. And the theories parallel the standard literary model in which a creative writer alternates between generating text and editing (Flaherty, 2005, p. 71).

I wrote the first draft of Carousel quickly, taking roughly four months from start to finish. As mentioned, I also began the manuscript without undertaking any form of planning. As well as providing a platform for this research, these processes were driven by significant anxiety about the task of writing a novel for the first time. I decided to begin quickly, rather than enable my anxieties to grow during a protracted planning process. Having started, I made a conscious effort to keep increasing my word count each day, rationalising that if I maintained a certain progress, the manuscript would inevitably be finished. There is writing theory that advocates this kind of rapid, start-to-finish approach. King states that ‘the first draft of a book – even a long one – should take no more than three months, the length of a season’ (2002, p149).

Fuelled by this anxiety, I didn’t allow myself to pause and edit whilst writing. As a result my editing process was undertaken on a completed first draft. Working with my academic supervisor and, later, publisher, the editing process was thus aimed at clarity, focus and continuity, rather than processes that may have had wider influences on the narrative and characters. Neave suggests that there is a difference between editing and revising whereby ‘[a] revision usually implies some significant change to the fictional world the writer has created. This distinguishes revision from the lesser changes implied by proofreading, or even editing’ (2012, p. 2). Neave also suggests that ‘a “successful” revision enables a writer to engage in a different way with his or her material’ (p. 2). While I am confident that Carousel benefited greatly from the post-manuscript process, my approach appears more akin to Neave’s description of editing, as opposed to revision. Whether this approach to redrafting is analogous with writing into the dark remains unclear.
This is one of many questions that have been posed within this exploration of what it is to write into the dark and what connection this method may have to post-apocalyptic fiction. To finalise the discussion, I will summarise the conclusions I have made and identify some of the questions that remain.

It seems clear that writing without knowledge of the narrative destination is the most identifiable and defining characteristic of the writing into the dark method. For writers such as McCarthy, Heyman and King, this is a conscious creative decision that informs their writing in many ways. For McCarthy it feels imbued in the very fabric of his writing – in its journey, its meander, its surprise and, ultimately, as life has all of these things, in its truth. For King, writing into the dark is about energy and suspense. The energy is both for him, to sustain his process as a prolific writer, and for his characters, who are given agency to drive the narrative forward into the unknown. For Heyman, the creative unknowing that comes with writing into the dark is the ‘alchemical ingredient’ (2013, p. 63) of any fiction.

Analysing my own process in writing Carousel highlighted the extent of creative unknowing that can exist throughout the writing. I realised how many significant narrative events within Carousel were arrived at without a plan, and how, while the journey from one to another may appear to the reader as carefully structured, they are, in reality, the result of an evolving and complicated creative process.

A study of Cronin’s practice, alongside that of other writers who adopt the contrasting practice of planning narrative, confirms that this practice is also neither simple nor homogenous. There are degrees of planning and different practices within these degrees. For Cronin, an overall knowledge of destination, and even the specific details of what happens within this destination, is central to his process. However, he seems to allow, and perhaps even embrace, some flexibility in the writing journey to reach this destination. In his practice, Cronin reinforces Dillard’s position on ‘vision’, where once ‘there are words on the page, this vision has been superseded by a more powerful process’ (1990, p. 57).
Coupland’s method of writing *Girlfriend in a Coma* from a series of observations on the world raises the question of what processes can be determined as planning. For Coupland there is no knowledge of narrative destination, rather the existence of note pads full of thoughts, exchanges and opinions to be incorporated into the narrative. This is a writing process that may retain an overall narrative uncertainty, but perhaps eschew this within specific scenes or sections. The lack of the discovery of a new world in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, in contrast to the environments depicted in many other post-apocalyptic novels, may be indicative of a method more akin to planning. This may also reaffirm that writing into the dark is different to working into the dark, whereby writing refers to creation of sentences in the manuscript and working can involve many creative processes, including filling notepads, with observations.

Not surprisingly there are ramifications for the adoption of each practice. Writing *Carousel* without a plan created several problems to overcome during redrafting. However, the question remains unanswered as to whether I could have planned the unexpected narrative events that eventuated while I was writing into the dark.

Post-apocalyptic literature provides an interesting framework to analyse these contrasting writing methods. The genre presents a unique challenge for writers, broadly conceptualised by Cole as the reimagining of the world as a blank slate. The post-apocalyptic blank slate is characterised by cataclysmic transformation, a lack of Skult’s ‘place’ and the notion of starting over. The transformation can be depicted visually, but also in relation to language and cultural and social markers. These environments encourage a process of discovery in the genre where new markers have not existed long enough to be mapped and characters originate from positions of ignorance due to proximity to the cataclysm, social and geographical isolation and the regressive state of communication.

Again, there is an unsurprising disparity of the level of these characteristics within post-apocalyptic fiction. The post-apocalyptic blank slate is fully realised with McCarthy’s *The Road*. Here, desolation is extreme and the characters have no choice but to continually discover the new world in the hope of survival. Much of
Cronin’s post-apocalyptic world in *The Passage* displays more evidence of social structure and development, but even where many years have passed since the cataclysm characters remain ignorant about most of the world, and discovery is required for both survival and further development. Within *Carousel*, as for *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the issue of transformation or survival is not so pressing. However, the cataclysm still offers the opportunity to start over in both texts, and, in *Carousel*, discovery driven by ignorance remains a defining narrative force.

The question of whether these genre characteristics have a relationship to the method of writing into the dark is difficult to answer with certainty. Personally, I did experience a synergy between writing into the dark and depicting the specific moments of discovery within *Carousel*. McCarthy’s adoption of the writing into the dark practice in his post-apocalyptic text *The Road* seems to confirm this synergy further. His significant background in writing Westerns, a genre that Cantor suggests shows striking similarities to post-apocalyptic fiction, noteworthy in relation to setting, isolation and discovery, also adds weight to the assertion. Cronin’s admission that there was ‘nothing systematic’ about his specific reimagining of the post-apocalyptic world in *The Passage*, despite his planned approach to narrative, is revealing. And one could look at the catalogue of Coupland’s work and speculate that *Girlfriend in a Coma*, as the last book he wrote from existing notes, was perhaps lacking in moments of discovery as a result.

Creative writing is a notoriously difficult practice to analyse. Many writers are reluctant to fully examine their creative methods, much less discuss them in the public sphere. Drawing upon the material that is available, alongside my own experience in writing *Carousel*, this research confirms that writing into the dark is an effective method to depict moments of discovery in literature. While discovery is in no way exclusive to post-apocalyptic fiction, the characteristics I have identified in the genre can result in a consistent and intensive focus on discovery, perhaps to a greater degree than in other genres.
References


