

Zoom Chat Week 6: Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (Parts 1-4, pp. 1-164)

Alexis: it almost doesn't feel like it's an apocalypse sometimes

Jennings: prolepsis (as literary device, using omniscient flashforwards to tell readers what will happen in future, and what is not yet known by the characters in the present)—first instance on p. 15: “Of all of them who were at the bar that night, the bartender was the one who survived the longest. He died three weeks later...”

Lina: That part gave me chills!

Zoe: This book drew me in way faster than any of the others because of things like that

Taylor: I still thought Jeevan was going to be a main character and I was like what??

Robert: Honestly, it's hard to tell who the main character in the story.

Josie: I love how they all relate to each other. Super similar to Year of the Flood

Lina: In my Fiction writing class the prof just said that when it's more omniscient narrator, the point is less about one character and more about an idea, which I think definitely goes with this book

Whitney: that's a really good point^

Alexis: Reminds me of the Arundhati Roy's “The God of Small Things” novel, emphasis on those small things to define meaning and purpose in life

Whitney: I think she is saying how unimportant they are and how we are so dependent on things that could be snatched from us in a second. I spent a lot of time imagining what I would do if water stopped running and I had no means of communication

John: In Mandel's novel, artists and performers find work illuminating the dark remnants of the world. Is Mandel commenting on the necessity of artists to fill the world with color and imagination? Is art and entertainment something people need to feel alive in the soul? Is it needed to carry on? During the COVID 19 pandemic, thousands of artists, singers, songwriters, and actors have become unemployed. What does it say about our society that these artists are deemed unnecessary during the pandemic, and have thus struggled to find employment? Does our world view art as important as the world in Mandel's?

Brooke: So you have already touched on my questions, but they were: 1. What is the significance of choosing King Lear as the play to focus on? 2. Since Shakespeare is such an important figure in the novel, what parallels exist between what is happening in the novel and what happened during Shakespeare's life?

Reed: How are so many of the survivors musicians and not one is an engineer? Why would we abandon systems to keep electricity/technology after an apocalypse while all the bones of the systems are still potentially operational? 20 years seems like way to long for society as a whole to passively accept the lose of technology.

Kyle: The apocalypse in “Station Eleven” is triggered by an exceptionally vicious flu-like disease that forces people to evacuate the city. Years after the disease onsets people are living in towns throughout the country and travelling in caravans. Seemingly all technology has been abandoned, yet people are still gathering. Would people return to technology and an old way of life after such an apocalypse in real life?

Lina: 1. What do you make of Miranda being okay with her comics never being published? 2. What is the significance of the phrase "survival is insufficient"?

Grant: We have seen the idea of faith/religion being turned to in the face of perils and a pandemic. This idea was used in the Year of the Flood and Station Eleven. Do you see any similarities or differences between how the prophet uses his faith/community and how Adam One used his faith/community? Also, do you see any similarities or differences between the messages that Adam One and the prophet would tell their people?

Tim: Why the switch from past tense to present tense? Especially during chapters of the past are written in present tense. Includes Ch.15,14, and 13. Does this seem to better connect the past and the present? Does it represent the blurring of time during a pandemic?

Maria: 1. "The flu...was our flood," said the prophet on page 60 of Station Eleven. This message sounds eerily similar to The Year of the Flood. What similarities and differences do you see in the role religion plays throughout both novels? You already talked quite a bit about this, but I had prepared the question: 2. Mandel focuses more on the despair of what is lost rather than the hope of what can begin as a result of the apocalypse in contrast to other authors' approaches we have read. Is the author trying to communicate anything to her audience with this emphasis? Does the book make you feel any differently about your life and the world?

Miles: I think the novel makes it clear how important and enduring art is; is it realistic that people will work to preserve our art if/when our society collapses? Looking at dead civilizations, art is often lost or heavily fragmented after their fall. With today's focus on history and preservation—are we more prepared to preserve art during a societal collapse?

Natalie: How does the title Station 11 relate to the events and themes within the novel? What is Arthur's role in the story? It's almost like everyone has some kind of connection to him, but we'll find out later.

Rhi: 1. Why are certain members of the Travelling Symphony referred to by name (i.e., Dieter, Sayid, August) while others are only referred to by their position in the symphony (i.e., the second horn, the conductor) or other title (i.e., the prophet, the bartender, the makeup artist)?

2. Rather than consistently following one narrator, Mandel's novel frequently shifts perspectives, mainly in the sections describing pre-apocalyptic events. Why do you think she chooses to do this?

Taylor: What is the significance of the glass storm paperweight? It keeps popping up throughout the novel and I was just wondering if anyone had any thoughts. I think it's a way of keeping time and a good element of something recurring in a changing world. Also, this book has so many quotable messages in it! I'm bookmarking every few pages.

Whitney: Why do you think that the people focus so much on the past? Why aren't they documenting their own experiences like running into towns like the one the prophet lived in? They seem not to want to discuss it. Is it because the present is so sad or maybe because they want to keep the memory of as many of the things from the past alive? I think both. I also wonder why there is such a huge focus on Arthur. Someone who does not even experience the apocalypse.

Josie: "He couldn't tell if his headaches were caused by straining to see or by his anxiety at never being able to see what was coming". This quote brings up an interesting question. What do you think causes the most mass panic during apocalyptic times? Not knowing much about the pathogen/disease, not knowing what you should do, trying to survive from other people, etc. Each book looks at fear differently and I think it would be interesting to see what everyone else thinks about the fear factor in Station Eleven.

Robert: In this novel, there seems to be an emphasis placed upon music, literature and theatre during the apocalyptic events that take place in the novel. What role do you think that this emphasis plays in the novel? Moreover, what is the significance of the fine arts in real-world apocalyptic circumstances?

Zoe: I find it interesting Mandel opened the novel with the characters at the theater, and expanded on the arts during the apocalypse in the second section. Why has Mandel chosen to discuss the use of the arts in the apocalypse?

Alexis: I was really interested in some of the objects and phrases that come up again, like the tattoo "survival is insufficient", the paper weight, and the Station Eleven comics. Thinking ahead to this Museum of Civilization that the characters are soon to encounter, what is the importance of selecting these objects to repeat in an apocalyptic setting?

Samantha: In both Year of the Flood and Station Eleven, the year the pandemics affect their worlds become kind of like a "year zero". Why do apocalyptic novels seem to restart human history when these devastating pandemics occur? Do you think we, in this universe, will do the same thing, should such an event happen?

Taylor: @Rhiannon I was also wondering that! I noticed though, that they are all named at some point. I know the sixth guitar has a name but I forgot, and I know the clarinet was called

"Sidney" once. Maybe it depends on who's point of view the text is from, and how well that person knows the character? But then, it's not usually from any particular point of view... It certainly makes it hard to keep track

Maria: @Reed, I had been wondering why there were so few scientists trying to rebuild technology too! The world made those developments once, and it could happen again much more easily.

Taylor: @Alexis I was wondering more about the paperweight, but I see that, too. Also, Luli the dog belonging to the prophet... Surely it's a new dog with the same name, but I love the way it prompts the reader to connect the dots!

Rhi: @Taylor Exactly, it is quite confusing haha. That is a good point though, I hadn't considered that!

Sierra: Arthur dies while performing King Lear and we see throughout the novel that the Traveling Symphony performs Shakespeare's works. How do you think the Shakespearean motifs coincide with the comic and novel of Station Eleven? What do you think the motto "Survival is insufficient" means?

John: @Bobby I had a similar question to yours. I think Mandel is saying that art and entertainment are needed to live a full life. This is embodied by the Symphony's motto: Survival is Insufficient. However, like Dr. Jennings says, it does seem reminiscent of higher developed societies as less developed societies emphasize survival over arts.

Alexis: Another question I have is regarding the use of Shakespeare. I know there must be an intentional connection made since his plays were written and first performed when London was experiencing bouts of plague which caused the arts to shut down. But I also remember from that period that the arts and theatre were considered lowly and anti-religious to some cultures. While we've only seen the prophet once so far when he interacts with the TS after they perform, he doesn't seem too keen on inviting them back to perform. Could the prophet represent the tyranny that suppresses art and freedom of expression?

Grant: @ Samantha, I think they restart human history because an apocalyptic event tends to be an ending of the world we know and a beginning of a new era in our history. I think novels do this to keep track of how long it has been since that apocalyptic event had started. I think in our universe we would do the same thing for the same reasons.

Reed: @maria yeah. I would expect people to use resources to rebuild instead of just forfeit all of it.

Lina: @ Maria and Reed, it would be very hard to create tech without resources that we currently get from China, like a lot of supplies for computers. Losing the global economy would be a huge set back

Taylor: I think @Reed brings up a good thought for the fact that all of these people in the symphony survived through the apocalypse and not one of them is an engineer, a doctor.... but I think that's because the survivors kind of did exactly that, survived together. They may have holed up in a band room together and just organized this group, or maybe the members who joined later just took up music because they had nothing else to live for

Natalie: Yeah it's interesting how Arthur is at the center of all these relationships.

Whitney: ^ I was wondering that too like they just seem to want to play their music and move on not really focusing on rebuilding. When they kept mentioning airplanes I was like geez if you're not gonna try to rebuild you'll never see another airplane!

Maria: Same Zoel!

Taylor: This all reminds me of the Renaissance festival (I work there) and the travelers who are still traveling from state to state today performing and trying to make the most of the lack of resources and income in the pandemic

Rhi: It's like escapism

Tim: @Rhi yeah

Alexis: Even when we're not in a pandemic, I think most artists still consider why Shakespeare in particular is still relevant today after so many centuries.

Whitney: that reminds me of those videos on Instagram of people in their apartments singing together and playing music as a way to cope and come together during covid
14:37:08 From Natalie to Everyone : @ Rhi yes! Like everyone wants to forget about their problems for a while.

John: @Reed. That is true. The infrastructure and technology would still be in place after only 20 years after an cataclysmic event. Engineers would be able to continue operating them, although at a less prevalent level. Still, I think Mandel omits this as a thematic choice.

Zoe: It's odd that in a pandemic business goes away, and the arts become more valuable

Reed: @Taylor I wouldn't expect them to manufacture everything at the same capacity as before but eventually it could be done. My question is why haven't people focused on reestablishing electricity, telephone signal and wifi using all of the already existing devices and service providing centers.

Samantha: I think people need to not only survive, but to live and entertain themselves. Therefore, of course people turn to the arts and humanities to cope in dark times.

Alexis: I now desperately miss musicals and concerts. As soon as the world opens up I'm heading to the Schuster!

Reed: sorry taylor lol I meant @Lina

Taylor: @Reed I get it yeah! I remember there was a little blurb about them trying and trying to "find the internet" and they eventually just gave up... Maybe there's not enough people with enough drive to try to reestablish society. It seems incredibly sparsely populated

Taylor: You're fine I was responding anyways lol

Whitney: @alexis same! I always go looking through videos of the last concert I went to back in 2019 when life was normal lol

Brooke: @Samantha, right! I think people need to find a purpose for living, and art is an enduring purpose for so many because it doesn't need infrastructure to be created or performed. It makes it a perfect coping mechanism

Sierra: @Zoe, I agree that the use of music and acting is used to shine on the little bits of hope that are still left in society and as way to bring people together in a time when it's needed most. I also agree with Lina when she says the arts is why of bringing meaning in the world after the pandemic. People who have lost meaning they can find it again. And in the case of everyone in the Symphony it allows them to use their skills to survive, think of why they travel from town to town, to perform in exchange for survival.

Alexis: Do we know why the characters survive over the others? I don't remember reading if they were immune or anything.

Reed: @alexis, they do address that some are immune and its not all from isolation

Taylor: I thought it was strange that those parents and their child were just dead in their beds, like they had been there expecting to die, or because the crisis got to them so fast

Sierra: @Alexis, I don't think it ever says, but I think those who prepared and isolated survived

Samantha: yes

John: Shakespeare was known for his tragedies. Tragedy seems pretty important to apocalyptic fiction.

Samantha: Hehe you could say Arthur died for his art

Kyle: He also wrote comedies

John: Which ties in which the comics of Station Eleven. Also, other dystopian apocalyptic fiction have mentioned Shakespeare. One prominent example is Brave New World by Aldous Huxley.

Natalie: I wonder why the author keeps bringing us back to King Lear. I am not familiar with this particular play other than the King gives up his king status and privileges to his daughters and goes insane?

Josie: I think the whole idea with Shakespeare too is death. Shakespeare is known for talking about death all the time and death is obvious in the spread of disease

Rhi: For the Shakespeare part it reminds me of people going back to their roots, to something familiar that most people have at least heard of instead of newer works. Also ironically the older works might be more relatable to current ways of life than "new" ones pre-apocalypse

Tim: Some cultures would also deliberately destroy the art of other cultures too.

Brooke: @Tim, Art is so integral to culture, so if you want to destroy a culture, you need to go for their art or else they can use that to rebuild.

Tim: @Brooke Yeah, that makes sense.

Sierra: I overall think the art is used to parallel the events of characters, there is a line where Miranda makes a remark about how she named the main character's dog after her dog. I think overall that the use of Shakespeare is used to show and express tragedy, which is the main theme throughout the novel

Sierra: @Josie I agree that the use of Shakespeare is used to show death, you have Arthur dying while performing it, all the people who die from the virus. You also have the Symphony performing it, which could maybe be a way to cope with death and perform plays that everyone can kinda relate to

Lina: Makes me think of Hera in Star Wars Rebels, who has a family memory piece that is both art and a way of remembering

Samantha: @Brooke as proof of that you could go back to the Nazis burning books and banning certain music to degrade Jewish culture

Josie: @Samantha that reminds me of "The Book Thief" That book is one of my favorites and hits that idea of culture in art really hard

Brooke: @Samantha, Exactly what I was thinking!

Samantha: Omg wait Arthur is like King Hamlet

Rhi: @Lina Going all the way back to your questions, I kind of liked how Miranda was okay with her comics never being published. It seems like it was really a passion project for her, and almost therapeutic, like a diary at times because she would incorporate elements from her own life into the comics. Kind of sad that they never got widely published, but at least it seems like she got something out of them

Tim: Maybe since so many have died, its kind of a "small world"

Whitney: @tim to me that makes it more bizarre that they all kind of have Arthur moments

Taylor: He kind of helps with the timeline of the story since he's related to everyone

Whitney: I wondered if anyone picked on luli being the name of the prophets dog and Miranda's I was wondering if they were going to be connected some how as we read

Sierra: @Whitney that's what I was thinking too, I really want to know how they are connected.

Kyle: The way the apocalypse was presented it appeared that technology was quickly and easily abandoned while art was preserved

Samantha: Technology and the arts sort of switch places? iPhones are collected as historical artifacts like how famous pieces of art are kept in museums.

Lina: ^^OO good point

Zoe: Woah that's an interesting point samantha

Kyle: Ironically Apple products are kind of a mixture of art and technology

Rhi: Why has no formal government been restored either?

Robert: I agree with Alexis. It is a unique take on the genre.

Samantha: Also people seem to connect more through theatre and music than social media in the present narrative.

Grant: @Rhiannon, my initial thought was that no are formal government has been established because there aren't any forms of mass communications that's require technology

Josie: I personally think because art is a less realistic genre to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. People as a whole, in my prediction, will focus on government, technology, forming communities again, etc. Basically, the restore of normalcy

Tim: I thought 20 years seemed quick for technology to go away, but it has happened to some extent before. Look at countries like former soviet countries, north korea, Venezuela, cuba, etc. In 20 years or so, technology and innovation ceased dramatically, standards of living dropped, etc. And there wasn't even a pandemic in those situations.

Samantha: Indeed

Robert: Totally agree. We are collecting and preserving more art as well, but this preservation depends on who is preserving it.

Josie: I think that it's interesting to think about how if we resort to art as a form of survival and decide to save it over technology, are we reverting back to a primal form using our art or staying the same by preserving art in order to restore humanity once again?

Lina: "perhaps the archives are incomplete" -Obi Wan

Samantha: That should not have made me laugh as hard as it did

Alexis: retweet

Tim: @Lina funny

John: With Africa and Asia having much larger populations than Europe and North America, you would expect a majority of the survivors to be of nonwestern cultures. With this assumption, Shakespeare may not actually be the high art in the case of a true apocalyptic situation.

Lina: ^^ I really wish I could know what's going on in other countries in the story!

Whitney: very good point!^ I was curious of what Moscow was like because they were highlighted