

Bert the Turtle Won't Save You: American Science Fiction Prose and Criticism of Nuclear Civil Defense During the 1950s by Cory Matieyshen

Artistic and literary engagement with nuclear weapons dates back at least as far as the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with truly speculative works of fiction appearing well before the pivotal events of August 1945. While never as common as mutation stories, science fiction prose with plots engaging with aspects of civil defense policy began to appear soon after the Federal Civil Defense Administration was formed in 1950. As civil defense policy shifted from bomb-proofing homes to evacuation and, finally, elaborate home shelters, civil defense plots in science fiction prose changed as well. I will argue that science fiction novels and stories were the only artistic or literary works to engage critically with nuclear civil defense policy before the end of the 1950s.

I will not discuss the full range of science fiction stories with a civil defense plot in this presentation. I have chosen to not discuss works depicting life centuries after an imagined nuclear war (referred to as the “long tomorrow” in the title of a 1955 novel by Leigh Brackett). Instead, I will focus on works set in a near future that either closely resembled 1950s America or, at the very least, would have appeared plausible to an American of that time. I believe such works to be more directly critical of the contemporary policy environment than their far-future counterparts. I have also accepted a somewhat broad definition of what “science fiction” means. Of the five authors whose work I will mention, only William Tenn and Philip K. Dick are widely recognized as science fiction writers.

During the early 1950s, the public education efforts of America's civil defense authorities treated nuclear weapons as scaled-up versions of conventional weapons. Bert the Turtle, star of a film, comic book and radio show, taught children to “duck and cover” wherever they happened to be if a nuclear attack occurred. Children are warned that not taking action could lead to them being knocked down, hit by debris from demolished buildings or receiving a burn worse than a sunburn, all effects of blast and

heat rather than radiation.¹ In the film version of the more adult-oriented *Survival Under Atomic Attack*, radiation is mentioned briefly then quickly dismissed as only dangerous at the moment of explosion. A Japanese family that supposedly returned to a normal life after the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are shown to assure viewers that most individuals exposed to radiation would not only recover if they got sick but go on to lead normal lives and bear healthy children. With radioactivity rendered non-threatening, simple forms of shelter, basic emergency equipment like a few extra cans of food and a first aid kit along with straightforward preparations such as turning appliances off and closing doors and drapes before proceeding to shelters as simple as a workbench are promoted as effective survival measures.² This approach has been summed up as “bomb-proofing homes,” a policy that existed alongside calls to disperse factories and government offices to areas away from vulnerable city centers.³

The characters in William Tenn’s short story “Generation of Noah,” published in 1951, take far more elaborate precautions than those recommended in the early civil defense films and publications. Seven years before the start of the story, the Plunketts sold everything to purchase a farm well outside of the city in an effort to avoid the nuclear war that male head of household Elliott Plunkett believed was inevitable. In the belief that any activity or possession not geared toward survival should be rejected, the profits from the family's chicken operation are spent on improvements for their underground shelter rather than on any above-ground luxury. As members of the Survivors Club, the Plunketts were one of a number of American households who reorganized their lives by voluntarily dispersing.

In addition to providing for the physical security of his household, Plunkett established a series of

¹ United States, Federal Civil Defense Agency, *Duck and Cover* (1951), Internet Archive, MPEG-4, <http://archive.org/download/DuckandC1951/DuckandC1951.mp4> (accessed December 15, 2012).

² United States, Federal Civil Defense Agency, *Survival Under Atomic Attack* (1951), Internet Archive, MPEG-4, http://archive.org/download/Survival1951/Survival1951_edit.mp4 (accessed December 15, 2012).

³ Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties*, *Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 53, 109; Allan M. Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 117.

rules, drills and educational programs. No member of the Plunkett household is allowed to go beyond markers around the farm showing the points from which any of them should be able to reach the family's shelter within three minutes. When Elliott Plunkett's six-year-old son Saul fails to reach the shelter in time during a drill, he is told that he would be locked out of the shelter if he were at all late during an actual attack. To reinforce that lesson, Saul is forced to recite in graphic detail what would happen to his body if he were left out in the open, then he is beaten. Although somewhat bitter about being reduced to such measures, Plunkett believes his child-rearing techniques and altered lifestyle is fully backed by cutting-edge science. When nuclear weapons actually fall and Saul presents himself for the beating he believes he deserves for being twenty seconds late, Elliott denounces violence and makes his family swear they will not resort to violence no matter what the provocation.⁴

The main element of criticism in Tenn's work is the way taking civil defense seriously would distort individual lives. Although eventually vindicated, the years the Plunketts spent ensuring they would always be within three minutes of their bomb shelter limited their contact with the outside world to those they could telephone (typically to exchange survival ideas with other members of the Survivors Club) and the man who bought their eggs. With the exception of the two foster children the Plunketts agreed to take in, one wonders what opportunities to date and marry would be available to their children. Years of drills and beatings distorted Saul's childhood, something the Plunketts realize only after the attack.

More broadly, Tenn's scenario contradicts some key aspects of early nuclear civil defense policy. Civil defense authorities wanted preparedness to become a "way of life" without destroying America in the process. By removing himself from the industrial workforce and his entire household from the consumer marketplace, Elliott Plunkett's fictional reaction to the threat of nuclear warfare fails to reach the careful balance the civil defense authorities desired. In addition, the division of labor in the first

⁴ William Tenn, "Generation of Noah," in *There Won't Be War*, ed. Harry Harrison and Bruce McAllister (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1991), 272–286.

civil defense publications assumed that married women spent the bulk of their time in their homes. With so much (presumed) free time on their hands, civil defense activities were merely an extension of the “women’s work” they were already doing. More importantly, only women were called upon to make themselves available around the clock for civil defense activities. The division of labor between mothers and fathers was later clarified: the male head of household was expected to direct occasional drills and exercises.⁵

Despite the efforts of both the civil defense authorities and the Atomic Energy Commission to downplay the risks, radioactive fallout became a serious concern among Americans beginning in 1954. The series of nuclear tests the United States performed in the Marshall Islands that year caused radioactive ash to spread over several thousand miles of the Pacific Ocean. Despite being 72 miles from the nearest detonation, all 23 crew members aboard the fishing vessel *Lucky Dragon* suffered from radiation poisoning. One crew member later died.⁶

In the summer of 1954, Langston Hughes became one of the first authors to create a fictional scenario based on what had been publicly released about radiation to that point. In “Radioactive Red Caps,” first published under the title “Charged With Atoms, Simple Takes Charge,” Jesse B. Simple (Simple) offers his theories about what nuclear weapons would mean for African Americans in places like Mississippi. Segregationists would create a voting or loyalty test that would ensure that blacks would be “Jim Crowed” out of bomb shelters. By the time the Supreme Court heard the civil rights case, the war would already be over and African Americans like Simple would be “atomized.” Given that whites in the American South would still need black waiters, nannies and porters after a nuclear war, “atom-charged” blacks would spread radioactivity throughout white communities well after whites emerged from their shelters. After some reflection, Simple believes African Americans could survive a

⁵ McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home*, 34–35, 47, 53–55, 84, 109, 120.

⁶ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 352–53; Lisa Jean Daly, “Defending a Way of Life: Civil Defense in the United States, 1940-1963” (Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1995), 151.

nuclear attack even without shelters. In his view, “[i]f Negroes can survive white folks in Mississippi ... we can survive anything.”⁷

Hughes’ story is only a few pages long but nonetheless addresses several objections he and the NAACP had to civil defense policy. First, he draws attention to what was later called the “shelter dilemma”, what to do when more people required shelter than there was space for. Secondly, Hughes’ satire offers a parallel protest to those spearheaded by the NAACP against the FCDA’s racist policies. The protection measures suggested in civil defense publications did not apply to those who did not own their own homes and, in particular, to those who did not have basements. Urban African Americans were particularly disadvantaged in both respects. Although he had been replaced by the time Hughes published his story, the appointment of Millard Caldwell, a segregationist and former governor of Florida, as Truman’s head of civil defense led to fears among African Americans that public shelters and other post-disaster assistance would be “Jim Crowed” as Simple puts it.⁸

In “Foster, You’re Dead”, published in 1955, Philip K. Dick draws attention to another aspect of disparity in civil defense planning: those who own their homes but cannot *afford* to build a shelter. The title is from a gym class where the main character, Mike Foster, moves too slowly to reach a shelter in time. Somewhat similar to Saul Elliott in Tenn’s earlier story, Mike is told that he’d be dead if he moved that slowly during a real attack. His other activities at school, including art classes devoted to making survival gear, are also focused on civil defense training. In fact, America as a whole is fully devoted to civil defense. Foster embraces the civil defense message and begs his father to purchase a shelter. At that point, shelters were accessorized much like 1950s cars with their own equivalents of fins and chrome, putting them out of reach of Foster’s parents. Foster’s father makes a short-lived deal to buy a showroom model but the shelter is repossessed when he misses a payment. Mike Foster, who had taken

⁷ Langston Hughes, “Radioactive Red Caps,” in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. Donna A. S. Harper, vol. 8 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 50–51.

⁸ Charles A. Carpenter, *Dramatists and the Bomb: American and British Playwrights Confront the Nuclear Age, 1945-1964*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies 91 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 136; McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home*, 123, 141, 150.

to spending as much time as possible in the family shelter because it made him feel safe, goes missing, only to be discovered sleeping in one of the store's shelters.⁹

Dick actually commented directly on his motivation for writing this particular story some years later. He originally wrote his work in late 1953 in response to a statement by President Eisenhower expressing the hope that Americans would eventually treat a bomb shelter as a family purchase, much like a car. That idea incensed Dick, who believed that bomb shelters were a public good, not a private one. To that end, he deliberately invokes the idea of over-accessorized, overpriced shelters as a recipe for inequality, just like higher-end cars.¹⁰

Tenn, Hughes and Dick focus on the social costs of civil defense rather than questioning the ability of civil defense measures to actually save lives. Even this somewhat indirect attack on civil defense was unusual before the middle of the decade. Far from being critical of the civil defense message, American media organizations played a major role in disseminating the FCDA's message during the early 1950s. Civil defense films were produced in Hollywood studios then distributed across America at no cost to the government. News agencies self-censored their coverage of nuclear issues and, in general, limited or eliminated negative coverage of civil defense policy. It was only around the time Dick's story appeared that mass media started to become less supportive of civil defense. While artistic and literary works engaged with nuclear issues more broadly, science fiction was the only medium to focus directly on civil defense to that point.¹¹

Reader fatigue led to a precipitous reduction in the publication of nuclear-themed stories by 1954. By 1955, novels rather than short stories became the dominant medium for fictional works dealing with

⁹ Philip K. Dick, "Foster, You're Dead," in *Second Variety and Other Classic Stories by Philip K. Dick* (New York: Citadel Press, 2002), 221–37.

¹⁰ *Second Variety and Other Classic Stories by Philip K. Dick* (New York: Citadel Press, 2002), 413–14.

¹¹ McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home*, 35–36; Daly, "Defending a Way of Life," 87–88; Robert A. Jacobs, *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 119.

nuclear war.¹² Novelists supportive of the FCDA took advantage of the opportunity presented by the relative lack of competition and changing market to produce works of science fiction that painted nuclear civil defense in a favorable light. *The Long Night*, published in 1956 by civil defense consultant Martin Caidin, is blatantly pro-civil defense. Volunteer FCDA ground observers and the controller they report to, not the military, spot Soviet aircraft flying too low for radar to detect, allowing civil defense authorities in the fictional city of Harrington to be ready for the attack twenty minutes before the planes arrived. The immediate aftermath of the attack is essentially a novelization of *Survival Under Atomic Attack*. Anyone who found even the simplest shelter, particularly furniture, survives without serious injury so long as they remember to turn off their appliances. By drawing in civil defense personnel from surrounding areas according to a well-established FCDA plan, the fires in Harrington are contained and survivors are moved into camps or medical treatment facilities as appropriate. Radiation is never a factor.¹³

Despite being written by a true believer, there is a somewhat subtle but telling criticism of nuclear civil defense policy in *The Long Night*. By assuming, first, that the Soviet Union would only have a few thermonuclear weapons available to them and, second, that only larger cities would be attacked with larger weapons, Caidin is able to assume that all but the largest American communities would still be hit by the less powerful but more numerous nuclear weapons.¹⁴ That assumption allows Caidin to draw upon a publication that was already out of date because the fictional citizens of Harrington were hit by the types of weapons that were available at the beginning of the decade. Much like the way *Survival Under Attack* dismisses the threat of radiation, Caidin briefly but definitively writes off the larger cities. He is, in effect, saying that civil defense is useless for the vast majority of Americans, immediately reducing the propaganda value of his novel.

¹² Paul Brians, *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1987), 16–19.

¹³ Martin Caidin, *The Long Night* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1956), 2, 15–17, 35, 43, 96–101, 157, 195–97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, 52–53, 158.

There are two additional and far less subtle criticisms of Caidin's employer in *The Long Night*. The first addresses the FCDA's efforts to educate Americans about radiation. In the novel, a large column of debris is raised miles into the atmosphere then falls as a dirty rain on those who were outdoors. In that case, refugees who remembered talk of fallout after nuclear testing in the Pacific are assured by FCDA radiation monitoring personnel that there is no radiation. Refugees in another area with no nearby radiation monitoring personnel are not so fortunate when a mother declares her vomiting child to be suffering from radiation sickness based on a half-remembered pamphlet about radiation she had read not long before. Dozens of refugees abandoned the safety of the welfare camps for the dangerous countryside in the ensuing panic.¹⁵ Caidin proposes that the only Americans who should learn about radiation in any detail are the radiation monitoring personnel. All others should defer to the experts.

The most devastating direct attack against the FCDA dominates the last pages of the novel. At the time Caidin's novel was published, the FCDA had abandoned both its dispersal and bomb-proofed homes policies. As expressed by FCDA director Val Peterson, "the alternatives are to dig, die, or get out; and certainly we don't want to die." Convincing Congress to pay for Americans to dig (shelters) was still challenging so beginning in 1955, getting out (evacuation) became the main focus of FCDA's educational efforts.¹⁶ In Caidin's novel, despite hardship and shortage, the FCDA welfare and reconstruction plans prove to be more than adequate to maintain order and provide a homes, food and work for Harrington's survivors within the city itself. Caidin declares that so long as the surviving residents of a city remain within its boundaries and are committed to living there and rebuilding, a city hit by atomic weapons would still remain a city with the help of civil defense authorities. Any evacuation to the countryside would only leave dead cities behind.¹⁷

As it turned out, evacuation was abandoned as official policy the same year that Caidin published

¹⁵ Ibid., 129, 185.

¹⁶ Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud*, 117.

¹⁷ Caidin, *The Long Night*, 232–34, 240–42.

his book. By 1958, promoting the construction of private family shelters became the sole focus of civil defense policy. The basic message of the civil defense authorities was that Soviet aggression could be countered through private initiative and family fortitude.¹⁸

In 1957, musical protest and early civil disobedience against the annual Operation Alert civil defense drills began to appear. The calypso track “Atomic Nightmare,” released by the Talbot Brothers, declares an intention to “run, run, run like a son of a gun” rather than “standing like a soldier,” roughly what Americans were called upon to do during the drill. That was also the year that peace activist Dorothy Day began to be consistently successful in her efforts to get arrested for refusing to follow the orders of the civil defense authorities.¹⁹

Major street protests and efforts on the part of the science information movement to counter the message of the civil defense authorities, in part through science fiction of their own, appeared in 1959.²⁰ Helen Clarkson's novel *The Last Day* was published that same year. In Clarkson's novel, the United States is attacked by thermonuclear weapons while the main character, Lois Cobbett, and her family are vacationing on an island six miles offshore. All of the radio stations on the mainland are destroyed, forcing the islanders to rely on the knowledge of a resident familiar with civil defense instructions “from the late fifties.” Following his advice, all residents of the island protect their homes with sandbags given that none of them have basements. To conserve resources, all food and water are pooled and accommodations shared wherever possible. The island's only doctor proves adept at being a comforting presence but, as he acknowledges, is only able to treat some of the symptoms and prevent infection rather than curing radiation sickness itself. When their shelters prove woefully inadequate, all of the islanders die within a few days. Lois Cobbett is the last survivor.²¹

¹⁸ McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home*, 57–59, 67.

¹⁹ David Janssen and Edward Whitelock, *Apocalypse Jukebox: The End of the World in American Popular Music* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2009), 46–47; Dee Garrison, *Bracing for Armageddon: Why Civil Defense Never Worked* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), 73–74, 92.

²⁰ Garrison, *Bracing for Armageddon*, 88–89, 92–96.

²¹ Helen Clarkson, *The Last Day: A Novel of the Day After Tomorrow* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1959), 7–8, 66–67,

The “conversation” (essentially an eight-page essay in quotation marks) among the six islanders still alive on the fifth day strongly condemns America’s civil defense authorities. By the end of the 1950s, nuclear weapons had been a reality for fourteen years but “Civil Defense was still in the planning stage.” The gap between weapons technology and defences against them was particularly evident in civil defense publications that claimed that shelters that would have been ineffective against “the baby bombs of World War II” would adequately defend against nuclear weapons. In line with military policy to make anything associated with nuclear weapons a secret, the FCDA and its successors denied vital information to Americans such as the effects of nuclear weapons on cities and on human bodies. By doing their part to reassure and misinform, the civil defense authorities were complicit in leaving Americans “more bored than frightened” and therefore willing to accept a belligerent foreign policy and weapons stockpiling.²²

Protests against civil defense began to appear in a variety of literary and artistic forms in 1961. Jules Feiffer’s play *Crawling Arnold* trivializes the shelter craze. Two works directly address the fallout shelter dilemma, an issue that was being discussed nationally by that time. “The Shelter,” an episode of *The Twilight Zone* television show, includes some ugly exchanges between neighbors who have shelter and those who do not. Billy Chambers recorded “Fallout Shelter,” a song about a father who refuses to allow his son’s girlfriend into their shelter as the civil defense authorities advise. The son then chooses to leave the shelter to die with his girlfriend rather than remain with his parents and live.²³

To paraphrase David Seed, social criticism in science fiction presents a dreaded outcome in an effort to convince readers to ponder on the present signs of disaster.²⁴ When official civil defense policy focused on bomb-proofing, dispersal and basic shelters, science fiction writers responded with works drawing attention to the dangers of social isolation and disparity inherent in those policies. When

74–75, 109, 183.

²² Ibid., 160–67.

²³ Carpenter, *Dramatists and the Bomb*, 87–88, 131–33; Janssen and Whitelock, *Apocalypse Jukebox*, 45–46.

²⁴ David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 9.

evacuation became the core policy, Caidin proposes that the social destruction of cities would result. The final major civil defense policy, more elaborate private shelters, was met with artistic and literary protests in a wider variety of forms. Later works of science fiction prose critical of civil defense policy such as Clarkson's novel were far more pointed in their criticism than earlier works, clearly stating that civil defense measures would fail if there were actually an attack. The significance of the works of fiction from earlier in decade lies less in the shift away from conceding that nuclear war was survivable than in the fact that science fiction prose was the only form of artistic or literary protest to engage with civil defense policy at all.