

***Station Eleven* by Emily St John Mandel**

Introduction

“Twenty years after the end of air travel, the caravans of the Travelling Symphony moved slowly under a white-hot sky.”

When you think about post-apocalyptic science fiction stories, what kind of thing comes to mind first? Maybe an alien invasion, *Pacific Rim* style monsters perhaps, and almost always the mad scramble of a protagonist to stockpile resources and protect their loved ones from the imminent chaos and destruction—these are tropes which are tried and tested in this genre.

What mightn't come to mind as immediately is a story about a travelling Shakespeare troupe wandering the North American continent decades after the actual apocalypse has struck, which is exactly the story that Mandel tells in *Station Eleven*.

While post-apocalyptic tales tend to focus on the action around the impact of a fictional disaster, Mandel's novel speaks to the attitudes and characteristics of people which drive any action that occurs. She interrogates central questions about human society, inviting readers to consider what human qualities can endure even an apocalypse, what qualities are timeless.

Characters (a tale of two timelines; part one)

“...once we're seen, that's not enough anymore. After that, we want to be remembered.”

Part of the novel's ambition is that while it's set 20 years after the apocalyptic Georgia Flu, it constantly reaches decades into the past to search for meaning. In particular, the novel's central character is **Arthur Leander**, an actor whose death coincides with the breakout of the Flu. Tracing his origins from obscurity to fame, Mandel juxtaposes his philandering and untrustworthy behaviour with repeated attempts to be a better person, or perhaps just be more true to himself, before his death. We'll eventually see that many of his actions have consequences years into the future.

Arguably equally important in legacy is his first wife, **Miranda Carroll**, whose comics lend the novel its title. Take this with a grain of salt—she's kind of my favourite character—but the time and energy she invests in the *Station Eleven* comics are arguably the most valuable investment of the novel. Her comics survive her in the years following the Flu, and are a source of escape and purpose for others just as they had been for herself.

Both of these characters come into contact with **Jeevan Chaudhary**, a paparazzo and journalist who regularly follows Arthur through his career, photographing Miranda in a vulnerable moment before her divorce, and booking an interview with Arthur years later as he plans to leave his second wife **Elizabeth Colton**. We see Jeevan struggle with his purpose in life throughout the novel, though it can be said that he ultimately finds it after the Flu, when he is working as a medic.

Finally, there's **Clark Thompson**, Arthur's friend from college who remains loyal, though not necessarily uncritical, of him all throughout his life. As the Flu first arrives in America, Clark is just leaving for Toronto, but a Flu outbreak there causes his flight to be redirected to Severn City Airport, where he and others miraculously survive in what will become a key setting of the novel.

Themes (part one)

“That’s what passes for a life...that’s what passes for happiness, for most people...they’re like sleepwalkers...”

These characters already speak to some of the major themes that formulate the novel. On one hand, Mandel explores various meanings of **contemporary or modern civilisation**. We live in a technology-driven age where constraints of time and space mean less than ever before. For example, people are mobile through space thanks to airplanes and telephones, and the internet means that any and all information is available to anyone, all the time. Mandel constantly looks back at this society and describes it in terms of our technology: for example, “the era when it was possible to press a series of buttons on a telephone and speak with someone on the far side of the earth.” On one level, she comments on how many of these minor miracles are taken for granted in our every day lives.

On another level, these elements of society also give rise to the culture of **celebrity** in our lives, as high-profile figures are put under increasing pressure to maintain appearances at all times, and lead increasingly ‘perfect’ lives as a result. These were pressures that Arthur struggled to live up to, and his “failed marriages” accompanied his career at all stages. The flip side of this is that people who follow celebrities, such as Jeevan, lead increasingly emptier and more vacuous lives—and Jeevan is well-aware of this, telling Miranda that he doesn’t seek a greater purpose in life beyond making money. This lack of purpose, this ennui, is something that tints much of society through the eyes of Mandel.

Another major theme which the lives of these characters start to explore is the **value of art** as a source of purpose. While civilisation is portrayed as fragile and meaningless, art—in all its forms, including creating, reproducing, performing and consuming—is a way for people such as Miranda to understand, process and escape their lives. This theme is arguably the most important, as it tethers different parts of the novel together; even after the apocalypse, people turn to art as a way of understanding and connecting to others as well as to themselves.

Characters (a tale of two timelines; part two)

“I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth.”

All of this finally puts us in a position to think analytically about characters in the ‘present’ timeline, that is, 20 years after the Flu. We experience the present mostly through the perspective of **Kirsten Raymonde**, a performer who survived the Flu as a young child. Because she was so young when it happened, many of the traumas she experienced have been erased by her mind, and she struggles to piece together what she lost in a quest for identity and meaning, largely driven by her vague

memories of Arthur. She travels with the Travelling Symphony with others such as **Alexandra, August** and **the conductor**—they have collectively adopted the motto, “survival is insufficient.”

Through the story, they are pursued by **the prophet**, later revealed to be **Tyler Leander**, the child of Arthur and Elizabeth who survived and grew up in the decades following the Flu outbreak. A religious extremist, he becomes the leader of a cult of fanatics who amass weapons and conquer towns by force. Both Kirsten and Tyler pursue the *Station Eleven* comics, quoted above—they each possess a copy, and resonate strongly with the struggles of the characters created by Miranda.

(CW: suicide) Also important is Jeevan’s brother, **Frank**, a paraplegic author who was writing about a philanthropist in the last days before his death, whereby he kills himself so as to give his brother a better chance of surviving. While he isn’t a particularly major character, his writing on morality and mortality (quoted with the first batch of characters) are symbolically and thematically important.

Themes (part two)

“The more you remember, the more you’ve lost.”

Inevitably with this genre, **survival** and **mortality** are major themes, as massive populations of people have died and continue to die due to the impacts of the Georgia Flu. To some extent, survivor’s guilt motivates many to search for a deeper meaning to their survival, hence the motto of the Symphony. It also drives them to turn to art as we’ve explored, since bare subsistence isn’t enough to give their lives the meaning they desire. Maybe this is what it means to be human.

On the other hand, the Flu also turns others to **religious extremity**, as is the case with Elizabeth, Tyler and the rest of their cult. This speaks to broader ideas about **faith, fate** and **spirituality**—are there greater forces out there who manipulate events in our world? Certainly, there are enough coincidences in the novel for this theory to be valid; even just Kirsten and Tyler both having copies of *Station Eleven* and both acting under the influence of Arthur is so coincidental.

However, perhaps the most important theme here is **memory**. Mandel ultimately puts this as the central question to readers: is memory more of a blessing or a burden? Is it preferable to remember everything you’ve lost, or be ignorant of it all? I’m not sure she really answers this one, to be honest. Various symbols—and even the constantly shifting narrative perspective—evoke the epic sense of loss in the apocalypse, and yet encountering characters like Alexandra, who never really knew what the internet was, makes you rethink that loss; perhaps it is better to have experienced the internet at all.

Symbols

“People want what was best about the world”

There’s a category of symbols in the novel that represent memories of technology. Consider the **discarded phones** and **credit cards** in the Museum of Civilisations,

all mementos of what the world lost. Note that, given Mandel's ambivalent commentary about modern society, not all that was lost is bad—the credit card embodies the materialism and consumerism that drive our world today, and shedding it may be construed as a form of liberty, in fact.

It is **airplanes**, however, that serve as the greatest reminder. Their sudden disappearance from the sky becomes a constant reminder of how the world changed, and people still look up in the hopes of seeing an airborne plane; they cling onto the hope that maybe, just maybe, all of this can somehow be reversed. The last flights of the human race—pilots attempting to return home to be with their loved ones—are also made in hope, though their outcomes are consistently unclear.

In this sense, airplanes can also be seen as a source of fading hope, or rather, despair. For one, it was the very mobility afforded by planes which caused the Flu to spread around the world so rapidly. Now, confined to the ground forever, they represent the immobility of humans in the present. They also take on meanings of death, and in particular, the final airplane that landed at Severn City Airport, quarantined with people still on board, represents the difficult decisions that have to be made in order to survive. The mausoleum plane also pushes Tyler further into religious extremism, as he reads the bible to the now-artefact in an attempt to justify the deaths of everyone on board.

These symbols highlight the jarring difference between the world before and after the Flu, but on the other hand, there are also symbols which connect the two worlds; the importance of **print** cannot be underemphasised here. Anything that was printed—photographs, comics, TV guides, books—are all enduring sources of knowledge and comfort for Flu survivors, and basically become the only way for children born after the Flu to remember our world, a world that they never actually lived in.

To conclude

“We have been lost for so long...we long only for the world we were born into.”

What is it about humanity that Mandel actually explores in this novel? It's a bit of a tricky question, because at all stages of the novel, human society is inevitably divided—into those who survive, those who live on in memory, and then those who are born after, with no recollection of the past.

The answer depends on your interpretation. Is this a story about the tragic nature of loss? Is it about homesickness, and perhaps nostalgia, both as a blessing and a curse? Or is it about art, survival, and the meaning of life? In some ways, it's about all of these things.

As you can probably tell, I really enjoyed digesting this book, and I hope you do as well!