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THE ANTHROPOCENE REVIEWED

Essays on a Human-Centered Planet

by John Green



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THE ANTHROPOCENE REVIEWED

This page is known to publishers and bookbinders as the "half-title page," because it lists the title but not the author name or subtitle. The half title once served a real function in the printing and bookbinding process, but these days it is mostly ornamental. I've always felt like half-title pages are a bit gratuitous. By the time I've arrived here as a reader, I already know the title of the book, and if I need to be reminded, it's perpetually available to me on the book's front cover. But, then again, in an age of screen reading, I suppose every facet of bookmaking is anachronistic, and I do deeply love the feel of paper, and the sight of print, so I'll give half-title pages two and a half stars.

“YOU’LL NEVER WALK ALONE”

IT IS MAY OF 2020, and I do not have a brain well suited to this.

I find more and more that I refer to it as “it” and “this” without naming or needing to name, because we are sharing the rare human experience so ubiquitous that the pronouns require no antecedent. Horror and suffering abound in every direction, and I want writing to be a break from it. Still, it makes its way in—like light through window blinds, like floodwater through shut doors.

I suppose you are reading this in my future. Maybe you are reading in a future so distant from my present that “this” is over. I know it will never fully end—the next normal will be different from the last one. But there will be a next normal, and I hope you are living in it, and I hope I am living in it with you.

In the meantime, I have to live in this, and find comfort where I can. For me, lately, comfort has meant a show tune.

In 1909, the Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnár debuted his new play, *Liliom*, in Budapest. In the play, Liliom, a troubled and periodically violent young carousel barker, falls in love with a woman named Julie. When Julie becomes pregnant, Liliom attempts a robbery to support his

burgeoning family, but the robbery is a disaster, and Liliom dies. He ends up in purgatory for sixteen years, after which he is allowed a single day to visit his now-teenaged daughter, Louise.

Liliom flopped in Budapest, but Molnár was not a playwright who suffered from a shortage of self-belief. He continued mounting productions around Europe and then eventually in the U.S., where a 1921 translation of the play attracted good reviews and moderate box office success.

The composer Giacomo Puccini tried to adapt *Liliom* into an opera, but Molnár refused to sell him the rights, because he wanted “*Liliom* to be remembered as a play by Molnár, not as an opera by Puccini.” Instead, Molnár sold the rights to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, the musical theater duo who were fresh off the success of *Oklahoma!* In doing so, Molnár ensured that *Liliom* would be remembered almost entirely as a musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein, retitled *Carousel*, which premiered in 1945.

In the musical, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s song “You’ll Never Walk Alone” is sung twice—first to encourage the newly widowed Julie after her husband’s death, and then by Louise’s classmates years later, at a graduation ceremony. Louise doesn’t want to join in the song—she’s too upset—but even though her father is now invisible to her, Louise can feel his presence and encouragement, and so eventually she starts to sing.

The lyrics of “You’ll Never Walk Alone” contain only the most obvious imagery: The song tells us to “walk on through the wind and through the rain,” which is not a particularly clever evocation of a storm. We are also told to “walk on with hope in your heart,” which feels aggressively trite. And it reports that “at the end of the storm, there’s a golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark.” But in reality, at the end of the storm, there are tree branches strewn everywhere, and downed power lines, and flooded rivers.

And yet, the song works for me. Maybe it’s the repetition of the words “walk on.” I think two of the fundamental facts of being a person are 1. We must go on, and 2. None of us ever walks alone. We may *feel* alone (in fact, we *will* feel alone), but even in the crushing grind of isolation, we aren’t alone. Like Louise at her graduation, those who are distant or even gone are still with us, still encouraging us to walk on.

The song has been covered by everyone from Frank Sinatra to Johnny Cash to Aretha Franklin. But the most famous cover came in 1963 from Gerry and the Pacemakers, a band that, like the Beatles, was from Liverpool, managed by Brian Epstein, and recorded by George Martin. In keeping with their band name, the Pacemakers changed the meter of the song, increasing the tempo, giving the dirge a bit of pep, and their version became a #1 hit in the UK.

Fans of Liverpool Football Club almost immediately began to sing the song together during games. That summer, Liverpool’s legendary manager Bill Shankly told the Pacemakers’ lead singer, Gerry Marsden, “Gerry, my son, I have given you a football team, and you have given us a song.”

Today, “You’ll Never Walk Alone” is etched in wrought iron above the gates of Anfield, Liverpool’s stadium. Liverpool’s famous Danish defender Daniel Agger has YNWA tattooed on the knuckles of his right hand. I’ve been a Liverpool fan for decades,¹ and for me the song is so linked to the club that when I hear the opening notes, I think of all the times I’ve sung it with other fans—sometimes in exaltation, often in lamentation.

When Bill Shankly died in 1981, Gerry Marsden sang “You’ll Never Walk Alone” at the memorial service—as it has been sung at many funerals for many Liverpool supporters. The miracle of “You’ll Never Walk Alone” for me is how well it works as a funeral song, and as a high school

1. Why? When I was twelve, I was on my middle school soccer team. I was awful, of course, and rarely played. We had one good player on our team, a guy named James. James was from England, and he told us that in England, there were professional soccer teams, and thousands of fans would stand together, shoulder to shoulder, and sing all through the games. He told us that the best team in England was Liverpool. And I believed him.

graduation song, and as a we-just-beat-Barcelona-in-the-Champions-League song. As former Liverpool player and manager Kenny Dalglish said, "It covers adversity and sadness and it covers the success." It's a song about sticking together even when your dreams are tossed and blown. It's a song about both the storm and the golden sky.

At first blush, it may seem odd that the world's most popular football song comes from musical theater. But football *is* theater, and fans make it musical theater. The anthem of West Ham United is called "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," and at the start of each game, you'll see thousands of grown adults blowing bubbles from the stands as they sing, "I'm forever blowing bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air / They fly so high, nearly reach the sky / Then like my dreams, they fade and die." Manchester United fans refashioned Julia Ward Howe's U.S. Civil War anthem "Battle Hymn of the Republic" into the song "Glory, Glory Man United." Manchester City fans sing "Blue Moon," a 1934 Rodgers and Hart number.

All these songs are made great by the communities singing them. They are assertions of unity in sorrow and unity in triumph: Whether the bubble is flying or bursting, we sing together.

"You'll Never Walk Alone" is cheesy, but it's not wrong. The song doesn't claim the world is a just or happy place. It just asks us to walk on with hope in our hearts. And like Louise at the end of *Carousel*, even if you don't really believe in the golden sky or the sweet silver song of the lark when you start singing, you believe it a little more when you finish.

In March 2020, a video made the rounds online in which a group of British paramedics sang "You'll Never Walk Alone" through a glass wall to coworkers on the other side, who were in an intensive care unit. The paramedics were trying to encourage their colleagues. What a word that is, *en-courage*. Though our dreams be tossed and blown, still we sing ourselves and one another into courage.

I give "You'll Never Walk Alone" four and a half stars.

HUMANITY'S TEMPORAL RANGE

WHEN I WAS NINE OR TEN, I saw a planetarium show at the Orlando Science Center in which the host, with no apparent emotion in his voice, explained that in about a billion years, the sun will be 10 percent more luminescent than it is now, likely resulting in the runaway evaporation of Earth's oceans. In about four billion years, Earth's surface will become so hot that it will melt. In seven or eight billion years, the sun will be a red giant star, and it will expand until eventually our planet will be sucked into it, and any remaining Earthly evidence of what we thought or said or did will be absorbed into a burning sphere of plasma.

Thanks for visiting the Orlando Science Center. The exit is to your left.

It has taken me most of the last thirty-five years to recover from that presentation. I would later learn that many of the stars we see in the night sky are red giants, including Arcturus. Red giants are common. It is common for stars to grow larger and engulf their once-habitable solar systems. It's no wonder we worry about the end of the world. Worlds end all the time.

A 2012 survey conducted across twenty countries found wide variance in the percentage of people who believe humanity will end within their lifetimes. In France, 6 percent of those polled did; in the United States, 22 percent. This makes a kind of sense: France has been home to apocalyptic preachers—the bishop Martin of Tours, for instance, wrote “There is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born.” But that was back in the fourth century. American apocalypticism has a much more recent history, from Shaker predictions the world would end in 1794 to famed radio evangelist Harold Camping’s calculations that the apocalypse was coming in 1994—and then, when that didn’t happen, in 1995. Camping went on to announce that the end times would commence on May 21, 2011, after which would come “five months of fire, brimstone and plagues on Earth, with millions of people dying each day, culminating on October 21st, 2011 with the final destruction of the world.” When none of this came to pass, Camping said, “We humbly acknowledge we were wrong about the timing,” although for the record no individual ever humbly acknowledged anything while referring to themselves as “we.” I’m reminded of something my religion professor Donald Rogan told me once: “Never predict the end of the world. You’re almost certain to be wrong, and if you’re right, no one will be around to congratulate you.”

Camping’s personal apocalypse arrived in 2013, when he died at the age of ninety-two. Part of our fears about *the* world ending must stem from the strange reality that for each of us *our* world will end, and soon. In that sense, maybe apocalyptic anxieties are a by-product of humanity’s astonishing capacity for narcissism. How could the world possibly survive the death of its single most important inhabitant—me? But I think something else is at work. We know we will end in part because we know other species have ended.

“Modern humans,” as we are called by paleontologists, have been around for about 250,000 years. This is our so-called “temporal range,”

the length of time we’ve been a species. Contemporary elephants are at least ten times older than us—their temporal range extends back to the Pliocene Epoch, which ended more than 2.5 million years ago. Alpacas have been around for something like 10 million years—forty times longer than us. The tuatara, a species of reptile that lives in New Zealand, first emerged around 240 million years ago. They’ve been here a thousand times longer than we have, since before Earth’s supercontinent of Pangaea began to break apart.

We are younger than polar bears and coyotes and blue whales and camels. We are also far younger than many animals we drove to extinction, from the dodo to the giant sloth.

In the spring of 2020, a few weeks after the emergence of a novel coronavirus began to shut schools and clear out grocery stores in the U.S., someone sent me a collection they’d made of times I’d publicly mentioned my fear of an infectious disease pandemic. On the podcast *10 Things That Scare Me*, I’d listed near the top, “a global disease pandemic that will result in the breakdown of human norms.” Years earlier, in a video about world history, I’d speculated about what might happen “if some superbug shows up tomorrow and it travels all these global trade routes.” In 2019, I’d said on a podcast, “We all must prepare ourselves for the global pandemic we all know is coming.” And yet, I did nothing to prepare. The future, even in its inevitabilities, always feels vague and nebulous to me—until it doesn’t.

After my kids’ school closed, and after I’d found a mask that I’d bought years earlier to minimize sawdust inhalation while building their tree house, but long before I understood the scope of the pandemic, I called my brother, Hank, and told him I was feeling frightened. Hank is the levelheaded one, the sane one, the calm one. He always has been. We have never let the fact of my being older get in the way of Hank

being the wise older brother. Ever since we were little, one of the ways I've managed my anxiety is by looking to him. My brain cannot reliably report to me whether a perceived threat is really real, and so I look at Hank, and I see that he's not panicked, and I tell myself that I'm okay. If anything were *truly* wrong, Hank wouldn't be able to portray such calm confidence.

So I told Hank I was scared.

"The species will survive this," he answered, a little hitch in his voice.

"*The species will survive this?* That's all you've got for me???"

He paused. I could hear the tremble in his breath, the tremble he's been hearing in my breath our whole lives. "That's what I've got for you," he said after a moment.

I told Hank I'd bought sixty cans of Diet Dr Pepper, so that I could drink two for each day of the lockdown.

And only then could I hear the old smile, the my-older-brother-really-is-a-piece-of-work smile. "For someone who has spent four decades worrying about disease pandemics," he said, "you sure don't know how disease pandemics work."

One rule of retail marketing maintains that to maximize sales, businesses need to create a sense of urgency. *Mega-sale ends soon! Only a few tickets still available!* These commercial threats, especially in the age of e-commerce, are almost always a fiction. But they're effective, an echo of our apocalyptic visions: If we feel a sense of urgency about the human experiment, maybe we'll actually get to work, whether that's rushing to save souls before the Rapture or rushing to address climate change.

I try to remind myself that back in the fourth century, Martin of Tours's eschatological anxiety must have felt as real to him as my current anxiety feels to me. A thousand years ago, floods and plagues were seen as apocalyptic portents, because they were glimpses of a power far

beyond our understanding. By the time I was growing up, amid the rise of computers and hydrogen bombs, Y2K and nuclear winter made for better apocalyptic worries. Today, these worries sometimes focus on artificial intelligence run amok, or on a species-crushing pandemic that we have proven ourselves thoroughly unprepared for, but most commonly my worry takes the form of climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety—terms that did not exist a few decades ago but are now widespread phenomena.

Humans are already an ecological catastrophe. In just 250,000 years, our behavior has led to the extinction of many species, and driven many more into steep decline. This is lamentable, and it is also increasingly needless. We probably didn't know what we were doing thousands of years ago as we hunted some large mammals to extinction. But we know what we're doing now. We know how to tread more lightly upon the earth. We could choose to use less energy, eat less meat, clear fewer forests. And we choose not to. As a result, for many forms of life, humanity *is* the apocalypse.

There are worldviews that embrace cyclic cosmologies—Hindu eschatology, for instance, lays out a series of multibillion-year periods called kalpas during which the world goes through a cycle of formation, maintenance, and then decline. But in linear eschatologies, the end times for humanity are often referred to as "the end of the world," even though our departure from Earth will very probably not be the end of the world, nor will it be the end of life in the world.

Humans are a threat to our own species and to many others, but the planet will survive us. In fact, it may only take life on Earth a few million years to recover from us. Life has bounced back from far more serious shocks. Two hundred and fifty million years ago, during the Permian extinction, ocean surface waters likely reached 104 degrees Fahrenheit, or 40 degrees Celsius. Ninety-five percent of Earth's species went extinct,

and for five million years afterward, Earth was a “dead zone” with little expansion of life.

Sixty-six million years ago, an asteroid impact caused a dust cloud so huge that darkness may have pervaded Earth for *two years*, virtually stopping photosynthesis and leading to the extinction of 75 percent of land animals. Measured against these disasters, we’re just not that important. When Earth is done with us, it’ll be like, “Well, that Human Pox wasn’t great, but at least I didn’t get Large Asteroid Syndrome.”

The hard part, evolutionarily, was getting from prokaryotic cells to eukaryotic ones, and then getting from single-celled organisms to multicellular ones. Earth is around 4.5 billion years old, a timescale I simply cannot get my head around. Instead, let’s imagine Earth’s history as a calendar year, with the formation of Earth being January 1, and today being December 31 at 11:59 PM. The first life on Earth emerges around February 25. Photosynthetic organisms first appear in late March. Multicellular life doesn’t appear until August or September. The first dinosaurs like *eoraptor* show up about 230 million years ago, or December 13 in our calendar year. The meteor impact that heralds the end of the dinosaurs happens around December 26. *Homo sapiens* aren’t part of the story until December 31 at 11:48 PM.²

Put another way: It took Earth about three billion years to go from single-celled life to multicellular life. It took less than seventy million years to go from *Tyrannosaurus rex* to humans who can read and write and dig up fossils and approximate the timeline of life and worry about its ending. Unless we somehow manage to eliminate all multicellular life from the planet, Earth won’t have to start all the way over, and it will be okay—at least until the oceans evaporate and the planet gets consumed by the sun.

But we’ll be gone by then, as will our collective and collected

2. Agriculture and large human communities and the building of monolithic structures all occur within the last minute of this calendar year. The Industrial Revolution, two world wars, the invention of basketball, recorded music, the electric dishwasher, and vehicles that travel faster than horses all happen in the last couple of seconds.

memory. I think part of what scares me about the end of humanity is the end of those memories. I believe that if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, it does make a sound. But if no one is around to play Billie Holiday records, those songs really won’t make a sound anymore. We’ve caused a lot of suffering, but we’ve also caused much else.

I know the world will survive us—and in some ways it will be *more* alive. More birdsong. More creatures roaming around. More plants cracking through our pavement, rewilding the planet we terraformed. I imagine coyotes sleeping in the ruins of the homes we built. I imagine our plastic still washing up on beaches hundreds of years after the last of us is gone. I imagine moths, having no artificial lights toward which to fly, turning back to the moon.

There is some comfort for me in knowing that life will go on even when we don’t. But I would argue that when our light goes out, it will be Earth’s greatest tragedy, because while I know humans are prone to grandiosity, I also think we are by far the most interesting thing that ever happened on Earth.

It’s easy to forget how wondrous humans are, how strange and lovely. Through photography and art, each of us has seen things we’ll never see—the surface of Mars, the bioluminescent fish of the deep ocean, a seventeenth-century girl with a pearl earring. Through empathy, we’ve felt things we might never have otherwise felt. Through the rich world of imagination, we’ve seen apocalypses large and small.

We’re the only part of the known universe that knows it’s in a universe. We know we are circling a star that will one day engulf us. We’re the only species that knows it has a temporal range.

Complex organisms tend to have shorter temporal ranges than simple ones, and humanity faces tremendous challenges. We need to find a way to survive ourselves—to go on in a world where we are powerful enough

to warm the entire planet but not powerful enough to stop warming it. We may even have to survive our own obsolescence as technology learns to do more of what we do better than we can do it. But we are better positioned to solve our biggest problems than we were one hundred or one thousand years ago. Humans have more collective brainpower than we've ever had, and more resources, and more knowledge collected by our ancestors.

We are also shockingly, stupidly persistent. Early humans probably used many strategies for hunting and fishing, but a common one was persistence hunting. In a persistence hunt, the predator relies on tracking prowess and sheer perseverance. We would follow prey for hours, and each time it would run away from us, we'd follow, and it would run away again, and we'd follow, and it would run away again, until finally the quarry became too exhausted to continue. That's how for tens of thousands of years we've been eating creatures faster and stronger than us.

We. Just. Keep. Going. We spread across seven continents, including one that is entirely too cold for us. We sailed across oceans toward land we couldn't see and couldn't have known we would find. One of my favorite words is *dogged*. I love dogged pursuits, and dogged efforts, and dogged determination. Don't get me wrong—dogs are indeed very dogged. But they ought to call it *humaned*. Humaned determination.

For most of my life, I've believed we're in the fourth quarter of human history, and perhaps even the last days of it. But lately, I've come to believe that such despair only worsens our already slim chance at long-term survival. We must fight like there is something to fight for, like we are something worth fighting for, because we are. And so I choose to believe that we are not approaching the apocalypse, that the end is not coming, and that we will find a way to survive the coming changes.

"Change," Octavia Butler wrote, "is the one unavoidable, irresistible, ongoing reality of the universe." And who am I to say we are done

changing? Who am I to say that Butler was wrong when she wrote "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars"? These days, I choose to believe that our persistence and our adaptability will allow us to keep changing with the universe for a very, very long time.

So far, at a paltry 250,000 years, it's hard to give humanity's temporal range more than one star. But while I initially found my brother's words distressing, these days I find myself repeating them, and believing them. He was right. He always is. The species will survive this, and much more to come.

And so in hope, and in expectation, I give our temporal range four stars.