

(Optional Reading)

"The Plague" and "Contagion" are popular again. Why are we drawn to fictional pandemics when we're in the middle of a real one?

By Valerie Jones , Deseret News - April 21, 2020

In a twist of uncanny timing, Emily St. John Mandel is releasing her newest novel in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. But it's her last novel that has people interested, and for good reason: the subject of her last novel was a world-wide pandemic.

Her novel "Station Eleven" was a hit when it was published in 2014 — it has sold 1.5 million copies, been translated into 27 languages and was a finalist for the National Book Award. But in the last few weeks, the novel — set in a world in which a strain of flu has decimated most of the world's population — has had another surge of popularity.

Though Mandel has been promoting her new novel, "The Glass Hotel," over the last few weeks, she remains confused about the new readers swarming to her last novel.

"I don't know who in their right mind would want to read 'Station Eleven' during a pandemic," Mandel said, according to Vulture.

But "Station Eleven" isn't alone in seeing a surge in popularity. Other tales of epidemics, plague and apocalypses have received a boost from the COVID-19 outbreak.

The 2011 film "Contagion" made its way to iTunes' top movies list in March, while the 1995 film "Outbreak" and the Netflix documentary series "Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak" were among just some of the shows that have gained popularity on Netflix in recent weeks, according to Business Insider.

Meanwhile, Albert Camus' classic novel "The Plague," originally published in 1947, has seen its sales jump dramatically in Europe, according to The Guardian.

The novel sold 226 copies in the United Kingdom in February 2019 and 371 in February 2020.

But the first three weeks of March 2020? The book sold 2,156 copies.

As more people find themselves isolated or quarantined in their homes, with more time on their hands to open a book or watch a movie, many people are being drawn to tales that some might say hit a little too close to home at the moment.

So what is it about stories of pandemics that draw in audiences — even when we're in the middle of one?

How pandemic novels help us

Mandel, the author of “Station Eleven,” is not the only author in recent weeks to speak out to fans about the ways fiction is suddenly meeting reality.

Author Stephen King set fans straight about his 1978 novel “The Stand,” which is about a weaponized strain of influenza that kills 99% of the world’s population, according to USA Today. “The Stand” has also been on Amazon’s Top 20 Most Read book list for the last five weeks.

King tweeted on March 8 in response to fans posting on social media comparing the coronavirus pandemic to the events of the book. “No, coronavirus is NOT like THE STAND,” King tweeted, adding that COVID-19 is “not anywhere near as serious” as the vicious disease in his novel.

Yet the fact that “The Stand” takes such an apocalyptic view of a pandemic could be part of what is drawing readers to it in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, according to **Dr. Kyle Bishop, a professor of English at Southern Utah University.**

Bishop told the Deseret News he has been rereading King’s novel lately because it helps him “put things in perspective.” **“On some level, we have to use fiction to explore the anxieties and fears that we have,”** Bishop said. “So, in that way, fiction functions similarly to a science lab — which is, let’s put these things into motion and let’s see what happens.”

Stories are a “safe” way to explore possible outcomes of challenging or frightening situations and to deal with fears associated with them. This isn’t just true of stories about pandemics.

The aftermath of World War II and the rise of nuclear weapons led to the popularity of fiction about the possibility of World War III and nuclear warfare, according to Bishop. This includes films like “Godzilla” and the 1953 adaptation of H.G. Wells’ “The War of the Worlds,” as well as novels like “Alas, Babylon” and “A Canticle for Leibowitz.”

“Once society becomes aware of a threat, that threat becomes the focus of narrative,” Bishop said.

Storytelling is a method that humans have used to manage their fear of the unknown for centuries. Boccaccio’s “The Decameron,” written in the aftermath of the Black Death in Italy in 1348, depicts a group of 10 young people who quarantine themselves together to avoid the plague. To pass the time, they tell each other stories.

Not only is “The Decameron” a lasting work of literature (maybe not coincidentally, it is currently a number one bestseller in Italian literature on Amazon), it also influenced doctors at the time it was published to recommend reading and storytelling as methods of fighting off disease “as a way of diverting the mind and maintaining spirits high,” according to research from Dr. Martin Marafioti, a professor of literature and culture at Pace University.

So perhaps it’s only natural that, as anxieties over the coronavirus pandemic and the accompanying economic fall-out grow, people turn to movies and books to try to make sense of the chaotic world around them.

Novels bring hope

Of all the books and movies that are seeing a resurgence of popularity, there’s one in particular that seems to be sticking out as the “book of the moment.”

International editions of Camus’ “The Plague” are currently out of stock on Amazon as European readers continue to flock to the classic novel. In the United States, “The Plague” is being discussed everywhere from The New York Times to NPR to The Wall Street Journal.

Meanwhile, on social media, quotes from the novel seem to be everywhere. Some readers are encouraging others, “If you’ve never read The Plague by Albert Camus, now’s the time to do it.”

So what is it about this 70-year-old novel that is speaking to people today?

The novel begins in the Algerian city of Oran in 1940 and follows the efforts of a doctor as the plague spreads first from the city’s rats to its human inhabitants. Although it is sometimes viewed as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of France during World War II, “The Plague” is first and foremost a story about an epidemic and, more importantly, about **how humans react in the face of adversity and tragedy.**

“What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well,” Camus wrote in the novel. “It helps men to rise above themselves.”

It’s this sense of hope that humanity will triumph that is another factor that drives audiences to seek out stories about plagues and pandemics, according to Bishop.

“We want to see some sort of hope or some sort of positive outcome,” said Bishop. “So if the worst were to happen, we would be able to say, ‘Okay, yeah, but there’s a solution. There is a way out of here.’”

Camus’ daughter told The Guardian in March that she believes “The Plague” (“La Peste” in the original French) has hope to offer to readers today. “The message of ‘La Peste’ rings true today as it did back then, as it will in the future,” Catherine Camus told The

Guardian. “I’m glad to learn people are reading it again. If there’s a passage in the book that speaks to readers, that gives them hope, this is what is important.”

What will stories be like after COVID-19?

Stories about pandemics are different from other types of fiction. Before movie theaters closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak, superhero blockbusters ruled the day. But while the Avengers could take on super-villains with ease, there’s not much they can do in the face of a global pandemic.

Superhero stories became popular after World War II and again in the wake of 9/11, according to Bishop. Sam Raimi’s “Spider-Man” in 2002 — the summer after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 — launched our modern era of superhero movies, in part because the idea of heroes saving the day was comforting in an uncertain time.

In the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, will superheroes and blockbusters still maintain popularity? When movie studios begin to operate again and theaters reopen, what new stories will we tell?

Future movies and television about the COVID-19 outbreak are almost a certainty, according to Bishop. Though he doesn’t expect superheroes to go away any time soon, he does anticipate there will be a “shift” in the way they are portrayed. “You’re gonna see maybe instead of these ‘Avengers’-level global threats to the entire universe, we’ll see some superhero stories about stuff that’s much smaller, much closer to home,” said Bishop.

In a similar way the post-9/11 era highlighted the heroism of firefighters and emergency workers, **Bishop expects there will be a much larger emphasis on doctors, medical workers and “ordinary” heroes following the coronavirus outbreak.**

“It’s an opportunity to show the true heroes, who are more average, common, everyday people who are doing their jobs, who are putting themselves in harm’s way,” said Bishop.

Still, with many film and television studios shutting down production until the coronavirus outbreak has passed, any new movies will not come any time soon. The stories that are told likely will be affected by how bad things get before the outbreak ends.

“We’ll watch a movie like ‘2012’ or ‘The Day After Tomorrow’ because it’s not real,” Bishop said. “But if it’s a story that is about millions of actual people dying, I don’t think we’re gonna necessarily want that story for quite a while.”

Assuming the outbreak is brought under control more quickly, a movie version is much more likely. “In any given year, there’s at least one World War II movie, because we still want to explore the heroism of that period,” Bishop said. “We want to look at it and learn

lessons from it.” He expects the same will be true of this era of history, as well. “There’s going to be a desire for that, especially after it’s over,” he said. “Because people like to look back at these events and then have these stories.”