



Tuesday, February 12, 2008

Mekeisha Madden Toby:

Doomsday themes are booming in TV, film and literature



America suffers 23 nuclear attacks, but one small town in Kansas is spared and the survivors find the courage to forge together and start anew.

This is the overriding theme behind CBS' never-say-die, apocalyptic series "Jericho," which returns tonight for a second season. While fans had to pull some pretty impressive stunts to bring the show back, the timing could not be better for the program, which embodies a feeling of despair that looms over popular culture as of late.

From blockbuster hits such as Will Smith's "I Am Legend" and the shaky-camera horror sensation "Cloverfield," to the influx of doomsday documentaries on cable including "Six Degrees" on the National Geographic Channel (which debuted Sunday and re-airs Thursday) and the still white-hot 13-year-old "Left Behind" literature series for youngsters, Americans are feeling like it's the end of the world as we know it. But unlike R.E.M., we do not feel fine. "Apocalyptic (themes) emphasize a certain sense of futility and human frailty in response to forces seeming supernatural or otherwise out of human control," says John Grayson Nichols, director of film studies at Christopher Newport University in Newport, Va.

"The current round of dystopic films emerges from a certain national frustration with the war, Congress, the president, and with a global war on terror that strains a sense of what individuals can do. In response, these films, TV shows and books reflect that sense of frustration and offer hope in heroic, almost supernatural individual achievement."

Not one to miss an opportunity, Hollywood has its finger on the pulse of the nation's fears.

"Cloverfield" has been in theaters for less than a month and has already grossed \$76 million. In theaters just before Christmas, "I Am Legend" made \$253 million. On the small screen, ABC's castaway drama "Lost," which offers a more esoteric take on the apocalypse, attracted 16 million viewers when it returned for a fourth season two weeks ago. This is the largest TV audience the show has enjoyed in nearly two years.

A lack of trust

It doesn't take Nostradamus to see that the other prevailing emotion that these TV shows, movies and books reflect is distrust. Just look at the results of the Associated Press/Ipsos poll taken last week that says 70 percent of Americans are unhappy with the current presidential administration and 88 percent are displeased with Congress.

If we don't trust the government, fictional characters don't either.

In "Cloverfield," the film's young heroes could not count on the government to tell them what the destructive, man-eating creature was or where it came from or what the military planned

to do. On "Lost," a rescue team has come to the island to help the plane-crash survivors get home, but more than half of the castaways have doubts about their intentions. On "Jericho," covert agent Robert Hawkins (Lennie James) has the nuclear bomb that proves the U.S. government was behind the attacks and not Iran and North Korea as officials said. The protagonists rebel in all three instances.

"I am so glad that 'Jericho' is coming back," says Samuel Allen, a Detroit fan. "It is made for people like me who like good drama and storylines and people who want to escape daily life but don't want to watch mindless reality shows where people make fools of themselves. 'Jericho' is more realistic."

Elayne Rapping is a pop-culture expert and professor of American studies at the State University of New York-Buffalo. She says Allen's feelings and those of other fans reflect our need to allay our social and economic uncertainties, if only through our sources of entertainment.

"Pop culture raises our greatest fears or social conflicts and resolves them, sort of like therapy," she says.

Leaning on a larger power

Professor Nichols at Christopher Newport University says that because the country has been in states of uncertainty in the past, apocalyptic themes have played out in entertainment for decades. Over the years, he says, the message always comes back to a renewed belief in a higher power, with Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins' post-Rapture "Left Behind" (Living Books, \$14.99) books being the strongest modern example.

"The sense of a lack of human agency is coupled with a renewed spiritual urgency," says Nichols, who also works as an associate English professor. "One of the first, Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis,' features an underground workers' movement that is led by a pseudo-Christian female schoolteacher who is able to give hope to downtrodden workers who live beneath the streets of an opulent futuristic city."

Nichols' colleague, English professor Roberta Rosenberg, takes his assessment one step further.

"Actually, the Judeo-Christian culture is messianic and apocalyptic, so it is no surprise that we view things this way," she says. "The last book of the New Testament is Revelations and deals with the apocalypse. Our Puritan ancestors believed that they were engaged in a 'New Jerusalem' and that they were going to fight against Satan for the last time."

Biblical virtues such as love, self-sacrifice and faith also prevail in our modern apocalyptic tales. One could argue that all these characteristics came into place when fans of "Jericho" convinced CBS not to cancel the series by mailing the network pounds and pounds of peanuts. Peanuts are no match for mustard seeds, but that's good old-fashioned faith all the same.

Television You can reach Mekeisha Madden Toby at (313) 222-2501 or mmadden@detnews.com.

Find this article at:

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080212/OPINION03/802120395>

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.