



“Laws of Survival” by Nancy Kress

(illustration by John Ward <https://bitly.ws/ZZgD>)

For EAC 234, by Prof. Lisette Boily©

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Definitions: Apocalypse and Post-Apocalypse

- Common understanding of SF 'apocalypse' is end of the world or end of civilization (more commonly), brought about by world-wide calamity (war, disease, environmental cataclysm, alien invasion, zombies, etc.)
- Post-apocalypse refers to the period after the 'apocalypse' – where typically the remaining survivors suffer through the rest of their lives, fighting for basic human needs, and sometimes attempting to rebuild human civilization
- A common SF type of setting and scenario, which enables rich speculative scenarios of different types

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Definitions: Apocalypse and Post-Apocalypse, cont'd

- **Word Origins of 'apocalypse' = Greek 'apokalyptein,' which means 'to uncover'.** This translates into 'revelation' or 'to reveal' what is hidden (from Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary).
- Biblical meanings lean towards the 'wrath of God' scenario, involving the destruction of all 'evil-doers'.
- However, in SF, the Apocalyptic Scenario usually portrays the destruction of humanity and/or the Earth, etc., brought about by science and/or technology, aliens or just plain human arrogance*
- **This story's speculative scenario and deeper thematic issues rely heavily upon the original Greek meaning of the word 'apocalypse' (i.e. revelation)**

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Overall SF Setting: the Post-Apocalyptic (Near?) Future & Survival Scenario

- Post-apocalyptic (nuclear war) scenario in a (near?) future U.S.A (Raleigh is mentioned, which is in North Carolina)
- People are living in horrible conditions in refugee camps; our main character scavenges for food – everyone is just trying to survive any way they can
- Survival: the dogs in the story as a means of survival (first, the puppy, then the mangy poodle, then the dogs inside the alien spaceship)
- Different kinds of survival: first, physical, then a deeper kind of survival (again, different dogs in the story are presented as a means to achieve these different types of survival)

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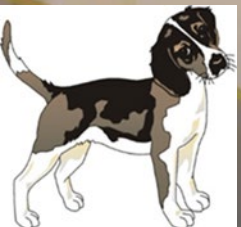


Specific SF Setting: the Robot-operated Alien Ship

- The robot-operated ship provides an ironic contrast to the human main character's life in the post-apocalyptic (post nuclear war) refugee camp in Raleigh (North Carolina, U.S.A.)
- The spherical robots (Blue and Green) are able to create anything, seemingly out of 'thin air,' which contrasts the life of scarcity outside
- The mysteries: of the alien ships on earth, of the dogs and why the aliens want them, of the 'Presentation' and the repeated 'these dogs do not behave correctly' statement by the robots
- **Finally, the alien ship serves as a catalyst for the human main character to regain her 'humanity' and revise her final 'law of survival'**

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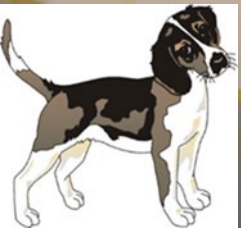


Making Sense of the Different Settings

- This story uses two different types of common SF settings (post apocalyptic and alien 'invasion') and turns them upside down, inside out
- We don't see the nuclear war/apocalypse (it happens in the past/off stage) and the post apocalyptic setting of scarcity, violence, scavenging and raw physical survival is only presented at the very beginning of the story
- The alien spaceship (dome) is not an active participant in the post-apocalyptic scenario, and seems not to have had anything to do with the nuclear war
- The humans in the story do not seem very interested in the presence of the alien ship - domes
- The alien spaceship - dome seems to interact only occasionally with individual humans (and dogs); the alien robots have their own mysterious agenda, which has nothing to do with destroying or enslaving humanity
- **This is not a typical type of post-apocalyptic 'end of the world as we know it' SF story; the readers' SF expectations are disrupted, highlighting the 'unknown' factor in the story**

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The Story's Speculative Scenario

Things to first think about in order to understand the story's speculative scenario:

- What if a person's survival mechanisms only allow them to physically survive, but they 'die' emotionally? Is that really true survival for a human being?
- What could be the most unexpected thing, which would allow such a person to re-evaluate how they are 'surviving' and change?
- How do these questions above specifically help you understand this story's speculative scenario?...

THE STORY'S SPECULATIVE SCENARIO REALLY FOCUSES ON:

1. General speculative scenario for the story: what if the revelation needed for a person to truly regain their emotional survival were initiated by the most unexpected and unlikely means?

2. Specific speculative scenario for the story: what if inhuman beings (alien robots and dogs) were the catalysts for a human to regain their full 'humanity' by reigniting their emotions?



SF & literary Devices in the story

- Speculative Scenario
- Circular, frame structure (see beginning and end of story)
- Title significance (what are the main character's 'laws of survival'?)
- First Person Narration
- Flashbacks
- World building / detailed description of SF settings in story (especially the alien ship-dome)
- Irony – all of the types: situational, verbal, dramatic
- Humour (sometimes subtle, sometimes harsh, a lot of verbal humour)
- Plot Conflicts (person vs. self, vs. person, vs. society, vs. nature)
- the Four Core SF Concepts:
 - Invention, exploration, discovery/revelation & transformation are all prominent



SF & literary Devices in the story

- The Unknown
- Characterization (round & dynamic (main character); round and static (main dogs); flat and static (robots))
- Dialogue, repetition
- Alien, robot, artificial intelligence
- Cautionary tale (related to main character's final 'law of survival')
- Readers' willing suspension of disbelief
- Theme: the main point, big idea the author is trying to get readers to think deeply about (can be explicitly stated or implicitly present – for readers to interpret)
 - Related to the speculative scenario
- Open or closed ending?
 - **Where is the main character at end of story? Does she know how her 'story' will end? Does it matter? What is 'open' and what is 'closed/resolved' in her life?**



Deeper Thematic Issues & Questions

- Related to the story's speculative scenario (see earlier slide)
- Related to the story's ironic presentation and disruption of both the SF post-apocalyptic (nuclear devastation) and alien invasion scenarios
- **Related to the original Greek meaning of the word 'apocalypse' = 'to reveal what is hidden (what was hidden, which is revealed for the main character, by end of story, about her life, and how she is choosing to live it?)'**
- Related to the story's title significance (laws of survival)
 - Main character's 'laws of survival' are often framed through negatives (don't, never, etc.)
 - By story's end, her final law changes, and is framed in a more positive way, which is the key to the story's theme
 - How does this change to the main character's law come about?
 - **What does 'survival' look like, what does it mean, to the main character by end of the story? How is it different from what survival meant to her at the beginning of the story—and why does it matter?**



An Important Final Note about Academic Integrity

- ▶ **Do NOT use any form of generative AI (ChatGPT, advanced Grammarly tools, etc.)**
- ▶ **You are not supposed to ‘research’ the internet for ideas about our assigned short stories....(but if you do):**
 - ▶ **Make sure you quote and cite any and all external sources used in your submissions. (Again, you are NOT supposed to go outside of our course at all; there is no reason to go outside our course IF you are doing your own, authentic learning of the course materials).**
 - ▶ Try engaging what the internet source ‘said’ about the story—what does it mean, do you agree or disagree, etc.?
 - ▶ Always highlight YOUR OWN ideas about any story we cover in the course—if you are confused about a story, it’s okay to say so (asking questions and highlighting what is not understood are the best ways to learn something new!)
 - ▶ **Depending on the amount and severity of the uncited material and/or unauthorized use of generative AI, a zero grade, or a zero grade/failure in the course and a comment on the student’s transcript can result.**

THE END

