

A Talk with Justin Cronin

THE PASSAGE has already been sold in 25 countries and will be made into a film with Ridley Scott as the director. So many different readers have fallen in love with the book. Why do you think that is? Is there a common theme in the book to which everyone can relate?

This is not an easy question to answer without sounding self-congratulatory. First of all, I think it's simply a good story, in the old-fashioned sense. Characters you care about. High stakes. Moments in which everything depends on what someone chooses to do or not do. A certain kind of economy, even as it's quite a long story—by which I mean, everything matters. That's the kind of book I hoped to write.

I do think, too, that the story taps into a great deal of our shared anxieties about the world we live in. These are fraught times, to put it mildly, and the dangers we face, internal and external, in ourselves and in others, seem like strange new monsters to wrestle with. But at the same time, *THE PASSAGE* is not an unremittingly bleak story. I think we're all wondering what will redeem us. It's a hopeful thing to think that it could be something as simple as love for a little girl.

You are a PEN/Hemingway Award-winning author of literary fiction. Does THE PASSAGE represent a departure for you?

I think it'd be a little silly of me not to acknowledge that *THE PASSAGE* is, in a number of ways, overtly different from my other books. But rather than calling it a 'departure,' I'd prefer to describe it as a progression or evolution. First of all, the themes that engage me as a person and a writer are all still present. Love, sacrifice, friendship, loyalty, courage. The bonds between people, parents and children especially. The pull of history, and the power of place, of landscape, to shape experience. And I don't think the writing itself is different at all. How could it be? You write how you write.

That said, the differences are there. I think of them mostly as a matter of scale. I've always said that I never want to write the same book twice, and I deliberately took up *THE PASSAGE* as a novel (and ultimately a trilogy) that would operate on a much broader canvas than anything I'd done before, with a very energetic plot. I wanted to take ordinary people and place them in circumstances of such dire emergency that they couldn't help but reveal their truest selves in the choices they make. I've heard it said that character is "what you are in the dark." Strip away the distractions of daily life, and what have you got? I wanted to put my characters to this kind of test.

Your daughter was the spark that set your writing of THE PASSAGE in motion. What else drove you to delve into such an epic undertaking?

The other force at work was something more personal and writerly. One of the reasons that the story of *THE PASSAGE* had such a magnetic effect on me was that I felt myself reclaiming the impulses that led me to become a writer in the first place. Like my daughter, I was a big reader as a kid. I lived in the country, with no other kids around, and spent most of my childhood either with my nose in a book or wandering around the woods with my head in some imagined narrative or another. It was much later, of course, that I formally became a student of literature, and decided that writing was something I wanted to do professionally. But the groundwork was all laid back then, reading with a flashlight under the covers.

An anecdote: To this day I still remember the feeling of pure awed pleasure when I reached the final moment of Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*—my first encounter with literary irony. I was lying on the bed in the small upstairs bedroom of my grandmother's house; it was a broiling summer afternoon, and my feet were sandy from a morning at the beach. From outside came the smell of mown grass and the high-pitched sound of some species of tree-borne insect that my grandmother always called "the hot weather bird." I came to the final moment of the

book, and was so amazed—not only by the words on the page but my understanding of them—that I knocked an open bottle of mercurochrome off the bedside table, permanently staining the carpet. Sometimes life provides better metaphors than you can come up with on any number of long jogs through the falling leaves; that mark on the carpet was the permanent stain of pure readerly pleasure. I like to think that, whoever owns that house now, the carpet is still there, the red stain upon it.

I thought a lot about that moment as I was constructing, and then writing, *THE PASSAGE*. They felt the same to me. A great story is one that should knock something right off your table.

What genres did you draw on while writing THE PASSAGE? With much of the action taking place in the west, complete with trains, horses, and guns, would you consider the novel, in part, a Western? Science fiction is also a genre that comes to mind.

My intention was to write a book that transcended the idea of genre—a novel with both literary and popular attributes, equally driven by plot and character, with all the tropes of every kind of novel and story I ever loved, from about age ten to last week. I read a great deal of so-called literary fiction these days, and am a college English teacher, but I was raised on a steady diet of books of every kind—Westerns, science fiction, adventure novels, war novels, spy novels, fantasy and horror. The best thing was that, at the time, I made no distinctions about what kind of novel I was reading; I simply read, and liked a novel or not. Was it interesting? Was it exciting? Did I care about the characters?

The first “grown up” novel I ever read was Michael Crichton’s *The Andromeda Strain*, and it thrilled me completely. The second was a book I’ve never heard of again, called *The Sands of the Kalahari*. A group of people on a small aircraft crash in the Kalahari Desert, far from civilization, and have to make their way back to the world, with all the dangers and adventures you’d expect. I absolutely loved it and (obviously) remember it to this day. My school had a used paperback sale every year, and my parents would give me five dollars and I would fill a grocery sack with everything from Louis L’Amour to Arthur Hailey to *Valley of the Dolls* (which my parents confiscated before I could read it).

I’ve always been drawn to the idea of a robust plot, and I think much of our best literature comes from writers who straddle this fence. Dennis Lehane’s *Mystic River* is both a great crime novel and a great piece of literature. Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove* has absolutely every piece of westernalia in it and is, simultaneously, a masterpiece. One of my favorite writers is Alan Furst, whose WWII espionage novels are so enlivened by their stylish writing you can’t help but feel yourself in the presence not merely of a great story but the truth of history.

But science fiction definitely is a huge ingredient of THE PASSAGE.

By far my greatest love as a kid was science fiction—novels and stories, but also television and movies. Back then, in the 1970s, science fiction, especially on screen, didn’t have quite the gloss on it that it does now, and it was really dominated by two subjects, as I remember it. The first was space exploration; the second was the threat of nuclear war (and other versions of global apocalypse). I was a child of both the Cold War and the space program, and science fiction hit both of these nerves, often at the same time. I’ve already mentioned Ray Bradbury and Michael Crichton. Others include Isaac Asimov (*The Foundation Trilogy*), Arthur C. Clarke (*Childhood’s End*), and Philip K. Dick (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*). Robert Heinlein was an important writer for me, the first writer who really got me reading. A friend in 4th grade turned me onto his young adult novels, and to this day, I credit that friend with my being first a reader and now a writer. *Planet of the Apes* was huge for me—first as a novel, then the movies, and later even the ultra-cheesy television show. When I was in middle school, our local theater (one screen, as they all were back then) held a *Planet of the Apes* film festival, and my mother packed me a sandwich and dropped me off to watch all five movies, one after the other.

Other books, writers, films: Pat Frank's *Alas Babylon*. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter Miller. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. George Stuart's great novel, *Earth Abides*. The last had a huge effect on me, and still does. I even tucked a little homage to it into THE PASSAGE.

You have said, "I seriously never would have written any of my books unless I'd had kids." Can you explain?

I'm a writer, and a homeowner, and a taxpayer, and a college professor; but first and foremost, I'm a dad, and I view the world pretty much through this prism, and have since my daughter was born. All my books reflect this; parent-child relationships are central to everything I write. It's a cliché, but children really are the future; I worry about the world, and rejoice in the world, because the future I won't be here to see is the future my children will live in. I think becoming a parent just made me flat out more human.

I also think that as a writer you have to care about your characters in a way that's almost parental. You are responsible for their fates, while at the same time they are autonomous entities, not entirely in your control. It's a precarious state of affairs. Successfully getting a character through a novel sometimes feels like raising a child with the hope that, in the end, you can send them off to college. Before I was a parent, I didn't really know what this felt like. Now I do.

There have been many apocalyptic books and movies over the years, and THE PASSAGE tells a very frightening story of our world as we know it coming to an end. Do you think humans are obsessed with the end of civilization?

Yes, and we have been since we first dropped from the trees, I think. It seems to me a fundamental human anxiety. The oldest story of apocalypse in Western culture is the story of Noah, which THE PASSAGE overtly acknowledges. I think, though, that in the 20th century, at least since 1945, these mortal contemplations have tended to present the end of civilization as a human-made disaster. I was born right after the Cuban Missile Crisis, and grew up believing it was entirely possible that one day we'd all be incinerated. I had especially vivid nightmares of this right up until I was in grad school—right about the time the Berlin Wall fell, in fact. The end of the Cold War has rearranged the details of these anxieties somewhat, but the basic fear is still there—in me, in everyone. In 1945, scientific knowledge leapt way ahead of our maturity as a species. We are still lagging way behind.

Any thoughts on who you might like to see cast in the film?

I know the people at Scott Free Productions and Fox 2000 are talking about this, and a few names have floated to the top. But it's very hush-hush at this point. I'm just excited that such a talented team is working to bring THE PASSAGE to the big screen.

When will we get to read the next book?

Two years (fingers wishfully crossed).