

World Made by Hand and post-apocalyptic fiction: a prepper's perspective

Contributed by Jerry Erwin
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This review of James Howard Kunstler's novel considers other works within the sub-genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, including *Patriots: Surviving the Coming Collapse*, *Parable of the Sower*, *Lucifer's Hammer*, *The Road*, *Wolf and Iron* and *The Long Emergency*.

One recent evening with Jan Lundberg on his sailboat, I was discussing James Howard Kunstler's *World Made by Hand* with him, from my perspective of a preparedness consultant who also focuses on predictive analysis regarding societal collapse. Jan then suggested that I write a review for CultureChange.org. As a fan of both James Howard Kunstler's weekly *Clusterf--- Nation* and of post-collapse/dystopian fiction, I couldn't resist the idea.

Over the years, I've noticed a huge gap in the way that post-collapse stories are written. At one end of the spectrum are novels that are heavy on useful information, skills and techniques, but somewhat low on writing style. One novel that we consider had the premise of collapse created by a global credit crisis, and a subsequent collapse of the US Dollar.

At the other end of this sub-genre are books that are very well-written, yet weak on technical detail, with regards to the re-engineering of available resources, weapons, etc. Or, for that matter, with regards to armed groups in a post-collapse environment, as well as individuals or groups that may have been prepared, prior to the collapse.

A good example of the former would be Jim Rawles' *Patriots: Surviving the Coming Collapse* (1996), a prophetic novel. The writer is the modern patron saint of survivalism. The book is actually an instruction manual, dressed as fiction, for legal purposes. This book is considered the bible of modern survivalism, and is actually used as reference material. Jim Rawles, A former US Army All-Source Intelligence Officer, already walks-the-walk, and has written several books on preparedness, but is not a traditional fictional writer, per se (although Rawles does have a separate screenplay, currently looking for a film-maker).

The character descriptions in *Patriots* are somewhat lacking. The reader has to tolerate some fundamentalist Christianity. Regardless, the average survivalism / preparedness-minded individual will be absolutely glued to this book for its information, as well as its well-written scenes involving combat with modern weapons. It is also ominously predictive: The collapse in his novel is created by a global credit crisis, and a subsequent collapse of the US Dollar.

The late Gordon Dickson's *Wolf and Iron* (1990), also takes place in the aftermath of a socio-economic collapse. Dickson was a well-established science fiction author, who did his research. In *Wolf and Iron*, he describes subjects such as blacksmithing, firearms, knife-fighting, searching for/concealing weapons, and the fabrication of items such as crossbows, made from automotive parts. There is even a horse-drawn covered wagon featured in this novel, built from tractor-trailer parts by a wealthy individual, who, as in other novels of this type (including Kunstler's), saw the collapse coming. This wagon is complete with bedrooms, workshops, and modern military crew-served weapons.

I would have to rate *Wolf and Iron* at a distant second to Jim Rawles' *Patriots* as a novel that can be tabbed and used for reference.

As for well-written and less detail, the perfect example here would be *World Made by Hand*. Having read *The Long Emergency*, it was obvious to me that Kunstler, a long-established author of fiction and non-fiction, was next trying to get the world's attention, particularly those who may, or may not have read *The Long Emergency*. *World Made by Hand* is basically a fictionalized companion to his brilliant predictive non-fiction piece regarding the societal effects of resource depletion and climate change.

At first, I was not exactly in a hurry to read Kunstler's latest novel, as I had sampled parts of it at a Barnes & Noble. For the sake of an idea for a birthday present, I had my wife get me a copy of *World Made by Hand* anyway, since I love the sub-genre of post-collapse fiction so much, and had just finished reading the old 1977 classic, *Lucifer's Hammer*.

Lucifer's Hammer (1977) was one of the fictional pieces that contributed significantly to the survivalist movement, as we understand it today. A comet's impact with the Earth creates an extremely bad, worst-case "fast crash" scenario (as compared to a societal, decades-long, more realistic, "slow crash" scenario, which I am convinced we have been in since the 1970s -- but is the subject for another article). In this novel, people begin feeding on one another, literally, within a month of the event.

In *World Made by Hand*, which takes place roughly 15 to 20 years from now, what is left of the US population basically reverts back to an incredibly hard, 1800s-style existence, in a post-petroleum world. This view is widely agreed to, across the wide spectrum of peak oil theorists, activists, futurists, doomers, survivalists, etc. Kunstler's description of this post-peak oil world is well done, in what people eat, the housing, the clothing, and the fabricated devices for things like hot water, etc. The fictional town, Union Grove, seems to have been spared a lot of the societal upheaval having occurred everywhere else in the US: Violence between different social classes, races, etc.

For some reason, even rubber, in the form of automobile and bicycle tires, no longer exists. This must have really pissed-off the hardcore ecotopian bicycle riders who have read this novel.

Personally, I have had tires that I've stored and used on bicycles, motorcycles and automobiles for years, if not for an entire decade, with no problem. Also, many farmers in Eastern Europe and Asia have used the same automotive tires, on the same horse-drawn carts, for decades. This reversion back to old fashion wagon wheels seems to be more of a Kunstler fantasy, where Peak Oil meets *Little House on the Prairie*. Kunstler's vision is particularly evident in the imagery at his dedicated *World Made by Hand* website.

Kunstler does not pull punches with his portrayal of his NFL/NASCAR stereotype. The bad guys, who live in an old trailer park near the town of Union Grove, are all former "motor heads" led by a former truck driver, Wayne Karp. Everyone in the town, including a nearby wealthy plantation owner (who seems to be one of us: A peak oiler who saw what was coming), live in fear of this group.

As I read this novel, the local bad guys appear pretty laughable, as an effective group. This may be relevant to the fact that Union Grove is described as being spared much of the violence that took place everywhere else in the US. This group of roughly 100 people seems to be armed with only a few pistols, and do not post any sort of security, whatsoever. They also seem to be drunk or stoned most of the time. While reading the scenes involving this group, I'm thinking, "Just myself and one other military-trained individual could take out at their entire command structure, at the very least."

Kunstler's lack of detail in describing firearms or techniques used makes it difficult to visualize various action scenes. For instance, in one scene, the main character Robert Earle rides with the security element from the New Faith Brotherhood to rescue a boat crew held for ransom. Kunstler describes the characters well, but only describes two of the New Faithers as "having rifles," with one being armed with a sawed-off shotgun, and Earle armed with an old .41 Ruger Magnum (at least the New Faith person leading the mission correctly describes it as a "bastard caliber." It would indeed be very odd to see a weapon in this caliber, this long after a societal crash). But for the most part Kunstler does not describe the rifles, pistols, the amount of ammunition, etc. Such descriptions would be important in order to visualize in any realistic sense what is happening in this novel. Not having read any of Kunstlers' other fiction, I can still guess he must not be known for writing action scenes.

I would highly recommend that Kunstler visit a gun show, being held at a major US city, for starters. As I have introduced other peak oilers to these shows, the learning experience for them can be described as “shocking.” Besides, there are a lot of other resources at these shows for preparedness-minded people. I can personally attest to the fact that purchases of assault rifles (primarily AR-15’s [the civilian version of the M-16 rifle] and their variants) and ammunition have skyrocketed recently, to the point of nationwide shortages and back orders, competing with government orders for the military.

At these shows I have talked to vendors and attendees. It is not just the change in Executive Branch: people outside of the peak oil, transition town, and “doomer” cultures (people still trapped within the dominant culture, for that matter) seem to feel that something is wrong with this society, and that bad times are coming, but just cannot put their finger on it. A good fictional parallel to this would be some of the humans still “plugged-in” to The Matrix, who could feel that something was not right with the world.

Another good example of a critically well-written novel, but low on technical detail is Cormack McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006). This book in particular, however, does not require a lot of technical detail, as it is a profoundly moving novel about a father and his son, struggling to survive as refugees, traveling on-foot in a dead, nuclear winter-type environment. This particular novel hit me like a ton of coal, as a father, and as a dedicated collapse “prepper.” It hit me pretty hard, as someone who has already grown-up parentless (in abusive foster care) during a previous period of energy scarcity (late 1970s), and has been dedicated to protecting/teaching his own son. As I was reading this, I kept thinking of a good subtitle, such as *The Road: Why You Don’t Want to be a Refugee*, or *The Road: If You Have Any loved Ones, You Better Start Prepping Yesterday*.

Other post-apocalyptic novels have fallen well within the center of this sub-genre, such as the late Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, as she described a climate-changed and resource-depleted California, in the year 2025. Her technical references, along with references to some minor technological innovations (primarily in personal entertainment) are genius. Her book, originally published in 1993, was obviously well researched, as well as ahead of its time. Of all the dystopic / post-apocalyptic fiction I’ve read, Butler’s has to be the most predictive, from a peak oil and climate change perspective.

Butler, an African American woman, was also well known for writing about slavery, tying it in with much of her science fiction. Her description of the inner mindsets of slaves and slaveholders is downright disturbing. *Parable of the Sower* realistically describes how slavery could re-manifest itself, in a dystopic American future.

If you’re a serious prepper with regards to societal collapse, you’re probably not going to get much out of *World Made by Hand*, other than some good reading entertainment, accompanied by some potential hair pulling, as you wonder why certain characters do the things they do.

If you fit the current peak oil activist stereotype who has researched the subject well, who may also be a liberal progressive and possibly retirement age, having no basic knowledge of firearms, and few, if any hands-on preparedness skills, this book is probably for you, and anyone you would like to be educated on the subject of peak oil. This crowd could effectively argue that “It’s not meant to be a technically precise story. It’s trying to describe what the world will be like for the U.S., on the other side of global peak oil.”

If there is a complete socio-economic breakdown someday, brought on by the sudden decline in global crude oil production, I do not believe that the post-peak, collapsed US will look exactly like Kunstler’s book. The future after a collapse may not resemble *Little House on the Prairie* (at least not in every location). It could look like something else from the 1800s, with the remains (or the “table scraps,” as Kunstler fondly puts it) of the 20th Century, with late 20th Century weapons, tools, and a lot of re-engineered/re-fabricated technology.

Further Reading

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Jerry Erwin previously wrote for Culture Change
Survivalism: for Peak Oilers and Ecotopians Too?