

COMMENTARY

Michael O'Donnell: When will the great pandemic novel be published?

By Michael O'Donnell
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People shop for books at Da Book Joint at the Boxville marketplace on April 29, 2023, in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)

The pandemic is officially over. By federal declaration, the public health emergency expired on May 11, capping a general sense that has been in the air for months. Yet COVID-19's devastating effects are going nowhere.

I recently attended a wedding where only one of the bride's parents was there to see her take her vows because the coronavirus had claimed the other. The World Health Organization estimates that 1.1 million Americans and nearly 7 million people globally have died as a result of the disease. Nevertheless, three years after the world locked down, memories have begun to fade at the sudden disruption that the pandemic caused to education, commerce, religion, socialization, giving birth and facing death.

It will be the task of literature to help us remember. Books have always illuminated not just our innermost thoughts — the domain of Henry James and Virginia Woolf — but also generational upheavals like the one we have just endured.

Narrative pushes aside headlines and statistics to take readers directly into the experiences of others: it is an empathy engine. Slavery's true horror showed its face in the pages of Toni Morrison's "Beloved." Joseph Heller's classic farce "Catch-22" reveals the absurdity of war. "Anna Karenina" illustrates how the repression of women in the nineteenth century smothered the aspirations of half the world's population. I never really understood the shame of appeasement until I read Kazuo Ishiguro's "The Remains of the Day."

And now we must contend with a once-in-a-century pandemic that killed millions of people while terrifying billions. Literature cannot avoid the following questions. Humankind has just been through something extraordinary. What was it? What did it mean for a generation of children to simply miss a year or two of interaction with each other? For entire nations to freeze, panicked, while hoarding food and leaving bodies wrapped in the streets?

How will we come to regard the era of masks and vaccines — such an American preoccupation in its divisive fury? Will those unable to mourn the ones they lost ever move forward in remembrance and peace?

Perhaps it is too soon for literature to face these issues. We are enjoying a much-needed reprieve as a society from vicious fighting over COVID-19. Does anyone really have the stomach to read a book right now about masks, germs or — God forbid — Zoom cocktail hours? Literature, like historical analysis, needs perspective in order to mature, and the road to perspective is paved with time.

The best novel about the pandemic of 2020 may well be written decades from now — much as a key book about America's westward expansion appeared only in 1985: Cormac McCarthy's "Blood Meridian." Generations of accumulated wisdom allowed McCarthy to display not just what we had done in our advance West, but to tether that movement's brutality to humanity's inherent thirst for violence.

On the other hand, contemporaneous literature is capable of finding raw truth. George Orwell's "Homage to Catalonia" — arguably a cheat, because it is nonfiction — memorably captured the Spanish Civil War in real time. Ian McEwan's "Saturday" conveyed the ambivalent mood in Britain leading up to the invasion of Iraq soon after it occurred. Gary Shteyngart has confronted the pandemic already with "Our Country Friends," a novel about bubbling up during COVID-19. At the level of the zeitgeist, Don DeLillo addressed Midwestern ennui and Reagan-era anxiety under the fog of the same in 1985's "White Noise." His narrative trick was to transmute fear of a mushroom cloud into another specter entirely called the airborne toxic event.

When I sat down to write about my family's pandemic experience, I used a similar approach to DeLillo's. I had no interest in a novel dealing with masks or case counts. But I did feel a need to express the sudden intensity of parenting a young child without the support systems of school or community.

So I told a story about a father and son on a hiking trip who become stranded in the mountains during a time of war. They must spend the winter together high in a remote alpine cabin, afraid to descend. My characters are stranded just as my family had been. Their circumstances are simply more exotic. How would they manage, cut off from the world, to pass the time, get through home schooling, and play without other kids? By developing this theme in a story far from needles or rapid tests, I could explore the pandemic through narrative in a way that felt fresh.

Better writers will approach the pandemic from other angles. It is never too soon to grapple with world-shaking events. As to whether there will be an audience for such books: there already is. Look no further than the recent explosion in popularity of stories that seemed to anticipate the pandemic before it occurred, like Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 novel "Station Eleven" and Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film "Contagion." Mandel offered hope while Soderbergh gave us verisimilitude; what both have in common is art of quality.

When someone does write the great pandemic novel, readers will find it when they are ready for it. In its pages they will recognize their own pandemic experiences, or discover new ones they had not previously considered. And, in a process that literature can magically perform, readers will be transported and see the world anew.

Michael O'Donnell is the author of the forthcoming novel "Above the Fire." His writing appears in The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Wall Street Journal and The Economist.

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