

BOOK REVIEW

Lawrence Wright, *The End of October: A Novel*, New York: Knopf, 2020; pp. 400.

Prophesizing the Coronavirus

What happens when you ask a New York journalist to write a script about the end of the world? He imagines a full-on pandemic, right before a real pandemic sweeps across the globe. Such was the case with Lawrence Wright, New York staff writer and Pulitzer-prize winning author. His novel, *The End of October*, first published in April 2020, eerily synthesizes the events of the coronavirus pandemic, with a few twists.

The novel follows the journey of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) microbiologist Dr. Henry Parsons, a man who although possessed a loud and commanding voice, was “short and slight” due to a slight deformity during his childhood (Wright 2020, 11). The almost Nazi “*Herr Doktor*” travels to Indonesia to look into a mysterious virus that sprung up in Jakarta. He quickly realizes the danger of the air-borne disease, but he is far too late, as others have contracted the fictional virus Kongoli and began to travel around the world.

A carrier, Henry’s own driver, goes to Hajj in Mecca, but before Henry can get to him, the carrier dies during Hajj and is trampled upon. The result is the end of the carrier’s misery and the simultaneous spread of the virus to millions of other pilgrims. As such, a political and religious dilemma ensues to convince the Saudi administration to lock down Mecca, a task deemed nearly impossible. However, heroic Dr Parsons steps in, vocalizing the necessity of the situation, “I’m not just talking about containing a pandemic [...] I’m talking about saving a civilization” (Wright 2020, 120). Since the disease was first spread by Muslims, spectators all over the world watch in horror as the deadly virus spreads across the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia, leaving no continent unscarred. Distressed, people blame Islam for the sufferings of many innocent, stimulating Iran to fire missiles in response to Russia’s launch of cyberwarfare in the Arab World (Wright 2020, 272) and tensions continue to boil in the Gulf, amidst the havoc.

Much like real life, the president of the U.S. contracts the deadly disease and is one of the very first to be vaccinated. In the novel, other celebrities including Taylor Swift, Brad Pitt and even Anderson Cooper die of the Kongoli virus. Wright certainly does not spare us of detail. The novel is extremely well

researched, with detailed descriptions of types of viruses, containing methods, warfare plans, contingency systems, and shockingly detailed accounts of the ways in which the Kongoli virus attacks the body until death. He details systemic procedures governments take as cautionary measures such as an entire lockdown, “police reinforced, borders closed, sports and entertainment facilities shuttered, non emergency cases discharged from hospitals, schools closed, public meetings postponed, and the government shut down. In addition, any travelers need to get home at once before the pandemic takes root in America” (127).

Wright even alluded to the evolving virus, “The problem is that we might be able to design a vaccine for the virus we have on hand, but we can only guess at where it’s going” (150). Sure enough, coronavirus variants Delta (first identified in India), and Omicron (first identified in South Africa), have also begun to spread across the world. Ironically, the novel discusses how the Russian vaccine was deemed the least effective by other countries (277), which is also the case in the real world. Russia’s Sputnik V, a viral vector vaccine, brought up skepticism on its on-the-ground efficiency. The World Health Organization halted its review into Sputnik V due to insufficient data and quality control issues. Consequently, Russia’s vaccine is currently not approved for use in Canada, China, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, South Africa, and the United States.

After publishing the book, Wright admitted that he was impressed by the selflessness of the medical workers who risked their lives to save others. In *The End of October*, the nurses and doctors leave hospitals in complete chaos, converting normally bustling institutions into ghost towns. As a result, he dedicated the book “as a tribute to the courage and ingenuity of the men and women who have dedicated their lives to the service of public health.” Heavily influenced by Albert Camus’ *The Plague*, the book opens with one of his quotes, “But what does it mean, the plague? It’s life, that’s all.” Yet it is also about death. Tragedies of losing loved ones to the virus are heartbreakingly captured in the novel. Characters either have to deal with death, death of loved ones, or even to bury their own family. The story ends on a dismal note, leaving readers with an uneasy feeling of impending doom.

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