

Daniel Cordle, “Protect/Protest: British Nuclear Fiction of the 1980s.” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 45.4 (2012): 653-669.

Contained within a special issue of *The British Journal for the History of Science* on ‘British Nuclear Culture’, Daniel Cordle’s article provides a valuable assessment of the nuclear referent within a selection of British writings during the 1980s. Both Cordle’s article and the special issue more broadly outline an emerging area of scholarship which aims to unpick the ways in which nuclear technology and weaponry influenced British cultural life during the Cold War. Cordle’s article focuses on a series of socio-political events during the eighties – notably the “hard-lines stances” (655) of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan towards the Soviet Union and increasing reaction to the British government’s 1976 civil defence pamphlet *Protect and Survive* – and evaluates how these wider issues filtered into literary representation.

Cordle opens with an assessment of Maggie Gee’s novel *The Burning Book* (1983). He notes that the work is not a direct appraisal of nuclear defence policy, ostensibly offering “a conventional family saga” (653), yet argues that “periodically the narrative of the family’s lives is interrupted by voices from Hiroshima, [. . .] and at the end the family’s stories are violently truncated as a nuclear war breaks out” (653). Using Gee’s novel, Cordle describes a particular Cold War sensation whereby “nuclear threat shadows and threatens everyday life, but is largely unnoticed until crisis breaks out” (654). His key point in relation to 1980s fiction in Britain is that it articulates, uniquely, “a politics of vulnerability” (654) whereby literary works do not necessarily produce extended polemics against nuclear warfare but rather communicate the helplessness felt by individuals and communities in the event of thermonuclear conflagration. Cordle sees this literary strategy as emerging parallel to increased public scrutiny of the recommendations contained within *Protect and Survive*, arguing that “in order to construct a narrative of national civil security” (655) the pamphlet was required to highlight “the vulnerability of the country to nuclear attack” (655) as a means of legitimising the purpose of civil defence. Cordle continues by providing an excellent analysis of *Protect and Survive*, outlining how increasing media attention as well as E.P. Thompson’s counter pamphlet *Protest and Survive* (1980) and the rejuvenation of CND elevated a previously unnoticed government publication and made it “part of the iconography of 1980s nuclear culture in Britain” (656). *Protect and Survive*, Cordle argues, became a powerful symbol as its supposed reassurances about surviving nuclear war were overwhelmingly offset by its demonstration of “the vulnerability of ordinary citizens in a decade in which the threat of nuclear war came to seem much more urgent” (656).

The final part of Cordle’s article turns to a survey of nuclear fiction and contemplates a selection of major themes: “gender and family,” “the environment” and “society and socio-economic organisation.” He picks out a variety of works, such as the television drama *Threads* (1984), Raymond Briggs’ graphic novel *When the Wind Blows* (1982) and Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time* (1987) as well as providing interesting readings of two post-apocalyptic young-adult novels which have largely escaped critical attention – Louise Lawrence’s *Children of the Dust* (1985) and Robert Swindell’s *Brother in the Land* (1984). The analysis of these two works ties in with

the article's earlier critique of *Protect and Survive* as their grim visions of post-nuclear war communities – Cordle argues that fiction for teenagers in the eighties was “impressively robust” (658) in portraying the realities nuclear apocalypse – highlights the extreme vulnerability of individuals and communities when confronting thermonuclear exchange. Cordle concludes by returning to Gee's *The Burning Book* and an examination of the political activism described in the run-up to the novel's catastrophic dénouement. Citing Gee's evocation of a fictional yet recognisable Greenham Common protest where a group of women lie down in front of missiles, Cordle remarks that the tactic flaunts vulnerability as a way of de-legitimizing *Protect and Survive* and helping to “strip away the illusion of both protection and survival, to gamble naked flesh against the nuclear holocaust that awaits” (669). In this final point, Cordle re-emphasises how British nuclear literature of the 1980s rarely adopted overt political standpoints, but instead utilised human vulnerability as a means of communicating the general absurdity of nuclear stand-off.

If there is one minor criticism of Cordle's otherwise excellent article it is found in a reluctance to place the fiction of the eighties in a broader literary historiography of British Cold War fiction. While Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) and Peter Watkins' docu-drama *The War Game* (1965) are briefly discussed, Cordle does not explore how works such *Children of the Dust* and *Brother in the Land* correspond in terms of form and theme with British disaster narratives from earlier 'hot' moments of the Cold War – notably, it may have been appropriate to cite John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956), which although about ecological disaster, sees worldwide terror accentuated by the British government's use of nuclear weapons on its own people and ends with the protagonist inadvertently killing his own brother. However, this is a small point that does not detract from a fine article. Cordle skilfully outlines an area of British literary studies that has otherwise been overlooked while, at the same time, appropriately argues for a historical reassessment of the 1980s as a decade haunted by nuclear anxieties.

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