

Little Maison on the Prairie

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À la mémoire de Michel Galtié, agriculteur

At long last, I live on the prairie. Not, however, because I followed the heroes of the Western or the protagonists of the *Little House on the Prairie* books. Rather than moving to the Midwest, I settled in the Southwest, not of the US, but of France. And in French, the language where the word comes from, ‘prairie’ means a meadow/field (with wild flowers). I learned this etymology reading the description on a little package with seeds for wild flowers, realizing that during my whole professional life of dealing with US culture and literature, I had had no idea what prairie meant.

As I’ve grown older, I’ve identified more clearly (or just dared to articulate more openly?) how my biography has shaped my scholarly interests. As a woman from a poor, Catholic, rural context, I represented a tiny minority in academe. And my feelings of alienation may well have contributed to both my research interests in marginality (from Toni Morrison and African American women’s literature via the works of Octavia Butler to vampires) as well as popular and material culture (mail-order catalogs at the beginning of the twentieth century). Some of my lasting ‘personal’ interests, reflected in my reading preferences here on the prairie, are postapocalyptic scenarios, especially those with ideas of a return to self-sufficient living.¹

¹ And I read (autobiographical) researches into upward mobility, recently Didier Eribon, *Rückkehr nach Reims*.

Since retiring to a small village in the Southwest of France two years ago, I've been able to indulge some of my own yearnings for more self-sufficiency—I planted an orchard (with fruit and almond trees), hazelnut bushes, raspberries, and blackberries. I've harvested crops like potatoes and onions, trading with neighbors who have given me additional things like chestnuts and eggs for almonds and cakes that I bake. For many of these neighbors, subsistence farming is a way of life they've only recently left behind. A hard life without luxuries (running water was introduced in the late 1950s), but—if I listen to the stories of village fetes, and the caring for farm animals—a very satisfactory life.

My neighbor and friend Colette Galtié, who spent her eighty years as a farmer in this little village, loves to read, especially historical fiction having to do with farming, preferably about our region. I managed to find a French copy of *Little House on the Prairie*, a book I thought she might find captivating, in spite of her fundamental lack of interest in US society and culture. And indeed, she found many points of reference in the book, many comparable experiences in the descriptions of farming and life in straitened circumstances. My childhood has given me similar interests and ideas, like a conviction that a life without a washing machine is not really desirable—I remember my mother crying because the skin on her hands broke open on the washboard. The older women in our village remember their mothers still doing the laundry in the little river; nobody is nostalgic for this grueling labor. Additionally, Colette and I agree that we do not want to live without central heating (we remember bedrooms in which the water in glasses would freeze over).

And yet ... The recent explosion of (mostly popular) fictions that imagine apocalyptic scenarios with a return to simpler, more primitive ways makes me wonder. It suggests that I am by no means the only person who is, albeit ambivalently, attracted to such pastoral fantasies of the good, simple life in the country.²

It is no coincidence that postapocalyptic fantasies find a particularly fecund reception in the US. Historically, Thomas Jefferson (who had been the young nation's ambassador to France) with his idea of the yeoman farmer as the ideal (because independent) citizen of a democracy has been extremely influential, since the supposedly virgin and supposedly endless and abundant supply of land provided space for all who wanted to settle there. Like Rousseau and many Romantic thinkers (and the pastoral tradition), Jefferson was suspicious of cities and idealized the country and its population—a strain of thought still influential today, when utopian societies are

2 For better-known postapocalyptic novels, see Margaret Atwood's novels and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). One fantasy of self-sufficiency not related to a breakdown of civilization is Dylan Evans's *The Utopia Experiment* (2015).

invariably placed in the country and dystopian ones in the cities. And he was convinced that the less government, the better.³

Together with the myth of the frontier, the Jeffersonian ideal has constituted an incredibly fertile reservoir for the American imagination. In spite of historical revisions and interventions that suggest that it is only tangentially grounded in fact and has neglected to look at violence and genocide, the myth of the frontier has shaped American cultural fantasies again and again, over the decades and across the media. And from the moment of the frontier's disappearance, i.e., its closure by the US Bureau of the Census in 1890, popular fictions have nostalgically referred to the myth. Since an essential part of the myth has always been a fundamental ambivalence—the westward expansion of the frontier inevitably destroyed what it deemed most valuable—popular fictions invariably juxtapose the unfettered, free individuals (the Natty Bumppos) with the settlers. And while the free individual motif meant an absence of women and community, the settler motif included both.

Thus, the myth becomes intertwined with another myth: the little house on the prairie, the settling on individual farms dedicated to subsistence farming. This was a life of hardship, but satisfaction; of utter dependence on nature, but far-reaching independence from society and state. Quite a few of the most successful texts dealing with subsistence farming on the frontier were written by women, among them Willa Cather's wonderful novel *O Pioneers!* (1913) and the *Little House on the Prairie* (1930s) series.

The *Little House on the Prairie* series narrates and records—in a kind of exaggerated illustration of the Turner hypothesis—starting over again and again on the 'frontier' due to the restlessness of the father. The family moves from place to place, not only because places prove to be too difficult to cultivate (or are devastated by locusts, or destroyed by blizzards) but also because they become too crowded for the father's taste. For example, at the beginning of *Little House on the Prairie*, "Pa said there were too many people in the Big Woods now. [...] In the West [...] there were no settlers" (Wilder 1-2). The books are unrelentingly realistic: We learn what the settlers packed in the limited space of their wagons—bedding, tools, pots, pans, nails, and needles; no furniture, however, because the father can build furniture from scratch in any place. We read how one can cook with only a few basic ingredients. And I, personally, owe a solid knowledge of how to build a log cabin with only the essential tools to that novel's chapter "The House on the Prairie" (Wilder, *Little House*).⁴

3 These theories also included a distrust of a too strong government, a feature to which many postapocalyptic novels relate.

Even with the radical isolation of farmers on the frontier, nobody could really start from scratch or exist without some kind of support from the outside world. Many things like sugar or metal had to be brought to the frontier or bought if there was some kind of general store⁵ within reaching distance (and cash in the family). The arrival of a cookstove is a great joy for everybody, a luxury to be celebrated. In an economy like this, waste is unknown. The quilt is one of the most famous examples of recycling when patches of used clothing are sewn together for rugs and blankets; the girls already have “quilt blocks and [...] scrapbag[s]” (Wilder 123). I remember that my grandfather kept a collection of bent, used nails in the attic; Colette can relate to this, her family has always saved things; places like barns, basements, and stables where you can store things abound in the country. Hardly anything is ever thrown away. For example, kitchen waste goes into the compost, and that which cannot go into the compost (rats!) is fed to the chickens (in former times, pigs as well). This, then, is truly a sustainable way of life—the people don’t travel, they stay with their crops and their animals, and they do not waste.

With the transition from subsistence to industrial farming at the beginning of the twentieth century, the little house on the prairie gives way to huge silos and fields as large as Manhattan, fields that can only be cultivated with gigantic and extremely expensive machines (Schlereth 44). Hard physical labor and a life of utter simplicity are changed by technology, modern amenities, and leisure. Farmers become part of the capitalist consumer society, interdependent and dependent, part of networks of trade and commerce.

The end of subsistence farming did not come about without major cultural work, work that for the farmers in the Midwest was done by mail-order catalogs, specifically *Sears, Roebuck*. My research suggests that mail-order catalogs were the main national media for farmers before radio and TV, and they identified (certainly not only for altruistic reasons) with the task to communicate social and economic transformations to the farmers. How do you (you being a society/state/major company) nudge farmers into abandoning subsistence farming? Closely reading the mail-order catalogs, we can see how it was done: by suggesting that farming for cash would open up venues to a better life with more creature comforts (washing machines play a major role, but mostly farming technology). In the decades around 1900, when the US developed into the first consumer society in the world, politicians were anxious about a rural exodus, a flight from the hardship of the country to the promises of the cities. One of the

4 The self-sufficient and pious farmer family of Ingalls’s books not only embodies a Jeffersonian ideal but has later served as a reference point of conservative ideologies.

5 For a description of a general store, see Wilder, *Plum Creek* (154).

resulting political anxieties was to supply an expanding urban population with enough agricultural products.⁶

The transition from subsistence to surplus production for a capitalist market demands business acumen from the farmers—they have to know what kind of investment will return the highest profits or what role time management plays. “There is no business in the world,” the *Sears, Roebuck* catalog suggests, “in which returns are so certain as in dairying” (Schroeder 24). While earlier catalogs talk only about saving money, now, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the main thrust is making a profit: “Nearly all farmers keep cows to make money” (484).

One of the cornerstones of that radical transformation, of course, concerns a radically different way of dealing with animals. The catalog suggests that the farmers now, “under modern conditions,” should think of their animals no longer as “Bill, the plough horse” or “old Brindle” but as “machines” (Schroeder 869). At the end of this transformation, we now have horribly abused animals in industrialized farming; especially pigs and chickens are raised with disgusting and ethically questionable methods (read Annie Proulx’s novel *That Old Ace in the Hole* [2002] for a depiction of the cruel abuse of animals by the cattle barons of the nineteenth century, but also for the ecological consequences of such a transformation in agriculture).

Over the last decades, the end of subsistence farming has evoked nostalgic recreations that frequently manage to ignore the heavy work, an unpredictable nature, and the monotony of a lonely life. The ecological, ‘green’ movements have bred a desire for organic food and less ‘alienated’ lifestyles, similar to some utopian novels like Ernest Callenbach’s (lousy) *Ecotopia* (1975).

Historically, utopia has invariably been placed in small communities—isolated places such as islands or secluded valleys, following the pastoral tradition. There are practically no utopian novels set in big cities; indeed, in Marge Piercy’s feminist classic *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), the utopian sequences are set in an idyllic countryside, while the dystopian horrors are set in the city. In the twentieth century, the few utopian novels that could be imagined nearly all started from a drastic premise—they fantasized away major portions of the population. The aggressive potential of this fantasy remains unexplored and glossed over in utopian novels, while the recent postapocalyptic fictions wallow in it; they frequently indulge in detailed explorations of worldwide epidemics, cannibalism, warfare, or genetic mutations that kill off most human beings, leaving the few scattered survivors to start from scratch in a world where all institutions and the economy have collapsed.

6 I have published several articles where this process is explained and analyzed in more detail; cf., e.g., Koenen, “Mail-Order Catalogs”; “What Do You Keep Cows For?”

It is only fairly recently that these recreations of a pastoral idyll have become highly visible in literature, but with a major twist: They are no longer envisioned in the context of utopias but as a refuge in a postapocalyptic world. In a plethora of postapocalyptic scenarios, American (and, increasingly, British and German) writers dramatize (sometimes celebrate) again and again the breakdown of politics/society/civilization (caused by war, epidemics, zombies, an electromagnetic pulse) and imagine small groups or loners that rediscover subsistency. Survivalist fictions are complemented by how-to books, suggesting that with much less than forty acres, anybody with a healthy body can live independently. “The End of the World as We Know It”⁷ features in fictions that serve multiple needs and has also figured in survivalist documentations. *Doomsday Preppers*, for example, a successful reality TV show about survival, aired from 2011 to 2014. What does all this mean? Is it a flight from a society experienced as increasingly complex and controlling? Is it a child-like yearning for a golden age of innocent beginnings? Is it a means of confronting anxieties in an ever disturbing barrage of real and potential threats? Is it true that hard times “whet the appetite for survival stories” (Thurman), as some claim?

Many postapocalyptic fictions imagine a future haunted by rabid zombies, and the investment of these fictions in the exploration of otherness is obvious. Usually, the emphasis in the novels is on the (violent, frequently militaristic) struggle of the human survivors against the zombies. Original variations on the theme are Deirdre Gould’s *After The Cure* (2013) and *The Cured* (2014), where zombieism is a disease that may be cured. Gould’s books deal with the reactions of people to the recovery: Are ex-zombies responsible for what they did during their infection (like killing others, sometimes loved ones, and/or eating them)? How do the cured zombies deal with feelings of self-loathing and guilt?

In many postapocalyptic fictions, though, there are no zombies, only human survivors in societies devastated by war, epidemics, or electromagnetic pulse, people who have to cope with the violence of marauding gangs or simply hungry neighbors. This leads to the breakdown of all technology and communication, infrastructure and creature comforts such as central heating, and isolation on lonely farms or in small communities where subsistence farming is the main occupation. In essence, we are back to the *Little House on the Prairie*.

An overwhelming majority of these fictions is told from a mostly young, male point of view. One excellent exception is a much earlier novel by Marlen Haushofer, *Die Wand* (1963), and the more recent *Chaos: 429 Tage ohne Strom* (2016) by Bianca

7 An idea popularized by the American band R.E.M. in their 1987 song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine).”

Bolduan⁸ features a first-person narrator who is a grandmother in a village in Schleswig-Holstein (Germany) and an admirer of *Moby Dick*. The male point of view is frequently chauvinistic, even militaristic, nearly always sexist, often racist, sometimes openly homophobic⁹—the *Breakers* series (Robertson) and *Apocalypse Z* (Loureiro) are notable exceptions. What nearly all these fictions have in common are protagonists who are physically healthy. In the postapocalyptic world, somebody like me—older, not in good health, female—has no place. The chronically sick die in these futures, like the diabetic girl in *One Second After* (Forstchen, 2009).

With the *Little House on the Prairie* series, these fictions share an unrelenting realism; here, as well, we find long lists of things to be secured (never forget to hoard toilet paper for your postapocalyptic life). Some novels hardly differ from survivalist pamphlets in the way they obsess about these things. James Rawles’s highly questionable and seminal *Patriots* (1982) is a case in point. Even science fictions like the vastly successful *The Martian* (2011)¹⁰ by Andy Weir and Stephen Baxter’s *Titan* (1997) imagine (some kind of) subsistence farming in space—in both cases under strict limitations given by extremely hostile environments. After the apocalypse, big cities are hostile environments as well; in the example of the *Breakers* series, the few survivors have to raid the garden centers, looking for seeds, in order to start farming.

The general drift of these fictions, their nostalgic orientation to a supposedly happier simple life, even if that life is extremely harsh and hard, is suggested in *Chaos*: “Sometimes we wish time would return to when there was no electricity. It was simple, there were rules and limitations” (my trans.).¹¹ Many of these fictions stress the sense of liberation with the demise of entertainment technologies, the revival of traditional values, and the sense of community (e.g., *Chaos*, Sherry’s *Deep Winter*). In some fictions, community, indeed, is seen as both essential (elementary for survival, defense of the community) and desirable. Along with that, we see a renewed importance of religion—not only because some of the writers are obviously believers of the religious right (like Rawles and Sherry) but also because, as in *World Made by Hand* (2008), the survivors “did not have diversions like televisions or recreational shopping anymore, and the church had become [their] get-together place” (Kunstler 213). Compare this

8 In this postapocalyptic novel, nearly 90% of the population have died.

9 All of these attitudes are more or less wrapped up in contexts supposed to make them more palatable—thus, gay men are depicted as pedophiles, etc.

10 Recently made into a movie.

11 “[M]anchmal wünschen wir uns die stromlose Zeit zurück. Sie war klar, sie hatte ihre Regeln und Grenzen” (Bolduan). The first-person narrator describes how nobody wants to use electricity once it’s back, because people are managing—after a difficult period of transition—just fine. Several pages later, however, the washing machine reminds the female narrator of the finer sides of electricity.

with an observation about rural life in the US of the nineteenth century: One leading figure remarked that even in the relatively developed regions of New England, the only recreation were funeral occasions (Egleston qtd. in Emmet and Jeuck 14). Life in the postapocalypse has reverted to regionalism as well; the precarious infrastructure and subsistence farming do not allow for bigger communities or much trade with the outside world.¹²

Obviously, the preference for a postapocalyptic life amounts to a fundamental criticism of contemporary society. An immense dissatisfaction must have led to these scenarios; Freud's discontent with civilization comes to mind. Although all the protagonists start out shocked, grieving, and sometimes traumatized, they increasingly come to enjoy the return to a much more 'primitive' way of life in a majority of these fictions. While scavenging the remains of the perished consumer societies, the individuals slowly begin to see the rewarding features of the new life; they not only deplore the absence of electricity, the lack of medical care, and failure of communication with the outside world but they also begin to praise the advantages of tight communities, shared values, and a return to the basics (e.g. in Kunstler's *World Made by Hand*). They celebrate that things are no longer mass-produced but handcrafted (the fictions prefer a selective gaze here and dwell on furniture and houses; one wonders about things like, again, toilet paper, or china).

It is troubling, though, what these fictions manage to accept: the survival of the strongest as the basis of life; the loss of individual freedom (especially for women and, frequently, minorities); self-defense as a substitute for a legal system. Not even mentioned in most of the novels and only hinted at in one is the disappearance of intellectual life. There may still be some music, but there is no literature, no theory, no philosophy. And more than a whiff of technophobia emerges; characters are happy to observe that the only part of the old world that is definitely lost is "the part that the machines lived in" (Kunstler 283). We get an idea of the price one has to pay for such a society when the protagonist describes a root canal without the help of advanced technology and without modern anesthesia. Amazingly, the protagonist fails to see the connection, but of course it was not his root canal.

As much as I enjoy reading postapocalyptic novels, these features disturb me, and others as well: the absence of people like myself, the hasty rejection of intellectual life and technology (plus the problems mentioned above like militarism, frequently also lousy style). I wonder: Do the authors represent people fed up with society because

12 "Everything was local now" (Kunstler 242), a result of the collapse of infrastructure, echoes the Green emphasis on local consumption. "Globalism was over" (Kunstler 362). This of course also means that the cuisine is much more local and absolutely not international: Spices are a scarcity.

contemporary life is seen as too repressive? Or because it has become too comfortable (remember the thirsting for adventure, even violence in *Brave New World*)? As somebody who can relate to some of the nostalgic yearning, but who's never included, and who would not like to make do without certain things (material and intellectual), I am profoundly ambivalent.

My gardening experience has demonstrated beyond a doubt that subsistence farming would be way beyond my powers. My friend Colette looks back on a life of subsistence farming with her husband Michel, and although she cannot imagine having led another life—she has always loved working outdoors, enjoyed living with the animals—she also stresses the hardships: There were no vacations, no creature comforts, certainly no luxuries. Talking with her, I am confronted with a fundamental choice we had or have to make; I am made acutely conscious of the price (and I don't mean money) we pay for creature comforts—comforts that, for example, allow us to live longer (and without pain) since we have access to advanced medical care. And probably even that ambivalent choice is a thing of the past—there are hardly any small farmers left in our small valley. You can no longer eke out a living by subsistence farming. Tant pis.

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