

Episode 21: The End of the World As We Know It (And I'm Inside)

I've been trying to avoid writing about the pandemic as a whole because I think everyone spends all day every day involuntarily being forced to reckon with the fact that we're just having to go on with our silly little days while the world is ending. But then Sydney announced it was going to extend lockdown for another month, and suddenly every other thought left my head. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to just go about my day knowing that I am going to have to listen to some of the stupidest opinions in existence from people who either think the government is using the vaccine to microchip us, or people who are ultra-cops who want to police low socioeconomic areas out of existence. And then on top of that there's Afghanistan, the climate crisis and a never-ending stream of other terrible things I'm supposed to also somehow internalise and have an opinion on.

I've been alternating between pacing around my room like a caged animal, overestimating my personal fitness by speed walking 5kms in the dark to avoid people during my state-sanctioned exercise time, and lying on the floor staring at the ceiling. You could add a Jeff Buckley soundtrack and a single tear running down my cheek and I'm like the shittiest protagonist in an indie film. I'm doing fine, thanks for asking.

And I'm gathering that other people are feeling approximately the same. The other day I put up a screenshot of a Tumblr post on my Instagram story about deciding to lie down and wait for death in a fancy little outfit during the apocalypse, rather than desperately trying to survive, and like 15 people, including some of my nice normal friends who don't think death is a huge cosmic joke responded to it being like "YEP. SAME." Anyway, since my brain literally can't process anything beyond the fact that it feels like the world is ending, that's what we're talking about.

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition – and today I'm thinking about doomsday.

Ok, to be honest with you – I've been kind of mulling over some iteration of this episode since March of 2020. When the pandemic was first declared to be a pandemic, I thought it could be kind of nifty to look at films like Contagion and see how the reality of a highly contagious airborne virus measured up to cinematic expectation. But the more this wore on, the stronger the impulse was to put it on the backburner. It's hard to look at reality vs. the movies in a light way when the actual problem at hand is just sort of... happening outside your door. So, I didn't do it, and here I am a year and a half later still experiencing the same issue.

I actually think, with more time and somehow less distance, I've got a different idea of how to approach this. So, inspiration came from a couple of places. Pre-pandemic one of my favourite shows to watch was *Doomsday Preppers* which, much like the title suggests, was a show about America's weirdest people and the tens of thousands of dollars they spent on preparing for whatever version of the apocalypse they saw coming. Some of them were religious zealots, some of them thought that the earth was going to turn on its axis, and some of them just had reasonably sensible concerns about climate change, taken to their logical extreme. And I've been thinking about those people a lot, because essentially the pandemic has made a lot of their concerns a reality, but I get the sense that none of them have actually used their bug out bags to get the hell out of dodge yet.

And then the second piece of inspiration came when Bo Burnham released his widely acclaimed comedy special *Inside* on 30th May 2021. If you haven't watched it, it's uh... well it's about being trapped inside your house while the world ends. It's pandemic art. But the good kind, not the kind like the movie with the guy *Riverdale* in it about the "COVID-23" virus and "quarantine camps". It's funny and also extremely upsetting, which is sort of where I sit emotionally most days anyway. And while I was watching it for the 15th time, I started thinking wondering if the preppers on *Doomsday Preppers* were having similar thoughts. I started thinking too hard about other people's emotional inner lives, is what I'm saying.

Between *Doomsday Preppers* and *Inside*, there's two visions of how the end of the world plays out and they're worlds apart. So, I want to spend some time unpicking what the doomsday preppers shown on the TV were up to, why that doesn't jibe with reality, and what an actual piece of pandemic art tells us about how we're really processing disaster. If at any point throughout this episode you hear me using the words "unprecedented times" I want you to pause the podcast, come find me, box my ears. Ok? Ok. Let's get into it shall we?

Doomsday Preppers premiered on the National Geographic channel in 2011. The basic premise of the show is that Practical Preppers, a disaster preparedness/survival company, comes out with a camera crew to the strongholds of some of America's biggest preppers to rate their preps, while also giving the audience some stats on the likelihood of each prepper's end of the world scenario happening. Each prepper's dream disaster scenario – or at least, the one that they're most afraid of – varies wildly. They're afraid of everything from electromagnetic pulses wiping out the power grid, to literal judgement day and everything in between. Sometimes that in between includes pandemics, although less often than you'd think. If that premise doesn't tell you that this show is going to feature the full gambit of America's paranoid, government-hating freaks and weirdos, then allow me to verbally confirm that that is the case. Some of the arsenals these people are holding would have been enough to carry Russia through the first and second World Wars. And it's just sitting in some guy's basement in Colorado.

Now, as someone who struggles with having a body as a general concept, let alone placing that body in the context of continued survival following a nuclear holocaust or some such thing, I find it really difficult to understand why anyone would latch on to something as nebulous as the end of the world to fear. Don't these people have real problems? Or at the very least, some sort of social anxiety? And look, if the makeup of the show's audience is anything to go by, the answer is maybe no. Domsday Preppers became one of the National Geographic channel's most successful shows, with a majority male audience aged 44+. While Nat Geo does make an attempt to show off a diverse range of preppers, the folks featured on the show are also overwhelmingly middle-aged white men. Probably because that's largely also the prepper community. There's one episode where a nice woman is showing off her self-sustaining garden where she intends to ride out the impacts of a huge tectonic shift in the mid-west and use bee-products like honey and wax to barter with travellers fleeing the cities. She says, "It can be really hard to feel like you are part of the prepper community, when politically and ethically you don't align with a lot of other preppers". She's one of the few people featured without a huge cache of weapons, and one of the few women featured who doesn't actively talk about defending herself from would-be rapists with deadly weapons.

Survivalism isn't a new concept – human beings love to prophesise the end of days, meaning that there is always a subset of people seeing those predictions and saying, "I think the fuck not." The Church of Latter Day Saints has been

telling followers to stockpile for years, citing preparedness as one of the things the Big Man Upstairs is about. Things like the war and economic depression have long-lasting impacts on the way that people approach the world. Anyone with older relatives probably has at least one who can't walk past a special on tinned vegetables in the supermarket without coming back with enough to feed an army. But I do think there's a pretty significant difference between say, some stockpiled cans or an interest in knowing how to grow your own food, and the types of things going on in Domsday Preppers. When Preppers first came out a review in the New York Times called it "offensively anti-life... full of contempt for human kind" – and this is true. While none of the preppers can agree on which end of the world as we know it scenario is going to happen, the one thing almost all of them have in common is that everyone anticipates violence. And in many cases, is not only anticipating but gleefully expecting it. One of the particular preps that stuck in my mind was a man who had built a bunker for his family in the middle of nowhere that had a mechanism that doused their doorstep in flames, so that any would-be intruders would be cooked to an agonised crisp if they were deemed to be unfriendly. Or even just unwanted. All this was set up feet away from the children's bunk beds. Another was a man who had sunk all his money into a truck that was essentially a tiny, heavily fortified house on wheels, so they could leave their neighbours in the dust. Like Mad Max without the leatherwear. Mad Max but for the suburban dad. Every episode there's a montage of the prepper patrolling the perimeter of their property with some sort of assault weapon with a

voiceover saying "Well obviously, with our stockpiles of food and water we have to be concerned about unsavoury types who might be panicking. If they get past my barbed wire fence and my dogs, they'll meet me." It's never supposed to be funny, but 'me' I always some pale guy in ill-fitting tactical wear waving a gun around or crouching in the ready position.

I think the thing that stands out watching these episodes now is how convinced everyone is that the end of the world will be an event. It feels so Hollywood. Like one day, they'll wake up, and a little computer voice will say "Good morning, the nuclear holocaust will begin in 15 minutes. Please begin gathering your weapons and head to your bunker of choice. Ensure you pack your copy of *The Knowledge: How to Rewrite the World from Scratch*. You're going to need it". But that's not really it, is it? For one thing, the world ends for people all the time. In one memorable episode of *Preppers*, a white man with a Cambodian wife shows off his cave bunker that he's bought for his family following full societal collapse. It's cold, wet and uncomfortable, and the camera cuts away to his wife, who fled the Killing Fields as a child, staring, traumatised into the middle distance. "I've done this before," she says. "I know I can do this. I don't need to prove it. I don't want to talk about it. You just do it." While her husband is busy playing dress up for an imaginary scenario of persecution, her world has already ended once. She wasn't the hero of the story – she was just a kid who saw the worst humanity had to offer at that moment and managed to make it out.

For another thing, we're in the middle of a doomsday scenario now. A pandemic is one of the events referenced on *Doomsday Preppers* as something to be ready for. There's one episode where a woman shows off her preparations for the global spread of a deadly flu-like virus – I think she'd been inspired by the then-recent SARS and H1N1 outbreaks. She takes us through her hideous suburban mansion filled to the brim with PPE, disinfectants and food stores, then walks us through the drill she runs with her family so that they know how to prevent the spread of the virus and defend their home. And look, this woman won the world's shittiest lottery – her prediction for the end of the world came true. But I want the follow up – I want to know whether she saw the words 'Global Pandemic' appear on her TV and thought "yes!" Did she run the drills and arm herself? Did she start cracking into her supplies of rice and beans? Did her kids and grandkids look at the rising body count on their TV and think "Wow, she wasn't crazy after all"?

The cynic in me thinks no. Because the end of the world doesn't actually look like it does in the movies. There's no big announcement, no main characters, no ticking clock. We're all just sitting in our houses, slowly melting down. Like do you remember what you were doing when you realised there was a pandemic happening? Neither. I do remember one weird moment where I went to a shopping centre after things had opened up a bit and a voice over the intercom reminded everyone that they needed to wear a mask and remain socially distanced, which felt a bit apocalypse-y. But other than that, no one has come marauding

my snacks or toilet paper, no one has attempted to take my virtue and I've never thought "Shit, I wish I owned a fire arm." Rather than turning on each other, everyone just sort of ended up forlornly staring into their Zoom meetings and going "how are you holding up?"

This long slow collapse has never been more beautifully reflected than in Bo Burnham's *Inside*. If you haven't actually watched the special before starting this episode, I highly recommend doing so, but to give you a very brief summary: *Inside* is filmed predominantly in one room, and features Bo Burnham endlessly referring to and unpicking the types of internet culture that made him famous in the first place, largely through song but also through small written sketches. The songs careen between tones in a way that I think would be kind of unsettling if we weren't all feeling a little emotionally frayed anyway. A song about the heavenly mundanity of a white woman's Instagram veers off into a 15 second sidebar about missing dead parents. A song about addressing problematic behaviour spirals into a self-reflexive punch on about the nature of accountability. At one point he just weeps into the camera. *Vulture* called it a Cindy Sherman-esque self-portrait, where instead of unpacking versions of femininity, Burnham is unpacking versions of online personas. In short, it's the perfect piece of art for this time and place. *Inside* somehow manages to tackle the end of the world as we know it in a way that feels at times painfully authentic.

This special demonstrates this best in one shot of Burnham from above, eyes closed,

microphone resting on the pillow next to his head, blanket over his shoulders, various pieces of music paraphernalia littering the floor. Without opening his eyes, he says:

"I don't know about you guys but I've been thinking recently that, you know, maybe allowing giant digital media corporations to exploit the neurochemical drama of our children for profit... you know... maybe that was a bad call... by us. Maybe the flattening of the entire human subjective human experience into a lifeless exchange of value that benefits nobody except for a handful of bug-eyed salamanders in Silicon Valley... maybe that as a way of life forever, maybe that's um. Not good..."

He takes a deep breath and there's a pause before he continues: "I'm... horny."

I think the reason I love this so much is that it highlights the fact that the actual pandemic isn't the problem necessarily – it's more that the governmental and social failures during the pandemic are symptoms of crisis in the other nebulous systems we use to govern our life. The problems we've created for ourselves are so... abstract that they feel insurmountable. How do you deal with the fact that the internet has seeped so far into the grout of your life that your children might be becoming fascists on an internet forum and you wouldn't even know about it? Doomsday isn't a singular event. It's a long and on-going unfurling of everything that's gone wrong in the course of human history. And the second you start to think about it very hard at all your horrible little gremlin brain kicks

in with your most base needs to distract you.

There are no heroes in that situation. How do you even know when to start using the tinned beans you've stored, or to come in guns blazing, when it turns out that the state of labour exploitation means that the heroes of the pandemic are 15 year old grocery packers on their second round of COVID?

Look, I'm willing to concede that for about 10 minutes there, I can see how, if you were a prepper, that it would have been tempting to yell "It's happening!" while American cities crumbled into waves of protest and police brutality, but the thing is, those things only started happening after the doomsday event had already kicked off. Well, I mean... the large scale protests, not the police brutality. The police brutality's been there for years. But I don't think either of those things got preppers out of their seats. The survival scenario that the preppers planned for is happening. Instead, it looks more like the kind of self-mutilating introspection that we see on Inside. I don't think this is the doomsday event that the preppers were planning on, because they're not really being called to action in the way they planned. Wesley gave me this wonderful quote from Frank Herbert's 1965 novel Dune that I think applies here: "Forever seeking, forever prepared and forever unready."

Well, there was the pandemic episode. We can put that to bed now. Given that we've talked a little about lockdowns, I would just like to take this moment to say that Sydney has been in lockdown with no financial support for its most

vulnerable for weeks now. The Australian Unemployed Worker's Union is currently campaigning for higher income support during lockdown as a proven method of successfully helping economically insecure people stay in their homes. The AUWU does great work – I'm going to chuck a donation their way, if you would like to join me. Otherwise, talk to me about the end of the world next time you see me at the pub (if we're ever allowed out again). Peace!

This episode premiered on 25th August 2021

Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))

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