

A COMMENTARY BY PHILIP BEIDLER

Remembering *On the Beach*

BEFORE WORLD WAR II, HOLLYWOOD SCARED PEOPLE TO death with mad scientists and monsters. During World War II they specialized in strutting Nazis and villainous Japs. After the war, political subversives mixed with space creatures, and vice versa; as importantly, in what had come to be called the nuclear age, a whole new category of fear film centered on atomic mutants: *Them*; *Godzilla*; *Attack of the Crab Monsters*; *It Came From Beneath the Sea*. More directly, *Invasion USA*. (1952) combined fear of nuclear attack with communist takeover, helping to usher in the new Cold War genre of Soviet/US atomic mass destruction movies culminating in such boomer classics as *Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*, both issued in 1964.

Less frequently remembered, perhaps because slightly older—albeit now decidedly more interesting for its emphasis on the human depiction of nuclear aftermath than on the Pentagon-Kremlin mechanics of initiating wars of mutual annihilation—is the one that first got the attention of popular audiences on the subject. That would be *On the Beach* (1959), Stanley Kramer's elegiac representation of the dying remnant of a world in the wake of global atomic warfare. In the golden age of Technicolor and Cinemascope—and to this degree anticipating its better known successors—it was a black-and-white film of stark, muted, austere genius, featuring career performances from a number of important actors: Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, a pre-*Psycho* Anthony Perkins, and Fred Astaire, in his first purely

dramatic role. In all these respects, it became a movie that challenged people who saw it never to look at the world in the same way again.

As was characteristic of the times, the origins of the film lay in a moderately popular, Book-of-the-Month-Club or Reader's Digest Condensed Books sort of book: a novel of the same title by a prolific, but relatively uncelebrated Anglo-Australian writer named Nevil Shute, that had showed up two years earlier and had gained a certain cachet of intellectual discussion. The author, whose full name was Nevil Shute Norway, by birth Anglo-Irish, had served a teenage stretcher-bearer during the 1916 Irish Rising and then been conscripted to brief World War I service in British Army. After University education at Oxford, he had trained as an aeronautical engineer, and then had again returned to military service during World War II as a Royal Navy Reserve officer working with secret weaponry. In the meantime he wrote substantial amounts of fiction. A postwar emigrant to Australia, today he remains something of cult figure, though with no single book remembered to most readers save *On the Beach*. At the time, a lot of people seem to have bought it—with sales of a quarter million, it ranked number eight on the 1957 best-seller list for fiction. One wonders how many read it. I certainly did, although it is hard to say just when, looking back on events fifty years ago. Whether I came to the book before or after the film, I'm not sure. I have certainly never forgotten it.

At the same time, even as post-global conflict, end-of-the-world text, it wasn't unique. Most American public school students, for instance, would likely have remembered Stephen Vincent Benet's "By the Waters of Babylon," a pre-World War II fable about a post-apocalyptic New York City, which seems to have been standard curricular fare during the era. Those of more advanced predilections might also have been aware of a sequence of mid-1950s stories by popular science-fiction writer Walter Miller about a post-nuclear landscape, eventually assembled into the 1960 cult novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Like these in many ways, in the fable dimension at least, I can see now that it was not a particularly good novel. Workmanlike is the best one can say, at least until toward the end, with a lot of rather stilted dialogue, quasi-scientific exposition, back-story; plot-rigging, and typecast major characterizations. The American sub captain, Dwight Towers, having brought his command south by submerged route from the contaminated Northern Hemisphere, is US Navy by-the-book and relentlessly faithful to a wife two years dead, in sum a rather wooden, if sententious prig. Moira Davidson, the unmarried Australian woman with whom he falls in love, and she with him, is a boozy sexpot, the kind of single girl-about-town Americans would have considered the local whore, in the specific instance also decidedly in the thrall of what would

now be understood as alcoholic drinking. Symptomatic of the problem is a sailing race in which the two participate, early in the book, where she manages, in the course of overturning the boat, to ditch the top of her swimming suit, coyly called a bra. The bra is not the problem; the boat is. Shute, it turns out, was himself an avid sailor; the pages devoted to the race are filled with opaque summary of the most useless nautical jargon. Similarly, in the book's final quarter, scenes devoted to the fatalistic passion developed by the cynical Australian scientist John Osborne for grand prix auto racing, Shute the engineer and driving enthusiast emerges, with loving attention and detail devoted to various automobile makes, designs, racing techniques and protocols. A younger Australian couple, Peter and Mary Holmes, facing death with their infant daughter Jennifer, are ingénue material in the customary parallel relationship with the more problematic Dwight Towers and Moira Davidson. The aforementioned John Osborne, as in all the analogous books and movies, is the "scientist," explaining things so that lay people can understand them, within the text and without. At the same time, in spite of all this, one must concede that even fifty years later, the evolutions of the major characters through their intertwined stories and those of the lives of others surrounding them make their fates both individually and commonly affecting. I shall return to more about this later.

The basic outlines of book and movie are relatively congruent. The major characters comprise the core of a various and interesting group of people assembled in southern Australia, at the bottom of the southern hemisphere, around Melbourne. They are all basically waiting to die as a result of radiation sickness after a global nuclear war two years earlier

In the book, the war has begun, as far as anyone can tell, with a bomb dropped on Naples by the Albanians—a good choice for the times, in the late 1950s the quintessential rogue nation, loony, dark, and secretive, an off-brand Communist dictatorship menacing even by Balkan standards. (Not for nothing in 2008 are ethnic Albanians, after the bloody 1990s mass-killings in the former Yugoslavia, the people now prepared to set off the newest round by just declaring Kosovar independence from Serbia.) Then someone unidentified has dropped one on Tel Aviv. The Egyptians, equipped with nuclear weapons and sophisticated long-range bombers by their Russian sponsors, are an obvious choice; and the US and Great Britain become involved. With Cairo menaced, the Egyptians retaliate by dropping bombs on London and New York. Meanwhile, this has been tied up with a whole other scenario—now a curious blend of the imaginary and prophetic—involving a quite specific conflict between two expansionist Asian powers, Soviet

Russia and Communist China. Russia wants the port of Shanghai as a trade outlet for the great production centers west of Urals, those having progressively grown into Asian space after their World War II relocation. The Chinese want the new industrial areas and the vast lands on which they sit for population expansion. It is the Russians and Chinese who have begun seeding bombs with “cobalt” as a nuclear contaminant producing enormous amounts of lethal radiation. At the same time, it is noted that the British and Americans, along with the Russians, have initiated the great campaigns of bombing for “destruction.” None of this was particularly good science, even for the time. Most pertinent for early 21st century readers remains the idea of a “limited” nuclear war, a “tactical” exchange of bombs between lesser nations. As phrased by the scientist, John Osborne, “It wasn’t the big countries that set off this thing. It was the little ones, the Irresponsibles” (96). Thus has come the unfolding of catastrophe, rather like the popular conception of a nuclear chain reaction, that quickly becomes an all-out war of global destruction among all powers, major and minor, with an estimated 4,700 weapons finally exploded worldwide, wiping out all major political and military targets and population centers in the Northern Hemisphere.

Accordingly, thus has occurred basically offstage, for those awaiting the deadly radiation cloud being carried by the rotation of the earth and the patterns of the prevailing winds, what we would call now the nuclear holocaust, had the expression been coined. It hadn’t, in fact, barely just in evidence at the time referring to the Nazi annihilations of the Jews. Still, as to Biblical proportions, Shute does it religiously by the numbers. The setting is seven years in the future. The time covered is the last nine months of people’s lives. Armageddon or Apocalypse would still have been mainly scriptural, finding popular-culture currency only later in the *Terminator* movies or in popular texts of Christian Fundamentalism such as the *Left Behind* series. (In movies, ironically, the former would become most closely associated with the Vietnam War; the latter with the scenario of a racing comet about to make impact with planet earth.). Doomsday would probably have been the operative adjective—linked to a quaint word and idea, fifty years later, known as *Fallout*. To borrow a literary reference, in the present case from a curricular staple widely known in the culture, T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men,” “This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but with” . . . radiation sickness. It is the disease of nuclear victims, that is, described indelibly by John Hersey, among others, in his postwar classic *Hiroshima*. Its main features are weakness; flu-like symptoms, fever, cough, aching joints; nausea and diarrhea. The latter are the primary processes

whereby one dies, as Shute is as pains to emphasize in the deeply moving human final portions of the book: vomiting one's guts up, and shitting one's pants off.

A nice geographic touch for the times, in both book and movie, is its setting in Australia, a vivid, interesting place of great appeal to post-World War II Americans. A vigorous young democracy of the land down under, something of a Pacific counterpart or national alter-ego, quaintly British and brawlingly American, it had figured highly in the Pacific War against the Japanese. It was the place where MacArthur had gone after the fall of the Philippines, according to media legend, to secure its defenses and to begin rebuilding American land armies. From Australia had been launched early, desperate attacks to reclaim New Guinea; Bougainville, the Solomons, first for the protection of the Australian continent and then as part of the great march across the Southwest Pacific conjoining with the great navy and marine campaigns of Nimitz to the North. Many Americans who had served in the Pacific, in the Marines, Army, Navy, and Air Corps, had spent time there. As recorded through Leon Uris' *Battle Cry*, itself greatly popular as both novel and film, it was a place where Americans like the lumberjack-Marine Andy Hookans, find both true love and a true home, in the outback with a wise, sturdy Australian girl, the widow of an Australian soldier. Australian soldiers themselves were famous as fighters in far flung theaters of war and as brave coast watchers on Pacific Islands, secretly reporting Japanese movements. The regions of Oceania themselves had further gained celebrity through James A. Michener's bestselling *Tales of the South Pacific* and the celebrated Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical that had sprung from its pages. Pacific travel generally was enlarged through Hawaii statehood and growth in the vacation industry once air travel became popular and convenient. On a more somber note, Bikini Atoll became the much reported site of American Pacific H-Bomb Tests, combining exponential aggravation of nuclear fears with notorious developments in the swimsuit industry.

In all this, Australia became America's great South Pacific ally, known to schoolroom geography aces as the only Island continent, and the biggest Island in the world. Previously known to Americans through Mark Twain travel books such as *Following the Equator*, in the age of film and TV documentary it became the land of exotic flora and fauna and in global athletics the ground of sturdy, sportsmanlike competition by its jumpers, runners, and tennis players. The groundbreaking British four minute miler, Roger Bannister, found his competition in the ascendant Australian challenger, John Landy. Sports magazines featured Aussie Davis Cup tennis heroes like Ken Rosewall and Lew Hoad. Meanwhile, in popular science,

Australia figured as a gateway to the Antarctic regions as part of the highly touted U.N. International Geo-Physical Year.

In *On the Beach*, Australophilia is the only form of admiration left. Australia becomes the good last place on earth, a good place for the human species to go down swinging. Throughout the movie, in an ineffable sadness, the band even plays “Waltzing Matilda.” The northern hemisphere has simply been wiped out. Now a miasmatic cloud of radiation moves with the prevailing winds and global climate patterns, steadily down the southern latitudes, bring with it the deadly radiation sickness to the last places of human habitation, the Southern Parts of Africa and South America, Australia and New Zealand. The early symptoms, weakness and nausea, are already the kiss of death. The diarrhea part sets in at the last, with everyone, young and old, especially in the book, trying to die with dignity basically while shitting themselves to death. There too, in a kind of admiring hymn to Aussie pragmatism, healthy acceptance, bodily candor, the government makes available basically painless death kits: tablets, presumably cyanide with some sleeping ingredient, and a syringe for those—children, pets, and the like, where injection might be preferable to oral administration.

Some small mention is made in the book of missiles as well as bombers. One suspects that this surely heightened American interest by the time of the movie. 1957 was year of the Russian Sputnik, followed in early 1958 by the US Vanguard. Space rocket aspirations were quickly translated into a race for missile nuclear-warhead delivery systems. Within years silos were going in across Nebraska and the Ukraine.

Accordingly, it was probably the 1959 movie that nailed most Americans on this one and helped them identify with the all-American cast. Gregory Peck is Dwight Towers, the American submarine skipper, having brought his boat to Australia from a dead northern hemisphere, a silent world with hundreds of millions, billions of silent, decaying corpses, including those of his wife, son, and daughter, he knows, back in suburban Connecticut. Ava Gardner is Moira Davidson, the hard-drinking, sexually promiscuous, independent Aussie woman, off on a final, end-of-the-world toot devoted to racking up as many laurels as possible in both fields before it is over. A younger, parallel couple, the Australian Navy Lieutenant Peter Holmes and his wife Mary, recent parents of their first child, are played by Anthony Perkins and Donna Anderson. The scientist in the book is named John Osborne—in a contemporary literary reference, the name also of the author of *Look Back in Anger*, one of the English playwrights and novelists grouped as “the angry young men.” Renamed Julian in the movie, and given a kind of wise savoir

faire, he is played by Fred Astaire in a graceful, elegiac performance for which he received an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actor.

In the book and the movie, the doomsday scenario is writ large into a last political plot and also into the closer cultural endgame, the web of individual psychological and social accommodations. The Australian Admiralty, assuming command over the US captain and crew, devise a scientific mission for the sub to cruise back to the west coast of the US. In a reprise of World War II adventure movies such as *Destination Tokyo* and *Run Silent, Run Deep*, with a nod perhaps to Disney's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the destination of their globe-girdling underwater mission is Alaska, to see how fast the cloud is moving south. It is also to resolve the mystery of a single radio signal, mysteriously emanating in strange, indecipherable Morse code, from a coastal station in the US Pacific Northwest, near Seattle. In the movie it is San Diego. That mystery is depressingly resolved when an attached Australian officer goes ashore in a radiation suit and finds the source: a overturned coke bottle—in a bald symbolic reference—wedged between a broken window sash and a transmitting key, rocking on its side when the wind blows and sending out intermittent gibberish. The power supply is a hydroelectric generating station, where the turbines have somehow, against all engineering expectations, held out for two years without servicing. One of the great, conclusive moments in the book and the film comes at the point in the mission when the scientist shuts down the power for the last time. Another involves a common sailor, one of the US Navy crew, a native of San Francisco, who has escaped while the sub has been at periscope depth looking for life in San Francisco Bay. From the sub, he can nearly see his house. When we see him last, he is back on the bay in a rowboat, bidding his shipmates farewell. He is trying to fish.

In these respects, a possible title for this text, capitalizing on a mixing of the sardonic and nostalgic that frequently makes itself available as a mood in retrospective writing about postwar popular-culture productions of this grim, melodramatic sort, might well have been “How *On the Beach* Scared the Be-Jeezus Out of Us.” That would have been amusing, but it would have grossly mischaracterized the somber beauty of the film in the social dimension and the chastening effect it clearly had on thoughtful audiences. It is repeatedly the small, human detail of the cultural endgame that strikes us. It is as if an ensemble such as the doomed chateau party assembled by Jean Renoir in *The Rules of the Game* has done a small tutorial in Kubler-Ross. All the steps are there: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

But there is more than just modelling. Indeed, in retrospect, whether re-reading the book or going back to the movie, one is finally struck by the end at how well people die both as individuals and as people understanding their role in relationships to each other and the world. Most wind up bearing to the end the stamp of personality that used to be called character. Generally, in making their forms of separate peace with doomsday, they all just basically opt to go crazy in their own ways; along the process, they find their own personal codes of endurance and acceptance, their small pieces of dignity and integrity. And this is no Hemingway conceit; this is how average, in many ways typical people learn how to die. Peter Holmes, the young Australian ensign, and his wife Mary foolishly plan to replace trees and re-design their garden. As they take their death pills, having made sure their child is dead first, they express quiet gratitude for the time they have found with each other. "I've had a lovely time since we got married," she says. "Thank you for everything, Peter." "I've had a grand time, too," he replies. "Let's end on that. John Osborne restores a vintage Ferrari, stores up a special alcohol-based racing fuel, and competes victoriously in the giddy, murderous, wreck-strewn trials and finals of the last Australian Grand Prix—on earth. Moira, calling on influential friends in government, has gotten the trout season set forward for one last year. She and Dwight go together to a celebrated mountain resort with a hotel full of jovial anglers. As with Jake Barnes and Bill Gorton at Burguete in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, the mood is elegiac and sacramental. It is also the last chance of Dwight and Moira to sleep together. As people do in this book, they do the right thing—each according to their poignant, crazy lights. Dwight, the American skipper, remains faithful to Sharon and the kids, all of them are two years dead. By now he talks about them as if they are alive somewhere in Connecticut; he is actually using a fishing rod he has bought to take home as a present for the boy, to make sure it is field-worthy; he has bought his wife a jeweled bracelet; he has been unable to find a Pogo stick for his daughter; Moira, using as a model a castoff from her childhood he has seen at her house, has had one fabricated. Moira has mysteriously stopped drinking and enrolled in business school courses in typing and stenography. She has also accepted the rules of the game sexually. Rather like Lady Brett Ashley—played, ironically, by Ava Gardner in the Hemingway movie—she seems to feel good at the end not being a bitch.

Meanwhile, especially in the book, one is struck also by how well old people face the end. Osborne's mother relieves him of his fears about final caretaking; his dotty old clubman uncle goes down trying to drink up all the vintage sherry in

the club cellars. Moira's father and mother send her on with humorous farewell encouragement to her last happy days with Dwight

The movie, visually and verbally, affirms the better parts of this. The main changes are in the Moira and Julian roles. Moira in the book is blonde, athletic, in her mid-twenties. In the movie, Ava Gardner is her late-30s prime, dark, somewhat worn, utterly womanly. The Astaire role makes Julian an aging bachelor, as opposed to the solitary, acerbic John Osborne of the book. Julian is wise, self-aware, not merely cynical. One of his great moments comes on the sub, where he is asked who started the war. "Albert Einstein," he says. He continues: "Everyone had a bomb, an atomic bomb, a counterbomb, countercounter bombs, the devices outgrew us, we couldn't control them. I know. I helped them. God help me." Toward the end, the film largely pares down the focus on a more general cast of characters. One particularly grim final exchange, in abridged version, takes place between Perkins and Anderson as they lie beside each other in bed, knowing that they have killed their baby and will now take their own lives. "I think I'll have that cup of tea," she says. Other changes seem less well imagined. In the movie, there is the attempt at a USA moment when the sub crew is shown as having taken a vote to head the boat home. In the book, having lost members to everything from Australian shotgun weddings to alcohol, VD, and the first cases of radiation sickness, Towers can barely muster a big enough crew to take the sub out and scuttle it in deep water—a thoroughly proper and official plan required by his military code. Moira is last seen in the film watching from the headland by the sea, waving.

A singular feature of the movie—perhaps making it more palatable to popular Hollywood audiences—is that nearly all the death is left to the imagination. In the book, Julian lovingly goes through a whole series of technical, mechanical steps for putting the Ferrari into mothballs. Then he gets in the driver's seat, where he has survived what may now seem all the strangely prophetic Mad Max carnage of the final races, and takes the poison. In the movie, Julian is last seen preparing to die by carbon monoxide, running the racer inside a closed garage. In the book, Dwight Towers has affirmed his conviction that he is "going back to Mystic," when he and Moira know he and the crew will be taking the boat down forever just offshore. In the movie, Moira waves as the silhouette vanishes against the grey sea and sky. In the last scene in the book, she sits in her car washing down her poison pill/death pill with a big slug from a bottle of brandy.

Despite such avoidances, there is plenty of sad starkness to go around in helping to recall how bleak the composite impression of the texts must have been at the time. Even now, the memory of *On the Beach* remains sufficiently vivid to outpace

the conventions and commonplaces of description born of fifty years of popular-culture overload. An adjective used by people responding to the book and the movie is “depressing.” That is true, one supposes, but only in the way students in critical essays use “sarcastic” when they mean “ironic.” On the other extreme, it is probably now too easy to develop easy high-culture literary or cinematic constructions of response. The Hemingway influence may be evident, but this is no time for T.S. Eliot. If there is to be an ultimate waste-land, no one is going to be around to see it. Likewise, *M*A*S*H* is still a long way off as well, with its fashionable, black-humor ditty that “suicide is beautiful.” What one takes away from re-encounter with *On the Beach* is the deeply human element of the text in relation to the times: of people doing their best in learning how to come to terms with themselves and the world in what Philippe Aries has called “the hour of our death.” That is the true impression of memory in all these relations—a profound sadness that it had to turn out this way, that human beings could not have done a better job with the world.

Such feeling—genuinely tragic recognition, it might be termed—is what one recalls now in something of a grand, noble, composite effect. As Fred Astaire/Julian says in the movie, echoing the parallel figure in the book, “The war started when people accepted the idiotic principle that peace could be maintained by arranging to defend themselves with weapons they couldn’t possibly use without committing suicide.” By comparison, Dwight Towers the American, something of a moral and intellectual prig, seems not notably perceptive save on matters military and familial, as in the way they do it in the US Navy or the Connecticut suburbs. Still, in the book, reflecting on the natural beauties of shore scenes he has seen on underwater mission to already dead regions along the North Australian coast, “Maybe we’ve been too silly to deserve a world like this.” He and Moira likewise achieve remarkable consonance in their a deep understanding of how people are going to need to react individually. Apropos of Dwight’s advising her to humor Peter and Mary Holmes on their garden plans—“Don’t you go and spoil it for them telling them they’re crazy.”—she reveals that she is already out ahead of him: “I wouldn’t do that,” she replies. “None of us really believe it’s ever going to happen—not to us,” she said at last. “Everybody’s crazy on that point, one way or another.” On her part, Moira rises late in the book to deal with Dwight himself as something of a childish idiot, actually enabling him in his comfortingly delusional conviction that somehow his wife and children aren’t really dead. Both Moira Davidson and John Osborne become Shute’s memorable interlocutors. It is hard to say who gets the best lines. Witty and half-loaded, he tells a party crowd early in the book, “I shouldn’t drink, you know. I inevitably say something brilliant.” And

so he does, more than occasionally, even down to his incidental revelation, in a last conversation with his sherry-soaked uncle, that the Australian rabbits will be the among the last of local animal life to go. Such ecological insouciance has been preceded in an earlier conversation with Towers in which he observes, "It's not the end of the world at all" . . . "It's only the end of us. The world will go on just the same, only we shan't be in it. I dare say it will get along all right without us." Eventually, he seems double-teamed with Moira, bantering with Peter Holmes on how any future race may attempt to reconstruct knowledge of a ruined world. "What sort of books are they preserving?" she asks. "All about how to make the cobalt bomb?"

This is the way the world ends, there is no denying. On the other hand, one resists updating the anachronism into equally inaccurate, current reference, as is sometimes now done, calling the book and movie "post-apocalyptic." That too would be an eviscerating conceit of these lives being played out against a human backdrop of social breakdown; public drunkenness, general anarchy. People lie in the streets near the entrances of pubs, not particularly hurting anybody. Stores and businesses more or less arbitrarily decide to stay open, and then more or less arbitrarily close. Always there remains the queer, close, human focus. Suddenly, average Australians start driving cars and trucks for the last time on gasoline stores everyone seems to have been hoarding, albeit for no particular reason. As noted, nearly everyone, everywhere, makes no end of goofy plans. Moira's father gets ready for the next year's work on the farm, spreading manure, making sure the cattle will get hay. John Osborne's dying mother sends him out to get moth balls for all the clothing left behind. Serious last-minute discussions are held by well-intentioned members of government on how trout populations might be affected by moving up the fishing to intersect with a late seasonal spawning period.

Certainly there is enough apocalypse on the horizon for people around Melbourne to know what it looks like to them—even if probably now recalled in the Australian connections of futuristic, dystopian Mel Gibson fantasy. Planting things back in context, one now can trace out a series more imminent *and* immanent grounds of cultural fear. The novel was published in 1957; the movie was released in 1959; the world depicted is set in 1963. During these years occurred the 1956 Arab-Israeli War and the 1958 formation of Egypt and Syria into the short-lived United Arab Republic, with distinct Soviet bloc affiliations and massive supplies of Soviet-bloc military equipment. Just earlier, in 1954, a Balkan crisis had been averted by absorption into Italy of the post World War II free-city of Trieste. After 1957 came the new fail-safe anxieties promoted by a nearly overnight changeover from nuclear bomber forces to intercontinental ballistic missile systems. At around

the same time came the highly publicized voyage of the USS *Nautilus* under the polar icecap and the ensuing, rapid conversion of nuclear subs to nuclear missile subs. Khrushchev sat at the U.N. pounding on the desk with his shoe, and stood bragging from the podium “We will bury you.” People somehow knew he was not talking just about material and economic production. Meanwhile, between 1956 and 1959, Fidel Castro and his forces effected the Communist Revolution in Cuba. By 1961, Russian missiles would be pointing at US mainland from barely offshore, prompting a US naval blockade that now seems to have come within an inch of provoking a nuclear war.

In such times of geopolitical and military fear, one is not surprised to find that the US Navy refused to cooperate with the movie of *On the Beach* by providing a nuclear sub, with the filmmakers relying instead on a borrowed British diesel and battery boat. On his part, Shute had nothing to do with the film. Dwight Towers is stiff, boring, domestic, sanctimonious, Gregory Peck does John Kerry. He is the Eisenhower-era good military man, the man in the conning tower, a towering individual. The only thing that saves the movie is the degree to which Peck could do such characters and stay this edge of likeability; that, and the addition—deeply offensive to Shute—that the Peck character has the good sense to sleep with Ava Gardner/Moira Davidson. Both Gardner and Astaire manage in the script to capture the book’s sense of the English civility of major characters, mixed with Aussie realism, resilience, earthy vitality. Australia, as a kind of cultural last refuge of human character, also supplies the clincher in the last scene of the movie. Once more, the band plays “Waltzing Matilda.” The shot is of the deserted streets of downtown Melbourne, with a banner that reads. “There is still time . . . Brother.”

A 2000 remake of the movie featured an actual Australian cast, headlined by Bryan Brown, well known to US audiences as a kind of quintessential down-under type from films such as *Breaker Morant*, *The Thorn Birds*, *Cocktail*, *FX*, and the like. Armand Assante played the US Navy sub skipper; Moira Davidson was played by Rachel Ward, actually British, but also Bryan Brown’s wife. Most people just complained that it was too long. At the time, the contention might have been added that it was irrelevant at the end of the cold war and in the ensuing era of nuclear arms limitation treaties.

After 2001, in the Age of Terror, it all seems much less far-fetched again. Planes have come from nowhere, flown by suicide pilots into the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon, and splattering an aborted mess of people all over a cornfield in central Pennsylvania. The terrorists and their state sponsors tauntingly encourage large-scale nation-state retaliation. Meanwhile, a market place in Baghdad, a café

in Tel Aviv, a polling station in Islamabad, an underground station in London, a commuter train in Madrid, become places for people to die en masse in a world where death can come basically any time, any place, out of nowhere, like mass-murder, starvation, ethnic cleansing, epidemic influenza, uncontrolled HIV. In the case of public violence, within and across national and international borders, suicide bombers provide the main delivery systems for now. The fact that they are human delivery systems quite likely may mean little, very soon, in a world of endlessly proliferated and proliferating nuclear weapons. Suicide bombers all over the globe will have nuclear capability. The number of potential atomic explosions around the world will make Shute's bizarre and imposing 1957, 1959, 1963 number look positively miniscule. The temptation to respond with massive nuclear retaliation will become nearly irresistible. One wonders how many bombers it will take to ultimately provoke such multiple and manifold responses by nuclear national powers. A new book may try to tell us the story that the end is near—if any books are left around to read; or if anyone is left around, of course, to read them.



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