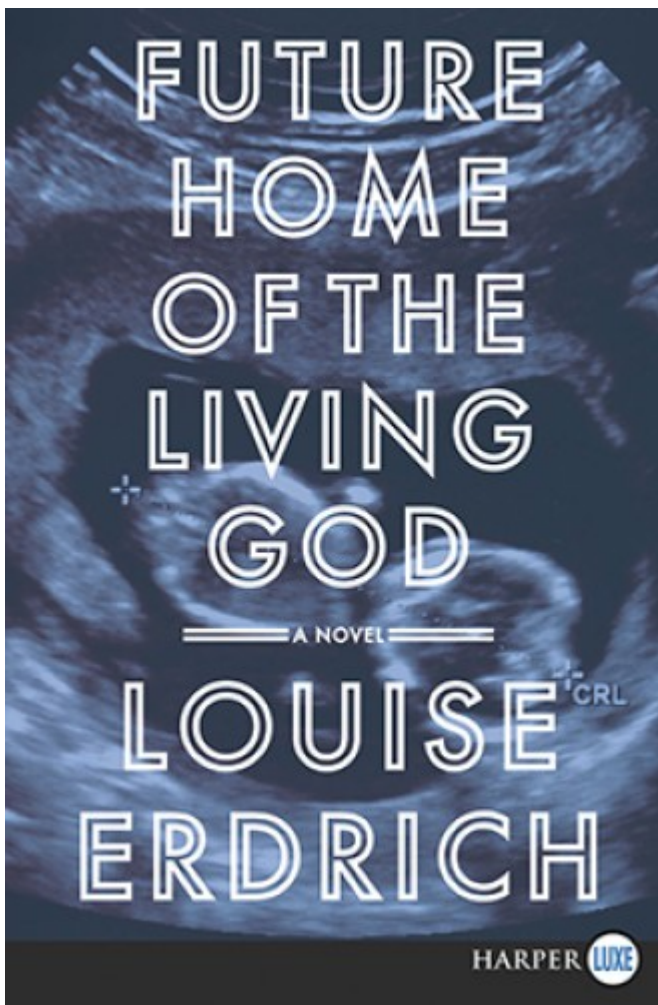


What happens after you survive an apocalypse?

## The lively dystopian worlds of Louise Erdrich and Kaethe Schwehn

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue

### In Review



### Future Home of the Living God

A Novel

By Louise Erdrich

HarperCollins



## **The Rending and the Nest**

A Novel

By Kaethe Schwehn

Bloomsbury Publishing

Two Minnesota novelists take their readers into dystopian worlds. In each novel, a contemporary young woman from Minneapolis must deal with the end of civilization as we know it. Each woman has an undefined relationship with the father of her child. Each refers often to the Christian faith—one having recently embraced it while the other has rejected it. And each one must flee when others want the child she's carrying.

Louise Erdrich is one of our country's greatest living storytellers and the award-winning author of 16 novels. Her heroine, 26-year-old Cedar, is the adopted child of a loving couple of "idealistic liberals." Newly pregnant, she must decide how to tell her parents her news and what to do about her lack of health care and an undefined relationship with the baby's father. She is part Native American, and when her Ojibwe birth mother makes contact, Cedar drives to see her, hoping to establish ties for the baby's sake and ask about any genetic concerns in the family history.

Meanwhile, on the radio and Internet are warnings of an impending reproductive catastrophe. Mutant genes are manifesting themselves in insects and animals. Odd, regressive traits are seen in newborns. People are panicking. When the government begins to round up pregnant women who may be carrying the last normal fetuses, Cedar goes into hiding and begins writing a journal for her unborn child, a chronicle of "a world running backward. Or forward. Or maybe sideways."

At the same time, she is working on the next issue of *Zeal*, a Catholic magazine that she founded after converting to Catholicism. She decides to "examine the breadth of thought on how Christ's divinity was made flesh. What could resonate more with what is happening right now? Now that it appears we might be losing our own spark of divinity, our consciousness, our souls?" The title of the novel points to Cedar's unshakable—or utterly naïve—belief in God's presence amid the disaster and in spite of threats to her unborn baby.

As in all of Erdrich's books, the characters are rich and complex. The mother-daughter tensions and the love between Cedar and her adoptive mom, Sara, are especially wonderful and nuanced. So is Cedar's relationship with her dad, Eddy, a depressed Dartmouth-educated intellectual who may be the only human who is positive about the apocalypse: "I am taking a perverse pleasure in the contemplation of this massive biological reversal . . . I have started reading Exodus. . . I have the chance each day to marvel at the vast dismantling, . . . [to] see more of the world's inner workings."

The theological thread and richly drawn characters are, however, only a sidebar to a plot-driven story of hiding, capture, and escape that barrels toward its conclusion.

The reader is riveted by the approach of a nasty dystopia. But I was even more compelled by the story that recedes as the dystopia takes over: the story of a hopeful young woman who must navigate new relationships, a new faith, a "new"

Ojibwe culture, and the adventure of pregnancy and parenting.

Whereas Erdrich takes on the chaos of a world on the brink, Kaethe Schwehn simplifies things: in her novel, the apocalypse has already happened. Mira is one of the 5 percent of the population that has survived. Three years earlier she left her ten-year-old brother, Bim, in a mall's amusement park and went across the hall to shop for a necklace. In a flash, her brother and most of the world's humans disappeared. A few of the survivors were touching someone during the flash and came into the postapocalyptic world with that person. Mira, who woke up with a necklace in her hand, is haunted by a "what if?" What if her brother had been holding her hand? Would he still be alive?

Minnesota is now a scarred landscape with no commerce, communication systems, electricity, or plumbing. Mira lives in Zion, a small community with rules about sharing, security, and hosting the "visitors" who wander in from Highway 39. When they're not scrambling to feed and clothe themselves, the Zionites occasionally try to make sense of what happened. Was the Rending (named for the moment when Jesus died and the curtain was torn) a climate disaster? Perhaps it was the Rapture—though the survivors seem no more wicked or saintly than those who are gone.

Then there are the Piles, huge collections of discarded goods that dot the landscape. Mira's job is to scavenge in the Piles for useful objects that the community can use: a massage table for the makeshift clinic, an unopened pack of Bic pens, a piece of PVC pipe, a plastic stadium seat, some unopened bottles of spices to flavor the ubiquitous roasted sweet potatoes. Schwehn highlights the humorous irony of humans being forced to mine the residue of their materialistic culture, discovering a Candyland game, unopened Q-Tips, or a partially buried inspirational sign.

Survivors seek meaning and comfort in a variety of ways. At first, some participate in Christian communion, but "there was no bread and there was no wine and the substitutes . . . felt wrong on the tongue. And besides . . . there wasn't anyone to lead them, and Christians like a good shepherd." Some follow Mira's friend Lana in a daily yoga routine. Others visit Chester, who listens without judgment, then hands each visitor a "fortune"—a quote cut from a popcorn popper manual, a list of crossword clues, or a pamphlet on vaccination side effects. Zionites know the quotes are nonsense, but they return for more. Chester is the closest thing to a chaplain that they have.

Like the others, Mira keeps some of her past secret, particularly the fact that she is the daughter of a Protestant pastor. Having rejected her faith at 17, the last thing she wants is to become a religious authority in Zion. As she says: “Before the Rending, I lived in a world of unconditional love.” To practice faith now, she continues, “I’d need to pretend I believed in an abundant unconditional love that saturated everything, that stalked us everywhere. I’d need to say, with a compassionate face, that resurrection was possible.” But now the world has been “lifted away,” as Lana says, and comforts and promises of faith mean little. So Mira tells no one about her faith, or about her memory’s archive of prayers, scripture verses, and hymn lyrics which haunt, inform, and sometimes comfort her.

When the first baby is born, the community must accept another fantastic reality. A very odd plot element works as a vehicle to challenge this vulnerable community. Then comes a second challenge. When Michael, a confident, charismatic stranger, walks into the camp, most Zionites are drawn by his storytelling and mesmerizing charisma. Soon the survivors must make a decision that tests their loyalty to each other and their ethos as a community.

However nasty the world is after the Rending, Schwehn’s depiction of it is entertaining, thoughtful, and even playful. She doesn’t avoid the horror of a desperate situation, but horror isn’t the main point. This is a rich, smart novel that imagines an incredible alternative world with a likeable and believable 20-year-old heroine who—unlike Erdrich’s Cedar—has agency and makes choices. Mira’s efforts to establish relationships, reflect on her faith, and assume leadership shape the plot and make a difference in the lives of the other characters. The dystopian setting intensifies the significance of those acts. The future may not look good for Mira or the other Zionites, but they practice a fragile, lovely, and decidedly nondystopian hope.

Schwehn is interested in what happens *alongside* survival. What can one hope for? Is there any room for Christianity when signs of death outweigh signs of life? What does one do with a silent God? Can faith still be a resource? During the most frightening moments of the novel, Mira and her friend Lana hang on to each other and repeat, “This is happening.” But other things are happening in Zion, too: a wrestling for human decency, loyalty to friends, the creation of community, and the identification of good in the midst of evil.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “More than survival.”*