

Classroom Guide: The Postman by David Brin

On page 1, Brin writes: “Short of Death itself, there is no such thing as a ‘total’ defeat...There is never a disaster so devastating that a determined person cannot pull something out of the ashes—by risking all that he or she has left...Nothing in the world is more dangerous than a desperate man.”

--What would you be willing to risk in order to survive? To save your family...or your nation?

--A willingness to risk all: Is this one aspect that drives criminals or terrorists, a sense of desperation that makes them particularly dangerous?

Tracking the bandits who stole his supplies, Gordon chides himself: “His worst enemy, over the next few hours, could be his archaic scruples.”

--Do scruples fall by the wayside when survival is at stake?

--How do you maintain a sense of morality when civilization has crumbled? Are standards of morality/ethics less important when people are starving?

Talking to the bandits, Gordon contemplates: “He had witnessed this combination of cruel contempt and civilized manners in other once-educated people, over the years since the Collapse.” (p. 7)

--Why does Gordon find this worse than people who had “simply succumbed to the barbaric times”?

--Is education a bulwark against descending to anarchy or chaos?

“Hope was an addiction. It had driven him westward for half his life.” (p. 16) Later, Gordon had “...come to realize that his persistent optimism had to be a form of hysterical insanity.” (p. 19)

--What keeps Gordon going when he has lost everything?

--Is there a fine line between rational and irrational hope? Optimism and insanity? Are these valid survival tactics?

The Doomwar was not one single cataclysm, but a series of midscale catastrophes: nuclear war and radioactive fallout, followed by waves of riots, disease and starvation, from which America could have recovered.

--What led to the final collapse of the government?

--How do the survivalists and anarchists, led by Nathan Holn, use fear to control and isolate people?

In Pine View, Gordon performs from Macbeth, quoting the lines, “Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! Come, wrack! At least we’ll die with harness on our back.”

--Why did Brin choose this particular Shakespearean passage?

--How does Shakespeare’s dark tragedy of a tyrannical ruler relate to The Postman?

--If you watched the movie, how did Costner modify that scene, and to what effect?

At the town of Oakridge, Gordon observes: “The farmer’s crop indebtedness, for instance – it was a classic early stage of share-kind serfdom.” (p. 72)

--What other signs does Gordon see of a return to a semi-feudal society?

The Postman weaves his own legend, out of lies and half-truths, until it grows bigger than anything he had imagined.

--Is Gordon a con artist? How does he benefit from this charade?

--Why is it so hard to stop, even as he is forced to invent ever more complex lies?

--How does Gordon develop as a character throughout the novel?

Brin mentions the “burnished image of a horseman” on the postman’s cap, referring back to the origins of the postal service in the Pony Express.

--What is the power of the postal uniform as a symbol? What if, instead, Gordon had encountered a military or policeman's uniform? Would it have the same power to unite people?
--What other symbols serve to revive a spirit of patriotism?

During the dogfight at Curtin, Gordon's subtle disapproval serves as a mirror to allow the townspeople to see themselves in a new light. Later Brin writes, "Those who had fallen the least far into savagery were those who seemed the most ashamed of having fallen at all." (p. 101)

--How does shame serve to modify people's behavior?

Brin portrays women as being used as chattel in this near-feudal society.

--Do you find this realistic? How do women begin to regain power?

--Why did Brin dedicate the book to ancient Greek drama, *Lysistrata*?

David Brin comments: "Most post-holocaust novels are little-boy wish fantasies about running amok in a world without rules. In fact, such lonely 'heroes' would vanish like soot after a real apocalypse."

--Does Gordon view himself as a hero?

--What is the role of heroes in fiction (and the real world) in a time of crisis?

--Can the distinction of heroes from scoundrels change in a crisis?

Gordon longs to stay in Corvallis, but he is trapped by his own charade. "He had to be a demigod in their eyes, or nothing at all. If ever a man was trapped in his own lie..." (p. 132)

--Has the man become the image?

In Corvallis, Gordon gets misty eyed over the return of electricity, and the sound of recorded music.

--What things would you miss most?

--Which aspects of civilization would be hardest to rebuild?

In Corvallis, Gordon encounters the House of Cyclops.

--What is the role of Cyclops in re-introducing technology?

--Is Cyclops a benefit or burden to the people?

--What is the parallel with the Oracle of Delphi or the Wizard of Oz?

The words "Who will take responsibility?" echo in Gordon's ears, whenever he desires to ride away from trouble.

--How does he rise to the occasion?

--What, if anything, in his background has prepared him to assume the role of command?

The people of the Willamette Valley are inspired by the symbols of Cyclops and the Restored United States.

--How fragile, and yet powerful are these "twin pillars of hope" – a hoax and a myth?

Consider the very different characters of Abbey (from Pine View) and Dena (from Corvallis).

--How do they each challenge the standards of their society?

Words fail Gordon when he seeks to rally the townfolk living with Powhatan, then he says: "For if America ever stood for anything, it was people being at their best when times were worst—and helping one another when it counted most." (p. 223)

--Why does Gordon fail in rallying support against the Holnists?

--What are Powhatan's reasons for refusing?

“It’s said that ‘power corrupts,’ but actually it’s more true that power attracts the corruptible. The sane are usually attracted to other things than power. When they do act, they think of it as service, which has limits. The tyrant, though, seeks mastery, for which he is insatiable, implacable.”

--How do you interpret this passage? What is its relevance to global politics today?

--What is the significance of the Order of Cincinnatus – citizens first, soldiers second?

Powhatan finally shows up to fight.

--What finally inspires him to fight?

--How does he differ from General Macklin?

--How does the legend of Dena’s band of women live on and inspire other women?

Communication (its loss and re-building) is a major factor in the novel.

--How essential are the lines of communication to maintaining civilization?

--What power comes from controlling access to the news or mail?

“All legends must be based on lies, Gordon realized. We exaggerate, and even come to believe the tales, after a while.” (p. 298)

--Comment on this quote, in regard to the legends that arise in the course of the story.

Of the four legends: the Restored United States, Cyclops, Powhatan, and Dena’s band of women, which do you believe has the most enduring power?

Various post-apocalyptic tales have offered visions of the world destroyed by nuclear or biological war, flooding, global warming or freezing, runaway virus or plague, asteroid or comet impact, out-of-control nanobots, or even alien invasion.

--Which are the most realistic threats to our civilization? To our planet?

--Do we have the ability to prevent such scenarios?

In his speeches, Brin refers frequently to an acronym: IAAMOAC – which stands for: I Am A Member Of A Civilization.

--What is he trying to say with this adage?

--Why do many people have contempt for aspects of civilization, ranging from government and politicians to paying taxes, public schools....and the postal system?

From the author: “The moral of The Postman is that if we lost our civilization, we’d all come to realize how much we missed it, and would realize what a miracle it is simply to get your mail every day.” ----

What things would you miss most? Which aspects of civilization would be hardest to rebuild?

Contrast and compare The Postman with other post-apocalyptic novels, such as The Road (Cormac McCarthy), Alas, Babylon (Pat Frank), Blindness (Jose Saramago), After America (John Birmingham), Riddley Walker (Russell Hoban), The Stand (Stephen King), A Canticle for Leibowitz (Walter M. Miller), or Earth Abides (George R. Stewart).

--What is the ongoing appeal of these tales of the End of Times?

--What do they tell us about ourselves, about the fragility of our civilization?

If you’ve seen Kevin Costner’s 1997 version of The Postman (Warner Bros.), contrast and compare the book and novel:

--How did they differ? Which did you prefer?

--Is Costner believable as the Postman?

(Page numbers refer to the paperback edition.)