Nation and “Last Survivor” Narratives

Nations are dynamic; they live, change and die. Sweden, to take but one example, is no doubt a very different “imagined community” today from that (re)presented in Selma Lagerlöf’s classic The Wonderful Adventures of Nils. In other cases, the community, the shared national language and common culture have not just altered but been lost altogether. Indeed, most nations through history have ceased to exist. The reasons are manifold: most extremely and violently, nations perish through genocide or natural catastrophes. But nations can also vanish because they are peacefully subsumed by other nations, or because the idea that connected a community of people ceased to be meaningful in a changing world. In any case, the passing of a nation – its language, its culture, its memory, its people – is a poignant and defining moment, reflecting as it does, on the one hand, the death of each of us as individuals, on the other, the end of civilization, and, ultimately, humankind as a species. In this paper I will explore some of the themes of “last survivor tales”, paying particular attention Terry Pratchett’s crossover novel Nation (2009).

Following Benedict Anderson, “nation” is here understood to be an “imagined community” – imagined because, as Andersen uses the term, each individual can only actually know a fraction of the people who make up a nation at any given time, but can still “imagine” fellowship, kinship and community with the anonymous many that make up the nation. But all nations are not nation-states or even multiple-nation states. An “imagined community” can also refer to small pre-modern nations. Even in cases where an individual might actually be personally acquainted with all other living members of the nation, it is still an imagined community, since it involves collective imagining of community with past and future generations of the same nation. Whether the context is large or small this “imagining” takes the form of shared myths, legends and stories, and “invention of history” (to use Eric Hobsbawm’s term). Thus, in terms of imagined community there’s no critical difference between Pratchett’s island nation of perhaps 40 people (before the tsunami), and the whole world as nation, which is the topic of, for instance Mary Shelley in Last Man (1826), or Richard Matheson’s I Am Legend (1954).
The second key term that will be used in this article is survivor tale. Interestingly, survivor tales share many features of genesis myths – narratives, that is, which portray the birth of nations. Frequently, the same story may be read as a survivor tale from one perspective and as a genesis story from another. In Christian tradition the Biblical story of Noah and the Flood is about the origins and birth of a nation. Noah and his family represent a *tabula rasa*; it is a mythogenesis. But at the same time it is of course the story of all the nations that were destroyed in the flood. From that perspective Noah is the last representative of all forgotten prelapsarian nations.

A very different example can be found in *I Am Legend*, a dystopian science fiction novel where the protagonist, Robert Neville, is the sole survivor of a pandemic. All other humans have either died or become vampires. When he commits suicide at the end of the book, the human race, here coincident with the human “nation,” dies with him. While a new race of “vampires” represents the future, the new nation, he becomes the stuff of legend. This survivor narrative is really a “last survivor”-tale and ends on a tragic note; the last survivor is the last to die, whereas in survivor tales, the survival leads to rebirth.

In this article I have taken up and adapted the term, “last survivor tale” from the “lay of the last survivor” in *Beowulf*, lines 2247-2266. In this fragment, the lonely protagonist complains that “death…took away every one of [his] tribe.” He goes on to describe how his companions are gone (“they sleep who should burnish the battle-mask”), and that there is no longer anyone to serve; all he can do is to hide the treasures of his people in the earth. The story should of course have ended there if he really is the last survivor. But this is one of the paradoxes of last survivor narratives: they presuppose a surviving reader. In this case the fragment was eventually incorporated into *Beowulf*. The bards and scribe(s) of the epic apparently saw fit to integrate it in the collective imagining of their nation. The “last survivor,” it turned out, was part of a larger nation that was *not* doomed to extinction, but could exploit the story for its continued collective imagining.

Another way in which last survivor tales can be made to make sense, is if they are told from the perspective of an outsider as in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Although Cooper certainly laments the fate of Uncas and the Mohican...
nation as a whole, it is in keeping with his view of history and race that the Mohicans should be doomed: history makes nations go through cycles of rise, decline, and fall; conflict war between races are inevitable; whites are superior to Indians, and any other race for that matter. Moreover, the fate of the Mohicans can serve as a warning: this is what happens if racial purity is not maintained (See Slotkin). The noble savage can only remain noble in death. In Cooper and many other 19th century writers, miscegenation and war between races is the mechanism that drives an inferior nation towards annihilation. The superior party in a conflict between races/nations on the other hand, can emerge strengthened, cleansed and victorious from war.

Racist ideology in its extreme form, even justifies genocide as something natural and to be wished for. Kurtz’ outburst “Exterminate all the brutes!” in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, is symptomatic. It perfectly voices a racist ideology. Fortunately, literature that openly and unambiguously assumes such a position – rather than criticizing it, as in Conrad’s novel – is rare. However, if we again turn the perspective to the survivors themselves, holocaust and genocide literature bear witness of extermination and survival. These are narratives that are rooted in the experience of being a survivor (even if you do not survive, as in the case of Anne Frank) and belonging to a nation that is in process of being exterminated.

Before the world wars, armed conflict could be regarded (by some) as natural and strengthening, at least for the conquering party. However, after WWI and WWII such a view gave way to a realization that all out war could lead to the destruction of the entire human race. In James Thurber’s The Last Flower (1939), what remains after the war is one man, one woman, one flower. The evil Queen Jadis in C. S. Lewis The Magician’s Nephew (1955) is the last unrepentant survivor of a world on which she has unleashed a doomsday weapon. Nevil Shute’s On the Beach (1957) and many other nuclear war fictions portray the end of human society, either directly because of annihilation or because civilization collapses. In Shane Acker’s computer animated movie Nine (2009) war has led to complete annihilation. The only remains of the human race are nine dolls, each containing a ninth part of the soul of the human that designed them. Even when the prospects are slightly less bleak, the image of an antebellum survivalist society, as in the Mad Max-movies or Hayao Miyazaki’s Nausicāa (1984), is widespread in contemporary
popular culture. Lately, pollution and the collapse of the ecosystem have provided other causes for the end of history (*Day after Tomorrow*).

There is not always a human cause in survivor narratives. The Biblical flood is an act of God. Pestilence lays waste to the earth in Mary Shelley’s *Last Man* (even if the plague actually seems to be brought about by a curse). And among the usual suspects we also find planet-size comets (*Deep Impact*) and aliens (*War of the Worlds, Independence Day*). In this context, the Ender series by Orson Scott Card provides an interesting twist on the threat from outer space and on survivor narratives. In *Ender’s Game* (1985) the threat to humanity is predictably averted, but in the process the aliens (called “buggers”) have been all but exterminated. The boy hero, Ender Wiggin, who has gone through the war thinking that it was a game, suffers from having brought about a xenocide (that is, the extermination of an entire alien species). There is a last survivor, however, a hive queen who has been hidden away. Ender becomes her “speaker of the dead” – becoming the mouthpiece of the last survivor and the lost nation.

Sometimes the cause of the catastrophe is not given at all. In Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic *The Road* (2006) the reader is never told what brought about the calamity – war, pollution, or aliens.

Even when an entire nation (or the world) is not at stake, group identification with a threatened band of courageous individuals triggers similar reactions in the national consciousness, as with descriptions of worldwide Armageddon. Thus Custer’s last stand and the Spartans at Thermopylae become metonymic stand-ins for the larger threatened nation, sometimes a specific nation, sometimes any nation.

It should also be pointed out that there is no essential difference in the workings of historical fictions and just plain fictions, since historical accounts are inevitably fictionalized. The account of the last days of the dwarves in Moria, which the Gandalf, Frodo & Co find in Balin’s tomb in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) is just as moving and exciting as any historical narrative, in which the representatives of a nation (any nation) are heroically vanquished. “They are coming”!

Another genre which is related to survivor-narratives is the desert island story. Both in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe, and in subsequent Robinsonnades, such as *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) by Johann David Wyss, and *The Mysterious
Island (1872) by Jules Verne, the castaways are isolated and have to fend for themselves. They are cut off from human community; they have to survive. But a major difference is of course that they are aware that human society has not come to an end just because they themselves have been marooned. Typically too, Robinsonnades are tales of first things rather than last – it is Mythogenesis, not Apocalypse. Robinson builds a new society. The desert island becomes a colony, or even a nation in itself.

As this brief overview shows, survivor-narratives come in many colours and sizes. It is also clear that many of them can be (and have been) used as children’s fictions – Robinson Crusoe, The Last of the Mohicans – and that even when they are adult-oriented, they are concerned with the promise of a future that children represent, or the denial of such a future. Without generation the nation is just as much doomed as the individual. Survivor tales are texts that define a nation – whether tragic last survivor-narratives, or their comic inversions (as mythogenesis-stories). They also define the individual’s relationship to the nation. In short, survivor tales are powerful nation-building texts. As such they regularly address children and/or adult society’s view of children and childhood.

After these introductory remarks, the time has come to look closer at one specific survivor-text, Terry Pratchett’s Nation. It is in my opinion a book that raises important questions about identity, nation and co-existence in the 21st century. And this despite its being set in Victorian times (sort of) and in a parallel dimension to ours. It also relates in interesting ways to other survivor narratives.

Nation is by no means Pratchett’s first attempt at re-imagining a process of nation-building. In fact it is a major theme in the Discworld series (+30 books, depending on how you count) as well as in the shorter Bromeliad-series. The major city on Discworld, Ankh-Morpork, is a melting pot where a motley crew of individuals (wizards, guards, tyrants, soldiers, high & low) and “ethnic minorities” (trolls, dwarves, vampires, Igors and many other fantasy creatures) negotiate their role in an evolving society. Ankh-Morpork is just another version of any modern, multicultural and urban metropolis, as seen through the distorting yet revealing lens of comic fantasy.

In Nation Pratchett takes a time out from Discworld, but continues his exploration of the individual’s role in society by writing a survivor-narrative. The book provides the
bare essentials: not a world but a desert island; no colourful multitudes, just a boy and a girl.

THERE IS NO TIME FOR SLEEPING. THERE IS SO MUCH THAT MUST BE DONE.

‘Who are you?’

WE ARE THE GRANDFATHERS!

Mau trembled, and trembling was all he could manage. His legs would not move.

‘The wave came,’ he managed. ‘Everyone is dead! I sent some into the dark water!’

YOU MUST SING THE DARK WATER CHANT.

‘I didn’t know how!’

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YOU MUST DEFEND THE NATION! YOU MUST DO THE THINGS THAT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DONE!

‘But there is just me! Everyone is dead!’

EVERYTHING THE NATION WAS, YOU ARE! WHILE YOU ARE, THE NATION IS!

WHILE YOU REMEMBER THE NATION LIVES! (34-35)

[Granddad Nawi] ‘Take one strip of the vine lengthwise and yes, it needs the strength of two men to pull it apart. But weave five strands of it into a rope and hundred men can’t break it. The more they pull, the more it binds together and the stronger it becomes. That is the Nation.’ (45)

Maps:

[cf Anderson]
But he had to stay alive. Yes! If he died, then the Nation would never have been.

He’d not been alone on the Boy’s Island. Oh, there hadn’t been anyone else there, but he’d felt the Nation around him. He was doing the right thing. But now? What were the right things? The Grandfathers bellowed and complained and ordered him about and didn’t listen.

He couldn’t find the silver thread either, or the picture of the future. There was no picture now. There was just him and this girl, and no rules to fight the darkness ahead.

[the Nation was rich and favoured] 101

Tsunami picture 108

Island not on map - “too small”, wrong name 181

‘I thought you saved her life.’

‘Yes, but the first time I saved her life I saved mine, too. Do you understand? If she hadn’t been here I’d have held the biggest rock I could find and gone into the dark current. One person is nothing. Two people are a nation.’

Pilu’s forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. ‘What are three people?’

‘A bigger nation.’ (278)

‘How can I answer you? There is no language. There was a boy called Mau. I see him in my memory, so proud of himself because he was going to be a man. He cried for his family and turned the tears into rage. And if he could he would say “Did not happen!” and the wave would roll backwards, and never have been. But there is another boy, and he is called Mau, too, and his head is on fire with new things. What does he say? He was born in the wave, and he knows that the world is round, and he met a ghost girl who is sorry she shot at him. He called himself the little blue hermit crab, scuttling across the
sand in search of a new shell, but now he looks at the sky and knows that no shell will ever be big enough, ever. Will you ask him not to be? Any answer will be the wrong one. All I can be is who I am. But sometimes I hear the boy inside crying for his family’ (360)

‘The right way. It’s the *Sunrise* Wave, and we are its children, and we will not go into the dark again. I vow it. It’s a new world. It needs new people. And you are right. Your father is a good man, but he needs you more than … this island does.’ … he will give your poor nation a shape (393)