

FINALIST FOR THE NEBULA AWARD



*THIS IS
THE WAY
THE WORLD
ENDS*

JAMES MORROW



PRAISE FOR THE WRITING OF JAMES MORROW

“James Morrow [is] a literary swashbuckler, his proud vessel a stalwart craft composed of rationalist thought . . . his weapons a rapier intelligence and a Swiftian gift for satire.” —*The Washington Post Book World*

“Morrow’s satire is funny and sad, and increases our ability to see the little bits of truth in our own world.” —*The Denver Post*

“Move over Kurt Vonnegut. James Morrow has put on the mantle of America’s best satirist.” —James Gunn, the University of Kansas

“[James Morrow] is an original—stylistically ingenious, savagely funny, always unpredictable.” —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Morrow understands theology like a theologian and psychology like a psychologist, but he writes like an angel.” —Richard Elliott Friedman, author of *The Hidden Book in the Bible*

“As near as I can tell, Morrow is the greatest kind of American author. He’s funny and profane, bighearted and brave, he never takes the same risk twice in his satire, and for some reason I can’t explain, I’ve waited almost 20 years to express my love for his work.” —*The Stranger*

The Wine of Violence

“[The] best SF novel published in English in the last ten years. It has the scope of *Childhood’s End*, the verbal playfulness of *Cat’s Cradle*, and the ethical seriousness and comic rage of *Rasselas*.” —*American Book Review*

“The story zips along with vivid images, and the message is clear: A heady brew, the wine of violence packs a hangover.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“[A] twelve-course literary banquet spiced with intriguing characterizations and

inventive plotting . . . Morrow draws his plot and characters together like a spinner patiently working at a spinning wheel, drawing fine threads of gold from seeming flax. . . . It is a triumphant writing performance that should guarantee an eager audience for future Morrow novels.” —*Atlantic City Press*

“Beneath the high-tech space trappings, the author paints a nice little fable about what it means to be ‘human’ . . . Are hatred and blood-lust as necessary for man’s soul as peace and tranquility? In this imaginative novel, James Morrow proposes a thought-provoking answer.” —*Fort Lauderdale News*

“Morrow spins a satiric examination of violence that runs from light comedy to Swiftian bitterness, without ever letting the reader feel smugly superior. [He] knows the value of pushing issues to extremes to highlight a central point and the effectiveness of allegory in various guises.” —*Newsday*

“An anthropological fable that, for all its cool intelligence, bustles with life . . . Morrow writes a breezy blend of philosophical fiction and blood-stirring adventure.” —*Penthouse*

The Continent of Lies

“Technology will improve remorselessly until we can be ‘wired in’ so completely that we can’t tell what’s real and what isn’t. *The Continent of Lies* . . . deals with this subject brilliantly.” —Arthur C. Clarke

“*The Continent of Lies* is superbly crafted. It deftly blends technology, fantasy, and myth and spices the mixture with adventure, humor, and wit.” —*The San Diego Union*

“[A] literary cruise missile. It hugs the reader’s consciousness as it roars through time and cultural dimensions, leaving readers stunned, delighted and baffled. . . . Morrow writes so plausibly and so effortlessly about the impossible and the unimaginable that little bits and pieces of his narrative cling to your subconscious. . . . This is high octane writing indeed.” —*Atlantic City Press*

“James Morrow takes you to places you have never been before. . . . There are Dante-like descents into various kinds of hell, and—what would a book about dreams be without it?—a generous dollop of Freudian symbolism.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“[With] a new plot twist with every turn of the page an encapsulation would be impossible, as well as spoiling the fun. But when was the last time you read any SF that had a meeting of the characters inside the bloated corpse of a giant alien whale? What a story. Read it.” —*West Coast Review of Books*

This Is the Way the World Ends

“The most affecting account of nuclear devastation I have read in a work of fiction.”
—*Newsday*

“Having no answers but only prophecy, Morrow is unafraid to feel pain or to make us feel it. . . . Astute, highly engaging, and finally, moving.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“*This Is the Way the World Ends* begins where *Dr. Strangelove* ends. It is a tale told from the other side of the grave—quite literally from the point of view of the dead—and what makes it so wonderful is not merely that it is informed about how and why the world may end, but because throughout it remains a true tale, rich in narrative and moral complexity, magically inventive and comic. . . . [James Morrow] has written a story of the way and the why of our dear and foolish world—its sources of life and of death—that is utterly dazzling and memorable.” —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Add to this scenario great suspense, fast action, a complex and sympathetic protagonist, and unrestrained black comedy, and the result is a wonderfully surreal novel worthy of comparison with the best political satire of this century.” —*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

“Just when you start thinking that everything that can possibly be done with the post-catastrophe novel has been done, along comes James Morrow to prove you wrong. . . . *This Is the Way the World Ends* is a magnificent surrealistic dark comedy that will scare you even as it amuses you, and it will leave you deeply moved. This is one of those books that other writers wish they had written.” —*Pittsburgh Press*

“If Kurt Vonnegut had collaborated with Jonathan Schell on an antinuclear novel, the result might be *This Is the Way the World Ends*.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Very few books make me cry, but this one did. . . . James Morrow has a surrealistic edge to his imagination and a devastating ability to disembowel by satire.”

Only Begotten Daughter

“[Its] lineage might be *Stranger in a Strange Land* out of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. . . . Such a summary as this can barely suggest the dense, hyperkinetic plotting of James Morrow’s novel, its welter of acute detail . . . or the vigor of its cartoonishly sharp-edged characters. *Only Begotten Daughter* is a rich, intelligent tour de force.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Imagine, if you will, Joseph Heller at his satirical best writing *The Satanic Verses*. Sort of a Catechism-22. What you would have would be close to James Morrow’s *Only Begotten Daughter*, a delightfully devilish novel that tiptoes along the fringes of science fiction while treading heavily on imperious practitioners of Western theology.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“A cheerfully secular rendition of the Second Coming . . . Morrow’s ambitious and wide-ranging satire plays straight with Scripture, reserving as its targets the intolerances and vanities of fallible humanity . . . *Only Begotten Daughter* is an intelligent, humane, and unusually funny novel.” —*Newsday*

“Morrow unerringly targets nerve endings that most readers won’t know they have until he zaps them, throwing out wild bits of social commentary and incidental barbs with impeccable timing. This novel invites comparison with Vonnegut and even Rushdie.” —*The Washington Post*

“It’s probably an insurmountable challenge for a reviewer to try to capture in a few hundred words the captivating delirium of this runaway carousel of a book. . . . Morrow’s novel is suffused with a peculiar innocence, an earnest inquiry into the nature of godhead, and an enduring if battered optimism about the importance of love. . . . If the narrative makes us flinch, it’s only because it is itself so unflinching in its dissection of human foibles and cruelty. Ultimately, Morrow has given us a frank and fascinating novel that provokes rather than offends—a remarkable work of fiction with the power to disturb our complacency and challenge us to consider anew the thorny questions of life and faith.” — *South Bend Tribune*

“Several notable novels of this gloriously multi-faceted type have been published

within living memory; examples include Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace*, and Jeremy Leven's *Satan*. James Morrow's *Only Begotten Daughter* is the latest, the most vivid, and perhaps the best of the lot. It has enormous chutzpah and schmaltz by the bucketful, and despite the relentlessness of its darker side it still contrives, against all odds, to carry its due quota of pure *mechaieh*." —*The New York Review of Science Fiction*

"Like many who see the world clearly, Morrow is driven frantic by the insanities committed in the names of the gods. He has written a work of satiric imagination as compassionate and horrifying as the book's publisher bills it. . . . It has fangs, and it bites. It is also very warm, very human, very humane." —*Analog*

"Heretical? Yes. Exuberantly so. The dark satirical tone of *Only Begotten Daughter* makes for a potent novel." —*People*

City of Truth

"A quick and delightful read, with a sharp, unmerciful edge that would have pleased old Jonathan Swift." —*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

"Morrow leavens his serious theme with sizable dollops . . . of humor, without losing poignancy—his prose is compulsively readable, sprinkled with nicely understated jokes. At 100-odd pages, the novel may seem short, but satire can become tiresome when played out too long—the length, like almost everything else about this novella, is nearly perfect." —*Publishers Weekly*

"*City of Truth* is a humorous and pointed futuristic novel about a man facing his son's inevitable death in a city which bars lies. Morrow's thought-provoking and fun portraits of the results of an utterly truthful society contrasts strongly with a man's refusal to equate hope with lying." —*Midwest Book Review*

"[True] satire is the work of a moralist in the grip of savage indignation, and gifted with sharp eyes, tongue, and wit. In the novella *City of Truth*, James Morrow wields a darkly glittering scalpel. . . . The cavortings of Morrow's Veritasians and Dissemblers are hilariously petty as all humanity, and poignant as a dying child." —*Locus*

"[Jack Sperry's] story is that of one man's struggle to find the balance of hope that lies

somewhere between truth and fantasy. Sperry's pain is even more poignant because Morrow handles it so deftly, without false sentimentality. Morrow is a Jonathan Swift for our times, and his *City of Truth* works on many levels, from wickedly sharp satire to touching tragedy." —*Starlog*

"[The] ending is affecting on the human level and besides, it's probably worth the read just for the cited notice on a cigarette pack: WARNING: THE SURGEON GENERAL'S CRUSADE AGAINST THIS PRODUCT MAY DISTRACT YOU FROM THE MYRIAD WAYS YOUR GOVERNMENT FAILS TO PROTECT YOUR HEALTH." —*Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*

Cat's Pajamas

"[Morrow's] latest collection demonstrates that his rapier wit has lost none of its edge as it encompasses twisted scenarios. . . . All the stories manifest Morrow's penchant for exploring the dark underbelly of technological promise and extracting quirky moral conundrums. Morrow's fans will revel, and first-time readers may find his grim humor making fans of them, too." —*Booklist*

"Morrow is a true satirist, a moralist who identifies some of our many faults and offers a wholly new perspective (not solutions, mind you, that is not his job) through his droll distortions. . . . [He] obviously loves his fellow human beings and has a sharp eye for their foibles. His wit and pen are sharper still. If you are unfamiliar with Morrow, this wonderful collection . . . is a superb starting point." —*Cemetery Dance*

"The first thing you'll notice about James Morrow is what outrageous ideas he concocts. . . . If you have an offbeat sense of humor, Morrow's *The Cat's Pajamas* will have you in stitches." —*Fantastic Reviews*

"Who else among modern SF writers (and Morrow, to his great credit, refuses to refuse the label) has worked so hard to sharpen the swords of satire? And had such fun doing it? . . . He is our Voltaire, casting a cold eye on both the follies of the day and the fashions of philosophy. He is our Swift, skewering his enemies with a smile. He would be our Twain, except that we already have one. He is in fact our Morrow." — Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author Terry Bisson in the book's Introduction

"Amplly displays [Morrow's] ability to juggle absurdity, tragedy, irony and outrage." —*Locus*

This Is the Way the World Ends

James Morrow



For my daughter Kathy

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Acknowledgements

Author's Note

About the Author

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

—Robert Frost

PROLOGUE

Salon-de-Provence, France, 1554

DOCTOR MICHEL DE NOSTREDAME, who could see the future, sat in his secret study, looking at how the world would end.

The end of the world was spread across the prophet's writing desk—one hundred images of destruction, each painted on a piece of glass no larger than a Tarot card. With catlike caution he dealt out the brittle masterpieces, putting them in dramatic arrangements. Which should come first? he wondered. The iron whales? The ramparts of flame? The great self-propelled spears?

By late afternoon the paintings were properly sequenced and Nostradamus made ready to compose the hundred commentaries that would accompany them. He opened the window, siphoned sweet air through his nostrils.

Tulip gardens. Sun-battered fields of clover. Crisp, white cottages. A finch chirped amid the nectar-gorged blossoms of a cherry tree. Now, thought the prophet, if only a cat would come along and devour the finch alive, I could rise to the task at hand.

He consulted the finch's future. No cats. The bird would die of old age.

He pulled a drape across the window, lit seven candles, dipped his crow quill in a skull filled with ink, and began to write. The gloom, morbid and relentless, inspired him. Like blood from a cut vein, words flowed from Nostradamus's pen; the nib scabbled across the parchment. Shortly before midnight he completed the final commentary. The painting in question showed a bearded man standing alone on a boundless plain of ice. *And so our hero, wrote the prophet, last of the mortals, makes ready to fly into the bosom of our Lord. Such are the true facts of history yet to come.*

The dark oak of the writing desk had turned the painting into a looking glass. Etched in the ice field were the prophet's raven eyes, craggy nose, and black tumble of beard—a face his wife nevertheless loved. Anne is going to enter my study soon, he realized. She will tell me something most troublesome. A pregnant woman waits downstairs for me. The woman is in labor. The woman wants...

"The woman wants my help," said Nostradamus to his wife after she had appeared in the study as predicted.

Anne Pons Gemmelle gave a meandering smile. "Sarah Mirabeau has come all the way from Tarascon."

"And her husband—?"

"She has no husband."

"Reveal to Sarah Mirabeau that I foresee an easy birth, a robust little bastard, and

happy destinies for all concerned. Reveal to her also that, if she troubles me further, I foresee myself losing my temper”—the prophet brandished his Malacca cane—“and tossing her into the street.”

“What do you *really* foresee?”

“It is all rather murky.”

“Sarah Mirabeau did not come to have her fortune told. She came—”

“Because I am a physician? Inform her that a midwife would be more to the point.”

By closing her eyes and biting her tongue, Anne retained her good humor. “The Tarascon midwives will not attend a Jew,” she said slowly.

“Whereas I shall?”

“I advised the woman that you have not been Jewish in years.”

“Good! Did you show her my record of baptism? No, wait, I foresee you saying that you have—”

“Already done so, and she was—”

“Not convinced. Then you must tell this fornicator that I have never delivered a baby in my life. Tell her that the medicine I practice of late consists in removing creases from the faces of aging gentry.”

“She is not a fornicator. One hundred days ago her husband was—”

“Killed by the plague,” anticipated the prophet.

“The widow believes you could have cured him. ‘Only the divine Doctor Nostradamus can keep me alive today,’ she said. ‘Only the hero of Aix and Lyons can bring me a healthy child.’ Yes, she has heard of your victories over the Black Death.”

“But not of my defeats? This Nostradamus she worships is not much of a Catholic, not much of a Jew, and not much of a miracle-maker—tell her that.”

“We must show her Christian charity.”

“We must show her *my* charity, nothing better. Your widow may, for tonight only, take to Madeleine’s bed. Madame Hozier, I am given to understand, is a competent midwife. I shall pay her five *écus*. If she objects either to the fee or to your widow’s heathenism, tell her that I shall forthwith cast her horoscope, and it will be the grimmest horoscope imaginable, full of poverty and ill health.”

Anne Pons Gemmelle scurried off, but the prophet’s privacy did not endure. He foresaw as much: a boy would wander into his secret study.

A boy wandered into his secret study.

“You were about to give your name,” said the prophet.

“I was?” The boy was fourteen, diminutive, olive-skinned, his curly black hair frothing from beneath a cloth cap.

“Yes. Who are you?” said the prophet.

“They call me—”

“Jacob Mirabeau. Your mother is in my daughter’s bedroom, giving birth. Tell me, lad, was the invitation that brings you to my private chambers printed on gold-leaf vellum or on ordinary paper?”

“What?”

“That was sarcasm. The coming thing. *Mirabile dictu*, what a reversal Bonaparte will suffer once he reaches Moscow!”

The boy yanked off his cap. “I know you! You are the one who sees what will happen. My mother collects your almanacs.”

“Does she buy them, or does she merely find them lying around?”

“She buys them.”

“Would you care for a fig?” Nostradamus asked cheerfully.

“*Merci*. My mother places great store in your predictions. She thinks you are God-touched.”

“Opinion about me is divided. The Salon rabble think I am a Satanist or, worse, a Huguenot, or, worse still, a Jew.”

“You *are* a Jew.”

“We are quite a pair, lad. I can see your future, you can see my past.”

“I am a Jew as well.” The boy gobbled his fig.

“Do not trumpet it. Being Jewish is not exactly the wave of the future, believe me. The Inquisition has not yet run its course, the Pope would have us in ghettos. Get yourself baptized, that is my counsel to you. Forget this whole enterprise of being a Jew.”

“Can you see some piece of the future right now, Monsieur le Docteur, or must you stare at the constellations first?”

“The stars are unconnected to my powers, little Jew.”

“But you have an astrolabe.”

“Also a brass bowl, a tripod, and a laurel branch. My readers expect a full complement of nonsense.”

“What do you foresee at the moment?” asked the boy, rolling a fig seed between his tongue and teeth.

“You are up too late. Do you realize it is almost midnight?”

“What else do you foresee?”

“Myself. Writing a large book.” Nostradamus wove his crow quill through the air. “One hundred prophecies, in ill-phrased and leaden verse. Gibberish, every last line, but the mob will love them. From now until the end of the world, booksellers will make fortunes out of vapid and dishonest commentaries on these stanzas. I shall mention the River Hister, and my interpreters will claim that I was referring to Hitler.”

“Who is Hitler?”

“You don’t want to know. More bad news for Jews.”

“If your book will be gibberish, why write it?”

“Fun and profit.”

“It would seem that—”

Fear silenced the boy. A nasty black wasp had fumbled past the drapes and looped into the study. It buzzed fatly. The boy sought refuge behind an enormous globe.

“Easy, little Jew. It will not sting you.”

“With all respect, Monsieur”—raising his cap, Jacob stalked forward—“I have my doubts.”

He swatted the wasp to the floor and stomped it past recognition.

“Why were you certain it would not have stung me?” the boy asked.

“I foresaw you smashing it first.”

Jacob replaced his cap, secured it by stuffing his curls beneath the sweatband. “Will this baby kill my mother?”

“Your mother will live to see seventy. Furthermore, Truman will defeat Dewey, forecasts to the contrary.”

“You are truly blessed, Monsieur.”

The prophet thought: a likely lad. He appreciates my talent, he does not hide his religion, he is quick with his cap. If my show can astonish a fellow so sharp, it is certain to set the rabble on their oversized ears.

“Tell me, Master Jacob,” said Nostradamus, opening a walnut coffer and removing a contraption of metal and glass, “would you like to see the future?”

“Very much so.”

Nostradamus carried the machine to his writing desk. The boy’s lips quivered. His eyes expanded.

“You are right to be awestruck, for the man who contrived this device is the most wonderful person of our age. Quick, who is the most wonderful person of our age?”

“You, my lord.”

The prophet alternately grinned and scowled. “The most wonderful person of our age is Leonardo of Vinci, who alone knew what expression each saint wore when dining with Christ.”

“I have heard of Leonardo of Milan.”

“Of Milan, yes. Of Florence, of Rome, of Vinci. But he ended his days in France—Amboise, the manor of Clos-Lucé. I was at his deathbed. With his final breath he bequeathed to me this picture-cannon, as he called it. Monsieur Leonardo loved cannons. He loved all weapons. Happily, this cannon fires no ball.”

Mastering his astonishment, Jacob approached the writing desk. The machine was a tin box with a chimney on top. From one side jutted a tube holding a brass ring in which sat a sparkling crystal disk.

“I was no older than you when the great man summoned me to Amboise. That was in... 1518, during my first schooling. Leonardo had heard of my gift. At Avignon they called me the Little Astrologer. I was frightened. Here was he, the illustrious Leonardo—*Premier Peintre, Architecte et Mécanicien du Roi*. And here was I—a boy of fifteen, burdened with peculiar powers. As it turned out, he fell in love with me, but that is another story.

“He showed me some drawings—our world in its final days, shattered by storms and floods. ‘Is this how God will contrive for His Creation to end?’ he asked me. Brother Francesco translated. ‘No,’ I replied. ‘I did not think so,’ he confessed.

“I told him how our world would end. ‘It will not be an act of God or Nature,’ I explained, ‘but a conflagration of human design.’ He painted what I described—fireballs hurled from great spears that had in turn been catapulted from the backs of iron whales. The renderings were perfect, as if plucked directly from my brain. He did them on glass.

“Odd—but of the hundred awful scenes I recounted, only four seemed to vex Leonardo. They all involved vultures. ‘Are you certain that vultures will be part of this war?’ he asked again and again. ‘Quite certain,’ I always answered. ‘I was once visited by a vulture,’ he would say. I could not imagine what he meant.

“The old man had in mind a great public spectacle. He wanted first to exhibit his holocaust paintings in Rome. Then we were to tour the countryside, finally the whole continent—taking the capitals by storm, dazzling rabble and rich men alike, warning them of the terrible future, filling our pockets with their coins.”

The portrait under which Nostradamus stood shimmered with the grace of its subject. Within the gilded frame, a woman smiled subtly.

“The old man never got out of France,” Nostradamus continued wistfully. “But I shall. Pope Julius himself will marvel at these masterworks—this I vow.” The prophet clapped his hands. “We need a white wall, boy. Take down this picture here—another gift from Leonardo. In a few centuries it will be worth an unimaginable amount of money. Little good that does me.”

Why a white wall? Jacob wondered. If this wizard means to perform some magic, would not a black wall be more suitable?

The boy removed the smiling woman. Even in the feeble candlelight, the exposed wall was as shockingly white as the winding sheet in which his father had been buried. Perhaps white was good for wizardry after all.

Nostradamus lifted a door in the side of the picture-cannon, revealing a small oil lamp, which he lit. Smoke wandered out of the chimney. “Believe me, Master Jacob, there is no sorcery in this machine, but only the divine reason with which God filled Leonardo to overflowing. You have heard of the *camera obscura*? Leonardo managed to turn one inside out. This part here—the aperture. Here—the plano-convex lens, ground from purest beryl.” The prophet inserted the first painting. “This business also requires darkness.”

Jacob snuffed the candles, one by one, and night fell upon the study like a succession of blows. The boy looked at the wall. What he saw made him dizzy and afraid.

“Dear God—it’s what Christians call the devil’s work!” A vast vision had appeared, many times the size of the smiling woman. Where does it come from? he wondered. Instinctively he turned toward the picture-cannon. “But the painting you put in there was so small!”

Jacob fixed on the vision. No less stunning than its size was its substance, a swollen, smoking, demon-spawned, self-propelled spear. “Will it really destroy the world?” he asked.

“Not by itself. There will be thousands like it, in many varieties.” Nostradamus glanced at his parchment script. “*This Satanic lance is a Soviet SS-60 missile,*” he read. “*Land-based. Intercontinental. Multiple warheads.* Do you understand?”

“No.”

The candle in the picture-cannon flickered. Shadows trembled along the shaft of the missile.

Nostradamus projected painting number two. “*This iron fish is a fleet ballistic missile submarine,*” he read. “*The dorsal scales will flip back, and the spears will fly*

to their targets using inertial guidance.”

“How can a fish have spears inside it and not die?” asked the boy.

Nostradamus projected painting number three. “*From hell’s hearth, a thermonuclear fireball—*”

“Is that Latin?”

“I am confounding you, Jacob. It will be best, I can see, not to begin with the weapons. These pictures need a *tale* to accompany them, am I right?”

“Tell me a tale,” said the boy.

Nostradamus sorted through the paintings, chose one, projected it. A vulture. Hunched, ragged, sallow-eyed, carrion-bloated.

“This is about a vulture, a war, and a man named George Paxton. A common man in many respects, but also perhaps a hero, entrapped in Fortuna’s wheel and sent on a series of frightening and fantastic adventures.”

The prophet projected another painting. A bearded man standing by a gravestone.

“Until he saw the three children in white...”