

Introduction

In the most celebrated episode of the original *Star Trek*, “The City on the Edge of Forever,” Captain Kirk travels back in time and rescues a woman named Edith Keeler from an oncoming car. By saving her, Kirk condemns humanity to its own destruction, as her survival is the human race’s death. What makes the episode so intriguing is that Edith Keeler is not a villain, just the opposite in fact; she’s a do-gooder, a peace lover, a person who has devoted herself to the betterment of humankind. But as she lived during the dawn of the Second World War, which is when she was supposed to die, her continued life allows her to ferment and grow an anti-war movement that blocks America’s entry into the war, leading to a Nazi victory and the world’s end. As Spock says, she was a good person at the wrong time.

Many books and TV series explore alternative fictional histories, like *Star Trek*, focusing their lens on the Nazi period. In *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth envisions what could have happened had Charles Lindbergh defeated Roosevelt for president, showing how decent people can become anti-Semites and dogmatic opponents of democracy under the right conditions. And in *The Man in the High Castle*, a TV series on Amazon Prime, we see what the world looks like if the Germans won the war, with good-guy American Joe in one reality becoming hedonistic Nazi Joe in another. What makes all these visions intriguing is how they explore scenarios in which people may be good, innocuous souls under normal circumstances, but become villains or unwitting accomplices to horrific outcomes in another.

This book is my third fictional attempt to dissect the era of COVID, during which our own nation morphed into a dystopian reality eerily similar to the books and shows listed earlier. As a frontline doctor during COVID, an author of several nonfiction books about the virus and our response to it, and a liberal who studies the vicissitudes of history, I watched helplessly as everything that I cherish and value became fodder for the dogmatic power of alleged experts who tore our world to shreds under the manufactured banner of *Scientific Necessity*. Those who demanded that we follow science proselytized just the opposite, draping us with deceptive lies and rituals that led us down a road of religious devotion, which stomped on any semblance of science and humanism. Those who stood on the mantle of pro-choice preached just the opposite when it came to COVID, insisting that no American should have a choice when it came to masks and vaccines and how they lived their very lives. Those who decried the events of January 6th as being the most egregious assault on freedom and democracy in our generation simultaneously praised governors and scientists and our president for stripping Americans of their most basic constitutional rights, including that of free speech, assembly, religious worship, and the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I watched in horror as the leaders, journalists, and doctors with whom I had felt an allegiance shoved our nation into a dark abyss of theocratic absolutism. As a doctor on the front line and someone who has studied COVID and the many fantastical claims made about it by these self-proclaimed experts, I was forced to helplessly watch public health officials, TV doctors, and political leaders dismantle science and concoct a manufactured narrative of fear that left hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people dead and millions of lives ruined, breaking their Hippocratic Oath as they relied on myth and snake-oils that fed their own power at the cost of human life. I understand the fragility of democracy and the need to protect choice, speech, and freedom no matter what calamity might befall us, and I trembled as those who claimed to be most devoted to democracy—liberals, progressive students, educated scientists—mutate our nation into a two-year hell of imprisonment, shaming, censorship, and lifeless bare existence, claiming to be promoting science and democracy as they decimated both.

CNN's team of propagandists—reporters I had relied on before COVID, reporters I truly respected—elevated Anthony Fauci into an unassailable god, labeled as “misinformation” anything that strayed from what I knew to be a fabricated and ultimately dangerous COVID script, exaggerated the impact of the virus while denying protection to those who most needed it and frightening the nonvulnerable in a prison of perturbation, and advocated censorship and what amounted to martial law across the country. By twisting the virus into a political tool and minimizing and enabling the real threat to our democracy (executive overreach, mandates, and censorship during COVID) while focusing instead on a transient threat (January 6th), our media and its selected group of self-serving doctors and scientists created a symbolic rallying cry against Trump and January 6th while mangling “science” and “truth” into their Orwellian opposites.

As the great philosopher Agamben said, our leaders and doctors took our lives away under the premise of saving them; they took our freedom away under the illusion of saving democracy. And none of the vitriol, falsehoods, and scientific butchery has yet to be completely undone. The thick air of COVID's maleficence remains with us and has transformed liberalism and science into their binary enemies, air so porous and toxic that not even their magical masks can block it.

What most fascinated and frightened me, though, was how quickly educated people simply fell prey to the gospel of COVID, questioning nothing, adhering to every ritual and falsehood as though it were written by God Himself. Many of my friends—with whom I share a general liberal/humanistic/scientific outlook on the world—became transformed into robotic nonthinking drones who berated any who dared question Anthony Fauci, who wore masks everywhere (even all alone in the car, for God's sake!), who were happy to close school and society and destroy any number of lives and institutions for a pandemic they believed was as pernicious as the Black Death, who cared not a whiff about the poor and youth and working people—who were severely injured by the oppressive and unnecessary quarantines—they had always claimed to care about, and who refused to look at any fact, labeling such truth as misinformation and dangerous right-wing conspiracy theories, all under the guise of scientific certainty.

These people, educated but clearly not smart, hypnotized by a narrative that bewitched them and flicked off the critical thinking and humanistic switches in their brains, became the Joes of *Man in the High Castle*, the anti-Semites of Phillip Roth's book, the progressive good-doers when times are good and Nazi-like sycophants happy to destroy society in the name of a myth during the era of COVID. They are Edith Keeler, good people at the wrong time, whose purported single-minded purity did more damage to the world than January sixth ever could. It is this phenomenon that triggered my desire to write this book.

In my first two books on COVID, I tackled the era of COVID in different ways. Both books were musical; I wrote ten songs for each to provide a three-dimensional texture to the stories.

Geriatrics Vengeance Club follows semi-autobiographical geriatric doctor Ben Polton as he tries to save his elderly patients from the ravages of COVID terror during the first year of the pandemic, only to be stripped of his license (something that almost happened to me just for stating a fact about the virus on social media) and deprived of his right to speak lest his “facts” verge from the Faucist gospel. Ultimately, in a fictional flare, he writes songs for some of his former patients and goes on a mask-free concert tour of the country, finally realizing that the only way to confront the madness of COVID and the perfidy of

the medical establishment is to bolt from the world of convention and establish his own haven beyond the clutches of society's pinchers.

In *The Great Stupidity*, three travelers during the Black Death confront absurd religious figures, doctors, scientists, and zealous lunatics in a Monty Python-like adventure pitting common sense and decency against a dogmatic world of self-proclaimed experts. When Smith's town is devastated by plague despite doing everything that the priests and scientists told them would protect them, he goes on a quest to find the Great Frenchie and reconnect Saint Ambrose's nail, believing that to be the answer to the plague's wrath. The story, in which good and smart people face others whose versions of science, truth, and fact are blatantly absurd and lethal, compares responses to that truly devastating pandemic with our own similar medieval response to an exponentially less dangerous viral event.

In both books, I show that science and truth become their own enemies when dogmatic forces gain control of society and when fear becomes the primary spark that drives human behavior and belief.

This book creates an alternate reality much like in the shows and books I listed earlier. While characters in this book are loosely based on actual people, everything about them is fictionalized; the characters (even the real ones) are my own creations, not existing in the real world but rather in an alternative world disrupted by a shift that lights the tinder of fear and myth that COVID has laid for us. The book is wantonly violent, something that may unnerve some genteel readers, but it is no more violent than the masquerade of masking, lockdowns, forced vaccinations, school closings, censorship, martial law, medical butchery in the name of science, and an Orwellian definition of misinformation with which our leaders, doctors, and media have suffocated us for over two years, destroying lives under a thin veneer of faux science. To me, that type of violence is far more insidious and dangerous than the more overt violence in this book, and frankly it is time to reveal what is happening in a more blatant way, which is what I have tried to do.

I insert two fictional characters into society who are the fuel of the book's fire. Both are good and decent people who, were it not for COVID, likely would have been benign or at least innocuous players on the world stage. But because of their passion and their desire to promote goodness and a liberal-scientific agenda, because of their binary brains and their disdain for anyone who dares to take an opposing view to the one and only truth that they proclaim, these people irrevocably disrupt the world, altering lives and events in a way that brings out the worst in many and the best in some. Jim Depich, a congressman from Pittsburgh, is a scientist and a progressive who doesn't believe in the niceties of politics. He falls prey to the COVID myth and then, after January 6th, becomes a zealot in his war against those who threaten "science and democracy," tearing apart any and all people who see the world through a different lens; his is a dichotomous mind, one built with spreadsheets, one of good and evil, one bereft of nuance. Mary Lou Kramer is a college student who embraces noble progressive causes, but who similarly is willing to discard life and all semblance of decency when it comes to protecting the world from "reactionary forces" during COVID, dividing the world and all its people into the simple formula of right vs wrong, true vs false.

By adding these two Edith Keelers into a cauldron of madness, into a world whose flames of fear and mutual distrust were already burning bright, I envision how people would change in a reality now propelled by passion and dogmatism, by power and hate, by Orwellian conceptions of science and freedom. Most of the book's characters are, like I said, based on real people, but in this world, they are of my own creation, altered by the shift created by Jim and Mary Lou; their names are what Jim Depich

calls them, as he has a nickname for everyone. And to weave a three-dimensional atmosphere into the words, I have hired a wonderful artist to create visual images of the accentuating madness. This is my *City on the Edge of Tomorrow*, my latest fictional attempt to make sense of a land that has gone off its hinges, one that has dropped us into a dark abyss, that has sullied so many people who I once believed to be allies and friends and demonstrated how little we can ever trust our media, doctors, and institutions again.