

About This Volume

Robert C. Evans

The theme of survival in literature has been the subject of hundreds of specialized scholarly essays and of scores of specialized scholarly books. Rarely, however, has it been dealt with in broad, general terms. In other words, rarely has anyone tried to study the importance of the theme *throughout* literature rather than in particular individual texts. The present volume obviously cannot hope to fill this huge gap, but it does seem to be one of the few books ever devoted to survival as a *general* theme rather than to “survival in [insert the title of a particular text].” One hopes that the present book will help generate fuller explorations of survival as a remarkably widespread and persistent issue in literature in general. Why have so many writers been concerned with this theme? Why is this theme so popular with readers or with viewers of films? Why has literature, almost since the very beginning (think of Homer’s *Odyssey*, for instance), been so often and so strongly preoccupied with the quest to survive? How and why is this matter deeply rooted in human psychology? These are just a few of the general questions that can be asked about survival as a general theme in literature.

The purpose of the present book is to try to deal with some of the questions just mentioned while also adding to the number of essays that explore survival as an issue in various particular works. The book also tries to tie questions of survival as a theme in literature to studies of survival as a topic in other fields, especially psychology and intellectual history. Charles Darwin, for instance, is mentioned often in this volume because Darwin was one of the first great thinkers to argue that survival was perhaps *the* crucial instinct of all living creatures. But long before Darwin had hit upon this insight and explored its manifold implications, creative writers had been dealing with the survival instinct in literary works of all kinds – poems, stories, dramas, novels, and, most recently, scripts for films. The essays included in *Critical Insights: Survival* examine

works in all these varied genres and also cover works from among the earliest to among the most recent. Canonical works are the topics of many of the essays included here, but so are examples of popular culture. Science fiction of various kinds is the focus of a surprising number of essays, partly because that kind of fiction seems especially preoccupied with issues of survival.

Science fiction, in fact, is the topic surveyed in the volume's flagship essay, by Darren Harris-Fain. A noted expert on this kind of writing, Harris-Fain explores some factors that help make science fiction unique among literary works that deal with survival. This includes the fantastic but plausible scenarios that science fiction can offer, among them natural disasters of unprecedented scale, humanmade catastrophes such as nuclear warfare or diseases, and threats to survival found on other worlds or caused by alien encounters. In addition, science fiction is notable for the kinds of protagonists it favors: intelligent and informed men and women who approach problems (including survival) logically and who keep their heads in a crisis. Harris-Fain offers a broad overview of many different science fiction texts that deal with survival as a central motif.

Critical Contexts

Following Harris-Fain's essay are four articles designed to study the survival theme using various contexts and methods. These essays emphasize four approaches in particular: the first takes a historical approach, the second offers an overview of previous scholarship on the topic, the third uses a specific critical lens (or theoretical perspective) to deal with the survival theme, and the fourth compares and contrasts the ways survival is dealt with by two different writers in two different works.

In his historical contexts essay, Robert C. Evans looks at a previously unpublished work by Zora Neale Hurston: *Barracoon*. Evans's article is one of the very first scholarly essays to deal with this important new text, in which Hurston interviewed one of the very last slaves ever brought from Africa to the United States, just before the outbreak of the Civil War. Evans's essay also offers

an overview of a key scientific book, by John Leach, on survival psychology. The essay examines the relevance of some of Leach's ideas to Hurston's newly published book.

Next, an essay by Paul Bailey offers an overview of scholarly treatments of the survival theme in literature. Bailey notes that relatively little of a comprehensive nature has been published on the survival motif in creative writing. Books that *have* examined the survival theme have done so, usually, in connection with one author or with one or two specific works. Instead, Bailey surveys commentary about the survival theme as it appears in various genres, including (1) young adult fiction, (2) popular nonfiction, (3) American novels, and (4) world literature in general.

In an essay on the evolution of survival in American short fiction, Steve Gronert Ellerhoff uses Darwinian literary theory to examine four short stories by four major American writers, three of whom specialize(d) in science fiction. The essay traces some of the ways in which concerns with survival have evolved over the past century or so, from survival in the wild to survival on other planets to survival in recent corporate culture.

In her essay on survival (and degeneration?) of the fittest, Britt Terry also stresses the impact of Darwin's thinking on the ways writers of literature have approached the theme of survival. Terry's essay argues that Darwin's ideas emphasized not only the ways species could progress but also the ways they could degenerate. In particular, she discusses the relevance of Darwin's notion that humans evolved from beasts and that they never quite lose their animalistic heritage.

Critical Readings

The next section of the present volume is devoted to Critical Readings—that is, to examinations of the survival theme as it appears in a variety of particular works. Because this section is organized chronologically, it begins with an essay by Christopher Baker on the Apostle Paul as Odyssean survivor. Baker reminds us that Homer was the most widely read and most deeply esteemed author in the Greco-Roman world in which the Apostle Paul operated. Examining

biblical texts by and about Paul, Baker shows how methods and themes from the *Odyssey* may have affected the substance and style of early Christian writings. His essay maintains that Paul's epic struggles to survive and share the Christian gospel resemble, in many respects, the experiences of Odysseus.

In an essay on survival in *Measure for Measure*, Nicolas Tredell examines Shakespeare's most famous problem play by exploring many different aspects of the theme of survival: the survival of individual characters as well as larger survivals of an instinctual, political, philosophical, and religious kind. The instinctual survival is that of sexuality, as a potent force that can both subvert and subserve the operations of power, in a climate that mixes puritan repression with predatory licence. The political survival is that of the state and the status quo. The philosophical survival is that of pagan beliefs in a Christian era. The religious survival is that of Roman Catholicism.

In the first of his Critical Readings essays, Robert C. Evans examines a little-known but intriguing work by Mark Twain: his unfinished sequel to the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Drawing on Rolf W. Frohlich's ideas about the survival instinct as a product of evolution, the essay shows the relevance of Frohlich's claims to Twain's narrative. Twain's characters face, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, multiple kinds of threat to their survival. The unfinished book amounts to a kind of *bildungsroman*, or novel of development, in which Tom and Huck mature under the influence of an older man who is a skilled and resourceful survivor.

Next, in an essay on surviving the vampire in *Dracula*, Nicolas Tredell argues that Bram Stoker's famous novel (1897) dramatizes individual survival in three main forms. There is the survival, the most fundamental kind, of the living person; there is the survival, within the Christian perspective to which most of the main characters subscribe, of the soul in the face of the threat that it may be lost to vampirism; and there is the strange survival of the vampire itself in the face of the threat from humans who wish to slay it. The essay additionally contends that the novel portrays three kinds of more general survival: the survival, into the modern world of the late nineteenth century, of elements of ancient beliefs and practices; the

survival of patriarchal gender relations in a culture that is starting to question and challenge them; and the archival survival offered by written words, which can preserve experience for future reference and survive the death of the individuals who produced them.

In “Issues of Survival in Jack London’s ‘In a Far Country,’” Kelley Jeans looks at the challenges of survival on the Alaskan frontier around the turn of the century, focusing particularly on two men who are derisively called “The Incapables” by the other pioneers, who eventually leave them behind during a trek across the Klondike. The Incapables—lazy, selfish, inexperienced, and unwilling to learn—break practically every conceivable rule of survival and end the story frozen and dead, having killed each other before the Alaskan winter could complete the job.

In his essay on survival in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Christopher Baker argues that John Steinbeck’s ability to compose his novel with both a microcosmic and a macrocosmic vision persuades us that the Joad family will survive if they can muster a personal set of values with which to combat the various forces arrayed against them. However, not everyone in the family can or will make the constructive choices that we see from Ma, Tom, Jim, or Rose of Sharon. The essay contends that some of the characters survive physically, some morally, and some both, while others do not survive at all.

In his second Critical Readings essay, Robert C. Evans examines the survival theme in mature early works by Philip Larkin, widely regarded as perhaps the most important (and certainly the most popular) English poet of the second half of the twentieth century. Larkin, who was obsessed with the theme of death, was therefore also greatly concerned with the idea of survival in various forms. This is an idea that appears in a remarkable number of poems he wrote during the 1950s and 1960s.

Paul Duke, in an essay titled “The Last Supper: Culinary Safety and Survival in Recent Science Fiction,” reflects a trend in recent literary criticism to examine the importance of food in human cultures. Duke argues that humans’ deep psychic association between survival and food may even mean that to eat or not to eat

is the ultimate existential question. Duke shows that two pioneering twentieth-century science fiction novels, Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* and Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, as well as many of the film adaptations inspired by them, express the fragility of our existence through the compelling metaphor of food. Duke suggests that although we continually seek individual and societal survival in various culinary rituals, no guarantee of safety or salvation can be found even when people are eating.

Science fiction is again a key topic in "Surviving Dystopia," in which M. G. Gainer argues that two recent works—Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009)—both deal with issues of survival and the ways proverbial knowledge can help people endure calamitous times. According to Gainer, both writers, in the novels just mentioned, show a keen interest in the theme of survival and in the ways remembered words can be crucial in promoting the existence not only of human lives but of worthy values.

Finally, Bryan Warren examines critical responses to Sean Penn's 2007 film about Christopher McCandless, a young man who abandoned his family and previous comfortable lifestyle to live a life of rugged individualism in the American west. Unfortunately, McCandless ultimately died of starvation only a few miles from civilization. His experiences were the topic of a best-selling book and have since been the focus of much controversy and much additional writing and filmmaking. Since most reactions—both to the book and to the film—center on reactions to McCandless and his futile efforts to survive, this essay offers a wide variety of responses to the theme of survival, both in literature and in the real world.

Resources

The final section of this volume offers a list of suggestions for further reading as well as a bibliography of additional works dealing with the survival theme. Information about the editor and contributors appears next, followed by a comprehensive index that focuses especially on the authors and titles dealt with throughout the book. All in all, the purpose of the volume is to demonstrate how

important survival has been as a motif in literature and film and to inspire further thought and scholarship on this significant topic.

The Survival Theme in Literature: An Overview_____

Paul Bailey

Despite the importance of survival as a theme in literature and as a concern of literary critics, few surveys of the topic exist. There is no chapter on survival, for instance, in the huge, ever-reliable two-volume *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs* edited by Jean-Charles Seigneuret, nor is survival one of the topics covered in the sixteen volumes published as part of the Bloom's Literary Themes series. The short-lived series titled *Literary Themes for Students* never made it to a volume on survival, and there seems to be no separate, stand-alone survey of the topic in the form of a comprehensive book. Perhaps, ironically, this is because *so much* has been written about survival in so many different individual contexts: as of mid-2018, the Modern Language Association's *International Bibliography* listed close to six hundred different items relevant to survival as a theme. The most recent item was an article on the Irish Abuse Survival Memoir; on the other hand, one of the *earliest* items listed was a 1956 article on the Comedy of Survival in Dickens' Novels. Obviously, however, discussions of survival in literature predate 1956, so one suspects that the number of possible items a dedicated annotator would need to discuss amount to far more than six hundred. Whoever—if anyone—ever takes on the task of trying to survey all this material will definitely have his or her hands full.

My goal here, therefore, is far more modest. I simply want to point the reader in the direction of some brief but useful surveys of survival as a literary theme while also emphasizing that much (*very* much) more work remains to be done.

Survival as a Theme in Literature for Young People

Interestingly, the publications (both in print and online) that do offer guides to survival as a literary theme are often aimed at younger readers. Joan Kanavy and Susan van Zile, for instance, are the authors of an eighty-page volume on survival as part of a series

on High-Interest Literature Units. This publication, apparently designed for middle-school teachers, offers chapters titled “Getting Started”; “Before Reading Activities”; “Reader Response Journals”; “Working with Literary Elements”; “Technology Connections”; and “Wrapping Up the Unit.” The authors write that the booklet focuses on “five favorite young adult novels” that emphasize the theme of survival: James Ullman’s *Banner in the Sky*, Jean Craighead George’s *My Side of the Mountain*, Theodore Taylor’s *The Cay*, Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, and Gary Paulsen’s *Hatchet* (5). The emphasis of this publication is on practical classroom strategies rather than on literary criticism per se. Much the same is true of a 126-page teaching guide and anthology titled *Survival!* published (with no editor listed) as part of the Heath Middle Level Literature series. This book includes works (in a wide range of genres) by such authors as Gary Paulsen, David Waggoner, Eddy Harris, Norma Fox Mazer, Jack London, Dwight Okita, Gary Soto, Maya Angelou, and Catherine Gourley. The three main projects discussed include “Writing a Survival Narrative”; “Producing a Survival Kit”; and “Preparing a Survival Manual.”

The assumption that young readers are interested in reading about survival also helps explain the appearance of a chapter on that topic in Alice Trupe’s helpful volume titled *Thematic Guide to Young Adult Literature*. Trupe’s chapter on “Survival” begins by asserting that one

conflict that drives the plot of many literary works is man versus nature. The classic novel exploring this theme is [Hemingway’s] *The Old Man and the Sea*, long a staple of the high school English curriculum. Some of the most suspenseful adventure stories successfully integrate this theme with other conflicts, such as Richard Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game” (1924), a story as popular with students as it is with teachers, and Robb White’s 1972 novel *Deathwatch*. The idea of proving oneself in a struggle against external forces is not a new one in Western culture, though the opportunities for doing so have dwindled in contemporary society. Extreme conditions, it is believed, bring out humans’ true toughness and intelligence. The novels discussed here include middle school classics as well as more recent works

that require young people to live by their wits in challenging locales remote from society. In most of the texts, the added dimension of struggle against societal attitudes, one's own prejudices, and family pressures give depth and poignancy to the effort simply to stay alive. (217)

Among the works Trupe discusses are Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*, Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*, Gary Paulsen's *Brian's Winter*, Will Hobbs' *Far North*, and Joan Bauer's *Backwater*. She offers plot summaries of each work but also makes interpretive comments in passing. She suggests, for instance, that in Taylor's novel, the protagonist's "success in adjusting to his disability and his ability to outgrow racial prejudice dramatically transform him" (218). By the end of the book, "he finds that he no longer shares the interests of his peers but rather wants to get to know the West Indian black community, hoping one day to find his island again and pay tribute to the man who saved his life" (218).

Trupe is even more enthusiastic about Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*, which she considers "a modern classic." In fact, she writes that if

a teen reads only one novel with a survival theme, this should probably be the one. What makes this story of a thirteen-year-old stranded alone in the Canadian wilderness so powerful? Brian [the protagonist] discovers both the fragility and the richness of life in this straightforward tale of man versus nature. *Hatchet* contrasts several key aspects of contemporary life with a life lived off the land. (218)

Trupe notes that Paulsen's sequels to this novel imply his "continuing fascination with the topic, as well as enthusiastic reader response." The most successful sequel, Trupe thinks, is "*Brian's Winter* (1996), which forgoes the final rescue of *Hatchet* in favor of continued wilderness existence and further learning about survival, now in the cold of winter" (219).

In discussing Will Hobbs's *Far North*, Trupe explains how one character "teaches [other characters] important survival skills." She notes that these skills help them "learn to respect [the teaching character's] knowledge, as well as the wild and fiercely cold world

they are left in and the value of friendship in a mutually dependent situation” (220). Trupe even states that this is

a classic man-versus-nature novel that embodies a critique of the ways contemporary Western society has lured Native Americans away from intimate knowledge of the land. The wealth the boys need to survive winter in the wild is, fortunately, still available to them in the remnants of the culture preserved in an elder’s memory, though much is lost to them due to divergence from the native language (220).

Trupe later calls Joan Bauer’s *Blackwater* “a woman-versus-nature novel enlivened with a woman-versus-human sub theme [. . .] about survival on two levels: survival of quiet, solitary introverts in an aggressively clannish, argumentative family and survival of grave injury in a wilderness environment” (220).

In addition to discussing the works already mentioned, Trupe also lists, at the end of her chapter on Survival, a number of other “reading recommendations,” including the following:

Deathwatch by Robb White, 1972; *Dogsong*, 1985, and *Haymeadow* 1992, by Gary Paulsen; . . . *Onion Tears* by Diana Kidd, 1991; *Death Walk* by Walt Morey, 1991; *Sweet Friday Island* by Theodore Taylor, 1994; *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* by Alden R. Carter, 1995; *Flash Fire* by Caroline B. Cooney, 1995; *Free Fall* by Joyce Sweeney, 1996; *Whichaway* by Glendon and Kathryn Swarthout, 1997; *The Grounding of Group 6* by Julian F. Thompson, 1997; *The Wild Kid* by Harry Mazer, 1998; and *When Eagles Fall* by Mary Casanova, 2002 (221).

Elsewhere, however, Trupe also mentions a number of various other works that deal with the survival theme. In discussing Chris Crutcher’s *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, Trupe notes that “Everyone, adult and teen alike, learns to look deeper to see what people are really made of in this chronicle of survival, friendship, and, ultimately, beauty” (41). Further, in the introduction to a chapter titled Breaking Silence, Speaking Out, Trupe states that “Naming and facing the most serious challenges to one’s own survival as an individual are

important steps in maturing, as well. In most of the novels discussed here, a character who has chosen silence, in some cases for years, takes that step toward healing” (43). This idea is also emphasized in her comments on Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*, in which she says that the protagonist’s salvation comes from “a free-spirited artist” who “promotes artistic expression as a survival skill” (45). Further, Trupe notes that in Brock Cole’s *The Facts Speak for Themselves*, the protagonist, although neglected and abused, develops “strong survival skills and a matter-of-fact bluntness when she chooses to break her silence about her personal history” (46).

Trupe also sees survival as a key component in Rodman Philbrick’s *Freak the Mighty* (reprinted as *The Mighty*). In this narrative a character “allows himself to believe in [another’s] fantasies about survival in a bionic body” (94). She notes that a similar theme of survival is seen in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, as a character “is headed toward a new life, and whether the reader interprets this as an afterlife or simply survival in a different part of the world, it will undeniably be better than the life he has been living—with freedom, music, color, and love” (129). Trupe also sees the theme of survival in Jain Lawrence’s High Seas Trilogy (*The Wreckers*, *The Smugglers*, *The Buccaneers*), in which “a few men working together to navigate and sail a relatively small vessel far from land are mutually dependent on one another,” so that “their survival often depends on accurately sizing up another person’s strengths and weaknesses” (118). All in all, Trupe provides a very helpful overview of the survival theme in quite a few important works of young adult literature.

Survival as a Theme in American Novels

Less useful, unfortunately, is Lynda G. Adamson’s survey of the survival theme in her *Thematic Guide to the American Novel*, which focuses more on plot summary than on literary analysis. The opening paragraph of Adamson’s chapter on Survival, however, does sketch the importance of the theme in five important texts:

About the Editor

Robert C. Evans is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he has taught since 1982. In 1984 he received his PhD from Princeton University, where he held Weaver and Whiting fellowships as well as a university fellowship. In later years his research was supported by fellowships from the Newberry Library (twice), the American Council of Learned Societies, the Folger Shakespeare Library (twice), the Mellon Foundation, the Huntington Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, and the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

In 1982 he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and in 1989 was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

He is a contributing editor to the John Donne *Variorum Edition* and is the author or editor of more than fifty books (on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century English literature). He is also the author of roughly four hundred published or forthcoming essays or notes (in print and online) on a variety of topics, especially dealing with Renaissance literature, critical theory, women writers, short fiction, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Contributors

Christopher Baker is professor of English at the Armstrong campus of Georgia Southern University, where he teaches courses in early modern English literature, Shakespeare, Milton, mythology, and the Bible as literature. Twice president of the South Central Renaissance Conference, he is author of *Religion in the Age of Shakespeare* (Greenwood, 2007), editor of *Absolution and the Scientific Revolution 1600-1720: A Biographical Dictionary* (Greenwood, 2002), and an associate editor of the forthcoming new variorum edition of *Cymbeline*. His essays have appeared in *Milton Studies*, *Ben Jonson Journal*, *Comparative Drama*, *Studia Neophilologica*, *John Donne Journal*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, and elsewhere.

Paul Bailey is an independent scholar with a special interest in early modern poetry and documentary films. He has extensive experience as a teacher of writing across the curriculum, particularly for nursing and psychology students. A future publication will involve George Herbert, the English devotional poet.

Paul N. Duke is an independent scholar with a special interest in Renaissance literature (particularly Shakespeare) and science fiction. Forthcoming essays will deal with both of these topics.

Steve Gronert Ellerhoff is the author of *Post-Jungian Psychology and the Short Stories of Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut: Golden Apples of the Monkey House* (Routledge, 2016) and coeditor, with Philip Coleman, of *George Saunders: Critical Essays* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). He just finished writing *Mole* for the Animal Series published by Reaktion Books. He holds a PhD in English from Trinity College, Dublin, and teaches at Des Moines Area Community College. His literary criticism and fiction can be found at www.stevegronertellerhoff.net.

M. G. Gainer, PhD, originally from West Virginia, taught English for more than a decade at several colleges and universities in western and central Pennsylvania. Though her dissertation focused on language and survival in dystopian texts, she also studies Old English maxims and their

His recent books include *C. P. Snow: The Dynamics of Hope* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); *Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); *Novels to Some Purpose: The Fiction of Colin Wilson* (Paupers Press, 2015); *Conversations with Critics* (Verbivorous Press, 2015), an updated edition of his interviews with leading literary figures; and *Anatomy of Amis* (Paupers Press, 2017), the most comprehensive account so far of the fiction and nonfiction of Martin Amis. He formerly taught literature, drama, film, and cultural studies at Sussex University and is currently consultant editor of Palgrave Macmillan's Essential Criticism series, which now numbers 86 volumes, with many more to come. He is a frequent speaker at a wide variety of venues, most recently at the 2018 Literary London Conference at the University of London and the Second International Colin Wilson Conference at the University of Nottingham, UK.

Bryan Warren is an independent scholar with a special interest in popular culture and Japanese literature, especially graphic fiction. He has previously published on Arthur Miller and has a number of forthcoming publications.