

# The Grim Reader: Five Plague-Related Stories for Quarantine

In times of social distancing, fear, and sickness, it's always interesting to look back at the past and see how others have dealt with similar situations. Here are five relevant reads for times such as these:

[\*The Plague\*](#), by **Albert Camus**. It is said that when the French become philosophical, they write novels. The great French intellectuals of the early 20th century are proof of this. The most famous of them were the existentialists Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, two men who were good friends until they fell out over communism, Sartre embracing it, and Camus rejecting it. But both were excellent writers.

Sartre wrote *Nausea* and *No Exit*. Camus wrote *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. *The Plague* was loosely based on a cholera epidemic that hit Oran, French Algeria in 1849, but is set in 1947. The individuals in the story are each faced with different aspects of a plague that seems to have no place in the rational order of reality. The absurdity of existence is a common theme in existentialist literature and is palpable in this story. It is not necessary to believe that existence actually is absurd to appreciate the perspective of people in a crisis that makes it appear as if it is.

[\*The Masque of the Red Death\*](#), by **Edgar Allan Poe**. This short story is Poe at his finest. It's the tale of a Prince who, when his kingdom is threatened by the "Red Death" ("Blood was its Avatar and its seal"), gathers a thousand friends with whom he sequesters himself in a citadel he has built. Completely sealed off from everyone else, they party hard, and dance till late in the night. One night, there appears an

intruder in a hideous mask, "shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave," who "stalked to and fro among the waltzers." When the Prince tries to confront the figure of death, he falls lifeless to the ground. And when the other guests accost the him, they find only the "cerements of the grave and corpse-like mask ... untenanted by any tangible form." It is the plague itself which has found them.

**[The Secret Garden](#)**, by **Francis Hodgson Burnett**. Unlike Poe and Camus, who have truths of their own to tell, Burnett's stories are outwardly life-affirming. *The Secret Garden* is about 10-year-old Mary whose parents die in a cholera epidemic. She ends up being sent to Yorkshire to stay at the moorland estate of her hunchbacked uncle. On the estate is a garden, walled up and inaccessible because the uncle's wife, who once cared for it has died. But Mary finds the key and enters the garden. Along the way she also discovers a boy, hidden in the manor house, suffering under the illusion that he is a permanent invalid. The boy joins the girl in the secret garden and finds that he can walk after all. A beautiful story.

**[Love in the Ruins](#)** (and *The Thanatos Syndrome*), by **Walker Percy**. Percy is the man for our times. *Love in the Ruins* begins at a highway underpass where psychologist Dr. Thomas More holds up. More has invented the "ontological lapsometer," a device that not only diagnoses your spiritual malady, but cures it. Trouble is, it causes any salt deposits in the nearby soil to burst into flame. The government has stolen and so the protagonist must go into hiding. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, More has just been released from an insane asylum and is allowed to practice psychology again, but he has discovered a government plot to take away the people's humanity by causing them, through spiking the water, to revert to apelike behavior. Social satire at its finest.

**[The Road](#)**, by **Cormac McCarthy**. McCarthy's dystopian novel of

what the world might look like in the aftermath of ... what? A nuclear war? That's the impression we are given. What happens to people when all living things except themselves have been destroyed and each is set against the other in a dead world? McCarthy is perhaps our finest living novelist.

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