Bridging the Gap Between Pandemic Fiction and Reality: Community and Solidarity in Val McDermid's *Resistance*

María Jesús Sánchez García (sanchezgmaria@uniovi.es)
0000-0003-2066-8764
Universidad de Oviedo

Abstract: Best known for her *tartan noir* fiction, Scottish author Val McDermid enters in 2017 the realm of pandemic fiction. Her radio drama turned graphic novel *Resistance* still bears the imprint of the essential features of Scottish crime written by women. A bacterium which has grown resistant to antibiotics decimates the world's population, forcing us to redefine communities and solidarity among groups. The scenario created, both improbable and alarmingly plausible, allows for the exploration of human reactions in the face of disaster. This article discusses the role of literature, and more specifically pandemic literature, as a means of psychological escape as well as social criticism, and explores its possibilities as facilitator of survival during societal collapse by means of collective action and solidarity.

Keywords: antibiotics, community, pandemics, resistance, solidarity, Val McDermid.

Acortando la distancia entre la ficción pandémica y la realidad: Comunidad y solidaridad en *Resistance*, de Val McDermid

Resumen: Reconocida especialmente por su ficción *tartan noir,* la autora escocesa Val McDermid se adentra en 2017 en la ficción pandémica con *Resistance*, en forma de drama radiofónico convertido en novela gráfica en 2021, sin por ello dejar de lado los elementos esenciales de la novela negra escocesa de autoría femenina. Una bacteria que ha desarrollado resistencia a los antibióticos es la causa de la diezma de la población global, lo que obliga a una redefinición de qué es comunidad y solidaridad entre grupos. El escenario creado, tan improbable como alarmantemente plausible, permite la exploración de las reacciones humanas ante el desastre. Este artículo analiza el rol de la literatura, más concretamente de la literatura pandémica, como medio de escape psicológico y de crítica social, y explora sus posibilidades como facilitadora de supervivencia durante el colapso de la sociedad a través de la acción colectiva y la solidaridad.

Palabras clave: antibióticos, comunidad, pandemia, resistencia, solidaridad, Val McDermid.

1. Introduction: Bridging the gap between fiction and reality

Science fiction has experienced a huge surge of interest in the last few years. Amid the panic and confusion caused by Covid-19, reading and viewing audiences were drawn to apocalyptic narratives, spiking the sales of classics such as Camus' *The Plague*, and the number of downloads of films and series set in pandemic and post-pandemic contexts. Fiction became suddenly too close to reality and this highlighted the question

of whether it is merely a way to escape it, or to reflect on it. In this article, I align with those who maintain pandemic fiction is not simply a form of entertainment, but a necessity owing to its capacity to help understand and process real crises by exposing how quickly the familiar can collapse. However, before considering why pandemic fiction can reveal itself as more than a mere leisure activity, the concept of literature must be examined. Literature is a complex notion: there is not just one way to understand it. These "pieces of writing that are valued as works of art"—according to the *Oxford Dictionary* definition—, can take many forms and be interpreted in various ways.

Professor of Scottish literature Alan Riach proposes in his *Scottish Literature: An Introduction* (2022) seven different ways in which to answer the big question: "what is literature?" In order to do so, he takes into consideration that, whatever form it takes, literature is made up of three main components, namely: "[l]anguage, stories and music." These elements help create two different "areas of sensual apprehension ... the visual and the aural," which are, in turn, "portals to reality" (26). Riach defines literature as a branch of the creative arts, whose most prominent genres are poetry, fiction and drama, and views it as a convergence of energies, namely personality, history and substance. Riach also asserts that literature functions as a form of communication and negotiation "that tells truths", engages in acts of resistance against normative values, and participates in an ongoing dialogue (26-32). Even though the notion of truth remains a controversial one, fiction can be regarded under this light as a manifestation of reality, as a link between fantasy and fact.

This description of literature as aesthetic representation of reality aligns with the understanding that, broadly speaking, fiction and lies are not synonymous, even though they both belong to the realm of the unreal. As stated by Jane Doherty and James Giordano, fiction "intends to provide an illustration [...] of reality" (1), very much in keeping with Riach's aforementioned notion of "portal to reality", from the perspective of the imaginary and hypothetical. As readers, we are required to enter into a fictional pact that enables us to immerse ourselves in an unfamiliar world, one in which the laws of physics may not apply, history may diverge from the account of events with which we are familiar, and the characters we encounter are either entirely fictitious or represented in ways that may not be strictly faithful to historical fact. However, we can

understand them and be able to empathise with their experiences. In these hypothetical situations, where we lie "between history and myth" (Riach 29), not only are we seeking comfort and escaping from reality as a way of coping with emotions, but also inadvertently improving our chances of survival.

This article does not aspire to analyse cognitive science studies in depth. However, the gap between the representation of reality by means of literature and this unexpected application can be bridged by looking into psychological studies on episodic memory—i.e., the conscious retrieval of personal experiences together with their context. Researchers from Harvard University laid out in 2008 some major concepts regarding the involvement of episodic memory "in our ability to carry out simulations," as those brain regions—such as the hippocampus—associated to recollection of past events were discovered to be "similarly engaged when people imagine future experiences" (Schacter et al. 39). These future scenarios I propose to be equivalent to those presented in literary works of fiction, more specifically pandemic fiction, for the purpose of this article. This is in line with the idea of "prospective brain," a term coined by Schacter et al. in 2007, and whose function is to make use of the stored "information from the past and the present to generate predictions about the future" (660). It seems, then, that our ability as readers to cross over to the literary world may well prepare us for real world scenarios involving the experienced alternate reality and make us better equipped to deal with disaster, as "[e]xperts have long recognized the important role than mental simulation can play in solving problems" (Taylor et al. 429).

In recent years, a picture of a sign in a bookshop window has gone viral—pun intended. It states that the post-apocalyptic fiction section has been moved to Current Affairs. It reads as dark humour, which is in itself a coping strategy with the grim context of Covid-19, but it also exemplifies the close relationship between fiction and reality. As suggested by Doherty and Giordano, we turned to such stories "in ways similar to those reasons for which [we] turn to the news" (1). There is a psychological need to understand, to neutralise the uncertainty. Pandemic fiction is a representation of fear and vulnerability, and our ability to empathise with the characters stems directly from our own anxiety about the unknown and the recognition of our own

defencelessness. In this sense, it could be stated that pandemic fiction is not merely fiction about pandemics, but a portrayal of contagious uncomfortable emotions. This very act of representation helps make sense of them, thus contributing to regulate them.

1.1. Literary canon(s) and margins. The case of Scottish pandemic fiction written by women

Traditionally, literature has been categorised in terms of canon and margins. There are genres, literary works, and authors, that have been deemed canonical, while others have been relegated to the periphery and regarded as less significant. But what exactly constitutes a canon? Alan Riach dedicates a chapter in his *Scottish Literature, An Introduction* to define this widely used term. He identifies it as "a form of cultural empowerment" and acknowledges how this power can be exercised in two antagonistic ways: it can be limiting, but it can also

> work as effective resistance to foreclosure and oppression intended by others... A canon can be a good thing because it prompts curiosity and can lead to worthwhile company. It can also be a bad thing because the others are sometimes out to exert their power over you or colonise you. (986)

Several layers can be found in this power dynamics. This is not only question of genre, but it has a geographical and a gender component as well. Val McDermid's *Resistance*, focus of this article, could easily be labelled as non-canonical according to all three. Firstly, because both of its forms—namely, radio drama and graphic novel—are non-traditional mediums, unlike more established literary forms such as the novel, poetry, or essay. Secondly, as a narrative of Scottish authorship, it occupies a marginal position relative to "English, Anglo-American, or Anglophone literature(s), including post-imperial literatures in English" (Riach 979). Thirdly, Val McDermid is a female author, which situates her within patriarchal margins, and *Resistance* stems from a literary genre that has been seen as written *by* men and *for* men, or even boys, yet it has been still considered minor: science fiction (Green and Lefanu 1985: 1). Even though this genre has enjoyed the public's favour and grown exponentially in the past few decades, hence facilitating the

diversification of its subgenres, its cultural and literary value have been denied for a long time.

As a source of entertainment, literature provides readers with psychological tools to navigate the challenges of the real world. It is a form of escapism and a way of coping. Moreover, science fiction—in whatever form it takes, from the depiction of seemingly unattainable futuristic *x*topian scenarios, to alternate realities that look uncomfortably realistic as seen, for instance, in the TV series *Black Mirror*—acts as an apparently innocent vehicle for cultural and critical thought. It uses its imaginary component to subtly conceal its socio-historical foundation and critique. Despite the challenges, these narratives, especially when "drawn from media often dismissed as unserious and trivial," in Peter Y. Paik's words, "are capable of achieving profound and probing insights into the principal dilemmas of political life" (1). Science fiction can also be described, as Patrick Parrinder already suggested in 1980, "as a 'thinking machine' which provides an outlet to visualize *what could be*, and therefore allows both reflection on *what is*, and some idea for planning *what to do next*" (Doherty and Giordano 1). In the following pages I will analyse how Val McDermid offers with *Resistance* both entertainment and food for thought to her audiences.

2. Val McDermid and the intersection of crime and pandemic fiction

Scottish author Val McDermid shares birthplace with renowned economist Adam Smith in the east coastal town of Kirkcaldy, in the county of Fife, and a taste for crime fiction and versatility as a writer with her contemporary Louise Welsh. Best known for her *tartan noir* and with millions of copies of her books sold all over the world, she was even labelled Queen of Crime by audiences. This is a moniker which shocked the Agatha Christie Estate, whose representatives sent in 2022 a cease-and-desist letter as they trademarked the expression, first used to describe the pioneering twentieth-century crime writer. A quick look at McDermid's upbringing and education, as well as her preferred genre is deemed necessary to fully understand the work at hand: the radio drama turned graphic novel *Resistance*. Even though *Resistance* falls most notably under the category of pandemic narrative, the development of plot and characters is inextricably linked to her other literary works.

Tartan noir is not simply a way of referring to crime fiction made in Scotland. It has a set of definitory characteristics that separate it from the work of authors such as Edgar Allan Poe or Agatha Christie herself. As stated by Yildirim Özsevgeç, its writers' main aim

> is to dwell fearlessly on the social context of crime without ignoring the narrative and to focus on life's gloomy and even dark side. Another striking feature of almost all the Tartan-Noir is the protagonists' defiance of authority, which, according to the Scots, is the cornerstone of their national identity. (107)

Interestingly enough, a genre that has been traditionally male dominated has seen in the last few decades a steep increase in the number of women authors, with writers of the stature of Louise Welsh, Denise Mina or Val McDermid herself. This phenomenon goes parallel to another interesting feature of *tartan noir*: female-centred storylines when written by women authors. These protagonists, very much like the writers who give them life and voice, are strong individuals who break away from gender stereotypes, doing their detective work while offering their view on social issues and standing up for the oppressed. Growing up in a working-class family and publishing during Thatcherism gave her a clear insight into the workings of patriarchy, and the challenges that she faced clearly translate into her characters. It is typical of her to even exaggerate and parody gender roles. To this day, she has raised her voice against any social or political issue she deems unjust, not just by means of fiction, but in interviews and social media, from Westminster politics to the Caledonian Sleeper train services.

Her humble upbringing did not prevent McDermid from attending Oxford University, and she became the first state school student to attend St Hilda's College, where she is now an Honorary Fellow. Even though "[her] school didn't even want her to apply … [she] had one supportive teacher and parents who realised that education was the way to a better life," as she told *The Daily Mail* in 2020. As she also acknowledges in that interview, challenges are not to be seen as problems, but as opportunities, a philosophy very much in keeping with the etymological development of the word "crisis" as a decisive point, which can also be applicable to the apocalyptical backdrop of *Resistance*.

More specifically relevant to her depiction of the female protagonist of *Resistance*, the reporter Zoe Beck, is the fact that, after graduating, McDermid worked as a journalist in England. In an interview with Jane Hamilton for *The Daily Record*, in 2021, the author recalls her time as a reporter in the seventies, "when the newsroom was dominated by men and female reporters were tasked with the 'soft' stories." McDermid rebelled against not being able to work on the "hard" stories, challenging the prevailing misogyny. Like her, Zoe is also a journalist who is already exasperated by having to cover stories that are not important. In a similar twist of fate, albeit much more dramatic in the fictional world of *Resistance*, both writer and character stumble upon a big story: McDermid covers the death of Pope John Paul I and Zoe finds herself at the epicentre of a pandemic outbreak. While McDermid then moves on to covering crime stories—and writing them—, Zoe's investigations turn her into a sort of detective herself, like McDermid's most notable characters, as she sets to unearth the origins of a pandemic that is rapidly sweeping the world and decimating its population.

3. The context of Val McDermid's *Resistance*

Val McDermid's *Resistance* appeared as a radio drama only a few years before the outbreak of Covid-19, as many other works of fiction including Louise Welsh's *Plague Times* trilogy of novels (2014-2017), films like *Contagion* (2011), or long-standing TV series such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), just to cite a few recent examples. Our fear of vulnerability has accompanied us well before we had to deal with a real global outbreak. Not surprisingly, it was precisely during the different stages of lockdown in 2020 that there was a surge in the interest towards pandemic fiction, as we seemed to be living in a grey area between the factual and the fictitious.

Resistance was first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 3rd, 10th and 17th March, 2017. It was later adapted into a graphic novel, in 2021, illustrated by Kathryn Briggs, and with certain changes introduced, such as the Prime Minister being depicted as a man in the radio script but a woman in the graphic novel. These three episodes were aired as part of the 'Experimental Stories' collaboration between said broadcaster and the Wellcome Trust Broadcast, Games and Film, an association which put together themed workshops to lead to radio dramas. Val

McDermid worked, together with radio producer Susan Roberts and microbiologist Christopher Dowson (University of Warwick), on the topic of antimicrobial resistance. She then opted for an apocalyptic storyline when writing her script for the Dangerous Visions series.

According to Meroe Candy, from the Wellcome Trust team (Sansom 706), these dystopian dramas were to be understood as pure entertainment and with no straightforward didactic message intended. However, it is difficult not to extrapolate lessons from such realistic, albeit worst-case scenario, accounts. This clash between pure entertainment and a discussion of major issues is also portrayed in *Resistance*, both in its radio and written versions. Its female protagonist, the journalist Zoe Beck, takes her job seriously—as noted in the previous section—and resents her profession turning into sheer entertainment. There is quite explicit criticism aimed at mass media in her comments and laments about her work, as can be observed in the following interaction between her and her husband:

> 'Oh Jamie, remember when I used to do real stories?'
> 'I remember. At least celebrity fluff doesn't obsess you
> the way investigative journalism used to.'
> 'It "obsessed" me, as you put it, because it mattered.' (10)

Zoe longs to cover stories that are important but feels trapped working at an outdoors event, the Solstice Festival, where the journalists were 'looking for the story—whatever passes for a story in a post-factual-world' (9). Little did she know then—nor did everyone else—that a place which she had already perceived as unhealthy and with no adequate sanitation would be ground zero for the pandemic that would serve as context for this story. Neither could she anticipate that the reason behind the upcoming disaster was grounded in something that for decades has been allowing human beings to feel safer against disease: antibiotics.

3.1 From resistance to resilience and the importance of empathy

Alexander Fleming, winner of the Nobel Prize for his discovery of penicillin, warned in a 1945 interview with *The New York Times* about the possibility of bacteria growing resistant to the drug, especially

when "self-medication and all its abuses" are concerned. "The greatest possibility of evil," he said, would be the use of "too-small doses" which would lead to microbes learning how to resist penicillin instead of clearing up the infection. This could be passed on to other individuals until the drug will not be able to save someone with an infection. As quoted in the newspaper, "[i]n such a case the thoughtless person playing with penicillin treatment is morally responsible for the death of the man who finally succumbs to infection with the penicillin-resistant organism" (21).

Noah Rosenblatt-Farrel argues that even though antibiotics have "rendered easily treatable many formerly deadly infections", it is also true that many have indeed seen their efficacy diminished or even lost (245). He is, however, optimistic as to how an appropriate response may help the same drugs already in use regain effectiveness. Rosenblatt-Farrel comes to this conclusion based on the fact that not all resistance has to do with the misuse of antibiotics and that there is a variety of mechanisms through which infections are fought; he also takes into account a wealth of studies which suggest that a reduction in the use of antibiotics results in the reduction of resistance to them as well (246, 250).

Val McDermid's character Zoe is, perhaps, not so optimistic. She reproduces Alexander Fleming's above stated concern, as Fleming himself acknowledged "he was handing us a loaded gun." Bereaved over her own losses, Zoe laments the renowned bacteriologist did not decide to "[flush] his Petri dish down the toilet instead of presenting us with the false promise of a world free from infection" (108). The fictional journalist proceeds to compare the world's current situation with that of Victorian times, when people had grown so accustomed to death that the illusion of immunity did not allow the population to take life for granted, leading them to a more stoic approach to existence. Interestingly, this *loaded gun* turns the table of resistance from physical back to psychological, as paralysing emotions are "a luxury we couldn't afford anymore" (108).

Resistance is defined in its third entry of the *Oxford Dictionary* as "the power not to be affected by something." We can be protected from bacteria and, in turn, bacteria can become unaffected by antibiotics. But these are not the only types of resistance that permeate McDermid's

work, as it can be perceived in spheres other than the physical, most notably psychological and political.

In connection with our physical and mental health, another related term can be extrapolated from Zoe's reflection above: *resilience*, or the ability to recover quickly. Michael E. Peters discusses this concept of resilience in his 2022 analysis of Camus' *The Plague*, paying special attention to its connection with human response to catastrophe. According to Peters, this capacity, together with

> the adaptability, strength and flexibility to overcome vulnerabilities especially of the weak, the attitude to mentally or emotionally cope with a crisis, to cope with pain and discomfort and ultimately to contemplate and face death especially one's own is a common set of related themes for those who want to highlight the ability of human beings as a species to transcend hardship (1)

However, resilience in the face of disaster is not just an individual strength. Self-preservation seems to be a first psychological response, whereas group preservation comes in second place, followed by blame-placing and justice-seeking (Peters 2).

This raises the question of the extent of our interdependence, an issue which is highlighted when a global tragedy, such as a pandemic, strikes. The outbreak of the fictional bacterial disease called Erysipelas, or the Sips, confronted the world population with the democratic and transnational nature of a virus, as did Sars-Cov-2 in 2020: it does not discriminate and travels across borders. According to Bryan Walsh in his 2020 article for the BBC "Covid-19: the History of Pandemics," there is nothing, from natural disasters to war, that has killed more than disease, and this is partially due to this difficult to control defining characteristic of microbes. After all, what is a pandemic if not something common to *all people* (from Greek *pan* plus *demos*)? Questions such as whether we are all on the same boat or just in the same ocean, or the issue of social responsibility versus individual interest, were raised and have proved to be rather controversial.

Yet this was not the first time such issues appeared in the collective consciousness. Other tragic events, at first sight not as far-reaching as

a pandemic, have been thought-provoking and show the connection between health and politics from a variety of angles. Let us take, for instance, the 2015 Charlie-Hebdó massacre, when jihadist gunmen took the life of twelve people at the offices of the satirical magazine. Sandro Galea, dean and professor at the Boston University School of Public Health, reflects upon the damaging impact of hate and hate crimes on public health on an article published on the wake of said attack, which serves as an example of societal shock and its various consequences—from the loss of innocent lives at the hands of terrorists to the growth of Islamophobia. According to Galea, prejudice and discrimination not only cause assault, but also have an impact on mental and physical health. They lead to mental health disorders such as psychological distress and depression—which can in turn lead to suicide—, substance abuse and even poor pregnancy outcome. Social justice cannot be then removed from the equation of public health. As observed by Galea, "health is a shared and universal aspiration. A desire to maximize the health of populations should galvanize us. It should push us to engage with the social fractures that threaten our potential to become healthier people."

If empathy is a necessity for a resilient society, in its broadest meaning, the difficult question of how to make it a reality needs to be addressed. Fear is a powerful force which causes human beings to react in order to survive, even if that sometimes means going against the group's interests—take, for instance, panic buying resulting in shops depleted of basic goods, or neighbour vigilantism taken to an extreme. In order to regulate the chaos that ensues after disaster, authorities face the need to take a stance on how to keep the order while ensuring the wellbeing of the citizens. New laws and regulations may be enforced, such as the establishment of curfews and regulated mobility. However, can the population just be forced to do the right thing, or do we need to be encouraged to by, for example, the use of punishment? After all, a sort of nihilist psychological response may result in rebellion if citizens feel cornered, creating a new set of problems.

Nudge theory, on the other hand, is based on the idea that it is possible to alter people's behaviour while individuals still keep the ability to maintain freedom of choice. It relies on the moral encouragement to do the right thing rather than on the enforcement of laws and the

prescription of punishment when they are not followed. Question remains whether nudge theory can be successful in terms of collective responsibility under such dire circumstances as a pandemic. A plague certainly provides a moral opportunity for the population to face the possibility of sacrifice for the sake of the greater good, as Michael A. Peters suggests (755), and empathy plays a crucial role in it.

Podcast host and former politics and philosophy lecturer Sean Illin also analyses the relevance of Camus' *The Plague*—and, by extension, of pandemic literature—, and the lessons that can be extrapolated from it. Most notably, he draws our attention to the fact that "we should see ourselves as members of a community, not as atomised actors" in his article "This Is a Time for Solidarity" (2020). He highlights three main principles which lead to the configuration of a resilient society: empathy, love, and solidarity. The presence, or lack thereof, of these principles, which according to him "make every society worthwhile", are not only relevant in Camus' novel, but can also be analysed across all pandemic fiction. They are most certainly pertinent in MacDermid's *Resistance,* as are the aforementioned concepts of *community* and *solidarity,* which will be developed in the following section.

4. Spaces of solidarity within and outside the community

Communities are social bodies: they are made up of people who relate to one another in various ways in order to function. Any given community works both horizontally and vertically, as there are peers but also hierarchies and authority figures. This establishment of roles and relations does not mean that communities work seamlessly and without conflict. There is a great variety of reasons why their members can be subject to instability, friction and vulnerability.

The attention of this article is focused on the extremely disruptive nature of pandemics beyond a public health level. Val McDermid's example provides a clear view of how the catastrophic snowball effect of a globally spread illness destroys not only the health of the population, but also has the capacity to alter social and political structures. It has already been pointed out that microbes, such as viruses—or, in this case, bacteria—are democratic and transnational, they have levelling properties. In a case like the context depicted in *Resistance*, they do so

to the extent of even destroying the vertical structure, as can be seen in the following excerpt from the graphic novel:

> In an unprecedented move, the Prime Minister has announced that the government can no longer function at a national level. In her shock statement, Eleanor Clooney blamed the Sips, the apparently unstoppable epidemic that has now claimed millions of lives worldwide.
>
> Mrs Clooney said, 'It has become clear that in spite of your government's tireless efforts to maintain civil society, we are faced with an impossible task. Just as the Sips attacks the systems of the human body, so its effects have destroyed the body politic. (134)

This destruction of the body politic also means the redefinition of societal norms and community all over the globe. Let us focus on the origins of the concept first. The word *community* derives from Latin and, as Naomi Silver describes, the root word *communis*, meaning *common*,

> breaks down into two possible derivations identified in the OED. The first, *com* plus *munis* (what is indebted, bound, or obligated together), is thought to be more philologically accurate, while the second, *com* plus *unus* (what is together as one), carries the status of folk etymology. (2001: 204)

According to this view, the most neutral meaning is merely an aseptic generalisation of the idea of togetherness, while the first derivation suggested carries a sense of obligation. In my opinion, the fact that this is the most "philologically accurate" of the two, also implies that a feeling of necessity lies at its core. We are social beings who need each other in order to survive, a necessity that permeates all aspects of existence, from everyday situations to a much bigger scale. Still, the issue is much more complex than that of the individual versus the collective. As coalitions are formed, different layers and degrees of belonging to a group appear. In a post-national political community as that on which a pandemic sheds light, a redefinition of borders (physical or otherwise) is bound to have a polarising effect.

It is worth revisiting the question, raised in the previous section, of how the instinct for self-preservation activates prior to that of group preservation and its connection to the notion of an obligatory sense of community. Conventional solidarity may appear as it "grows out of common interests and concerns ... of a sense of 'we-ness' of groups involved in a common struggle or endeavour" (Dean 115). Complex questions regarding altruism and selfishness arise here, especially as our reaction to pain and suffering is a key element that provides us with common ground for solidary responses. There are, hence, reactions and automatic responses, but also decisions: group preservation is also required for our survival, but it demands conscious changes in behaviour. Solidarity implies commitment, motivation for action as one of the key factors that shape solidary relations, and Steinar Stjernø argues that solidarity moves away from individual interest to contribution to those in need (Scholz 726). For Richard Rorty, progress towards human solidarity implies solidarity not being rooted in human essence, but it being seen 'as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation' (192).

Fear, when understood as a catalyst for such responses, reveals what we genuinely value and wish to protect, much like the act of tossing a coin to make a decision, only to realise we had always known the outcome we desired. However, an important question arises in moments of widespread, legitimate fear: that of who we should turn to. The simplest answer would be to turn to authorities: not just to those in command and having legal power, but also to experts on the matter, especially when our health and survival are concerned. There might be conflicting interests, however: politicians' and scientists' views may not align and that can, in turn, make the general population go from seeing "Jesus in a labcoat" to live in a state of mistrust (Doherty and Giordano 2), a predicament which is present in *Resistance* as well.

While the protagonist of *Resistance* is on her quest to find the origins of the disease, so as to clear the name of her friend Sam, accused of having started it by selling subpar sandwiches at the Solstice festival, there is a scientist specialising in infectious diseases, Dr Aasmah Siddiqui, who is on her own search for answers and solutions. Dr Siddiqui, another strong female character, finds herself fighting for

research funding as those with the money do not seem to be aware—or are in plain denial—of the urgency of the situation. As she tries to explain how the world is facing "the perfect storm", the director of the Life Sciences Centre is more focused on the fact that "[n]ot everybody succumbs" and that because they cannot yet answer the questions of what proportion of the population can survive it and how this particular bacterium mutates and spreads, "what [she is] saying sounds to funders like scaremongering to ring-fence more money, more prestige for [her] team" (63-64). It can be argued that the jump from seeing "Jesus in a labcoat" to losing confidence in scientists is not surprising when "[p]eople are dying and scientists—scientists for heaven's sake—are more worried about their personal prestige than about solving the problem" (65), as Dr Siddiqui laments in this exchange about the indifference shown by Big Pharma—i.e., the corporate pharmaceutical sector and their influence, often seen under a negative light, on healthcare.

Three main groups can be identified amid the propagation of the fictional disease of the Sips: the general population, the science community and the political class, with the last two becoming inextricably linked. As Dr Cheryl Laurie, who works hand in hand with Dr Siddiqui, tells Zoe, "[t]his is way beyond science now. This is political" (71). However, the type of political solidarity—as defined by Sally Scholz in *Political Solidarity*—displayed by the political class in *Resistance* is parasitical and rhetorical, as moral discourses do not necessarily imply moral practices.

Economic arguments are behind the lack of development of new antibiotics, as there is a socioeconomic structure that prioritises wealth over health. New antibiotics are not profitable enough, and pharmaceutical companies "are not in the business of altruism": "Statins, blood pressure stabilisers, corticosteroids, diabetes medication / That's where the money is. Antibiotics are a loser. All those millions to develop and then most people only take them a few times in their lives" (85). There also seems to be miscommunication between scientists and politicians, as the latter do not accept the seriousness of the problem: "by the time we politicians started listening to what the scientists were telling us, the damage was done. We were all to blame, even though we didn't understand the damage we were doing" (144).

Finally, when worse comes to worst, public figures face the conundrum of keeping their prestige or facing the music. Politicians are first denying the importance of the problem and then fleeing trying to save their own lives and avoiding taking responsibility, while the rest only get "[t]he end of any semblance of democracy" and "slip back to a tribal era" with the added problem of not knowing who their tribes are anymore (135); scientists are "ashamed of not having anything to say except, 'We don't know how to stop this on its tracks'" (68).

This takes us back to the idea of obligation, but not just as a forced community, but also as forced solidarity. In public health, for instance, there is a punitive sense of "solidarity by code" for practitioners, with an ethical oath taken by physicians promising to do no harm, a Hippocratic Oath by which they are supposed to abide. Interestingly enough, this well-known promise is not originally part of the oath, but taken from another of Hippocrates' works, *Of the Epidemic*s, very much in tune with the topic at hand. Among the general population, there also appears the question of voluntary versus obligatory compliance to safety measures, recommendations and regulations, for the greater good. But when this epidemic becomes a pandemic and then a wipeout new communities emerge, and people begin to find out who their tribe is. In Anna Triandafyllidou's words, a pandemic "opens up possibilities for a new understanding of citizenship or of membership to a political community that is post-national" (5).

Apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fiction in general, and pandemic fiction in particular, frequently depict societies (re)emerging following the collapse of former systems, with redefined borders and the dissolution of traditional nation-states. Although *Resistance* is no exception, it offers only a brief glimpse into what the "new normal" entails for the survivors, with mere snippets of the transition into the reformed societies, which offer an interesting insight into human reactions and interactions in the face of fear, with apocalyptic references that are easily accessible to the general public (*The Walking Dead* without zombies; *Game of Thrones* without dragons).

At the outbreak of the pandemic, the most relevant instances of people's reactions are the visceral attacks on Sam, who appears to be patient zero. Facing illness, a mob sets to burn down Sam's sausage shop, which eventually leads him and his family out of town. They remain

united in the face of adversity, and it is not until he finds himself alone that he offers himself as a guinea pig. Zoe, on the other hand, sees the big picture from the beginning and fights for the greater good. There is one, almost anecdotal, moment in which she does react in fear and protection of both herself and her youngest child. As a woman collapses in the supermarket, she flees the scene, which makes her question the type of person she has become. However, it is in her nature to prioritise the search for truth over her own safety and her family's, which cost her to end up transmitting the illness to her husband and children while remaining immune. Interestingly, Sam's and Zoe's different approaches result in the same outcome: they both end up burying their loved ones.

The kindest side of the science community is represented in *Resistance* by Drs Saddiqui and Laurie. Both Aasmah and Cheryl (usually referred to as Chezza), are scared for both themselves and the future of humanity. They feel frustrated as they cannot access the necessary funding and they do not give up even after there is nothing that can be done to avoid disaster. They join forces with other scientists from Germany, Australia and the United States, creating a new international community whose bond is not based on ego or profit.

As the narrative progresses, brief glimpses of the general population's reactions are shown. There are instances of communities being closed to strangers, measures enforced using violence. Empathy is not exercised in favour of a more survivalist, kill-or-be-killed, approach which prioritises self-preservation: "No strangers means no Sips" (89). At the end, a small, hopeful, community is created, which contrasts with previous desperate examples. The survival of the members of this new community is based upon covering their basic physical and psychological needs. Frontiers are not closed and new members are welcome to join, showing overcoming of fear and prejudice.

5. Conclusions

In *Resistance*, a single disease is responsible for reducing the human population by over 99.9% in only a few months, a dystopian scenario which feels unlikely, yet realistic. Microbiologist Christopher Dowson stated that "[t]he end of civilisation presented here is perhaps a metaphor for the end of modern medicine that would be the certain

result of widespread total antibiotic resistance" and Clare Samson concludes that everyone needs to work together, "and that includes an informed an engaged public" (706). Even though *Resistance* was not scripted with the intention of spreading a didactic message, it does confront the public with a scenario that is familiar enough to provoke critical thinking, and fictitious enough to create a comfortable context for episodical simulation. The first-person and dialogical approach facilitates this process as well, as it is difficult not to empathise with the characters and wonder what we would do if faced with the same dilemmas—even more so after 2020.

It has been discussed how literature in general, and science fiction (dystopian fiction and pandemic fiction) in particular, are a means of entertainment as well as a vehicle for cultural and critical thinking. In such realistic stories, especially after having lived through a pandemic, it seems inevitable to wonder whether we are doomed, as the picture that is painted is that of powerlessness—after all, the illness stops not because a cure is found, but because it ran its own course. In an interview published in 2017 by *The New Statesman*, same year in which *Resistance* was aired, McDermid replied "[i]t's hard not to think so, but I remain optimistic" when asked that question (62). The ending of the story contributes, in my opinion, to that optimism. Rather than providing an extensive or detailed account, the narrative chooses to present brief, impressionistic snapshots of the global changes without fully elaborating on their implications. It only gives its audience a few clues, a sense of "to be continued" which opens a realm of possibilities for all the characters and leaves much to the audience's and readers' interpretation. The uncertainty that accompanies the emergence of a transformed reality is thus emphasised, but with a taste for hope, as the survivors are seen as living in harmony and helping each other survive the aftermath of this traumatic experience. Crises prove to be decisive points, and challenges are opportunities to start anew.

According to McDermid, to show violence is sometimes necessary, "what it is and what it does" and she is "not here to bring comfort and joy" (Foster 28), and literature is something that makes you care and sensitise you (Riach 594). It is said in *Resistance* that "sometimes the only way to survive the end of the world as we know it is to pretend it's just not happening" (143). This is true, to an extent, as it provides

psychological relief. However, pandemic narratives can play that role and still prepare us to act when needed and, hopefully, even prevent apocalyptic outcomes as they can act as cautionary tales. Group preservation may be a secondary instinct, but it is coalition which has the potential to save us.

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