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**The Leftovers**  
**(Paperback)**

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by Perrotta, Tom

**\$14.99** (USD)  
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General Title Info

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Review Source

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- [Kirkus Reviews 2011 April #2](#)
- [PW Reviews 2011 June #1](#)
- [NY Times Book Review - June 2012 #4-Reviews](#)

Booklist Reviews 2011 July #1

One hundred people have disappeared from tiny Mapleton, New Jersey, in a Rapture-like event that has left the community visibly shaken. Some people are miffed at being left behind, while others are inconsolable over the loss of their loved ones. Mayor Kevin Garvey struggles to give the town a sense of community by adhering to such traditional rites as parades, yet his own family seems irrevocably broken. His son has joined a cult led by the charlatan Happy Wayne; his 16-year-old, straight-A daughter has morphed into a depressed goth; and his wife has become a member of the Guilty Remnant, a group of separatist fanatics who chain smoke, refuse to speak, and stalk Mapleton's citizens to ensure that they will never forget what happened. Perrotta brings to his sixth novel his gifts for satiric humor and compassion, ultimately depicting the universal feelings of people reacting to severe trauma, yet the book doesn't quite live up to the promise of its intriguing premise. Still, there is plenty to admire in its depiction of the apocalypse, suburban style. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: In somewhat of a departure, the latest from Tom Perrotta, the best-selling king of suburban angst, features a science fictionlike premise; with a hefty first printing and a major marketing campaign. Copyright 2011 Booklist Reviews.

LJ Reviews 2011 August #1

Website: <http://www.libraryjournal.com>

October 14 looked like any other day in the leafy New England enclave of Mapleton until it didn't. Eighty-seven townspeople and millions more around the world simply disappeared. Cars careened with no one behind the wheel, school kids were without teachers, food went uneaten on dinner tables, and lovers found themselves abandoned. The Rapture? No one knows. What we do know is that the psychological trauma for those left behind is overwhelming, and who better than Perrotta, known for his ability to zero in on the vicissitudes of middle-class America (Little Children; The Abstinence Teacher) to grapple with the impact? Three years after "The Sudden Departure," Kevin Garvey's wife has joined a cult, son Tom has ditched college to follow guru Holy Wayne, and lovely daughter Jill has shaved her head and taken up with stoners. Nora Durst's life is in a holding pattern as she awaits the return of her husband and child, while Reverend Jamison, enraged at being passed over, publishes a newsletter exposing the failings of the missing. VERDICT Perrotta has taken a subject that could easily slip into slapstick and imbued it with gravitas. Like Richard Russo, he softens the sting of satire with deep compassion for his characters in all their confusion, guilt, grief, and humanity. [See Prepub Alert, 2/21/11.] Sally Bissell, Lee Cty. Lib. Syst., Ft. Myers, FL

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LJ Reviews 2011 March #2

**Website:** <http://www.libraryjournal.com>

No, not dinner; the "leftovers" are the folks who didn't depart when a Rapture-like event empties cushy suburban Mapleton of 100 people. The leftovers are feeling pretty abandoned, and the new mayor is trying to help them get over it, but his wife has joined a cult, his son is following a prophet named Holy Wayne, and his daughter is not exactly her sweet, happy self. Perrotta excels at nailing the angst of Middle America, so this should be good.

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BookPage Reviews 2011 September

**Website:** <http://www.bookpage.com>

### Left behind in the suburbs

Tom Perrotta is often called a satirist. It ôs a nice, neat label, as square-cornered as a pigeonhole. But it ôs just not true.

The classical definition of satire is that you're exposing the folly of human behavior," Perrotta says during a call to his home in the Boston suburb of Belmont. Perrotta lives there with his wife, the writer Mary Granfield, and their two teenaged children. "For me there is no position where it is possible to be a human and not be implicated in the folly of human behavior. I always feel I'm implicated in that folly."

Perrotta supposes he earned the satirist label from the movie *Election*, which starred Reese Witherspoon as Tracy Flick. He wrote the novel on which the movie is based. "*Election* is one of the great satires in recent film history," Perrotta says. "It was much more satirical than the book. Just compare Tracy Flick in the book with what Reese Witherspoon does with her in the film. The book is a comic novel but it's not a satirical novel. The film pushes out! Because *Election* first brought me to the attention of most people, I'm in this box: People think of me, they think of *Election*, and they think of the movie."

Perrotta's boldest novel to date puts a whole new spin on apocalyptic anxiety after a Rapture-like event.

Not that Perrotta has any objections to the movie. "I really loved the movie, myself. I still do. It really holds up too, and it's been really influential in all sorts of ways. I think the success of the movie basically changed my life. I had published a few books and I was struggling to find an audience. I felt a real difference in the aftermath.

"I used to have that moment where I'd be introduced at a party and say, oh, I'm a writer, and people would say, have you written anything I've read? And I'd name my books and I'd get that terrible blank look. Now I could say, well, there was this movie with Reese Witherspoon, and people would light up," Perrotta recalls. "It felt like a big difference that my name was attached to something people had positive feelings toward. The other concrete thing it did was

allow me to find work as a screenwriter, which allowed me to stop teaching and really solidified my sense of myself as a professional writer.”

Still, the satire label that has trotted beside Perrotta like an over-friendly stray dog does not come close to encapsulating his estimable gifts as a writer. Or, as Perrotta says wryly, “Certainly what I’m doing now is very far away in terms of tone from that movie.”

That’s for sure. Perrotta’s early novels were set in working-class New Jersey, where he grew up and developed a passion for writing that eventually took him to Yale. But since his novel *Little Children* (2004), “there’s been a shift in the suburban territory that I write about” that both comically and tenderly reflects the attitudes and personal dilemmas of residents of the more affluent middle-class suburb where he now lives.

Not only that, his use of language has matured. Reminded that he once proclaimed that he wrote in the plain American English tradition of Ernest Hemingway, Perrotta laughs and says, “If you go back to *Bad Haircut* (1994) you’ll definitely see more of the Hemingway influence. I mean those sentences were just so short! But even then I was using that shortness for comedy in a way that Hemingway didn’t. Probably since *Joe College* (2000) the sentences have gotten looser and more complex in terms of syntax. So I’ve moved away from the Hemingway impulse. But I have to say that I have not moved away from the idea that literary fiction should work the way that popular fiction works, in terms of being a pleasure to read, with a story that moves swiftly.

“I have always wanted to be democratic,” Perrotta says. “My parents didn’t go to college and a lot of people I grew up with are not –‘intellectuals’ in the graduate school sense. I never wanted to write for a self-selected group of people who see themselves as literary. I want to write for anybody who is interested.”

All of these maturing impulses meld in near-perfect harmony to bring us Perrotta’s newest, most audacious and best novel to date, **The Leftovers**.

Set in the leafy suburb of Mapleton, **The Leftovers** opens on Departed Heroes’ Day of Remembrance and Reflection, three years to the day after a Rapture-like event has caused millions of people all over the world to disappear in an instant. In reaction, some people, like Laurie Garvey, join a monastic penitential cult called The Guilty Remnant, whose members dress all in white, smoke cigarettes as an article of faith and ghost about Mapleton to remind people that the end is near. Others, like Laurie’s college-age son Tom, follow the prophet Holy Wayne, a former UPS delivery van driver, and his Holy Hugs Movements. But many, like Laurie’s husband Kevin, the mayor of Mapleton, struggle to lead normal lives and keep their children—in Kevin’s case his teenage daughter Jill—from going off the rails. The action of the novel unfolds over nine months, as the Garvey family and their friends and acquaintances struggle to make sense of a world that is in most ways much the same as before but is also profoundly different.

Perrotta, who devours literary biographies and hardboiled detective fiction rather than literary novels while he is composing his own books, admits that he was thinking about books like Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* while writing **The Leftovers**.

“Obviously *The Road* was on my mind. But I think this book is almost the opposite of *The Road*. The landscape of *The Road* is utterly altered in the physical and in the human/social sense. What I wanted to do was create a world where the landscape wasn’t altered at all physically or socially. But psychologically it’s completely different. So whatever strangeness there is, is hard to locate, aside from the people dressed in white who are smoking, I mean. There are some changes that are visible and troubling. But in most cases it’s just much more a sense of ‘I can no longer trust the nature of the world,’ and that creates this feeling of anxiety.”

Another huge difference between **The Leftovers** and *The Road* is Perrotta’s gift for comedy. “I certainly found subject matter that is hard to treat comically. Loss is not easy to treat in a comical way,” he says with a laugh. Yet Perrotta is such a keen observer of human psychology—and human foibles—that many moments in **The Leftovers** are laugh-out-loud funny. “I think the comedy in this works best when it’s organic to the situation,” Perrotta says. “There’s comedy in incongruity. This juxtaposition of almost clinical grief with this insistence on living a normal life does create certain kinds of very dark comedy.”

But Perrotta's comedy is colored by great empathy for his characters. "Certain characters open up over time. It's very satisfying for me as a writer to live with these characters long enough to get a fuller sense of who they are and how they fit into the story. They just seem to get more agency somehow to tell you a little bit about who they are."

Among *The Leftovers*' most appealing characters are the smart, vulnerable teenager Jill and her Goth friend Aimee. "I've written a lot about my own teenage years and coming of age. But with this book I suddenly realized I had to write the Jill sections from Jill's perspective, and this time I was filtering that through my daughter and her friends, not through my own personal memories."

Perrotta notes, "I had this idea and it seized my mind—but for a long time I wasn't sure what I was going to do with it. It's probably good for a writer to feel that way, to feel like you're delving into messy, interesting, important subject matter without exactly knowing why. And I was starting to feel my identity was almost too solid. Like people talked about me in a certain way. Like they knew what a Tom Perrotta novel was. I wasn't comfortable with that. You start going into the old bag of tricks too much.

"Obviously some things in this book will be familiar—the setting and the subject matter will remind some people of other things I've written. But I think on the most basic ground level, I've forced myself into unfamiliar territory."

It's true. In this brilliant novel, he has definitely gotten himself a whole new bag of tricks. If you've never read a Tom Perrotta novel, now's the time.

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Kirkus Reviews 2011 April #2

A bestselling novelist returns with his most ambitious book to date.

Perrotta's popular breakthrough with *Little Children* (2004) received additional exposure from a well-received movie adaptation, and his latest has plenty of cinematic possibility as well. The premise is as simple as it is startling (certainly for the characters involved). Without warning, the Rapture has come to pass, "the biblical prophecy came true, or at least partly true. People disappeared, millions of them at the same time, all over the world." Yet the novel's focus isn't religious, and it really doesn't concern itself with what happened or why. Instead, as the title suggests, it deals exclusively with those left behind, how they deal with something few had anticipated and fewer had expected to experience. Their world has changed irrevocably, yet in some ways it hasn't really changed all that much. Life goes on, for the living, though the missing leave huge holes in it. Some deny the religious implications, preferring to refer to the more secular "Sudden Departure"; others question why those with deep flaws had been among the elect. A group that has dubbed itself the "Guilty Remnant" bears silent witness to the world of sin while awaiting its own judgment and reward. The wife of the town's mayor leaves her home to join them, though "she hadn't been raised to believe in much of anything, except the foolishness of belief itself." Their son disappears from college to join the "Healing Hug" movement; their high-school daughter loses her bearings as the family disintegrates. The novel is filled with those who have changed their lives radically or discovered something crucial about themselves, as radical upheaval generates a variety of coping mechanisms. Though the tone is more comic than tragic, it is mainly empathic, never drawing a distinction between "good" and "bad" characters, but recognizing all as merely human—ordinary people dealing with an extraordinary situation.

There's even a happy ending of sorts, as characters adapt and keep going, fortified by the knowledge that they "were more than the sum of what had been taken from" them.

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PW Reviews 2011 June #1

**Website:** <http://www.publishersweekly.com>

Perrotta (*The Abstinence Teacher*) gets seriously dystopian with his sixth novel when millions of people vanish into thin air one fine October day. Although the "Sudden Departure" resembles the Rapture, it was a secular event, leaving


a hodgepodge of survivors with neither solace nor faith. Despite the fact that her family was left intact, suburban housewife Laurie Garvey feels compelled to leave her husband, the mayor of Mapleton, and their two teenage children, to join the Guilty Remnant, a cult that still believes the end of the world is nigh. G.R. members must obey three rules: remain silent, wear white, and smoke cigarettes. Perrotta wittily and economically establishes this intriguing premise, but then largely sidelines his sharp satiric eye in favor of a straightforward examination of loss and bewilderment. Laurie's motivations are frustratingly vague: "She had joined the G.R. because... she had no choice." The senseless, sometimes absurd mission of the cult mirrors the gaping hole blown into modern morality, as hapless survivors trudge about, failing to connect in meaningful ways. Laurie's daughter, Jill, is morally adrift, and her son, Tom, comes under the sway of a charlatan religious healer, until suffering a cruel disillusionment. Though all the ennui is surely the point, the end of the world isn't much fun. (Sept.)

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## Tom Perrotta

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**Tom Perrotta****Birth Date :** 1961**Place of Birth:** United States New Jersey, Summit**Nationality :** American**Occupation :** Novelist**Table of Contents:**[Awards](#)[Personal Information](#)[Career](#)[Writings](#)[Media Adaptionis](#)[Sidelights](#)[Related Information](#)

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**Awards:**

(With Todd Field) Oscar nomination for Best Writing, Adapted Screenplay. Critics Choice Awards nomination for Best Writer. Chlotrudis Award nomination for best adapted screenplay. Golden Globe nomination for best screenplay--motion picture. Online Film Critics Society Award nomination for best adapted screenplay, and Writers Guild of America award nomination, all 2007 and San Francisco Film Critics Circle Award for best adapted screenplay, Satellite Award nomination for best adapted screenplay, and Chicago Film Critics Award nomination for best adapted screenplay, all 2006, all for screenplay *Little Children*.

**Personal Information:**

Born August 13, 1961, in Summit, NJ, son of Joseph (a mail carrier) and Suzan (a secretary) Perrotta; married Mary Cranfield (a journalist), September 14, 1991, children, Nina, Luke. **Education:** Yale University, B.A., 1983; Syracuse University, M.A., 1988. **Addresses:** Home: Belmont, MA. **E-mail:** tom@tomperrotta.net.

**Career Information:**

Yale University, New Haven, CT, lecturer, 1988-93; Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, preceptor, 1994-98.

In *The Leftovers*, Perrotta explores a question that actually came to public attention at the time the novel was being published: what would happen if—as some evangelical Christians believe will happen—a portion of the population suddenly disappeared? "*The Leftovers* offers us a Rapture scenario: a world in which a significant minority of the human population suddenly disappears without warning," declared *History News Network* reviewer Jim Cullen. "The twist is that no one can really make sense of the disaster, which is widely experienced as entirely random. This is especially disturbing to those with religious inclinations, as apocalypses go, this one is deeply disappointing." "The Rapture is one of those things in certain parts of the country and among certain people that is taken very seriously," Perrotta told Brian Braiker in a *USA Today* interview. "Among other people I would say, 'I'm writing a book about this Rapture-like event,' and I'd get blank looks. People wouldn't know what I was talking about." "In my book, people can't even agree on the meaning of the event and spend a lot more time grieving," Perrotta explained to Braiker. "If something like that did happen—even if we felt like our child or our partner left the world as a reward, I think we would still feel their absence and the shock of their removal in a very profound way."

"At the heart of the novel is a sense not just of loss but also of futility, as if God had asserted himself or herself only to leave everyone more confused," said David L. Ulin in the *Los Angeles Times*. "What does it mean that the Rapture has no meaning, that there is no logic as to who was chosen and who was not?" "Wisely, Perrotta leaves this open, focusing more on the human story than the metaphysical, which is essentially beside the point," Ulin declared. "The point is that we can't rely on outside structures for meaning—religious or otherwise." "The narrative core of the novel," Cullen stated on the *History News Network*, "forms around the four members of the Gervey family—Laurie, Tom, Jill and Kevin—which, strictly speaking, survives the Sudden Departure intact. But the lives of all four are upended by it." "Rather than let his characters—who live in a pleasant suburb named Mapleton—settle back easily into a New Normal," wrote Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times Book Review*, "Mr. Perrotta suggests that the world has somehow fundamentally changed, that the Sudden Departure has unhinged a lot of people."

"Perrotta began his exploration of the stress points between religion and secular American life in his previous novel, *The Abstinence Teacher*. *The Leftovers* feels like a logical, if extreme, extension of those concerns," declared fellow novelist Stephen King in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Not every character and motivation rings perfectly true... but the slow, sad drift of this suburban world into various forms of cultic extremism as a response to upheaval feels spot on." "Yet the novel isn't completely bleak," King continued. "If it were, we would care no more about these characters than about the ones who populate the post-apocalyptic 'Mad Max' films. In fact, we come to care about them deeply."

# THE LEFTOVERS

by Tom Perrotta

## About the Author

- Official Tom Perrotta Chronology

## In His Own Words

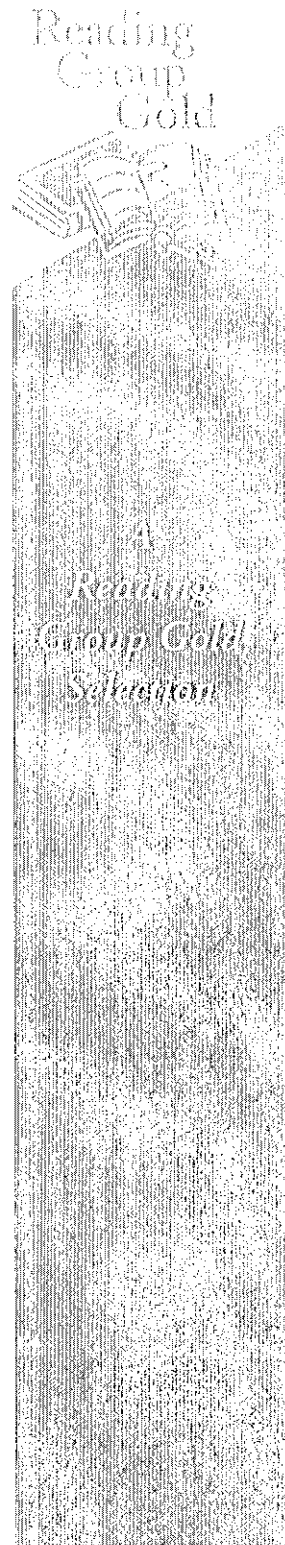
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 ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN





## Official Tom Perrotta Chronology

1961—Tom born August 13th; shares birthday with luminaries such as Alfred Hitchcock, Fidel Castro, and, most importantly, Danny Bonaduce, with whom he shares an uncanny resemblance throughout childhood, or so he likes to think. Berlin Wall goes up same day.

1966—Tom celebrates First Holy Communion at St. Ann's Church; in iconic scene, later repeated throughout adolescence, he watches with mixed feelings as more adventurous friends steal jelly donuts meant for reception. The Troggs release "Wild Thing."

1968—Busy year; Tom plays shortstop for Diamond Expansion in the Garwood Minor League, begins short-lived scouting career. Defending little sister, Tom threatens to throw syringe-wielding pediatrician "out the window," much to the amusement of his mother and the pediatrician. Summer of Love in San Francisco.

1972—Precociously political, Tom campaigns for George McGovern in Pop Warner football uniform, along with teammate and teammate's hippie brother; trio is verbally abused by neighbors, many of whom belong to misleadingly-named Silent Majority. "Horse With No Name" tops the pop charts.

1974—In a stab at *Easy Rider* cool, Tom ventures out in a long-sleeved tee-shirt emblazoned with the American flag, but his closed-minded peers react with scorn. His Seals & Crofts tee-shirt and blue sheepskin jacket don't fare much better with the critics. *Monty Python's Flying Circus* makes first appearance on American TV.

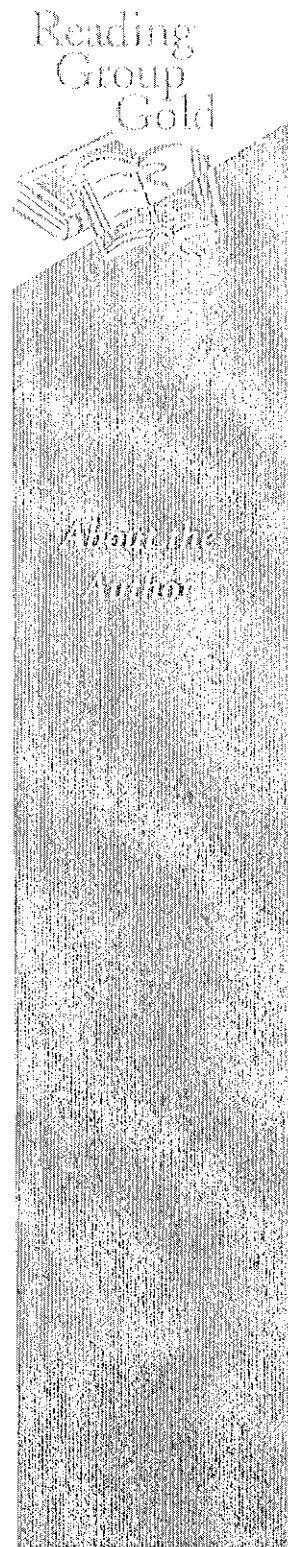
1977—A sophomore, Tom publishes “The Freak Show” in *Pariah*, a high-school literary magazine, initiating a productive three-year relationship with the publication. “One Tiny Plant”—an environmental cri du coeur heavily influenced by Rod Serling—and “The Standing Ovation”—a bittersweet expose of the fleeting nature of athletic glory, also heavily influenced by Serling—follow in junior and senior years. Country suffers from a bad case of *Saturday Night Fever*.

1978—Tom passes up tickets for a Bruce Springsteen show at the Capitol Theater to spend time with a girlfriend. Tom and girl break up that night; Bruce plays legendary five-hour show. John Irving publishes *The World According to Garp*.

1980—Tom gets summer job collecting garbage for the Garwood Department of Public Works. Doesn't throw up once, not even during heat wave. Ronald Reagan elected president.

1981—Tom publishes “A Safe Place for Dogs” in *The Spider's Web*, a college literary magazine. Feels life would be more meaningful if he were an Eastern European dissident, or a beatnik driving cross-country. Raymond Carver publishes *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

1983—Tom graduates college with a B.A. in English (with distinction in the major). Gets job proofreading *World Tennis and Tobacco Retailer* on the night shift. Quits and goes to work for Division of Consumer Affairs, protecting homeowners from fraud and abuse by sending polite form letters to unscrupulous contractors. Martin Scorsese makes *King of Comedy*.



1985—Brief stint in Bay Area. Tom resides in make-shift loft in Oakland Industrial Center with college friend, artist Byron Kim, works as clerk in Excess & Surplus Property storage facility; enjoys answering phone with the words, "ESP Warehouse, may I help you?" Gabriel Garcia Marquez publishes *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

1987—A graduate student at Syracuse University's Creative Writing Program, Tom takes a part-time job writing ad copy. Responsible for many notable radio spots, including "Superstars in the World of Cars" campaign for local dealership. Congressional hearings into Iran-Contra affair.

1988—Tom takes job as writing tutor and part-time instructor at Yale University, at one point receiving paycheck for grand total of 0 dollars and 0/100 cents. First published stories—"The Weiner Man" in *Columbia Magazine* and "Wild Kingdom" in *The Gettysburg Review*. Sonny Bono elected mayor of Palm Springs.

1991—Tom marries Mary, moves to Brooklyn. Writes still-unpublished novel, *Lucky Winners*, about a working-class family that wins the lottery and lives to regret it. Nirvana releases *Nevermind*.

1992—Temporarily unemployed, Tom becomes obsessed with presidential election, which features three-way race between Bush, Clinton, and the always entertaining Ross Perot. Also takes up roller-blading. Dan Quayle spells "potatoe."

1993—Unwilling to abandon his obsession with the recent election, Tom begins his own novel about a three-way race for high-school president. At the same time, he ghost-writes teen horror novel for bestselling

series (don't ask which one; he's taken an oath of non-disclosure). Toni Morrison wins Nobel Prize for Literature.

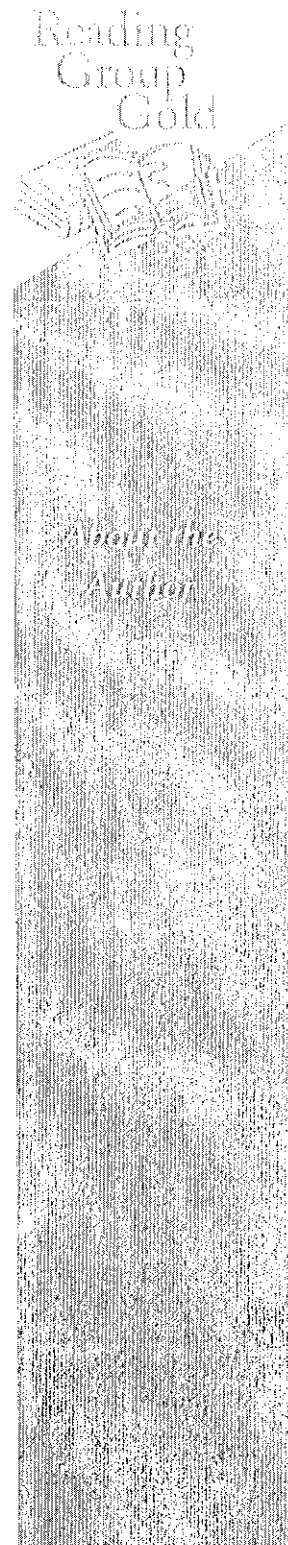
1994—Tom's story collection, *You Start to Live*, is accepted for publication by a small press called *Bridge Works*. At publisher's insistence, he changes title to *Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies*, which turns out to be a much better idea. Daughter Nina is born. Very cute kid. Tonya Harding takes a whack at Nancy Kerrigan.

1996—Tom's still-unpublished novel, *Election*, is optioned by Bona Fide Productions and MTV Films. When he tells his Harvard students that the novel recounts a cut-throat race for the "meaningless post" of high-school president, the audience of ex-high-school-chief-executives reacts with visible shock and dismay. Richard Ford wins Pulitzer for *Independence Day*.

1997—Tom publishes *The Wishbones*, a comic novel about a New Jersey wedding band that has absolutely nothing to do with Adam Sandler movie *The Wedding Singer*. Son Luke is born. Handsome devil. Tobias Wolff publishes *The Night in Question*.

1999—Tom's six-year-old novel *Election* is finally published, beating Alexander Payne's excellent movie version (starring Matthew Broderick and Reese Witherspoon) by only a few months. First season of *The Sopranos*.

2000—Tom publishes *Joe College*, a novel about a working class kid from New Jersey who goes to Yale during the same years Tom went. Only a couple of passages are autobiographical—the one about Tom's



myriad food aversions, and the one about that other thing he prefers not to talk about. George Bush “wins” the presidential election, with the Supreme Court playing the role of Mr. M.

2004—Tom publishes *Little Children*, the hardcover version of which sports a memorable cover showing two goldfish crackers floating on a field of astroturf. Pepperidge Farm is not amused. Gay marriage legal in Massachusetts.


2006—Todd Field’s powerful movie version of *Little Children* (starring Kate Winslet and Patrick Wilson and co-written by Tom) is released by New Line. Tom has a small role near the end. Dig the blue robe and shorty pajamas. George W. Bush reads Camus’s *The Stranger* during summer vacation.

2007—Tom publishes *The Abstinence Teacher*, a novel about sex education, religion, soccer, and the Great American Culture War; has hours of fun Googling the phrase “Hot Christian Sex.” Reverend Ted Haggard pronounced “completely heterosexual” by fellow minister.

2008—Tom writes screenplay for *The Abstinence Teacher*, collaborating with *Little Miss Sunshine* directors Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Gas prices reach record highs; Journey has a new lead singer. It’s 1978 all over again.

2009—Barack Obama inaugurated as 44th President. *Jersey Shore* a surprise hit on MTV. Is this a great country or what?

2010—Tom writes *The Leftovers*, a novel about a suburban town muddling through the apocalypse. Drill, baby, drill!

 *A Conversation with  
the Author*

Interview conducted by Laura Wilson, Executive  
Producer, Macmillan Audio

**I really enjoyed your book. There's a lot of humor in it, even though there's a lot of sadness. What was that like for you as a writer, to sort of find the humor in what's ultimately a sad situation?**

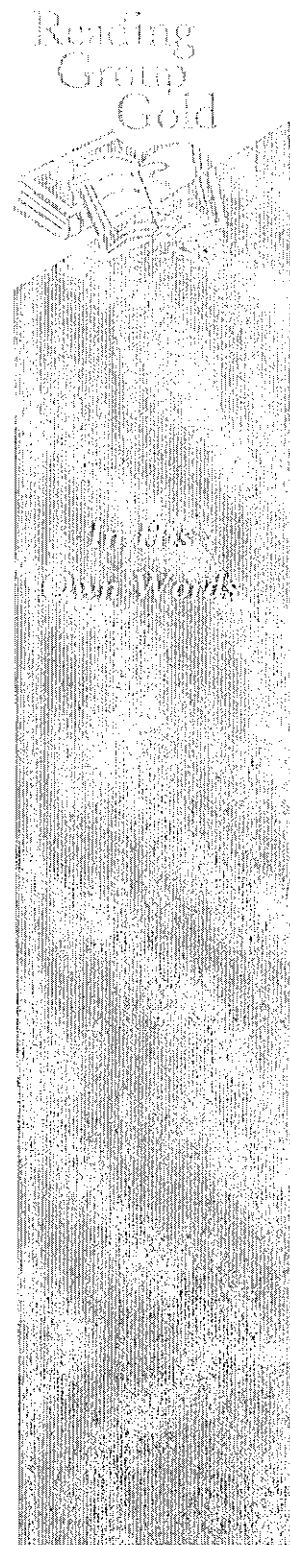
Well, I have to say it was almost the reverse for me. I'd been experimenting in recent years with trying to see just how much I can broaden the idea of the comic novel, and if I could get it to accommodate this idea of a post-apocalyptic scenario. And while there is quite a bit of humor in the book, I ultimately realized that the book was more about grief and loss and sadness.

**You don't expect people to just disappear one day. And yet it was very affecting.**

The Rapture is obviously a cataclysmic event. But I started realizing it was a metaphor for getting older, for mortality and living with mortality. It's really powerful. We all basically live in a world that we define by the people who have disappeared. Obviously they haven't disappeared in some sudden unexplained way, but there's the sense of living with the absences and with loss and trying to go on in spite of the fact that there are these mysteries that you don't understand.

**One of the great comic [elements] in the book is the idea of being forced to smoke. Were you trying to build in an element of social critique?**

I was thinking that if you really do dispense with the idea that you have an indefinite future, and the future is inherently limited, then what would happen? This idea of smoking seemed really interesting



to me; it becomes a declaration of faith, that we're not going to live long enough to get sick from it. It became a kind of ambiguous social critique in that smoking is a very complicated act in our culture, the meaning of which has changed dramatically over recent decades.

**I really liked the teenage characters in the book and how their planned futures begin to lose meaning for them. [How] was writing from a teenager's perspective for you?**

I've been doing that for quite a long time. My first book, *Bad Haircut*, was a coming-of-age book, *Election* was set in a high school, and *The Wishbones* dealt with young guys in a rock band. What's different now, of course, is that I'm writing from the perspective of a father who has teenage kids and who no longer necessarily sees the world through the eyes of a kid, but more through the eyes of a parent. There is some element of returning to my roots as a writer, but also of having a whole new perspective.

**When you were writing [*The Leftovers*], were you aware of the prediction of an imminent Rapture?**

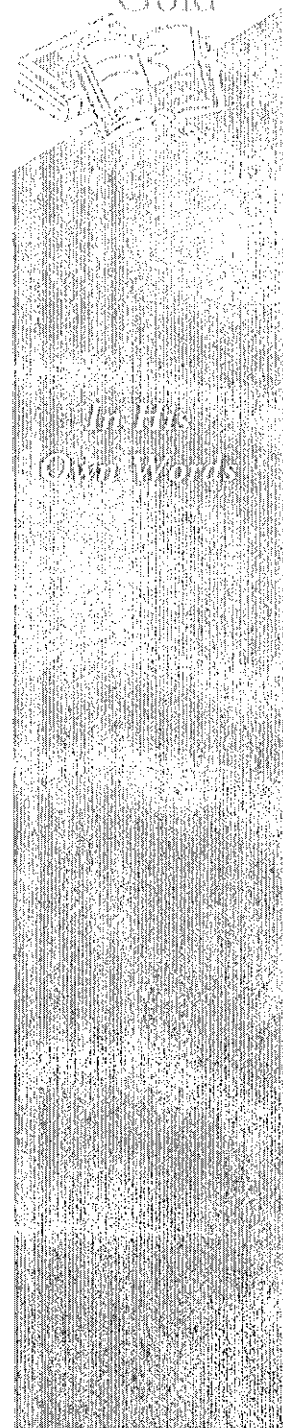
I wasn't. I was writing this between 2008 and 2010. (The Rapture was predicted for May or June of 2011.) What I was aware of, of course, was the impending apocalypse of 2012, which is the end of the Mayan calendar. There's always some apocalyptic scenario we're living with. My imagination was more rooted in more mundane situations. I remember being very focused on the economic collapse in 2008 and that sense that some people felt, and still feel to some degree, that the structure that we've taken for granted all our lives, living in a really powerful, prosperous country where the future is sort of expanding and guaranteed and that our kids will prepare for a

world that makes sense. And there was this feeling that this could all go away and we could be living in a very different world ten years down the road. What I wanted to write about was the world where characters no longer felt their futures were guaranteed or predictable or comprehensible. It's obviously a kind of a magnification to go from economic doubt or despair to a post-apocalyptic scenario. I'm much more interested in that idea of losing faith in the future than I was of sort of critiquing any kind of religious prophet.

**Suburban life is a topic you've explored in other novels. What do you like about writing about people in a suburban setting?**

It never feels like a choice to me; it's like the default setting of my imagination. I'm from a small suburban town, I grew up that way, and with the exception of a couple years when I lived in Brooklyn, my life has been spent in relatively suburban settings. For me, this idea of a small town as a kind of an understandable social unit is important to me. I think there have been a lot of writers who've been experimenting lately with really sprawling novels that will deal with a number of different characters and different points on the globe. I understand that as a method of getting at the global culture that we live in, and I understand writers who want to maybe juxtapose very different historical periods to make some larger points about how things have changed over time. I tend to like the sort of idea of the novel as a little village, and the novel as a microcosm, a smaller world standing in for a larger one.

Reading  
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Are you already at work on your next book? Do you go from book to book, or do you spend some time in between novels deciding what you want to work on?

I usually spend about a year recovering from the effort of finishing the last one, and what I'll usually do in that year is sometimes write journalism, sometimes short stories. More recently, I've been doing some screenwriting. So over the past year I've been working on a screenplay for my last book, *The Abstinence Teacher*, and also I had adapted my novel *The Wishbones* for a TV pilot, so that's what's been keeping me busy. And I have also been working on a collection of short stories.

As a writer who's had his work made into movies, did it work for you to see your work on screen?

I've been very lucky and really happy with the film versions of both *Election* and *Little Children*. I think there's a leap of faith that you take; you're turning over your creation to these other artists, these writers and actors and directors. I've just been extremely lucky to get really talented people doing wonderful things. Sometimes as a writer it's a little bit humbling. The movie of *Election* has become a kind of cultural icon that overshadows the book, and you have to live with that. I understand why: Reese Witherspoon's performance in that movie is, I think, going to survive a long time and really stand out as one of the great comic performances in recent memory. I've learned to really love that sort of rolling the dice of collaboration and seeing what happens.

 Recommended Reading

Philip Roth  
*The Plot Against America*

Tim Reiterman  
*Raven: The Untold Story of  
Rev. Jim Jones and His People*

Margaret Atwood  
*The Handmaid's Tale*

Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken,  
and Stanley Schacter  
*When Prophecy Fails*

Stephen King  
*The Stand*

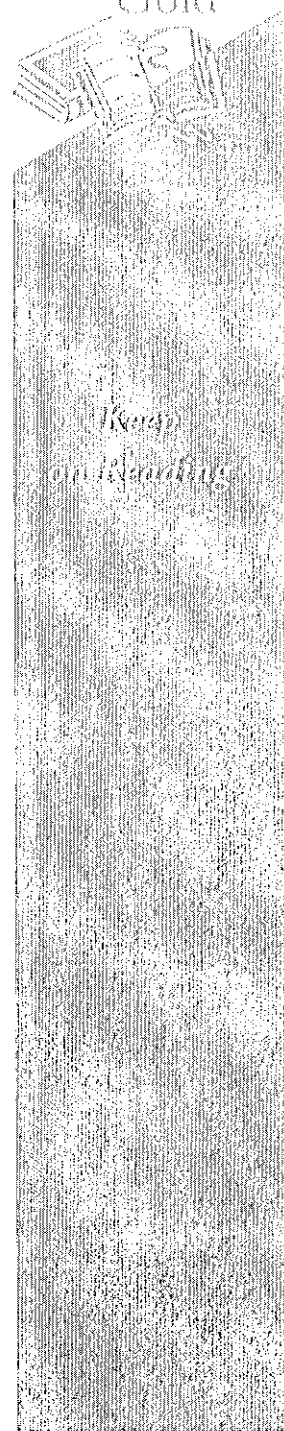
Donna Johnson  
*Holy Ghost Girl*

Cormac McCarthy  
*The Road*

Janet Reitman  
*Inside Scientology: The Story  
of America's Most Secretive Religion*

Ray Bradbury  
*Fahrenheit 451*

Reading  
Group  
Gold



## Reading Group Questions

1. Tom Perrotta's *The Leftovers* focuses on life after a mysterious mass disappearance that may or may not have been the Rapture. How do the various characters feel about being "left behind?" Which character's view of the Sudden Departure makes most sense to you?
2. *The Leftovers* is set in an idyllic American suburbia—with adult softball teams, a strong school system, and beautiful leafy neighborhoods. Why do you think the author set this novel—and his other novels—in such a place? Is there something especially pleasant or idyllic about the suburbs? Or is that just a myth?
3. Jill Garvey thinks it's easy "to romanticize the missing, to pretend that they were better than they really were." Is this true? How do the main characters in *The Leftovers* view their friends and relatives who have disappeared?
4. How do you feel about Christine's relationship with Mr. Gilchrist? Is she simply a victim of a predatory, charismatic older man who dupes her into thinking she's someone special? Or is something more complicated going on between them?
5. Why do you think Laurie Garvey joins the Guilty Remnant? Once there, why do you think she stays? What sort of benefits might a cult-like community offer to people reeling from an event like the Sudden Departure? What about the Healing Hug Movement led by Holy Wayne?

6. What do you think of the teenagers' sexual interactions in the book? Are they an accurate portrayal of contemporary teenage behavior? To what extent are Jill and her friends reacting to the trauma of the Sudden Departure, if at all?
7. Is Kevin Garvey a good father?
8. How would you describe the relationship between Laurie and Meg? Did you find what happens to them believable? What about the relationship between Kevin and Nora?
9. Like *The Road* and *The Passage* and many others, *The Leftovers* is set in a post-apocalyptic world. Why are we so fascinated by these scenarios? What sets *The Leftovers* apart from other novels about the end of life as we know it?
10. Perrotta describes some sectors of American society—such as television chefs—being “disproportionately hard hit” by the Sudden Departure. Is there any sector you wish could disappear?
11. What do you think the author's opinion of religion is? What about spirituality? Are there clues in *The Leftovers*?
12. Discuss the ending of the book. What do you think happens to the main characters after the book is over?

