

sci-fi/fantasy

If you want to
escape to another
world, you can
choose between



doom, dark
fantasy or
honest
laughter,

says **Lisa Tuttle**

If you take only one book away with you this summer, make it **The Passage** (Orion, £20 * £18). It's an absorbing, nightmarish dream of a book, a terrifying, apocalyptic thriller, populated by sympathetic, believable characters. Once you start reading, you won't want it to end. I was reminded of Stephen King at the top of his form, though Justin Cronin — an American professor of English — is a more economical writer than King. The body count is high, but so is the emotional impact. Cronin makes us care about his people, whether he's writing about a convicted murderer, a faintly nun, or a handful of survivors — possibly the last human beings alive — in the vast landscape of western America a century from now, forced into a constant struggle for survival against the attacks of the bloodthirsty creatures that were the result of a military experiment to create super-soldiers in our present war on terror. Adam Roberts's latest novel also begins in the near future with a military experiment, but his **New Model Army** (Gollancz, £9.99 * £11.69) is a populist, democratic one. Why, in an age of instant communication, should armies be run by slow, old-fashioned chains of command? Consider the terrorist cell and then imagine small armies, voting on tactics via mobile phones, hired by any government with a problem. Roberts has taken on current hot topics of crowd-sourcing and neural networks to ask questions about war and human nature, but also has fun blowing up well-known locations around the M25.

The world of **Unholy Ghosts** (Harper Voyager, £7.99 * £7.59) split from ours about 1996, when murderous ghosts returned to terrorise the living. As a result, governments and religions fell, replaced by the only group able to offer protection: the Church of Real Truth. Chess Putnam is a young witch trained to exorcise troublesome spirits and debunk false claims from people pretending to be haunted. She's also a drug addict with bad taste in men: details that make the first volume in Stacia Kane's Downside Ghosts series grittier and grimmer than most urban fantasy.

Those who like their fantasy dark should grab Sarah Pinborough's **A Matter of Blood** (Gollancz, £18.99 * £17.09). The first volume of a trilogy titled *The Dog-Faced Gods*, it's a blend of supernatural horror and detective noir set in a financially crippled near-future, when a private corporation known as The Bank holds governments to ransom. Detective Inspector Cass Jones is juggling two cases — the apparently random shooting of two schoolboys, and the hunt for a serial killer known as the Man of Flies — when his brother, an employee of The Bank, is found dead, his wife and children murdered. This first instalment raises more questions than it answers and leaves readers eager for more.

Themed anthologies run the risk of becoming predictable if the stories are too similar, but despite a shared obsession with the end of the world (or civilisation, or time and the Universe, take your pick), the tales in **The Mammoth Book of Apocalyptic SF** edited by Mike Ashley (Robinson, £7.99 * £7.59) are refreshingly varied. There are classics by Fritz Leiber, Robert Silverberg, Kate Wilhelm and James Tiptree Jr, but most are from contemporary writers and include six originals, of which the most outstanding is probably the amazing novella *Sleepover*, by Alastair Reynolds.

With such dark visions dominating the field, thank goodness for Terry Pratchett (above). He has been providing a welcome escape from the woes of our world into the much more amusing realm of Discworld for more than a quarter of a century and the latest excursion, which involves the invention of proper football with rules, has arrived, in timely fashion, in pocket-sized paperback. Read **Unseen Academicals** (Corgi, £7.99 * £7.59) and, laughter being the best medicine, you are guaranteed to feel better. *** To order books at discounted prices and with free p&p call 0845 2712134**

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The Times Review 3.07.2010