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I grew up evangelical. Terrifying rapture films scarred me for ever - Josiah Hesse

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Tales of wars, plagues and starvation left my friends and me fearing we'd be 'left behind'. They haunt me to this day

After millions of people vanish from existence, the world is thrown into violent anarchy, the streets a playground of theft, murder, rape, looting and suicide. Those "left behind" are about to endure seven years of a Cormac McCarthy nightmare: world wars, plagues and mass starvation, the streets littered with the decaying corpses of half the Earth's population.

It's a familiar story to anyone raised as an evangelical Christian in the last century, particularly if you grew up in the 90s with a shelf full of Left Behind rapture novels – which have sold 80m copies – or watched the Kirk Cameron film adaptation in 2000, or the Nicolas Cage version in 2014. Or if, like me, you just attended a screening of the most recent installment, Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist, starring and directed by Kevin Sorbo (best known for his starring role in Hercules: The Legendary Journeys).

Intended to be taken as a literal prophecy of events right around the corner, these stories terrorized me as a child – and haunt my dreams to this day.

I'm working on a memoir about these experiences and have interviewed dozens of people who grew up under this toxic theology. They all have the same story of being unable to reach their parents or siblings (a much more common scenario back in the pre-smartphone age) and suffering panic attacks at the thought of being left behind. It's a sensation that strikes to the core of your being, the overwhelming sense of abandonment reducing you to a crying infant unable to conjure its mother.

Unlike Hollywood Bible epics, these films are almost always independently financed, star B-list celebrities like Louis Gossett Jr or Margot Kidder, and are chiefly driven by proselytization over entertainment.

Rise of the Antichrist expertly weaves contemporary Christian right boogeymen (big pharma, Silicon Valley, mainstream media, Davos, the Covid vaccine, mental health experts) into an otherwise typical tale. It's the same narrative every time with rapture films, books and plays: the antichrist uses world war to manipulate the UN into installing him as leader of a global socialist government centered on the Mark of the Beast, a tattooed credit card – often a barcode bracketed by the numbers 666 – on everyone's right hand or forehead.

Sorbo's film also skewers the "globalist mainstream media", which has supposedly conspired to use Covid, and now the rapture, to keep people indoors, distracted and afraid, all in the name of power and profit. It's a boldly ironic stance for this movie to take, considering it rests in a tradition of using questionable theology to terrify audiences – often children and teens – resulting in lucrative bestsellers and a motivated voting base.

While every generation since Christ has interpreted modern events as evidence of the Book of Revelation prophecy coming to pass, it was a collection of post-hippie evangelicals in California who created the pop-theology of "the rapture" – a word that never actually appears in the Bible.

As part of "the Jesus Movement" – or, pejoratively, "the Jesus Freaks" – sober hippies like Bob Dylan were getting "born again" and preaching on stage about the coming antichrist. Following the collapse of the hedonistic ideals of the 60s, many flower children were being slowly seduced by the religious right, culminating in figures like Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson joining Billy Graham's Explo '72 festival, which Time magazine called "the Jesus Woodstock".

The literary accompaniment for this was Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, impressively tying modern events (the reunification of Israel, the rise of communism, the loosening morals of the postwar era) to biblical prophecy. One of the bestselling nonfiction books of the 1970s, it fueled the conversion of what would become much of the Christian right voting bloc of the 1980s.

A film adaptation starring Orson Welles hit theaters in 1978, but it was the low-budget rapture scare-fest *A Thief In The Night* that would set the template for not only countless films and novels about Armageddon, but an industry of fear-based plays, Christian haunted houses, and youth group sermons.

*A Thief In The Night* was filmed a short drive from where I grew up in Iowa. My parents were part of the tail end of the Jesus Movement (culture always reaches the midwest late) and hosted Bible studies and a youth center focused on end times prophecy. My mother wasn't certain if the end was near, but my dad regularly told me there might come a time when we would have to live off the grid, grow our own food, avoid money (the Mark of the Beast) and live in hiding in the wilderness. If we were found, we would be tortured by the armies of the antichrist, determined to get us to accept "the mark".

Our church held a screening of the sequel to *A Thief In The Night*, which was better financed and produced than its DIY predecessor. In *A Distant Thunder*, we follow a group of Christians who have been arrested by the antichrist's fascist army, and have the choice to either receive the Mark of the Beast or be executed. They know that if they receive the mark, they will eventually "drink the wine of God's wrath", as Revelation 14:9 says. They "will be tormented with fire and sulfur ... and the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night."

The task we're given is to "be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life".

*A Distant Thunder* ends with our lead character screaming hysterically as she watches her friends refuse to renounce Christ, then get decapitated by a guillotine.

My Christian friends and I were too young to understand the questionable leaps of biblical interpretation at work in these movies, or the political machinations fueling the cold war, the culture wars and the revolution of the Christian right in US politics. But we understood pain. We understood torture. We knew we were sinful. And we were convinced the world was not a safe place for us, and we shouldn't get too comfortable in our beds at night.

After my parents divorced and Dad moved out, Mom worked around the clock at a nearby hotel while attending community college at night. I was alone a good deal of my childhood, and at least once a week I was convinced that everyone I'd known had been raptured up to Heaven, and I was about to face the violence, disease, starvation and

isolation of the seven-year Tribulation. Worse, I might succumb to torture, agree to get the Mark of the Beast, and accept relief from momentary discomfort in exchange for an eternity of supernatural agony.

By the mid-90s, rapture fever was in full effect with my generation. DC Talk, arguably the Beatles of Christian rock, released a cover of Larry Norman's rapture anthem I Wish We'd All Been Ready, with the heartthrob Kevin Max singing the bridge with an eerie vibrato: "The father spoke, the demons dined / how could you have been so blind?"

The same year, the evangelist Tim LaHaye and novelist Jerry B Jenkins released the first in a series of 16 Left Behind novels placing biblical prophecy in a modern context. I don't know how many times I'd meet a new face at youth group or church camp saying the books had scared them straight. Meanwhile, speakers at my camp and Christian rock shows often tied the rapture to the coming Y2K disaster, and on New Year's Eve I was honestly surprised when the lights didn't go out – followed by explosions, sirens and gunfire – at the stroke of midnight.

It's the marriage of ancient prophecy with contemporary tropes that strikes an urgent fear in audiences – especially children. When you're still figuring out what the world is, it's easy to be convinced that your home, family, everything that makes you feel safe is ephemeral and can easily be replaced with unspeakable horror.

"As you watched the movie, you probably noticed some scary references to the way the world looks today," Sorbo explained in that gruff, fatherly voice I remember well from my childhood watching Hercules. "We live in a world of chaos, uncertainty and fear."

The audience was mostly retirement age, and laughed heartily at jokes mocking "the media", "trusting the science", and liberals embracing "mental health experts" over "conspiracy theorists". Much of the film reads like a Tucker Carlson segment come to life.

But I remembered very well the psychic impact this toxic theology has on a young mind. In fact, I don't need to remember. I still dream of demons, hell, the Mark of the Beast and the Lake of Fire a few times a week, sometimes sleepwalking – or sleep running – out the front door, convinced the antichrist is coming to tattoo 666 on my forehead, followed by an eternity of torture in hell.