

THE BIG IDEA

The Plague Year tells the story of a small coastal town which early one spring is visited by plague. The national government quickly quarantine the town to stop the disease spreading. The first anyone knows of this is on a Monday morning they set off to the the rail station to be met by armed soldiers in bio-hazard suits, and no trains running. The same is true of all the roads out, and the hills around the town are policed by armoured cars and helicopters. Very quickly, a 30 foot steel fence is erected around the town, and gunboats patrol the coastal waters. This is the story of a diverse community responding both to the disease, and to the enforced isolation. It is the story of a community in crisis, with many contemporary references (Hurricane Katrina, the impact of terrorism, bird flu, enviromental fears etc), but also aspiring to the status of myth – the story is both specific and universal.

There will be both series and serial elements, with weekly stand-alone stories, but also a narrative which carries us from one week to the next. While each episode will comprise a **story (or stories) of the week** which will involve up-close personal, human stories, there will also be scenes which connect those personal stories to the larger, social narrative which runs through the series, and a number of series narrative scenes.

Series elements. In a first series of eight episodes, each set of storylines will have loose, unannounced themes covering many facets of life in the plague town: **Love, Death, Crime, Government, Trade, Religion, Culture** and **Family**. Within these themes we will be examining characters *in extremis*, at crucial and dramatic turning points in their lives.

Serial elements. The narrative which carries us from week to week, and makes an audience not feel they can drop episodes, can largely be expressed in two sentences – **WHAT HAS HAPPENED?** and **HOW DO WE DEAL WITH IT?** This covers issues of unrest, disturbance, governance etc, but also takes the viewer into a larger, exciting, metaphysical realm.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED? The intention is to suggest to the viewer a range of possible interpretations for the original plague story, and make all of those explanations plausible but mind-boggling, before providing a final stunning climactic explanation which powerfully resolves the first series while setting-up a second (and third).

In episode 1, as a pre-credit sequence, dreamlike prequel, there are a series of explosions on a hill at the edge of town. A crowd of citizens gathers at the hillside (many of the characters we will get to know later are in the crowd). They stand before this bizarre firework display, and watch the hill open up before them – a dark cavern inside. Everything becomes still and quiet. One of the crowd says, do you know the history of this hill? It was a burial mound for the medieval town's plague victims. The word goes round the crowd. From inside the hill, there is a tiny scratching sound. A rat scampers out from the cave. After a shocked moment, one or two people start chasing it, but it evades them. It scampers through legs and feet – some try to kick it, some get out of the way. Someone says, we can't just let it escape. The crowd chase down the rat, and beat it with sticks and rocks, until it is still. Someone jokes about it. Then another, bigger sound from inside the hill. They turn and look. Hundreds of rats pour out of the cave, too many to even think of killing. Someone gets bitten. That person dies the next day.

And the day after that, the town is sealed off. And people start dying of plague.

The idea of this prequel sequence is that the community experiences a kind of communal nightmare, which they then wake up from and get on with their daily lives, only to find their daily lives are about to change. It establishes that the dramatic rules of the series are unorthodox, and it sets up a tension and expectation which burns through the series like a slow fuse.

What Has Happened? The narrative will explore a number of possibilities. Here are some of them-

Terrorism. The fear that the explosions and/or the spread of plague is an act of unannounced terrorism. This also throws up themes of the outsider, the stranger in our midst, the witch-hunting of the innocent.

Environmental Disaster. The belief that, in an almost Biblical way, we have brought the disaster on our own heads by tampering with nature. A local business or research centre connected to this.

Medical Malpractice. A plot involving the national gov't dropping in supplies of a newly-manufactured antidote. Regional government makes inoculation compulsory. Some evade being inoculated. A regular character, working in one of the hospitals,

calculates that everyone who has died from the virus was innoculated, but no-one who evaded the antidote appears to be dying.

Social Experiment. A creeping paranoid fear that the government has deliberately infected this small local population as an exercise in crisis control among the larger population.

All of these, and other interpretations, will be developed and appear to some extent plausible. The true answer is even stranger, and its discovery both resolves and climaxes the first series, and sets up possible further series.

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH IT?

This other continuing narrative strand details-

- a) the increasing restrictions of national gov't (first restriction on movement, then on trade and finally on communication – telephone, internet, post and news media restrictions are imposed as the mounting chaos in the local community creates the danger of more widespread social disorder)
- b) the impact of local gov't (as unelected local bureaucrats become increasingly important, and draconian, in handling the crisis), with the power and corruption that goes with that.
- c) the response of the community, both for the good and the bad (stories of generosity, self-organisation and personal sacrifice; as well as civil disobedience, insurgency and social panic).