Among the many aims of cultural studies, certainly not the least is to historicize and contextualize that which seems utterly contemporary, and to consider certain cultural phenomena and trends in both their momentary relevance and their part in a bigger temporal and spatial picture. John Hay’s *Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum Literature* does this most elegantly and insightfully, as it carefully avoids the two tiresome arguments lurking at either extreme end of such a project, namely that anything that happens today is merely a manifestation of an older model in a linear cultural continuity, or that this older model can really only be understood as a predecessor of its contemporary, fuller realization. Instead, Hay manages to construct a particular (and neglected) tradition of American postapocalyptic writing while interpreting it on its own sociopolitical and cultural terms from our early twenty-first century position. It is his skillful balancing of these positions that makes his study such a success and indeed relevant to more than one field of scholarly inquiry.

Hay’s main achievement does not lie in tracing the historical origins of the dominance of postapocalyptic fantasies in so many artifacts across media and genres today. Instead, he manages to distance himself sufficiently from this immediate contemporary environment in order to analyze the postapocalyptic imagination in early nineteenth-century America in its own right. In doing so, he does not lose sight of continuities and contrasts, but he also does not let the lens become more important than what is seen through it. To be sure, his study will be fruitfully read as a necessary and useful contextualization of the popularity of the postapocalyptic in recent decades, and it discusses its major reference points along the way (Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* is mentioned just like *Fallout 4* or *Mad Max*). Yet his most important contribution to this discourse is his exploration of how it has manifested itself at a particular historical moment, and how this moment was seen as a moment in relation to prior and coming ones. This includes a far-reaching analysis of the cultural and political functions such an embedding served at the time, and how these manifestations and functions relate to larger discursive formations of nationality, religion, science, futurity, or ecology, among others.

In doing so, Hay creates a model that should prove useful to scholars working beyond the immediate context of postapocalypticism. In an abstract way, Hay provides us with ways of talking about how people have imagined the future in relation to the past and present, and he builds this framework on an impressive variety of discursive acts that range from travel writing to poetry, from popular culture to “high” literature, and from historical treatise to landscape painting. Not limiting himself to analyses of a particular form of textual or pictorial expression allows Hay to do impressive new historicist work on the literary imagination while still distilling from this variety the
patterns that will serve others as they apply them elsewhere. Accelerated decrepitude (a sense of speeding through the civilizational cycle of rise and fall), proleptic historiography (imagining future historians writing about one’s present), uncanny historicism (constructing something as new while connecting it to an ancient past), and science faction (predictive texts of a posthuman world) are the terms that each describe a methodologically sound perspective on different imaginative forms. Hay’s theorizing of these concepts draws as comfortably on close readings as on intermedial comparisons. Especially productive is his argument that these devices develop in close connection to certain fields in the sciences—geology, anthropology, archaeology.

Perhaps the most striking challenge to a pervasive trope in US culture and indeed in American Studies is Hay’s supplement to the concept of Adamism that R. W. B. Lewis identified (and also somewhat glorified) in his classic *The American Adam* (1955). Instead of simply repeating what often seems like an all too eager dismissal of this myth-and-symbol approach to US culture on the part of postnationalist American Studies, justified as it may be, Hay’s critique happens by way of a parallel approach that complicates this Adamist tradition by juxtaposing it with a Noachian one. In other words, he reshapes this discussion through a paradigm that takes Noah and not Adam as the central symbolic figure in a national (and nationalist) imagination of futurity in and for the USA. Envisioning America not as an ahistorical clean slate for new beginnings but as a postapocalyptic site makes a major difference in how the present is connected to (or disconnected from) the past, and it has profound implications for an imagination of the future that wants to shape the present in which it occurs. Notably, Hay is not interested in a paradigm shift here, nor does he replicate the flaws of Lewis’ argument in making his. Instead, he argues that this Noachian imagination shows how truly complex the national imagination was at the time, and how these fantasies of new beginnings work against exceptionalist conceptions rather than support them, in contrast to their Adamic parallels.

In making this argument, Hay contributes not only to postnational but to postnationalist American Studies, as he goes beyond a critique of nationalism to a critique of the national itself since he not only delineates one important process of how US nationality was invented but also shows how fraught and tenuous this imaginative invention was. To that end, he explains how much it already relied on a vision of its end even when it sought to create a stable imagined community across time or even, ideally, outside of time. The symbolic figure of Noah draws attention to historicity where the figure of Adam denies it, and Hays convincingly shows how this irreducible historicity haunts and complicates the imagination of past, present, and future at a time when nationality promised a narrative that would transcend history.

If this consideration of postapocalyptic fantasies is an important contribution to postnational approaches that historicize an ideology that often presents itself as ahistorical, then it is at the same time also a welcome contribution to environmental criticism. Indeed, it integrates itself into this scholarly discourse as seamlessly as in the
former, but notably without wearing its theoretical perspective on its sleeve or letting it dominate the methodological repertoire as a whole. Ecocritical concerns shape the whole study as much as postnational ones, yet Hay’s book refuses to reduce its approach and the variety of its material to any singularity. Its strength lies precisely in considering the national and the environmental postapocalyptic imagination as closely intertwined.

In this and many other respects, then, Hay’s monograph is a scholarly model that is as relevant in its actual analyses as in the disciplinary variety it employs to carry them out. Its rich, meticulously researched historicist approach unearths forgotten texts and draws new attention to neglected ones, but its theoretical implications reach beyond its immediate area of concern, so that the book appropriately ends with a postscript that wonders, using the example of Detroit, what a postapocalyptic discourse does, now as then.

Given the prevalence the imagination of futurity is routinely assigned in conceptualizations of both dominant and residual cultural tropes, there is still a surprising lack of theoretically sound work on this topic in American cultural studies. Especially is this so with regard to work that considers the aesthetic along with the sociocultural, historical, and the political at the intersection of various discursive formations. *Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum American Literature* does not single-handedly fill this gap, but it is a solid beginning. It powerfully proves the vast potential of a temporal approach that historicizes imaginations of the future in order to learn as much about their own present as about the one in which they are being written about.