

## **The First Two Pages: *Maxine Unleashes Doomsday* by Nick Kolakowski**

### **An Essay by Nick Kolaskowski**

I spent years writing my new novel *Maxine Unleashes Doomsday*, which is unusual for me. With all of my previous novels, I'd completed the initial draft pretty quickly, in a matter of months. But *Maxine* started slowly, first as a short story written in 2014, before expanding in fits and starts to its current, novel-length size.

One of the biggest problems was a suitable framing device. *Maxine* follows the life of Maxine Hardwater from ages 14 to approximately 40, as she transitions from precocious teenager to wage slave to outlaw to... something very weird and different. As she ages, the United States collapses around her, dissolving from the imperfect-but-somewhat-coherent government we know today to something that more closely resembles *Mad Max: Fury Road*. (Yes, this is a dystopian science-fiction novel, in addition to a rural noir; there's also a big heist, and some thorny philosophical conundrums thrown in for good measure.)

That scope, and all those transitions within the character of Maxine herself, made it hard to keep the narrative under control. It seemed all over the place, without any kind of cohesion and flow. I despaired, until one day I randomly

remembered Peter Carey's excellent (and for me, life-changing) novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*, which won the Booker Prize in 2001.

In that book, Carey uses a peculiar framing device: The introduction suggests that the (fictional) narrative is taken from various handwritten accounts stored in historical archives all over Australia. Throughout the novel, short interstitial sections describe the condition of the papers as an archivist would. It's a neat blending of fact and fiction, to the point where, if you didn't know it was a novel, you might think you really were reading a primary historical document.

So I had my inspiration for a framing device: a group of (fictional) academics would kick off every new part of *Maxine* by discussing her life and the narrative of her they're trying to piece together, as if she were a historical figure. This became a very cool tool for foreshadowing and other techniques, as well.

Here's the first page of the book:

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Date: 5/29/2110

*Recovered from the hard drive of a Winpple Laptop Series 5, the last generation of that device line to enter the consumer market. Although the drive was heavily damaged (REF: Midtown EMP, "Big Guy War," Final Stage), our machine-learning algorithms managed to extrapolate most of the missing text using contextual data. Nonetheless, there are still some breaks, which are clearly delineated for your researching pleasure.*

*This document is particularly interesting as it provides a glimpse into conditions in Manhattan immediately following the*

*Collapse. Those scholars of the life of Maxine Hardwater will find some brief observations of her character during her “terminal” stage.*

Originally, I plunged from there into a narrative “close-up” of Maxine in action, but something about it felt too abrupt for the reader, dropping them into things too quickly. Maxine has been through a lot by that point in the narrative. Therefore, I decided to soften things by utilizing *another* trick of historical narrative: the recollections of a bystander. Which is why the first “voice” you hear in a book about a woman outlaw in upstate New York circa the mid-late 21st century is a weird eccentric who’s obsessed with a sailboat:

Baby, I crashed the sailboat.

Its gleaming white bow crunched into the new oyster reefs off Governors Island, the ones planted by the Revival Brigade to blunt the higher tides, and splintered like a cheap toy. Two months of sanding and painting and caulking and then puzzling out how to rig a sail, reduced in three minutes to fiberglass chunks and slithering nylon rope and bits of foam bobbing in the harbor’s toxic stew.

By the way, the Revival Brigade’s motto is “The Big Apple! Glorious Once Again!” They believe the first Flood was Special Delivery from the Almighty himself. And with enough prayer and repair work on our part, they think He might deign to spare us a second bath. Good luck with that one, I say.

I strapped on my life preserver, offered the dying ship a quick middle-finger salute, and leapt overboard. It took an hour to kick my way back to shore, where I swallowed two handfuls of antibiotics to kill any of those newfangled super-bugs in my bloodstream. The pills went down easy with my weekly ration of Jim Beam.

Do you remember a book on my shelf in the home office, J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World*? It turned out to be a remarkably prescient novel: global warming, rising water levels, a little bit of social chaos to keep things interesting. Its hero, a scientist named

Keran, ends up wandering south (“Like a second Adam”) into the blooming jungles.

I was taking the opposite path: due north, toward you. By sailing, I would have avoided the crumbling highways, the dead towns and ports stripped of food and gasoline, and New England’s warring clans: the New Iroquois, the Battling Irish, and—just when you think the human race has exhausted its capacity for corny nicknames—King Tut and the Beatdown Seven.

“Love you” was the last thing you said over the phone, from Halifax, before the connection went dead. I want to believe that Nova Scotia fared better than everything south. Given the rising temperatures, they say, Canada will soon become the breadbasket of the world. Once that happens, they’ll likely demand a stop to any jokes about moose and ending sentences with “Eh.”

Lower Manhattan now looks like Venice with a couple added skyscrapers. Half of Brooklyn is out to sea on a tide of PBR cans and fake hipster moustaches. The latter case demonstrates, yet again, that every bad situation has a silver lining.

In the first hours of our watery doom, when the tide rushed in and the news screamed about the barriers and floodgates finally giving way, I splashed my way uptown past bellowing cops and tiny skiffs from which street capitalists, who only a month before had been shilling Gucci knockoffs, hawked everything from swim trunks to scuba gear. The Bluetooth in my ear connected to the broker in Shanghai.

Don’t roll your eyes: For once, I wasn’t just working the numbers. Remember that Shanghai survived its own deluge, at great cost: thousands of casualties before they erected those concrete barriers and flood channels.

“How did you make it through?” I asked the broker, whose clipped and pleasant voice bore the faintest trace of an Oxford accent. By this time, I had huddled in the vestibule of an apartment building on Park, after slipping the excitable doorman a crisp fifty and waving him away. Screaming crowds and water churned past.

“I stayed in my condo, near the top of a skyscraper,” she said. “I drank beer for weeks, because it was cleaner than the water from the taps. The ones with money survived. The ones with money always survive.”

Considering our three-story brownstone in Brooklyn, the advice about skyscrapers helped me not one bit. “Thanks so much. Let’s

short my entire U.S. stock portfolio,” I said, then tapped my jaw three times to end the call.

His situation gets worse and worse; and as it builds (or implodes, depending on the point of view), you get more and more glimpses of Maxine—I found it builds some anticipation for what’s coming.

The moral of this story, at least for me: Don’t ignore the potential of an interesting framing device, especially if your narrative feels disjointed. It can prove just the glue you need to ensure that everything holds together.

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Nick Kolakowski is the author of the crime thrillers *Maxine Unleashes Doomsday* and *Boise Longpig Hunting Club*, both from Down & Out Books. His short crime fiction has appeared in *Thuglit*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Mystery Tribune*, and various anthologies. He tweets at @nkolakowski.