Harry Potter is not the only supernaturalistic fiction series taking the book trade by storm. Tim LaHaye, the long-time Christian fundamentalist leader, and Jerry B. Jenkins, a prolific popular fiction author, have so far brought out eight novels in a series portraying the last years of this world according to Revelation. Twenty-three million of these books are in print, leaving aside the accompanying children's series and the many foreign editions. As with Harry Potter, each new Left Behind novel draws throngs of people to stores.

The Harry Potter books are read by kids who take them for the parables of middle childhood that they are meant to be. Kids innately understand that the witchcraft stuff is make-believe. The Left Behind books are consumed by grownups who receive them as deadly serious instruction about soon-to-come cataclysmic events. The mainstream media miss that essential difference, and treat the Left Behind books as cheerful Sunday school curiosities. They are a lot darker than that. Coming as they do from a prominent figure on the politicized Religious Right, the realist thrust to movie theaters and living rooms, the first of the Left Behind books has been made into a film. It is a rather lethargic action film, with indifferent acting, cheesy special effects, and an incomprehensible plot. It throws some of the book's most ingenious story elements away, and garbles the well-crafted, dramatically effective last chapter. The importance of the book series ought not be underestimated on the film's account.

Why should end-times fiction come to the fore now? All during the Cold War, didactic end-times books abounded, presenting a thermonuclear third world war and then the Second Coming. Hal Lindsey and Edgar C. Whisenant became famous with such books in the 1980s. Pat Robertson used his television pulpit to predict that such a scenario would unfold in 1982. The way the Cold War actually ended—with the collapse of the Soviet empire under its own dead weight instead of a war—confounded all their predictions.

In 1995, two novels by major fundamentalist Christian leaders appeared, depicting a revised end-times scenario to accommodate the post-Cold War situation: The End of the Age by Pat Robertson and Left Behind, the first installment of LaHaye and Jenkins's series. In each, a non-mannmade disaster destabilizes the world's nations, allowing a charismatic political leader—the Antichrist, promising peace and prosperity—to rise. He institutes a one-world totalitarian government with its capital in Iraq, the site of ancient Babylon. He also institutes a cashless world economy, and requires all to have an identifying number—the "mark of the beast"—affixed to the body or else not be allowed to buy or sell. Plagues and wars come during a period called the Tribulation. The Antichrist is defeated at Armageddon. Christ returns to establish his thousand-year kingdom.

LaHaye's theory of end-times events—his eschatology—is more thoughtful and nuanced than Robertson's. LaHaye differs from Robertson and from most of fundamentalist seminary academia in espousing a pre-Tribulation Rapture: Christ returns and catches all who are saved up into the clouds. The Tribulation and all the drama involving the Antichrist come after that. People can still become saved after the Rapture. But they must go through all sorts of travail that the raptured believers are spared. LaHaye avoids some unpalatable implications by allowing the rapture of all children born and unborn, and some Catholics, too.

Robertson shortened his "post-Trib" scenario into one volume: it begins with an asteroid hitting the earth, and ends with the believers inhabiting the new heavens and new earth in their glorified, resurrected superbodies. For LaHaye, the Rapture itself is the disaster that destabilizes the nations. A few newly converted, inexperienced believers must then negotiate a world in turmoil. With a "pre-Trib" Rapture, the dramatic possibilities multiply. It's The Pilgrim's Progress for the twenty-first century.

CRISIS AND AFTERMATH
Left Behind opens with airline captain Rayford Steele flying along on a routine run. He thinks about his wife and son,
who are deeply enmeshed in a fundamentalist church near their home in Chicago. A fault line has opened in their family, with the two believers on one side, and Rayford and their smart-aleck college freshman daughter, Chloe, on the other. The beautiful but vacuous head flight attendant, Hattie Durham, with whom Rayford is guiltily working up to having an affair, comes to the flight deck telling a story Rayford cannot believe: many of the passengers are missing. Their still-buttoned clothes and personal effects lie in little heaps. From the transceiver, Rayford finds out that the disappearances are widespread, and some planes have crashed because their flight crews disappeared in similar fashion. Among the passengers still on board is Cameron “Buck” Williams, the crack Wanderkind journalist for a Newsweek-like magazine. He interviews Hattie, among others, regarding the disappearances.

Among the missing are Rayford’s wife and son. When Rayford returns to his sad, empty home, Assistant Pastor Bruce Barnes visits him. The church’s senior pastor, who has also disappeared, foresaw the contingency and left behind a videotape of himself explaining the Rapture. Viewing it makes Bruce feel stricken, since his being left behind shows up his devotional shortcomings and false vocation. Rayford views the tape, becomes convinced that the Rapture is the right explanation for the disappearances—and has his Damascus Road experience. Through Hattie, Buck contacts Rayford, wanting to interview the fateful flight’s pilot. Buck meets Chloe. They become saved and marry. Rayford, Bruce, Buck and Chloe become the inner clique of Bruce’s church.

Among Buck’s VIP contacts is Chaim Rosenzweig, the Israeli Nobel-laureate biologist and statesman who has invented a miracle fertilizer that can make the most arid region blossom. Earlier, Buck, and Rosenzweig witnessed an incident where the Russian Air Force attempted to attack Israel. Before the Israeli Air Force could scramble, the Russian jets all flamed out and plunged to Earth.³

In the world of Left Behind, Israeli political liberals become advocates of one-world government. Rosenzweig, the London financiers Jonathan Stonegal and Joshua Todd-Cothran, and a shadowy organization called the Council of Ten are grooming an attractive young politician, Nicolae Carpathia, to front the one-world government cause. Nicolae has risen meteorically, from backbench member of the Romanian parliament to president. He is blonde, blue-eyed, and said to be descended from Roman patriarchs. Rosenzweig and the financiers finagle Nicolae’s appointment as Secretary General of the United Nations.

Nicolae has the power of mind-control over all people except the saved. All world leaders, including a clownish Democratic president of the United States, instantly acquiesce in his plans: they will scrap 90 percent of the world’s armaments, and turn the remaining ten percent over to the United Nations under Nicolae’s personal control. The national governments they head will be dissolved, and the world redistricted into ten regions, each ruled by a potentate. The UN will be reconstituted as the Global Community (GC) and relocated to New Babylon, Iraq, freshly built on the site of ancient Babylon outside Baghdad. Nicolae will reign from there, first as supreme potentate and later as god in his very own compulsory New World Order religion.

Rosenzweig introduces Buck to Nicolae. Hattie gets Buck to introduce her to Nicolae, whom she has seen on television. Hattie becomes Nicolae’s personal assistant, then his fiancée. Nicolae buys up all the world’s communication media, making Buck his unwilling employee. On Hattie’s recommendation, Rayford becomes Nicolae’s personal pilot.

Back in Chicago, Bruce soon comes to realize that Nicolae is the Antichrist. Bruce outlines for the others the need for their group to be “spiritual Green Berets.” They decide to call themselves the Tribulation Force. The last sentence of Left Behind reads: “The task of the Tribulation Force was clear and their goal nothing less than to stand and fight the enemies of God during the seven most chaotic years the planet would ever see.”

Left Behind closes with the promise that Tribulation Force will become a militia group. The subsequent novels are slow to keep the promise. The second installment, titled Tribulation Force, fills out the prophecies to be fulfilled and furnishes background about Nicolae Carpathia. More recurring characters are introduced: Rosenzweig introduces Buck to Tsion Ben-Judah, an eminent, although fairly young, rabbinical scholar who heads an Israeli government-sponsored research program to compile a definitive list of criteria for the messiah. Ben-Judah and Buck go to the Temple Mount together, to see the two witnesses. These are two disheveled men in hooded robes who at first appear to be disturbed vagrants declaring their delusions in Bible-speak. (There are many like that in real-life Jerusalem.) But these two speak in New Testament lingo. Whenever someone tries to interfere with them, pillars of fire issue from their mouths to incinerate the offender. Ben-Judah converts to Christianity. When the GC murders Bruce by slow poisoning, Ben-Judah becomes the spiritual leader of Tribulation Force. Christians come to be known all over the world as “Judah-ites.” At its height, Ben-Judah’s Internet cyberministry reaches a billion rank and file Judah-ites. The remaining main character, David Hassid, is a Sephardic Jewish Israeli who becomes a high level GC functionary, and then a Judah-ite. Eventually, he too is inducted into the Trib Force.

In the next four installments—
Nicolae, Soul Harvest, Apollyon, and Assassins—the series settles down to a routine of the Trib Force members trotting the globe in planes, helicopters, and sports utility vehicles, talking on cell phones and spouting stiff, homiletic dialogue at one another. Nicolae atom bombs those parts of the United States where militia groups—not the Trib Force—challenge the authority of the regional potentate. The wreckage gets inconveniently in the way of Trib Force auto travel. The Trib Force principals spend most of their time rescuing one another, and rarely get around to doing the GC any real damage. There is an isolated bloody episode where GC police and Trib Force have a shoot-out in an abortion clinic. Rarely does the GC bother to repress the Trib Force.

In The Indwelling, Rosenzweig, feeling like The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, feigns a crippling stroke so that he can get near Nicolae in a wheelchair at a ceremony in Jerusalem. Rosenzweig conceals a scimitar made of special, semi-magical Israeli metal that cuts without physical contact. It is not clear whether Rosenzweig stabs Nicolae in the lower back or puts the blade up his rectum. Rosenzweig subsequently becomes a Judah-ite and a Trib Force member. Later, he and Ben-Judah will reside in the same safe house outside Chicago.

At his stupendous funeral in New Babylon, Nicolae is dramatically resurrected. Thereafter, whenever one GC citizen greets another, he will say, “He is risen!” The other will respond, “He is risen indeed!” Nicolae takes on an altered, Satan-indwelt personality, far meaner than before. He no longer requires sleep, and works twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week on his plans to destroy Jerusalem.

In the current installment, The Mark, the GC prepares its version of the mark of the beast: Everyone must accept a tattoo along with injection of an identity chip and worship Nicolae as god, or else be executed on the spot by the System. That makes him satisfaction. The epilogue indicates that the Organization subsequently succeeded in touching off a thermonuclear third world war. No non-Whites or Jews survived, but a few pure Whites remained to build the world anew.

The Left Behind saga are stunning. The Turner Diaries are presented as the ancient journal of an urban guerrilla in the Washington, D.C., area during the early 1990s. It is annotated by scholars in the distant future when the world is all Caucasian and ruled by an Aryan priesthood called “The Order.” In their day—the “New Era”—few records from the old era survive. Turner’s diary is a venerated relic.

The guerrilla, Earl Turner, finds the “race mixing” and social decay around him disgusting. When the “Cohen Act” outlawing all private ownership of firearms becomes law, that is the last straw. Turner joins a militia group called “the Organization” bent on overthrowing “the System.” In Turner’s world, familiar American civic institutions exist, but are irrelevant. The real power is exercised preternaturally by “the Jews,” a conspiracy as brilliant as it is evil. Clownish elected officials receive their instructions through the Israeli embassy.

The Organization’s ultimate goal is a world with no non-Whites or Jews. No matter how many Whites—including themselves—the guerrillas have to kill while breaking the System and exterminating all others, they are to do so. Early on, Turner blows up the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s headquarters with a fertilizer bomb to destroy a computer being readied to drive an internal-passport mark-of-the-beast system. Turner calmly reports his participation in ever-bloodier sabotage missions. In a hokey ceremony with hooded gray robes, he is initiated into the secret inner leadership priesthood, the “Order.” He writes his last diary entry just before leaving on a suicide mission to drop a miniature atom bomb on the Pentagon from a low-flying crop dusting biplane. His belief that he will gain immortality of a sort in the memories of his peers, and that he has served a holy cause, brings him satisfaction. The epilogue indicates that the Organization subsequently succeeded in touching off a thermonuclear third world war. No non-Whites or Jews survived, but a few pure Whites remained to build the world anew.

The Left Behind series and The Turner Diaries each present a nightmarish, through-the-looking-glass world. Each work’s hero is an insurgent against an insidious, uncanny conspiracy of world domination originating in Israel. Each is an evangelist, always on the lookout for qualified recruits. The parallelism of GC and the System, Judah-ites and the Organization, the Trib Force and the Order is clear enough. (For all Turner knows, there could be a conspiratorial, Jewish Nicolae-counterpart behind the scenes.) The Trib Force has supported itself thus far by embezzling from the GC. The Organization financed its rampages by armed robbery and counterfeiting. Rayford Steele’s sights are set on a believers-only utopia; Earl Turner’s on a gentiles-only utopia.

In The Turner Diaries, everything depends on the effectiveness of the guerrillas. The book is straightforwardly intended to incite people to go out and fight “the System.” In Left Behind, the outcome is predetermined. That makes the Tribulation a personal, largely interior, testing program for each believer, not a temporal situation where common
effort can alter the outcome. The main characters in *Left Behind* are curiously self-involved, even narcissistic. *Left Behind*'s purpose in the fundamentalist church scheme of things is devotional. It is a sugar-coated fear manipulation. To the fear of going to burn in eternal fire if one's devotional life is not right is added the more easily imaginable fear of being left behind to suffer through the Tribulation—and perhaps not make the cut even then. With each installment, what the errant believer ought to be afraid of is made more lurid. The point is to keep the devotee too afraid to think outside that box. One has to feel sorry

for people caught inside those morbid, fictitious preoccupations.

There is a scurrilous political message to the *Left Behind* books that I hardly think the authors consciously intend. If one were to ask them or their readers how they feel about public and civic life in America, I am sure they would access a different logic—tight men- tal compartment and declare their loyalty to the Constitution and their reverence for the Revolutionary Founding Fathers. Some of them would no doubt claim that such loyalty and reverence are exclusive- ly conservative Christian virtues.

But look at the public scene portrayed in these books. In this respect, *Left Behind* and *Turner Diaries* are exactly the same. In both, mainstream American public life and civic leaders are depicted as degenerate, irrelevant, useless, and ready to crumble. Demo- cratic institutions play no role at all. No Communist or Nazi propaganda ever treated them any worse. Neither work has the slightest use for pragmatic, tacitly secular Ameri- can civilization. LaHaye and Jenkins bring to the "public square." In this millennium, those values are slow poison.

In the short run, *Left Behind* does not seem likely to incite anyone to drastic action. Still, how dissatisfied must the fans of these books be with normal, quiet lives—how much repressed anger against those in authority over them must they harbor—to identify so strongly with Trib Force? Why is the idea of the world they know being torn to pieces so alluring to them? Is it troubling to con- template what mischief might develop as masses of North Americans, induced year after year to become so fundamentally alienated, get tired waiting for God to send up the balloon. [ff]

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Notes

1. *Left Behind: the Movie*, Cloud Ten Pictures, 2000. A wide theater release, planned for February 2, 2001, will have taken place when this issue of *IF* has gone to press. Cloud Ten Pictures has produced several other Tribulation epics.


3. The notion of Russia attacking Israel but being turned back despite overwhelming- ly superior numbers, after Ezekiel 38:14–16, often appeared in Cold War end-times sce- narios. Although Robertson made it the central event in his *Armageddon* in a 1982 sce- nario, he omitted it from his novel.

4. Hattie becomes pregnant with Nicolae's child. Because she will not keep her mouth shut, Nicolae has her imprisoned. The shoot- out ensues when the Trib Force rescues her from a coerced abortion. The authors do not pick up on the *Rosemary's Baby* scenario suggested by the pregnancy.

5. The autodidactic physician says the corpse looks "like a cocktail wiener with a sword poking through him."


7. This is the model Timothy McVeigh fol- lowed in carrying out the Oklahoma City bombing.


In Robertson's novel, the conspiracy the- ory element is downplayed. His villains are nondescript, swarthy third-worlders, and his compulsory one-world religion is New Age. There are no Jewish protagonists: Jews play little role, except that the population of Israel gets exterminated with a neutron bomb dropped on Haifa near the end.


The mainstream media never delved into the reasons why a meretricious, four-year- old book should suddenly arouse a flurry of interest. Until then, Robertson had had good relations with Jewish leaders, who welcomed his support for Israel and its Likud leaders. Robertson basked in the respectability he derived from the Jewish leaders' approval. When the Labor Party came to power in Israel and began the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Robertson condemned its actions as contrary to biblical prophecy. In January 1994, he had Ralph Reed attempt to intervene by lobbying some members of Premier Rabin's parliamentary coalition to defect, and bring the government down. Such