

# Reading the Pandemic

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As a professor in UTA's philosophy department, I teach a variety of classes, but no matter the subject, there's one thing that's always on the syllabus: fiction. Like the philosophical readings I assign, fiction challenges us to think deeply and imaginatively about what matters most. An essay or a lecture can teach you about a moral dilemma, but a short story can bring that dilemma to life.

This has been a year of moral dilemmas. Certainly, doctors have had to make hard choices about how best to care for their patients; but more than that, all of us have had to make hard decisions about how best to care for one another.

Here are four works of fiction that imagine pandemics, some similar to COVID-19 and some very different. Each of them has something special to say about our current moment, and two of them are available to read for free online.

## **Station Eleven (Emily St. John Mandel)**

"Because survival is insufficient." That's the motto of the Shakespearean theater company touring the post-pandemic ruins of civilization in this provocative novel by St. John Mandel. *Station Eleven* explores the value of art as a consolation, an inspiration, and a cultural inheritance, and asks us what we'd sacrifice to save it.

## **Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague (Geraldine Brooks)**

In the year 1666, a traveling tailor brings the bubonic plague to a small English village. Rather than attempt to flee, the townsfolk decide to quarantine their village to stop the spread of the disease. Brooks' novel is based on the real history of the village of Eyam, where only a quarter of the population survived the outbreak in question. *Year of Wonders* is essential reading after a long year of isolation and lockdown. It also contains what I consider the best fictional account of the way misinformation and superstition spread during times of crisis.

## **Stand Still. Stay Silent (Minna Sundberg)**

*Stand Still. Stay Silent* is a webcomic set a century after a devastating (and supernatural) pandemic. It follows a group of explorers from the last stronghold of human civilization as they embark on a research expedition into the "Silent World" beyond their borders. Sundberg's comic is gorgeous, gripping, and fun, and all of it is worth reading—but I particularly recommend its opening Prologue chapter, which takes place generations earlier, during the initial outbreak of disease.

*Stand Still. Stay Silent* is available to read free online at <https://sssscomic.com/>.

### **Unlocked: An Oral History of Haden's Syndrome (John Scalzi)**

When I teach the COVID-19 pandemic in my Contemporary Moral Problems class, this is the book that I ask my students to read. Although it is fiction, Scalzi's novella is written as if it were a real medical history, describing events following the emergence of a deadly virus that leaves many of its survivors disabled, fully conscious but unable to move their bodies. *Unlocked* is a wide-ranging look at how we experience and respond to both disease and disability, politically, medically, and socially.

*Unlocked* is available to read free online at <https://www.tor.com/2014/05/13/unlocked-an-oral-history-of-hadens-syndrome-john-scalzi/>.

