

# THE LEFTOVERS

by Tom Perrotta



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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



## Official Tom Perrotta Chronology

**1961**—Tom born August 13th; shares birthday with luminaries such as Alfred Hitchcock, Fidel Castro, and, most importantly, Danny Bonaduce, with whom he shares an uncanny resemblance throughout childhood, or so he likes to think. Berlin Wall goes up same day.

**1966**—Tom celebrates First Holy Communion at St. Ann's Church; in iconic scene, later repeated throughout adolescence, he watches with mixed feelings as more adventurous friends steal jelly donuts meant for reception. The Troggs release "Wild Thing."

**1968**—Busy year; Tom plays shortstop for Diamond Expansion in the Garwood Minor League, begins short-lived scouting career. Defending little sister, Tom threatens to throw syringe-wielding pediatrician "out the window," much to the amusement of his mother and the pediatrician. Summer of Love in San Francisco.

**1972**—Precociously political, Tom campaigns for George McGovern in Pop Warner football uniform, along with teammate and teammate's hippie brother; trio is verbally abused by neighbors, many of whom belong to misleadingly-named Silent Majority. "Horse With No Name" tops the pop charts.

**1974**—In a stab at *Easy Rider* cool, Tom ventures out in a long-sleeved tee-shirt emblazoned with the American flag, but his closed-minded peers react with scorn. His Seals & Crofts tee-shirt and blue sheepskin jacket don't fare much better with the critics. *Monty Python's Flying Circus* makes first appearance on American TV.



1977—A sophomore, Tom publishes “The Freak Show” in *Pariah*, a high-school literary magazine, initiating a productive three-year relationship with the publication. “One Tiny Plant”—an environmental cri du coeur heavily influenced by Rod Serling—and “The Standing Ovation”—a bittersweet expose of the fleeting nature of athletic glory, also heavily influenced by Serling—follow in junior and senior years. Country suffers from a bad case of *Saturday Night Fever*.

1978—Tom passes up tickets for a Bruce Springsteen show at the Capitol Theater to spend time with a girlfriend. Tom and girl break up that night; Bruce plays legendary five-hour show. John Irving publishes *The World According to Garp*.

1980—Tom gets summer job collecting garbage for the Garwood Department of Public Works. Doesn’t throw up once, not even during heat wave. Ronald Reagan elected president.

1981—Tom publishes “A Safe Place for Dogs” in *The Spider’s Web*, a college literary magazine. Feels life would be more meaningful if he were an Eastern European dissident, or a beatnik driving cross-country. Raymond Carver publishes *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

1983—Tom graduates college with a B.A. in English (with distinction in the major). Gets job proofreading *World Tennis and Tobacco Retailer* on the night shift. Quits and goes to work for Division of Consumer Affairs, protecting homeowners from fraud and abuse by sending polite form letters to unscrupulous contractors. Martin Scorsese makes *King of Comedy*.

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1985—Brief stint in Bay Area. Tom resides in make-shift loft in Oakland Industrial Center with college friend, artist Byron Kim, works as clerk in Excess & Surplus Property storage facility; enjoys answering phone with the words, “ESP Warehouse, may I help you?” Gabriel Garcia Marquez publishes *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

1987—A graduate student at Syracuse University’s Creative Writing Program, Tom takes a part-time job writing ad copy. Responsible for many notable radio spots, including “Superstars in the World of Cars” campaign for local dealership. Congressional hearings into Iran-Contra affair.

1988—Tom takes job as writing tutor and part-time instructor at Yale University, at one point receiving paycheck for grand total of 0 dollars and 0/100 cents. First published stories—“The Weiner Man” in *Columbia Magazine* and “Wild Kingdom” in *The Gettysburg Review*. Sonny Bono elected mayor of Palm Springs.

1991—Tom marries Mary, moves to Brooklyn. Writes still-unpublished novel, *Lucky Winners*, about a working-class family that wins the lottery and lives to regret it. Nirvana releases *Nevermind*.

1992—Temporarily unemployed, Tom becomes obsessed with presidential election, which features three-way race between Bush, Clinton, and the always entertaining Ross Perot. Also takes up roller-blading. Dan Quayle spells “potatoe.”

1993—Unwilling to abandon his obsession with the recent election, Tom begins his own novel about a three-way race for high-school president. At the same time, he ghost-writes teen horror novel for bestselling



series (don't ask which one; he's taken an oath of non-disclosure). Toni Morrison wins Nobel Prize for Literature.

1994—Tom's story collection, *You Start to Live*, is accepted for publication by a small press called *Bridge Works*. At publisher's insistence, he changes title to *Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies*, which turns out to be a much better idea. Daughter Nina is born. Very cute kid. Tonya Harding takes a whack at Nancy Kerrigan.

1996—Tom's still-unpublished novel, *Election*, is optioned by Bona Fide Productions and MTV Films. When he tells his Harvard students that the novel recounts a cut-throat race for the "meaningless post" of high-school president, the audience of ex-high-school-chief-executives reacts with visible shock and dismay. Richard Ford wins Pulitzer for *Independence Day*.

1997—Tom publishes *The Wishbones*, a comic novel about a New Jersey wedding band that has absolutely nothing to do with Adam Sandler movie *The Wedding Singer*. Son Luke is born. Handsome devil. Tobias Wolff publishes *The Night in Question*.

1999—Tom's six-year-old novel *Election* is finally published, beating Alexander Payne's excellent movie version (starring Matthew Broderick and Reese Witherspoon) by only a few months. First season of *The Sopranos*.

2000—Tom publishes *Joe College*, a novel about a working class kid from New Jersey who goes to Yale during the same years Tom went. Only a couple of passages are autobiographical—the one about Tom's

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myriad food aversions, and the one about that other thing he prefers not to talk about. George Bush “wins” the presidential election, with the Supreme Court playing the role of Mr. M.

2004—Tom publishes *Little Children*, the hardcover version of which sports a memorable cover showing two goldfish crackers floating on a field of astroturf. Pepperidge Farm is not amused. Gay marriage legal in Massachusetts.

2006—Todd Field’s powerful movie version of *Little Children* (starring Kate Winslet and Patrick Wilson and co-written by Tom) is released by New Line. Tom has a small role near the end. Dig the blue robe and shorty pajamas. George W. Bush reads Camus’s *The Stranger* during summer vacation.

2007—Tom publishes *The Abstinence Teacher*, a novel about sex education, religion, soccer, and the Great American Culture War; has hours of fun Googling the phrase “Hot Christian Sex.” Reverend Ted Haggard pronounced “completely heterosexual” by fellow minister.

2008—Tom writes screenplay for *The Abstinence Teacher*, collaborating with *Little Miss Sunshine* directors Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Gas prices reach record highs; Journey has a new lead singer. It’s 1978 all over again.

2009—Barack Obama inaugurated as 44th President. *Jersey Shore* a surprise hit on MTV. Is this a great country or what?

2010—Tom writes *The Leftovers*, a novel about a suburban town muddling through the apocalypse. Drill, baby, drill!



## *A Conversation with the Author*

Interview conducted by Laura Wilson, Executive  
Producer, Macmillan Audio

**I really enjoyed your book. There's a lot of humor in it, even though there's a lot of sadness. What was that like for you as a writer, to sort of find the humor in what's ultimately a sad situation?**

Well, I have to say it was almost the reverse for me. I'd been experimenting in recent years with trying to see just how much I can broaden the idea of the comic novel, and if I could get it to accommodate this idea of a post-apocalyptic scenario.

And while there is quite a bit of humor in the book, I ultimately realized that the book was more about grief and loss and sadness.

**You don't expect people to just disappear one day. And yet it was very affecting.**

The Rapture is obviously a cataclysmic event. But I started realizing it was a metaphor for getting older, for mortality and living with mortality. It's really powerful. We all basically live in a world that we define by the people who have disappeared. Obviously they haven't disappeared in some sudden unexplained way, but there's the sense of living with the absences and with loss and trying to go on in spite of the fact that there are these mysteries that you don't understand.

**One of the great comic [elements] in the book is the idea of being forced to smoke. Were you trying to build in an element of social critique?**

I was thinking that if you really do dispense with the idea that you have an indefinite future, and the future is inherently limited, then what would happen? This idea of smoking seemed really interesting

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to me; it becomes a declaration of faith, that we're not going to live long enough to get sick from it. It became a kind of ambiguous social critique in that smoking is a very complicated act in our culture, the meaning of which has changed dramatically over recent decades.

**I really liked the teenage characters in the book and how their planned futures begin to lose meaning for them. [How] was writing from a teenager's perspective for you?**

I've been doing that for quite a long time. My first book, *Bad Haircut*, was a coming-of-age book, *Election* was set in a high school, and *The Wishbones* dealt with young guys in a rock band. What's different now, of course, is that I'm writing from the perspective of a father who has teenage kids and who no longer necessarily sees the world through the eyes of a kid, but more through the eyes of a parent. There is some element of returning to my roots as a writer, but also of having a whole new perspective.

**When you were writing [*The Leftovers*], were you aware of the prediction of an imminent Rapture?**

I wasn't. I was writing this between 2008 and 2010. (The Rapture was predicted for May or June of 2011.) What I was aware of, of course, was the impending apocalypse of 2012, which is the end of the Mayan calendar. There's always some apocalyptic scenario we're living with. My imagination was more rooted in more mundane situations. I remember being very focused on the economic collapse in 2008 and that sense that some people felt, and still feel to some degree, that the structure that we've taken for granted all our lives, living in a really powerful, prosperous country where the future is sort of expanding and guaranteed and that our kids will prepare for a



world that makes sense. And there was this feeling that this could all go away and we could be living in a very different world ten years down the road. What I wanted to write about was the world where characters no longer felt their futures were guaranteed or predictable or comprehensible. It's obviously a kind of a magnification to go from economic doubt or despair to a post-apocalyptic scenario. I'm much more interested in that idea of losing faith in the future than I was of sort of critiquing any kind of religious prophet.

**Suburban life is a topic you've explored in other novels. What do you like about writing about people in a suburban setting?**

It never feels like a choice to me; it's like the default setting of my imagination. I'm from a small suburban town, I grew up that way, and with the exception of a couple years when I lived in Brooklyn, my life has been spent in relatively suburban settings. For me, this idea of a small town as a kind of an understandable social unit is important to me. I think there have been a lot of writers who've been experimenting lately with really sprawling novels that will deal with a number of different characters and different points on the globe. I understand that as a method of getting at the global culture that we live in, and I understand writers who want to maybe juxtapose very different historical periods to make some larger points about how things have changed over time. I tend to like the sort of idea of the novel as a little village, and the novel as a microcosm, a smaller world standing in for a larger one.

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**Are you already at work on your next book? Do you go from book to book, or do you spend some time in between novels deciding what you want to work on?**

I usually spend about a year recovering from the effort of finishing the last one, and what I'll usually do in that year is sometimes write journalism, sometimes short stories. More recently, I've been doing some screenwriting. So over the past year I've been working on a screenplay for my last book, *The Abstinence Teacher*, and also I had adapted my novel *The Wishbones* for a TV pilot, so that's what's been keeping me busy. And I have also been working on a collection of short stories.

**As a writer who's had his work made into movies, did it work for you to see your work on screen?**

I've been very lucky and really happy with the film versions of both *Election* and *Little Children*. I think there's a leap of faith that you take; you're turning over your creation to these other artists, these writers and actors and directors. I've just been extremely lucky to get really talented people doing wonderful things. Sometimes as a writer it's a little bit humbling. The movie of *Election* has become a kind of cultural icon that overshadows the book, and you have to live with that. I understand why: Reese Witherspoon's performance in that movie is, I think, going to survive a long time and really stand out as one of the great comic performances in recent memory. I've learned to really love that sort of rolling the dice of collaboration and seeing what happens.



## *Recommended Reading*

Philip Roth

*The Plot Against America*

Tim Reiterman

*Raven: The Untold Story of  
Rev. Jim Jones and His People*

Margaret Atwood

*The Handmaid's Tale*

Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken,  
and Stanley Schacter  
*When Prophecy Fails*

Stephen King

*The Stand*

Donna Johnson

*Holy Ghost Girl*

Cormac McCarthy

*The Road*

Janet Reitman

*Inside Scientology: The Story  
of America's Most Secretive Religion*

Ray Bradbury

*Fahrenheit 451*

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## Reading Group Questions

1. Tom Perrotta's *The Leftovers* focuses on life after a mysterious mass disappearance that may or may not have been the Rapture. How do the various characters feel about being "left behind?" Which character's view of the Sudden Departure makes most sense to you?
2. *The Leftovers* is set in an idyllic American suburbia—with adult softball teams, a strong school system, and beautiful leafy neighborhoods. Why do you think the author set this novel—and his other novels—in such a place? Is there something especially pleasant or idyllic about the suburbs? Or is that just a myth?
3. Jill Garvey thinks it's easy "to romanticize the missing, to pretend that they were better than they really were." Is this true? How do the main characters in *The Leftovers* view their friends and relatives who have disappeared?
4. How do you feel about Christine's relationship with Mr. Gilchrist? Is she simply a victim of a predatory, charismatic older man who dupes her into thinking she's someone special? Or is something more complicated going on between them?
5. Why do you think Laurie Garvey joins the Guilty Remnant? Once there, why do you think she stays? What sort of benefits might a cult-like community offer to people reeling from an event like the Sudden Departure? What about the Healing Hug Movement led by Holy Wayne?



6. What do you think of the teenagers' sexual interactions in the book? Are they an accurate portrayal of contemporary teenage behavior? To what extent are Jill and her friends reacting to the trauma of the Sudden Departure, if at all?
7. Is Kevin Garvey a good father?
8. How would you describe the relationship between Laurie and Meg? Did you find what happens to them believable? What about the relationship between Kevin and Nora?
9. Like *The Road* and *The Passage* and many others, *The Leftovers* is set in a post-apocalyptic world. Why are we so fascinated by these scenarios? What sets *The Leftovers* apart from other novels about the end of life as we know it?
10. Perrotta describes some sectors of American society—such as television chefs—being “disproportionately hard hit” by the Sudden Departure. Is there any sector you wish could disappear?
11. What do you think the author's opinion of religion is? What about spirituality? Are there clues in *The Leftovers*?
12. Discuss the ending of the book. What do you think happens to the main characters after the book is over?

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