

REX ZERO

AND
THE END
OF THE
WORLD

TIM WYNNE-JONES

MELANIE KROUPA BOOKS

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Summary: In the summer of 1962 with everyone nervous about a possible nuclear war, ten-nearly-eleven-year-old Rex, having just moved to Ottawa from Vancouver with his parents and five siblings, faces his own personal challenges as he discovers new friends and a new understanding of the world around him.

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THE END OF THE WORLD

I hear the bicycle before I see it. I swing around to see a boy racing down the wide gravel path through the park toward me. There's an awful squawking coming from a horn bolted onto his handlebars. He's got his finger down hard on the button and people are jumping out of his way, grabbing up toddlers, steering prams onto the grass.

Seeing him coming straight for me, I go all wobbly on my own bike and end up falling over just as he whooshes past with his head low over the handlebars and his tail up in the air. I want to yell something at him but the kid looks scared. Really scared. I get myself up, unruffle my feathers, and take a look back in the direction he came from. I don't know what I'm expecting to see. A stampede of longhorns? Killer bees? King Kong?

Then I notice the old man. The old man with the sign.

It's the summer of 1962 and there is a man in the park with a sign that says the end of the world is coming. He even

knows the date—October 23. Except he has trouble with his *b*'s and *d*'s, so the sign says OCTODER. The words and numbers are printed in black ink on bright yellow bristol board stapled to a stick. In even bigger words printed in red ink the sign says, PREPARE TO MEET THY GOB.

Is that what the kid on the bike is afraid of?

The sign doesn't say how the world is going to come to an end, but the placard man looks as if he's expecting a flood. He's wearing galoshes and a mack, except I know that's not what you call them in this country. The only people around here who use words like *galoshes* and *mack* are my family. These are the kind of words you find in the *Eagle Annual*, which my grandparents send me from England every Christmas. But whatever you want to call what the placard man is wearing, it's rain gear: big black boots, a yellow raincoat as bright as his sign, and one of those clear plastic emergency rain caps that you can fold up to the size of a package of Wrigley's Juicy Fruit gum. My mother has one of those caps in her purse—or she used to. One day, when I had nothing to do—and I never have anything to do these days—I folded it up to *half* the size of a pack of gum and then, to make sure it stayed folded, I ironed it.

The clear plastic emergency cap has bands you can tie under your chin. The placard man has his tied on tight, but you can't see the bow because of his thick grizzled beard. His hair, under the clear plastic hat, looks like a nest of snakes. His skin is yellow. Not as yellow as his sign, but yellow any-

way, in a sort of grayish, greenish kind of way. His face is pretty grimy, too, and his eyes are sad like a basset hound's.

Who wouldn't be sad if the world was going to end?

The scared boy leaps off his bike at the west-end steps and manhandles it up to Lyon Street. Then he's gone.

I look back at the end-of-the-world man. He's dressed for rain but there isn't a cloud in the sky. And if his prediction is right, the world isn't going to end for more than three months.

In three months I'll be in a new school. If school doesn't work out—and if the old man is right—at least I won't be there for long! We just moved to Ottawa and I don't know anyone. Every day I ride down to Adams Park on my trusty steed, Diablo, named after the Cisco Kid's speedy pinto.

"Vous m'croyez fou?" shouts the end-of-the-world man, tapping his plastic-covered skull. *"Regardez autour de vous!"*

He looks as if he's asking me if I think he's crazy.

I shake my head, which is a lie, but my mother always says that a person should be polite, especially to crazy people. I shake my head again. He growls. Even his growl sounds French.

Nobody spoke French back in Vancouver. I'll have to take French when I start at my new school. Everyone in my class will be able to speak French and all I will be able to say is *Merci Bon Dieu*, which is from a song on the new Harry Belafonte album my mum got from the Capitol Record Club. I'm learning all the words from "Merci Bon Dieu" so I'll be

able to talk to kids in my new class when they are speaking French.

“Get away from me!” shouts the end-of-the-world man.

He’s talking to a squirrel now. In English. He must be bilingual. The squirrel skitters away. Maybe the squirrel only speaks English.

We follow the man, Diablo and I, just for something to do, but cautiously, like Harry Lime in *The Third Man* trailing his elusive quarry. I make sure I hang way back. He smells pretty ripe. A couple of lovers strolling up the path have to stop holding hands as he walks right between them. They hold their noses instead.

A little kid playing catch with his mother misses the ball and it rolls right up to the man’s big black boots. He stares down at the red, white, and blue ball and growls at it, making the little kid cry and run to his mother.

She collects the ball, giving the old guy the evil eye. “Why don’t you take your end of the world some place else?” she says.

The end-of-the-world man looks back at me and I shrug. Then he looks down at where the ball was and his sign droops a bit.

He glances at me again and I wave. “Leave me alone!” he shouts. “*Vous pensez que j’ignore ce que vous complotez?*”

Merci Bon Dieu.

As I watch him walk away, his clothes remind me of something. I *do* have something to do today. A new Paint by

Numbers set. It's called *Toilers of the Sea*, and the men in it are dressed like the man with the placard, except they have sou'westers on their heads, not cute little clear plastic emergency rain caps.

I spin Diablo around and head for home, pumping hard. I can already smell the oil paint.

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