# Gethan Dick’s debut explores pandemic survival and millennial hope in dystopian London



Gethan Dick’s debut novel, *Water in the Desert Fire in the Night*, presents a thought-provoking dystopian landscape that begins amid the urban sprawl of Elephant and Castle in London. The novel opens with a vivid description of a water main rupture, exposing “white quartz pebbles being washed clean,” a metaphor for the fragility of the infrastructures we build to support modern life. This rupture serves as a metaphorical crack in our collective veneer, hinting at the chaos and turmoil simmering just beneath the surface.

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of a catastrophic pandemic, one that is relentless and deadly, sweeping through the city and leaving behind streets filled with the dead. Those who survive form an unlikely coalition, embarking on a harrowing journey southwards to seek refuge in Digne-les-Bains, France. This destination is portrayed not simply as a geographical point but as a beacon of hope amidst despair, a notion amplified by Sarah, an older woman in the group, who reminisces about the area's abundant resources and potential for renewal.

Dick’s characters, particularly the narrator—who embodies a youthful millennial perspective—navigate a world teetering on the brink of collapse. Her voice is laced with a mix of diffidence and cautious optimism, presenting a refreshing lens through which to explore themes of survival and human connection. As she reflects, “So, to be straight: I didn’t see it coming, I don’t know why it happened, and I don’t know what’s going to happen,” readers are invited to resonate with her uncertainty, mirroring our contemporary anxieties in a world often beset by upheaval.

The novel finds itself resonating with the narratives of other esteemed dystopian works, such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, both of which delve into the complexities of human relationships forged in crisis. Here, however, the originality lies in the millennial voice that permeates the text, blending existential uncertainty with an enduring spirit of hope. This thread urges readers to contemplate their resilience and capacity for adaptation in the face of societal collapse.

Amidst their journey, the motley group of survivors encounters various challenges and characters, including Martin, a practical ally who captivates the narrator’s heart. Through these interactions, readers witness the evolution of interpersonal dynamics under pressure. Yet, the characters occasionally feel underdeveloped, with certain plot points appearing overly contrived, as when a seemingly minor injury leads to a fatal outcome. This contrivance draws attention to the mechanical aspects of storytelling, rendering emotional engagement somewhat elusive.

A poignant aspect of the novel lies in its engaging recollections of the narrator's late mother, Heike. Born in East Germany and later settling in London, Heike’s life is richly layered with memories that enrich the narrative tapestry. Her character represents what is lost amidst the chaos: a nurturing presence, embodied in her vibrant, self-sufficient ways that stand in stark contrast to the desolate reality faced by the protagonist. The narrator’s memories of her mother’s heritage and her resilient spirit offer a glimpse of what it means to find strength in adversity, suggesting that while the end of the world may loom, the essence of humanity perseveres.

Ultimately, *Water in the Desert Fire in the Night* transcends a mere journey from one location to another; it invites readers to consider the value of resilience and forward motion in a world ripe with uncertainty. “There’s only forward, and you can only go forward from where you are, however wrecked that place is,” encapsulates a vital message of hope—one that resonates profoundly in an age frequently fraught with existential dread. Dick masterfully illustrates that while disaster may strike, the fundamental human spirit remains steadfast, echoing a timeless truth: hope endures even in the darkest of times.

**Reference Map**1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8:
[[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world)2. Paragraphs 2, 3, 4, 7:
[[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world)3. Paragraphs 4, 5:
[[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world)4. Paragraph 5:
[[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world)5. Paragraph 6:
[[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world)6. Paragraph 7:
[[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world)7. Paragraph 8: [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/14/water-in-the-desert-fire-in-the-night-by-gethan-dick-review-hope-at-the-end-of-the-world> - Gethan Dick's debut novel, 'Water in the Desert Fire in the Night,' is a dystopian tale set in London, where a catastrophic pandemic leads to widespread death. Survivors, including the narrator and companions like Sarah, embark on a journey to Digne-les-Bains in southern France, seeking refuge. The narrative explores themes of survival, unlikely alliances, and the enduring human spirit amidst societal collapse. The novel's originality lies in its millennial narrator's voice, blending diffidence with optimism, and its portrayal of a world on the brink of collapse, prompting readers to reflect on their own resilience in the face of disaster.
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