

ENGLISH 105, ESSAY PROMPT #4

Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* differs from most survival narratives in that the story takes a much more realistic (and often brutal) look at contemporary catastrophe and our bleak odds at survival: according to the story's protagonist, Mark Spitz, *there will be no triumphant return to normalcy*: humans *will not* win in the end, no matter how they come together as a community (and no matter how positive their outlooks on life!) to fight the zombie apocalypse.

As a result of this argument, *Zone One* is diametrically opposed to how most survival narratives play out: in more *naïve* arguments, humans often face incredible odds, but because they are human (or maybe because they are simply *American!*), they always seem to come out unscathed in the end. Take, for example, the film adaptation of the science fiction dystopia *I am Legend*: after a supposed cure for cancer begins turning humans into undead zombie-like creatures, the very last human on earth (played by Will Smith), *who also happens to be a virologist immune to the disease*, discovers a cure to save humanity only moments before dying (and then, implausibly, discovers *another* human just in time to hand off the antidote!). These narratives reinforce how Americans face catastrophe with totally unrealistic expectations, hoping to deal with very real global crises “just in the nick of time” with our supposed technological ingenuity (the very ingenuity that is also killing us!).

In his article “The Long Emergency,” James Kunstler calls this form of blind optimism “Jiminy Cricket syndrome.” He writes, “The wonders of steady technological progress [...] have lulled us into a kind of Jiminy Cricket syndrome, leading many Americans to believe that anything we wish for hard enough will come true” (Kunstler 2-3). In other words, according to Kunstler, no matter the nature of the catastrophe, Americans believe that we can “innovate” our way out of any problem: if we simply put our minds to it—*and wish for it hard enough*—we can successfully survive impending doom to live another day.

For your final essay, I would like you to study the plot and character development in *Zone One* to develop an alternative point of view to Kunstler's “Jiminy Cricket syndrome.” According to the events in the novel, how should humans approach global catastrophe, and how can this viewpoint be applied to better understand the very real environmental catastrophes that we are currently facing in the 21st century?

In order to apply Whitehead's argument to the environmental problems we face today, I would like you to research what's being referred to as the "sixth extinction event" in order to speak intelligently and critically about our current environmental challenges. Please include at least 6 outside sources to support your argument. These sources can include James Kunstler's article "The Long Emergency" and additional research about the "sixth extinction event" from a combination of popular and scientific journals. However, these sources may not include additional fictional retellings of environmental catastrophe from literature or film: your primary text for this essay is, and should remain, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*.

Please use accurate M.L.A. formatting, and be sure to refer to the Rhetoric for additional help. Furthermore, don't forget that I am always available to help during office hours! Make an appointment!

When complete, your essay should have five parts (from top to bottom):

- *A complete self-assessment form
- *A complete and clean final draft (with thesis underlined!)
- *A peer-edited draft
- *An annotated bibliography
- *A conceptual map