Bunker Life

By Rachelle Atalla

I quite unexpectedly, and with little foresight, fell into creative writing over ten years ago. I had been working as a newly qualified community pharmacist and, in a moment of crisis, decided I needed a creative outlet – a hobby, something completely different from the day job. It could so easily have been a foreign language, or life drawing, but as luck would have it, I flicked through an evening class prospectus and landed on *Creative Writing for Beginners*, very quickly becoming obsessed with the art of storytelling. I've never been much of a planner – not in my life and not in my fiction. And in this same vein, I did not set out to write a dystopian novel. Dystopia, I think, found me.

In 2016, while visiting Berlin with my husband and infant son, I entered my first bunker. As we paid admittance to a museum, we were informed, to our surprise, that our tickets also included a tour of a cold war, community-sized nuclear bunker. Obviously, I knew bunkers existed, but I'd had neither the interest nor inclination to seek one out. They were structures held at arm's length, something to be vaguely aware of but nothing more. However, the randomness of my circumstances was intriguing and I'm not one to waste an opportunity, so I found myself gravitating towards the meeting point for the bunker's next tour. Our group of twenty or so tourists were led by a guide down several flights of stairs, past an underground car park until we were facing a large metal door. A handle was turned, and finally we stepped inside.

I was immediately transfixed. It was this huge expansive space: dark and oppressive, bunk beds like stretchers hinged to the walls, kitchen quarters stocked with only tinned food, cold sterile bathrooms, and a mechanical wall that had the potential to divide the space in half if disease were to break out. Everything had been designed with the intention of removing potential hazards, an assumption by the powers-that-be that suicide attempts would be high, with nowhere to store dead bodies. There were so many questions: the fact that these structures were considered essential, that humans had created weapons capable of near total human destruction, and that we continually lauded that threat over one another. Implications of human worth and societal hierarchies were to be

considered too. Were social conventions to be maintained in this new underground world? This bunker had the capacity to house only a fraction of the city's population. So, what was the fate of those left behind? An odd blue-ish light illuminated our surroundings and as we walked it was almost unimaginable to me that people could exist here for any prolonged period. Yet, if nuclear war was to become a reality, the people in this bunker would consider themselves survivors. This existence their prize. I couldn't stop myself from asking, what were people willing to sacrifice for their own personal survival?

Atomschutzbunker, located in Kurfüstendamm | © Janericloebe / WikiCommons

Physically, I must have only been inside the bunker for twenty minutes, but I continued to be consumed by the space long after my visit. My first ill-fated attempted at writing about the bunker was in the form of a short story. However, there was too much of the setting to capture, and large-scale ideas and themes that needed to be explored further. With a daunting realisation, it was clear to me that I'd discovered the setting of a novel I was going to attempt to write. I considered my approach – I knew I wanted one unreliable narrator to guide the story and help portray the claustrophobia, but I had no idea whose voice that should be. It wasn't until I was reading the *Pharmaceutical Journal* at work one day when things began to align. I saw an unusual job vacancy for a pharmacist to come and work on an army base. I had always kept my writing and pharmacy profession separate but as I stood, staring at this job vacancy, I contemplated the idea of my fictional bunker needing a pharmacist – someone to dole out the medication each day, someone forced to interact with the bunker's other inhabitants. Why hadn't it occurred to me before? Working as a community

pharmacist allowed me at times to see people at their most vulnerable, witnessing the realities of how fragile life and our own health can really be. It's an interesting and often claustrophobic environment itself in which to explore the microcosms of society. These were all the qualities that I wanted for my bunker. So, it was decided – Wolfe, my protagonist, was going to be a pharmacist.

As I embarked on a first draft, I threw myself into an unhealthy exploration of bunkers, researching different ones from around the world. There was one in particular that I was drawn to – a bunker in the mid-west of America masked as a ballroom in an expensive hotel, a team of government employees always on hand, under the guise of hotel porters. I began to obsess over the smallest of details – I wanted to imagine the daily, mundane routine of life being played out inside a community-sized bunker. I would emerge from my writing and feel as if I had physically once again been inside. And I could no longer differentiate between what I had personally experienced in Berlin versus the version of underground life I had created.

There were huge moral implications that were further brought to the surface through my research. For example, it hadn't occurred to me, that if a nuclear event were to take place, a pre-planned operation would be implemented to ensure our prime minister, their family and close allies were escorted to a secure facility, but with no such strategic plan for the general population. And of course, not all bunkers were as bleak as the community-sized one I had experienced. Billionaires have and continue to build their own private, luxury bunkers – their biggest concern not being how to stop such apocalyptic events from occurring in the first place but rather, how to stop their own security teams from turning on them when the time comes. It strikes me that those with immense wealth continue to subscribe to the notion that money can save them from everything. And with the rise of populism, where citizens are pitched against one another, stoking fear of the other, we perhaps subject less scrutiny to those we elect in to positions of power. As the history books show, self-serving leaders make self-serving decisions, and yet there is rarely punishment for their actions. On reflection, perhaps bunkers as structures also need to be hidden from sight because to question their existence is to question society's order of power.

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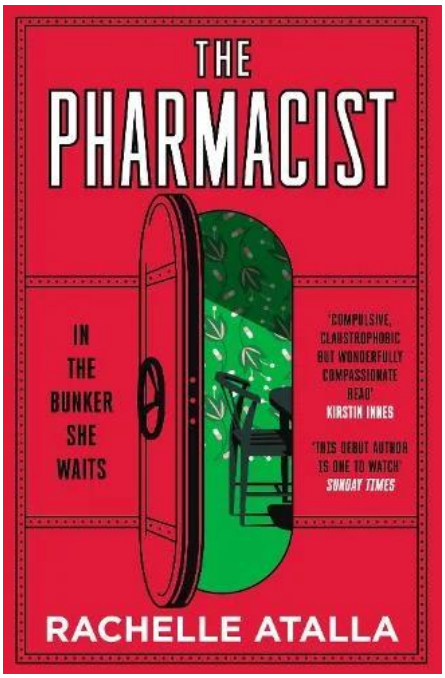
literature I've always enjoyed, taking inspiration from George Orwell, Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy, to name a few. Readers and writers find themselves being pulled towards dystopian fiction for a variety of reasons. For me, it is the freedom of being able to create a world without limitations, a more accessible space in which to interrogate the societal problems we face. It is somewhere I can lay down my biggest fears – a superstition of sorts, that if I write the worst of the world into fiction, then it won't become reality. Dystopian fiction also has this wonderful ability to heighten our compassion and broaden our empathy for one another. It is a reminder that ultimately nothing can be taken for granted.



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enduring extreme circumstances, about contemplating what we're all potentially capable of. Perhaps, in some way, writing dystopian fiction is my love letter to the world. It is a way for me to appreciate the beauty that can still exist in the extreme, and that hope can be found in uncertain times.

The Pharmacist is available now in paperback.

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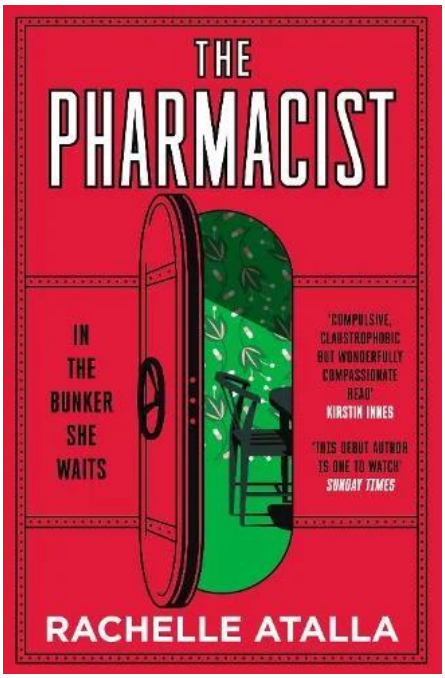

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