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WEEKEND ESSAY

# Covid kicked us all off the featherbed of civilisation

2020 catapulted the world into ‘interesting times’ and we’ve been through the five stages of grief — but in reverse, says

William Boyd



New Bond Street and other London attractions were unrecognisable in the spring

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

William Boyd

Friday December 25 2020, 6.00pm, The Times

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‘**M**ay you live in interesting times,” so the disarming old Chinese curse goes. Of course “interesting” in this sense is a loaded word full of threatening, unsettling nuances like anarchic, turbulent, disastrous, cruel and unpleasant. It is a curse, after all. Who would have thought at the beginning of 2020 that an

outbreak of a flu-type virus in a remote Chinese city that not many people had heard of, Wuhan, would have shaped the

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In 1969 the psychiatrist Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross invented the now familiar concept of the “five stages of grief”. The Kübler-Ross model suggests that the five stages are as follows: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It struck me as I contemplated this overview of 2020, just as we were about to leave it, that these five stages of grief had a strange relevance to what we have just lived through in the past 12 months but in reverse.

I remember that my emotions in March when we went into the first lockdown were somewhat baleful. Everyday life and everything that we took for granted was about to change dramatically. Everything closed apart from food shops and essential services. Life was put on hold. It was a depressing prospect but I think the nation was ready to accept it. This pestilence, this pandemic, that had started hospitalising and killing people around the world brought to the informed mind the great flu pandemic of 1918 (and onwards), one that generated a death toll considerably greater than all the fatalities of the First World War. The first two stages of living with Covid-19, acceptance and depression, arrived more or less simultaneously.

The French historian Fernand Braudel made a key distinction between the deep oceanic realities of history and what he called the “surface disturbances, the crests of foam” that are the histories of individual lives. Anyone looking back at a period of time they have lived through will be aware of how partial and incomplete their views and understandings of what they have experienced are. The recent history of the Covid-19 pandemic is the perfect case in point. All that each of us can see at the moment are the surface disturbances, the crests of foam that form our short lives and shortsighted judgments. That we can look back a hundred years to the other great pandemic is somewhat consoling — we can see it in its historical context; we

can pinpoint its beginning and its end and make an attempt to analyse what occurred. That option, as far as Covid-19 is

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evidence we have, however nugatory. To quote Braudel again we are “unconscious of the deeper realities of history, of the running waters on which our frail barks are tossed like cockleshells”. Be that as it may, 2020 happened to us all and we all have a story to tell, here and now.

It was eerily strange in the spring as I set off on my daily exercise-walk to see London’s streets so deserted. Sometimes I thought it was as if a neutron bomb had exploded. The neutron bomb being the type that kills humans but leaves buildings largely untouched. Traffic-clogged roads had become transformed and were suddenly fit for pedestrian use — one could wander four-lane thoroughfares undisturbed by any vehicle. Depressed but accepting, we adjusted the routines of our lives to the new bizarre conditions. Mask-wearing, social-distancing, self-isolating and once-a-week food shopping became the new norms. Society had pretty much ceased to exist, or so it seemed to me.

This initial mood that was at large appeared something entirely new, in my experience, but instigating a thought-experiment made me wonder if this was what it was like when a nation went to war. The war in this instance was against an unseen virus but the palpable tension in the air — fear of the unknown, fear of disease and death, fear of all manner of future consequences — reminded me of an attempt I had made in a novel to imagine what it must have been like to be alive in 1939 as Britain went to war against Nazi Germany. I had tried to imagine a young married couple, with their first child recently born, and what feelings would arise as war was declared. We now know that the Second World War lasted almost six years but in 1939 no one could have had any idea of its duration or its monstrous costs.

The spring of 2020 seemed to me very like that. Trenches were not being dug in Hyde Park, true, and gas masks weren't being

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apprehension would have been very similar. I thought that your life is going to change in ways that are out of your control is very destabilising. When our local Italian restaurant ran down its shutters the manager said to me with a smile: "See you in three weeks." Even then I thought that was a crazy act of wishful thinking. Our old life wasn't going to return for a long time and, even if it miraculously did, how would it be irrevocably changed?

More than 60,000 people have died from Covid-related deaths in the UK. As a rough calculation I think that among my circle of family, friends and acquaintances I know a dozen people who contracted the virus – two of them seriously and one who had to spend three days in hospital. This may be typical but I suspect not; this number merely reflects the idiosyncrasies of my situation. But Covid rules affected even common and inevitable mortality. My mother, Evelyn, died in Edinburgh in May aged 92, not from Covid. I was unable to attend her funeral, a basic and necessarily rapid affair of 15 minutes' duration that she would have been delighted with (she had declared she wanted zero fuss) and so I had to mourn her at a distance. Another very old friend who had been a witness at our wedding in 1975 died from a heart attack, also in Scotland, and so his obsequies were attended only by the requisite two people. These aren't Covid casualties but they will be for ever Covid-coloured in my memory.

And then summer came around and the lockdown seemed to be working. Cases fell; fatalities fell. In July most of the restrictions we had been living under were lifted. As soon as we were allowed, my wife Susan and I headed off to France. It was interesting to see how another country had coped with the same crisis. The lockdown rules in France were significantly stricter than Britain's. You couldn't leave your house without a written "attestation" describing your business and the details of your journey. Heavy fines resulted if any rules were broken. Life, post

the French lockdown, seemed remarkably normal. There was a certain amount of mask wearing — stringently enforced at

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complacency inevitably set in — perhaps, we all thought, the worst was over.

Perhaps it was that complacency (and of course general Covid-related fatigue and irritation) that caused the arrival of the third stage of living with Covid: bargaining. A lot of these bargains were with yourself — what you could covertly do; how you could reasonably interpret the somewhat vague new rules of behaviour as they were announced. Then one began to see overt flouting of the advice, particularly around gatherings of people, and noticing individuals who seemed not to be taking the slightest precautions. Many months had gone by, the crisis seemed to have passed or was visibly diminishing, went the thinking: we were all getting a bit fed up. And so the second wave of the pandemic duly arrived and Lockdown 2.0 was imposed. But the mood was different, it seemed to me. The population had gone through depression, acceptance and bargaining and now we were into the final stages of living with Covid; we had entered the realms of denial and anger.

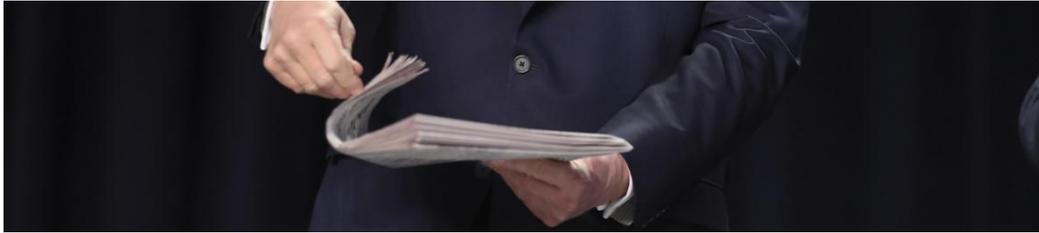
These two emotions were exacerbated in Britain by our unique problem, thumping away like a minatory ticking clock or funereal drumbeat beneath the already disturbed surface of our lives: Brexit. Whether you were a Remainer or a Leaver it was apparent to everyone but the most purblind and extreme that the tenth-rate, circular firing-squad that was our government was making a dog's breakfast of just about everything. U-turn followed U-turn; new advice cancelled out the old advice and then the old advice was re-introduced. A freewheeling, neo-liberal Tory party suddenly found itself a proponent of ever greater state intervention and massive public spending.





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President Trump was admitted to hospital in October after becoming infected

BACKGRID

In the face of everything that was happening the prime minister's Panglossian assurance that only an avenue of bright tomorrows awaited the citizens of the dis-United Kingdom looked an increasingly fantastical notion and one as thin as the forced smile on his face. More uncertainty was to be heaped on the mass of uncertainties we were already experiencing. The denial and anger stages of the Covid pandemic were growing more intense in every quarter. That mood seems to be raging now — one sees in massed gatherings and in heedless, careless proximity that the sod-it, Devil-may-care aspect of the British personality is ruling in certain populations.

But there were some silver linings to be perceived in the dark Covid-Brexit cloud. The vaccines are arriving and seem to be coming to our global rescue. Covid saw for Donald Trump as well. Despite his manic and surreal efforts to “unlose” the US election he is definitely going to be an ex-president. “There is nothing more pathetic in life than a former president,” so John Quincy Adams, the sixth president, declared. He too was a single-term president so knew what he was talking about. Something to look forward to then.

Returning to my war analogy, at the end of this year we seem to be inching closer to the defeat of our enemy, even if due caution will remain the order of the day. And what have we learnt? A new vocabulary of disease — “asymptomatic”, “intubating”, “anosmia”, “PPE” — and familiar words were re-energised: “tier”, “bubble”, “cluster”, “droplets”. We learnt how to pronounce “epidemiology”; new domestic habits were installed

— no kissing, no hugging and we could all wash our hands like surgeons. There was new respect for those on the front line, for

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Maybe it's too early to say but I think the experience of living through the arduous trials and tragedies of 2020 will have taught us some bitter lessons and also some positive ones. There's a Robert Louis Stevenson quote that I take out of context but that has real bearing on our post-Covid lives, whenever that moment arrives. The experience of the pandemic will have made us "Feel the needs and hitches of life a little more nearly", Stevenson wrote presciently in 1879. The pandemic was a globally shared experience and one that "made us get down off the featherbed of civilisation and . . . find the globe granite underfoot and strewn with cutting flints". That the globe is granite and that flints cut are not lessons that everybody needs to learn but here in the West and in the First World it is perhaps a timely reminder of the real, random, unforgiving nature of the human condition. It won't be forgotten quickly, I hope, and if that is the case then the fact that the pandemic made us get off the featherbed of civilisation and feel the needs and hitches of life may be a reacquaintance with certain truths that was long overdue.



Boris Johnson had his own personal bout with coronavirus  
TOBY MELVILLE/WPA/GETTY IMAGES

As the “interesting” year of 2020 fizzles out what are the prospects for its successor 2021? More of the same? Will we be

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another writer. In his book of poems *The Less Deceived* (1955), Philip Larkin included a poem addressed to his baby god-daughter, Sally Amis, entitled *Born Yesterday*. Larkin declines to wish the baby girl “the usual stuff” about being beautiful and lucky. Turning convention on its head he says, “May you be ordinary . . . / In fact may you be dull —/ If that is what a skilled,/ Vigilant, flexible,/ Unemphasised, enthralled/ Catching of happiness is called.”

Not a bad list of adjectives to be wished for but I think that after our “interesting” year we would heartily welcome an ordinary one, a duller one. We can always dream. There is no tariff on dreams.

### William Boyd’s new novel, *Trio*, is out now

Books

Coronavirus

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### Comments (52)

Newest

william boyd



Add to the conversation...



**Michael Duerden** 15 SECONDS AGO

“Anyone looking back at a period of time they have lived through will be aware of how partial and incomplete their views and understandings of what they have experienced are.”

And so I dare to comment on my own experience knowing it is

my own limited experience though set against what I hear on TV and in the news. The pandemic seems at times very unreal. Yes

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forms before going to the dentist where we wait outside with mobiles in hand awaiting clearance to enter.

But on our case the only person of our acquaintance to die was a 95-year-old aunt who passed away near the beginning but probable more from old age than COVID. Her funeral was held in the open air in the graveyard, and the care home staff who had looked after her were prohibited from attending by the priest. But no other family member has apparently cause the virus and no one in our immediate neighbourhood has caught the virus. So this invisible disease, like the Israelites in Egypt, seems to have passed us by.

Yes normal shopping activity is curtailed but there is always online shopping supermarkets and Amazon delivery drivers now outnumber cars on many roads.

... See more

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NM 47 MINUTES AGO

The 'virus' has done nothing apart from 'do what viruses do.' It is not particularly unusual nor is it very deadly. All problems have been caused by the incompetence of governments, explaining their bizarre actions in 'following the science.' Compounding the basic error is the conceit that government has the ability to 'save lives.' Mass vaccination is not needed for a viral disease which has a greater than 99% recovery rate. Effective antiviral chemotherapy (without significant side effects) could be valuable, but is not sufficiently financially attractive to 'big pharma' to stimulate research in this field.

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JB 42 MINUTES AGO ← NM



**World Traveller** 58 MINUTES AGO *Edited*

Nevertheless the research seems to hold out future  
I am Singaporean Chinese and am fluent in Mandarin. There is no

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ascribing it to the wrong source.

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**Martin Winter** 2 HOURS AGO

'Interesting times' according to wiki: '

"Despite being so common in English as to be known as the  
"Chinese curse", the saying is apocryphal, and no actual Chinese  
source has ever been produced. The most likely connection to  
Chinese culture may be deduced from analysis of the late-19th-  
century speeches of Joseph Chamberlain, probably erroneously  
transmitted and revised through his son Austen Chamberlain.[1]"

Or perhaps as Confucius also did not say 'it is better to light a  
candle than curse the darkness'

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**World Traveller** 59 MINUTES AGO Martin Winter

Totally agree. I am a Singaporean Chinese and am fluent  
with Mandarin. There is no such idiomatic phrase in the  
Confucian classics. I just wish people would stop using it  
and ascribing it to the wrong source.

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**Big Bruce** 2 HOURS AGO

Good essay. The Acceptance:Denial ratio is however, in my  
opinion, directly proportionate to the number of Covid serious  
illnesses/deaths witnessed or experienced.

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**Andonandon** 2 HOURS AGO

This pandemic should teach us to respect and look after our  
planet, nature and other animal species. We need to live

sustainably and not exploit resources to the point of exhaustion. We also need to reduce the numbers of humans on this planet.

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appreciate and our current actions will be the undoing of us.

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Vino 2 HOURS AGO ← Andonandon

Utter twaddle. This pandemic came about because pathogens have been infecting human beings since we climbed down from trees.

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Gina Burton 2 HOURS AGO



The five stages of grief in reverse. Perfect. Now it all makes sense...

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Arouet 3 HOURS AGO

We were way overdue for an adjustment of the narcissistic materialism that has been the status quo since the 80's, Millenials being the apotheosis of that. Maybe this kick in the pants will bring with it an emulation of some of the principles of the Greatest Generation?

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Jane Clemetson 1 HOUR AGO ← Arouet

That's a pretty mean attitude to adopt.

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Mr N D 1 HOUR AGO ← Arouet

No.

The only difference is that the Instagram crowd are now watching each other perform their narcissistic antics at home.

William Hardy

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3 HOURS AGO

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**W** If " due caution will have to remain the order of the day" after the pandemic , that's fine. So long as it is limited to more regular

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**C** Colin Smith 6 MINUTES AGO William Hardy

And in France, as William Boyd will be aware, an end to

**N** Norma R Williams 4 HOURS AGO  
the tyranny of "la bise" (young children being forced to kiss every tom dick and harry that comes into their home) Nicely written but you've got it all wrong. It's not the virus that's caused this pandemic. It's a political exercise in exploiting an irrational fear of death. To what end, I have not the foggiest.

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**T** tim wilson 3 HOURS AGO Norma R Williams

So the hospitals are not actually struggling?

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**M** This post violated our policy



**J** JJS 6 HOURS AGO

And the US election was definitely Italy rigged. Morning Mr Trump.. you are up early.

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**M** Michael Law 13 HOURS AGO

Is this meant to be ironic?

If not, consider that the 99.5% survival rate must mean that 0.5% of sufferers die from it. This rate is 5 TIMES that of flu...not to mention Covid's ability to render large numbers seriously ill and requiring hospitalisation/ICU admission.

But of course all these people are old and already ill in some way so we need not bother about them...

PS : do tell, in clear language, why the government did all

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Carl Sangwine 1 HOUR AGO Michael Law

Agree with your sentiments however, the fatality rate you quote is of those tested; it is significantly lower due to all asymptomatic and non confirmed cases.

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Sharon Feinstein 5 HOURS AGO Michael Law

Hear hear

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