

By: Rick Levin, author

I am exaggerating my response to the pandemic, of course. Yes, it scared the hell out of me. But I never feared the virus killing me, really.

What I feared was other people—that's always been my core fear, only here it was amplified and complicated, and I had to do a lot of so-called spiritual work

around my issues of trust and faith and acceptance and, you know, everything. All of it. Just like a lot of us, I suppose.

So, yes, on the one hand, I had a pretty severe case of the apocalyptic humdrums—amorphous anxiety and heightened agitation mixed with mind-numbing boredom. The end of the world is, among other things, boring as hell—an assaultive sameness that declares itself in a perpetually compounding crisis of meaning squeezing itself to a pinpoint of dumb death. All whimper, no bang.

But the flip side of this was a perverse exhilaration at watching our massive house of cards finally start to collapse. The whole bang-bang-shebang felt inevitable. Beneath its flimsy veil, Western Civilization strikes me as little more than a protracted nightmare, lit up by occasional flares of accidental beauty and aestheticized brutality—a disaster in slow motion, a neon-lit death cult, a logocentric dead-end. We killed all the good stuff long ago. Look around. Prove me wrong.

And America is its most putrid recrudescence—this stupid, noisy Las Vegas of the soul where human desire gets turned inside-out and infantilized in a gaudy cannibal dance of empty fetishes. American culture is the death rattle of the human spirit under attack. Fuck it. Let it come down.

Did I really want this lumbering beast patched up to hunt another day? Somewhere deep inside me resides this exquisite tension between rote survival and my so-called higher values. Fear and desire, desire and peace, peace and pain, pain and

dreams of no pain.

That tension speaks, on the one hand, to the bourgeois comforts of the status quo and the appeals they hold out to my neurotic mind while, on the other hand, there is the realization that those very comforts are false and drenched in blood, purchased at the cost of existence itself. How many people have to die for my convenience? It's all so very stupid.

It's a question of ultimate values, I suppose, and the diminishing returns on what the Buddhists call samsara—those short-term fixes that bring us immediate relief but actually make everything way worse in the long run, further exacerbating our suffering. Like heroin. Like voting for the lesser of two evils.

There is nothing very special about me. I am a samsara junkie through and through. Uncomfortable as I was watching the social fabric get torn to shreds, that very discomfort presented a fantastic challenge to the truth of my politics, which behold history with fear and trembling. The revolution will never be the revolution I want. The fix will always be popsicle sticks. Like everybody else, I was forced to question just about everything—reality, truth, my brain, my choices, my country, my life, life itself.

If I came up with an answer at all, it's that there is indeed a strange karma at work in the universe, a corrosive yet restorative cosmic justice that, in the end, balances all the scales. It's not nice, and it's not personal, and yet all of my joy and all of my suffering depends on my orientation toward that impersonality.

And the karma of the pandemic was a bitch. It pushed the envelope big time. It pulled me inside the belly of the whale. I was brought forth, kicking and screaming, to confront a very banal but

very real personal reckoning. I was compelled, by dire necessity, to reverse the polarity of things believed: It was not that the pandemic equaled the end of the world, but that the end of the world equaled the pandemic. Not that Trump

equaled the end of the world, but that the end of the world equaled Trump.

For me, this was as liberating as it was horrifying. It erased all distance between me and reality. Excuses and blame fled from my mind, as did any reassurance that I would be saved. The kingdom of heaven is within, and it is small. Very small. The universe will be fine without us. That awareness is the beginning of crawling out from under. You're dead already. Stop smiling at cops. Stop kowtowing to your boss. Salvation is now or never.

Off Route comes out early 2026

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Off Route is a raw, darkly humorous odyssey through a collapsing American landscape, where corporate indifference and societal decay amplify personal despair. Yet in the midst of the breakdown, it's also a testament to the fragile, enduring human spirit--forever seeking meaning and connection, even when the world, and the bus, feel perpetually off route.

RICK LEVIN is an award-winning journalist and critic. His work has appeared in *The Stranger*, the *Seattle Weekly*, *The Village Voice*, and the *Eugene Weekly*. His short fiction and essays have been published in a handful of literary journals, including *Oyster Boy Review*, *Timberline Review*, and *Blue Collar Review*. In a spasm of romanticism and blue-collar solidarity, he abandoned his journalistic career in 2019 to become a city bus driver in Oregon's Willamette Valley, where he lives with his wife and various animals. *Off Route* is his first novel.