Survivalism. To Americans today, the word suggests militias, armed preservation of personal freedoms in the wake of a violent (and much desired) collapse of the state. But there are much broader cultural resonances. Survivalism defines the traditional way America has dealt with its sense of an ending, conceived of the relation of the American individual to history and destiny. In what is commonly seen as its apocalyptic context, the central ideal of survivalism is simple. For when apocalypse is always now, thus the individual in perpetual training for the end, might this not be the way to defer this end perpetually? As with the title of the popular survivalist catalog *Loompanics*, panic ever looms. In this catalog, the citizen finds the self-help manuals that enable him to prepare. These are the means whereby each can, if only for himself alone, foreshorten secular and divine history, whereby each stretches individual life into an endless ‘now’ of preparation, in a forever war against Armageddon.

However strange this idea, it remains in American culture a central response to growing forces of technological and social change from Emerson down to modern SF. One cannot deny the real and growing presence of holocaust and apocalyptic menace in this century. Nor should one ignore the growing presence of so-called multicultural activism in America, for whom the individualist imperatives of the survivalist are anathema. Yet I would argue that the very form of this challenge, in its utopian and millenarist nature, is itself determined by a same cultural fixation on apocalypse. In professed counter-apocalyptic novels like Ursula Le Guin’s *Always*
Coming Home (1985), there is also a like desire to stretch now into eternity, if only in this case to turn the biblical 1000-year reprieve into little more than another million-year picnic. Informing the landscape of American culture from the nineteenth century to today, I see a close relationship between apocalyptic and millenial­ist thinking. Indeed, these impul­sions, issuing from a common source in Thoreau’s Walden, offer opposite­seeming and yet quite similar responses to ever­gathering forces of material change. The mirror that reflects their deeper likeness is Thoreau’s peculiar form of survivalism. For in Walden’s survivalist experiment Thoreau, rewriting in his imagination nature’s history in Biblical terms, creates a refuge where the American individual, in order to abide, must perpetually act the role of stranger in his own land. Thoreau is the first to explore what it means, in the survivalist sense, to ‘imagine’ disaster. For it is by means of such acts of terminal imagi­nation, such end games, that we learn how to put apocalypse in our pocket, and in corollary fashion, how to send away for mail­order millenia. I focus here primarily on the pocket apocalypse. To suggest the range and scope of this gambit, I will look briefly at three narra­tives: Thoreau’s ‘peaceful experiment’; Hemingway’s response to the war to end all wars, ‘Great Two­Hearted River’; and Jack Arnold and Richard Matheson’s imploding world in The Incredible Shrinking Man.

WALDEN AS SURVIVALIST EXPERIMENT

The intellectual context of Walden is Emersonian ‘self­reliance’. In this curious vision, we see society ‘everywhere ... in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members’. The individual is less openly than passively rebellion against social constraints: ‘It is easy to live in the world after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude after our own. But the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.’ Such a man, free and entire of himself, is not like Donne’s island, in need of being brought into contact with the main. Instead he becomes, in the covert act of cutting social ties, a center, not just of his world, but of the world, as a still place, a ‘now,’ in the midst of temporal change: ‘A true man belongs to no other time and place, but is the center of all things.’ This declaration of self­centeredness is at the same time self­empowerment: ‘No law can be