**Clarion Review**

Science Fiction

**Scourge of an Agnostic God**
Michael Juge
iUniverse
978-1-4502-2244-0
Five Stars (out of Five)

As post-apocalyptic novels go, *Scourge of an Agnostic God* is intelligent, detailed, and deep in psychology and spirituality. The story's protagonist, Chris Jung, lives in Falls Church, Virginia, with his pregnant wife. Battling insomnia, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, he contemplates suicide, thinking his wife would be better off without him.

One July evening, the couple is visiting friends when suddenly the power goes out; a truck driver loses control and crashes; cell phones and watches don't work; even battery-operated flashlights and radios are useless. Chris's friend Brandon theorizes that the calamity has been caused by an electromagnetic pulse, "a brief, but extraordinarily powerful surge of power." He continues, "And in an instant, we're transported to Little House on the Prairie." After watching the burning city sink into violent disorder, the four strike out on bicycles for Brandon's parents' farm, 100 miles away in isolated Rochelle, where they hope to grow food and find safety. On the way, their ranks swell with additional refugees.

In the meantime, Unitarian minister Reverend Rita Luevano has also fled, along with members of her congregation, students, and migrant farmers, to Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's Virginia estate, where they have formed an ad hoc compound, guarded by an armed security team trained by an El Salvadoran congregant.

Rev. Rita struggles with self-contempt, attempting to reconcile the way she has betrayed her values in order to help her group carry on: "I go out there, make these beautiful speeches about humanity as interconnected peoples, and what do I do the next day? When a large group of people come knocking on our door looking for help, I shoot my rifle in the air and threaten to mow said humanity down."

The lives of these unlikely heroes become entwined as they lead their rag-tag groups in a desperate struggle for survival in a suddenly dark and chaotic world.

While the plot of this novel is unoriginal, the author's attention to detail and realistic characterizations save his work from banality. In an early scene, the two couples are not merely watching unspecific television when the first EMP strikes: "The Simpsons intro was followed by a Hot Pockets commercial. Just as Brandon was about to say something, the power went out." Juge infuses his writing with such pop-culture references, strengthening its realism by providing a soundtrack of greatest hits. His tone is matter-of-fact and conversational, evoking Vonnegut in its casual reporting of horrifying scenes.

Juge holds a bachelor's degree in religious studies (which informs his depiction of his characters' spiritual struggles) and a master's in Middle Eastern studies; he now works in diplomatic security in Houston. A special "Note to the Reader" acknowledges that this book is an homage to colleagues who were at the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001; and a worthwhile homage it is, not merely adventuresome but thought-provoking as well.

*Karen McCarthy*