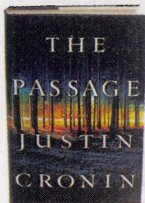


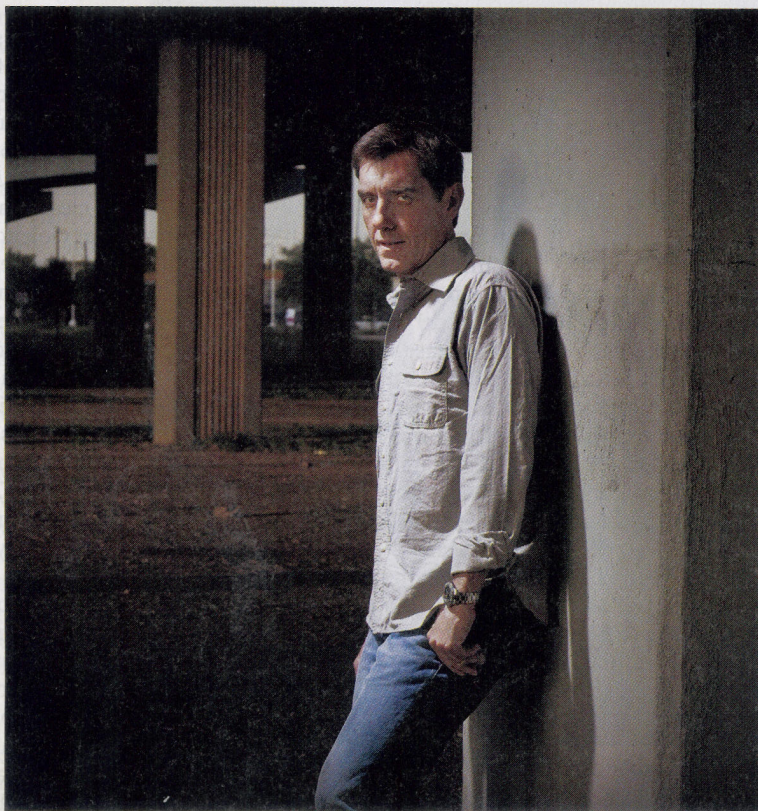
# BOOKS

## Altered Beast. Justin Cronin's debut as a horror writer is a powerhouse, set in a future America destroyed by vampires



### FIRST LINE

Before she became *The Girl from Nowhere*—*The One Who Walked In, The First and Last and Only*, who lived a thousand years—she was just a little girl in Iowa, named Amy.



**Joining the dark side** Award-winning novelist Cronin turns to the apocalypse

BY LEV GROSSMAN

JUSTIN CRONIN WAS ONCE A MAN. And not just a man but a successful midlist literary novelist. His first book, *Mary and O'Neil*, won the PEN/Hemingway Award in 2002. According to the book jacket, it's about "two vulnerable young teachers who rediscover in each other a world alive with promise and hope."

But then something happened. Perhaps Cronin strayed into the wrong bookstore aisle and something bit him. Whatever it was, somewhere between 2004's *The Summer Guest* and now, the change came upon him. He transformed into a horror novelist, and he let loose on that promising, hopeful literary world a plague of vampires.

The setup of *The Passage*, Cronin's magnificent beast of a new novel, doesn't do much to

advance the booming field of vampirology. A team of scientists discovers a strange virus in the heart of the Bolivian jungle. The military, having presumably never seen any movie ever, attempts to weaponize it and deliberately infects a bunch of death-row convicts—and a little girl named Amy—to see what happens. The convicts turn into vampires.

Or zombies. They're a bit of both—mindless like zombies but nocturnal like vampires, and they're fast and strong. And they really like blood. Meanwhile, the

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little girl turns into something else entirely.

What makes *The Passage* special is the extraordinary level of verbal craft and psychological insight Cronin brings to what might have been a stock zombo-vampiric fable. When a character meets a vampire—the humans call the creatures "virals" or "smokes"—Cronin doesn't just give you white pancake makeup and fangs. He shows you "the way the facial features seemed to have been buffed away, smoothed into an almost infantile blandness." Likewise Cronin doesn't just give you a little girl. First he gives you the wrenching story of her conception and eventual abandonment at a convent by her good-girl-turned-prostitute mother. Then he gives you the girl, but by then he has you dead to rights. Like some power-mad scientist, Cronin has taken his literary gifts, and he has weaponized them.

Cronin's years as a "serious" novelist—whatever that means in our wonderfully promiscuous, hybridized literary age—haven't made him soft. Pacing isn't a problem: he lashes his characters cruelly from set piece to set piece. He prosecutes his premise aggressively. He has the natural world builder's gift: he lays out the ground rules, sets the initial conditions and then lets the machine run while you, the reader, claw helplessly for an off switch.

At times the ragged, plucky survivors of *The Passage* get lost in that big, rich world. You start seeing them the way a viral would: as just tasty meatbags to be plucked from the herd. But that doesn't diminish the overall effect of the novel, or at least not by much. *The Passage* can stand proudly next to Stephen King's apocalyptic masterpiece *The Stand*, but a closer match would be Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: a story about human beings trying to generate new hope in a world from which all hope has long since been burnt. ■

JAMIE CONLAN