

# Backyard Nuclear War

By Linda Burnett

Book Review:

*The Day After The Day After: My Atomic Angst*,  
by Steven Church. Soft Skull P, 2010.



To read Steven Church is to know Steven Church, or so it seems with his latest memoir. *The Day After The Day After* showcases Church's psyche, stamped by fear and familial pain. Add equal parts social commentary, media deconstruction and local history, and you will get a profile of the American collective unconscious during the early 1980s. For Church, nothing defines growing up in the Reagan era like the shared anxiety over a Russian nuclear attack on our heartland. Those classroom lessons on radioactive fallout came to life—and into his backyard—when the hit ABC-TV disaster movie *The Day After* was filmed in Church's hometown, Lawrence, Kan., in 1982, the summer before his sixth-grade year.

It makes sense for Kansas to be the locale for this arguably seminal movie (at least for its genre). In media, Kansas epitomizes America: It is Dorothy's home before Oz. "Kansas is a symbol," Church writes, "a representation, a metaphor, and Lawrence seemed like the perfect new distillation of that." Historically, his town has fostered considerable violence. The term "Bleeding Kansas" originated from Quantrill's raid in 1863 in Lawrence. Church was even conceived during a week of local antiwar riots, what was referred to as "Days of Rage."

I could not recall seeing *The Day After*, so I rented it, and it is relentlessly pessimistic—in one scene, post-nuclear attack, a girl tries to prettify herself with a ribbon, but her scalp is too scorched. The movie is annihilating to the soul. Today, with happy endings slapped onto the bleakest subject matter for the sake of big box office and high Nielsen ratings, this movie of mass destruction would not get made. The apocalyptic images of burned babies in

rubble buried itself within Church's adolescent brain. The movie did not so much ignite his imagination as fuel its machinations. As a child, he already experienced fevered hallucinations that doctors thought caused brain damage: He predicted that wolf-ants would consume him; he feared his house would burn down, so his father built an escape hatch for his basement bedroom. His father's career instability—as a low-level property manager, wannabe lawyer—and divorce from his mother—three husbands to her name—along with his brother's death in a car accident, further frayed those nerves.

While Church treats this movie like lost DNA, even tracking down the director in his fancy house in Los Angeles for additional insight, his research results in a dead end toward self-actualization. To round out his atomic angst, add a scattering of chapters consisting of fictitious letters he writes to a blind boy in the movie, a trip to salvage his aunt's tornadoed house, and reflections on his two children in a post-9/11 world.

This book will cater to an audience that is fascinated by its own demise. Church's examination is a terrific study in how the media shapes what we obsess about. In the penultimate section, "Fallout," he states, "This movie was supposed to change the world. It was supposed to make a difference—at least in the long term." Perhaps Church put too much faith in a made-up narrative. Ultimately, his infinitely readable book is a wildly playful psychic album—snapshots of his life linked by a preoccupation on the greatest Armageddon, real or imagined. If the cockroaches do inherit the earth, *The Day After The Day After* might be the perfect artifact for them to find.