

SAFETY IS BUT A DREAM
NIGHTMARE IS THE REALITY

A NEW WORLD:
RETURN
JOHN O'BRIEN

A New World: Return

A Novel by John O'Brien

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Dedicated to my mother, June O'Brien. Thank you for all of your help, all that you do, and for making this book and series possible.

The New World series is a fictional work. While some of the locations in the series describe actual locations, this is intended only to lend an authentic theme. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Also by John O'Brien

A New World Series

A NEW WORLD: CHAOS

A NEW WORLD: RETURN

SAMPLE

The sound is coming rapidly closer. Amongst the clatter, I make out the faint slap of feet on the floor, although muted in some way. Our lights are focused in the middle of the store where the majority of the noise is rapidly drawing near, but without picking up a sight of anything. Horace and her team begin withdrawing backward down the aisle toward the entrance, still facing in the direction of whatever is coming toward them. I can tell that they aren't going to make it to the end of the aisle before whatever is making the sound is upon them. I see by their faces that they know it too.

I stand to get a better angle over the shelves. My light immediately catches sight of a night runner leaping across the top of the shelves; the gray-skinned creature gathers itself before leaping to the next shelf, with other night runners adjacent to it and more following. I immediately open fire on the closest one. The solid thuds of high speed steel impacting flesh and bone are subdued beneath the echoing crack of the rounds being fired. I catch the one in mid-leap across the chest causing it to somersault in mid-air, crashing heavily into the shelf in front of it from its forward momentum. Strobes flash behind me as Robert opens up on others. I flinch as his barrel fires close to my ears causing them to ring loudly.

"They're on the shelves!" I yell out.

The night runners are converging on Horace's group in the aisle who are quickly making their way to the entrance end but the night runners are going to be on them before they make it. Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement down the lane towards the back of the store coming into the cones of light from Gonzalez and McCafferty. More emerge from the hallway entrance on the left side, crossing the lane and light quickly before heading down the aisle across. More shots ring out as both women engage an increasing number of emerging night runners. Temporal distortion sets in.

Gonzalez and McCafferty kneel on the floor on opposite sides of the lane. Night runners fall as they run into the light painted towards them but more replace those fallen. Rounds strike some of those coming out of the hallway entrance and they pitch forward headlong, disappearing down the aisle behind the shelves. Some fall there with only their feet extending into the lane. I notice some continue to move slowly, crawling down the aisle, signifying they are only injured. The sound of gunfire is continuous as we fight back the sudden rush of the horde. Robert and I are concentrating on the ones leaping across the shelves, Gonzalez and McCafferty focus on the ones on the ground.

Steel fills the air as we attempt to hold them back. Gray bodies seem a solid mass as our light picks them up. Blood sprays from many and they fall or are driven backwards but they are quickly over-trodden by many more behind them. As we reload, magazines clatter across the linoleum where once only shopping carts rolled. The rapid and constant sound of spent cartridge rounds clink as the floor quickly fills with brass. Strobes fill the air, momentarily outshining the light from our flashlights. My hearing is now completely gone on the left side but I don't notice the ringing. Adrenaline and focus have taken over.

The night runners quickly close the gap on Horace's team and on us because of their numbers and how close they were to us when they started. Blue Team is running with their rifles pointed left, unable to see anything over the shelf beside them. Anxious and knowing they are about to be beset upon yet unable to do anything about it. I know that feeling. It is a feeling that makes you sick at heart; a very desperate, lonely and out of control feeling. The first night runner leaps on the shelf next to them and slams into the trailing member.

With the strong smell of gunpowder hanging in the air, I see a night runner leap from the shelf and hit a Blue Team member from behind, both of them falling to the ground. He lets out a surprised shout as he falls face forward with the night runner on his back. The light from his flashlight spins as his rifle hits the ground with a clatter, coming to rest ahead of him against the shelf. My light illuminates the night runner's back as it bends forward and its hands flail wildly as it begins clawing at the fallen soldier. I would take the shot but I don't want to risk hitting the team member, and other members of Corporal Horace's team are in my line of fire should a bullet go all of the way through. The Blue member screams again as fingernails and teeth begin to find their mark. He twists and turns in an attempt to throw the night runner off his back but the creature is too well situated for him to gain any leverage.

"Cover me and keep them off my back!" I yell over my shoulder to Robert and take off down the aisle without waiting for a response.

My ear is ringing so bad that I don't think I would hear one even if it is given. Continued flashes from Robert's M-16, and seeing night runners vanish from on top of the shelves as his rounds find their mark, tells me he either heard or is just continuing on with what he was doing before. Either way, my back is clear for the moment. My vision is blocked by a shelf as I enter the aisle bringing my visual perspective down substantially.

I tear off down the aisle feeling helpless by my being unable to shoot the night runner off our member who is down and hearing his continued screams. Just as I arrive behind the night runner, the remaining upright soldiers from Horace's group round the corner of the aisle, apparently not realizing that one of them is down. The night runner raises its head just as I

arrive in an apparent attempt to find another place to bite. I bring the butt of my M-4 against the base of its skull, hitting it with a resounding crack and sending it sprawling forward. Reversing my carbine, I fire a short burst into it before it has a chance to hit the floor. Blood sprays from between its shoulder blades, neck and the back of its head in rapid succession as my rounds find their mark. The top of its head explodes outward in a thick mist, sending blood, bone, and brain onto the floor in front of it. It spasms twice and then falls limply to the linoleum, its head coming to lie in an ever widening pool of blood and tissue.

Additional flashes of light strobe ahead like a disco dance floor. Corporal Horace and the others have joined in the fight and are helping Henderson, Denton, Rogers, and Bartel in their battle to keep the area to the front clear. The noise coming to what is left of my hearing indicates a full-fledged firefight in progress all around. The continuous pop, pop, pop of steel leaving the chambers of a multitude of rifles makes up a majority of the noise with shouts of communication sometime rising above the cacophony. Fleshy thuds of steel-jacketed bullets finding their marks, solid thumps from those that miss; hitting cans, shelves, floor and walls, ferocious howls of pain, shrieks born from desire and excitement, the crash of bodies hitting the ground and shelves, knocking assorted good from where they sit all add to the din echoing in the building. Within it, I hear moaning coming from the Blue member at my feet.

I begin to turn to my left when I'm hit solidly from above knocking me backwards. Maintaining that turn forcefully so as to end up on my back, I sweep my left hand out and bring my M-4 around with my right as I continue to fall, hitting the floor on my back adjacent to the member already down. Something heavy lies across my body. I expect the growling and tearing to begin but the night runner on top of me doesn't move. I push the inert body off and sit up. The blaring light from Robert's flashlight stares into my eyes from the end of the aisle, blinding me and not allowing me to make out anything behind it. The light pauses momentarily before flashing back to the area on top of the shelves. *That was a close one. Thanks bud.*

A warning signals inside of me. The kind of sixth sense like when you have your back to the ocean and a large wave is about to break over you. You look back over your shoulder just in time to see it crash down. I shine my light upward to catch a night runner leaping in mid-air above me. The M-4 in my right hand barks and kicks slightly as I fire at the night runner descending swiftly toward me. It is coming downward like a receiver going airborne and diving to catch a pass; head down and arms spread outward. It is shrieking with its pale mouth wide open and its eyes are locked on mine. The slow motion scene allows my mind to register and record minute details; the bloody and torn blue short sleeve shirt with ribbons and name tag still attached but mostly hidden by the dark blood stains, the NCO stripes sewn on the sleeves, the

wild look in its eyes, the silver watch and gold wedding band. *They apparently didn't get them all*, I think as my first round strikes the left side of its chest, my second hitting it in the mouth and my third impacting immediately after on the right cheek just under the eyes. The force of the rounds hit like sledge hammers causing its trajectory to alter in midair. A pinkish mist fills my sight as the back of its head vanishes into the air behind it. The shriek stops immediately and it slams onto top of the shelf above me, knocking off the items sitting there, and it hits the floor beside me with a loud thump.

I shove the first night runner off of my legs and stand quickly shining my light into the rafters of the open ceiling above me. There is movement in them as more night runners move along the steel beams high above. I fire at one centered in my beam almost directly above me and see blood blossom on its torso as my bullets fly true. It releases its grip on the beam and begins its long fall to the floor with an agonized shriek.

"Watch out above! They're in the rafters!" I yell running back down the aisle where Robert, Gonzalez, and McCafferty continue to battle the seemingly endless horde.

"Horace, keep the front covered with the others," I say into the radio. "We'll be withdrawing back to you down the last aisle."

"Roger that, sir," I hear her reply.

"Make sure you cover the shelves and rafters as we pull back. We also have a man down in the aisle," I add into the radio reaching the end of the aisle.

"Will do, sir," she responds.

"Gonzalez, McCafferty, we're pulling back to the front down the end aisle. Gonzalez, when I say so, pull back through us. You're point. Quickly but carefully!" I yell above the gunfire still erupting.

"Hooah, sir!" Gonzalez responds.

I reload and add my rounds to an atmosphere thick with steel and the smell of gunpowder. The rafters are full of night runners leaping their way towards us. Bodies fall from the heights as fire is shifted from Horace's group and from Robert's and mine. The top of the shelves are clear. *They've shifted strategy*, I think feeling my M-4 kick back slightly into my shoulder. *Wow! They're able to shift strategy as a group. That's something to throw into the bag of knowledge.*

The lane ahead is littered with bodies. Live ones scramble across the pile only to fall to the ferocious firing of Gonzalez and McCafferty, adding to the growing number lying on the floor, drawing ever closer. "Robert," I say grabbing his shoulder to get his attention. "You'll follow Gonzalez."

“Okay,” he responds quickly with the wide eyes of intense adrenaline that is coursing through his body.

“McCafferty, fall back to me and we’ll cover the rear!” I yell. “Gonzalez, go now!”

They both stand and walk backward firing into the night runners as they go. I continue to put bursts of fire into the rafters, picking out night runners there and see them fall as the steel impacts their flesh. The light from our flashlights cannot reach far back so we are only able to take out the ones that leap into our range. Multiple lights probe the ceiling and rafters above. Sparks fly from the steel beams as near misses ricochet into the darkness. Red tracers streak upward from the store front and our position.

As she reaches my position, Gonzalez turns and catches my eye. Giving a head nod, she proceeds past to lead our retreat out of here. The night runners still rush our position on the floor. *There must be hundreds here*, I think. I shift my fire to the ones on the ground ahead taking one out just twenty feet away. Blood sprays from its chest and neck as multiple rounds from my carbine strike it. Its head, almost severed by the force of the rounds, falls sideways as blood gushes and squirts from the severed arteries. Its body kicks out to the side spinning to the ground. I feel part of the spray splash against my cheek and forehead.

“Robert, Go!” I yell and notice only the decrease of fire that signals his departure.

“McCafferty, you have the top rafters and shelves as we move. I have the ground,” I shout across to where she has taken up position.

“You got it sir,” she yells back.

“Horace, we’re on our way. Did you get the wounded?” I ask pressing the radio transmit button.

“We have him, sir, but we have another one down,” she responds.

“Get them outside and be ready to go,” I say quickly.

I hear her answer on the radio but cannot make out her reply.

There’s no time to ask for it to be repeated. I drop two more to the floor, the last one falling almost at my feet and reload. I pull a mag out of my vest taking notice that it is the last one. *Uh oh, that’s not good*, I think sliding it in and releasing the bolt. More night runners pound the floor behind the two still in their death throes at my feet. I flip to semi and light flashes from the end of my barrel taking the nearest one in the head. Its head snaps backwards and its feet leave the ground, the body hitting the linoleum on its back with a thud.

“I’m on my last mag. We’ll have to make this quick. Let’s go!” I shout to McCafferty.

“Me too! I’m right with you,” she responds.

We stand and begin walking quickly backwards, McCafferty taking down night runners that have come above us in the rafters, the sound of their bodies slamming into the shelves and floor evidence of her deadly aim. I keep the ones in front at bay. Head shots are easy at this distance but I am quickly running out of ammo. Pop! Pop! Pop! I am rapidly moving my aim from head to head as we retreat but more replace them. We pass the next aisle behind us, with the central mass still only twenty feet away, neither gaining nor losing distance between us. The speed at which they are running at us causes them to drop literally at my feet and they will quickly be upon us when I run out of ammo. I glance around to mark our progress and see the lights from Gonzalez and Robert round the corner of the end aisle.

“We’re going to have to make a run for it,” I yell to McCafferty across the lane. “Now go!”

I see her turn and begin running down the lane and turn the corner. Focusing back to my front, I pick up the pace of my backward steps. Not quite running but close. Tripping and falling would not be in my best interest right now and not because of some labor and industries injury claim. It would be a bit worse than that. I wonder if I can sue the store for harboring dangerous creatures. Pop! Pop! My rounds meet and intersect two more heads splashing blood and brain matter on those behind as I round the corner and enter the aisle.

Glancing over my shoulder, keeping my direction and most of my attention on those about to round the corner, I see Gonzalez and Robert running for the front door silhouetted by the light streaming in from outside. McCafferty is following close behind them concentrating on the ceiling above. *Almost home*, I think. I refocus on where the night runners are just rounding the corner. Our gunfire seems to have had little effect on their numbers although I do notice they are now only concentrated in certain areas as opposed to seemingly spread across the entire interior. Still backing toward the entrance, I hear the click of a bolt running dry behind me. That click registers immediately and seems louder than all of the other sounds filling the store.

“I’m out!” McCafferty yells in my direction.

“Make a run for the door, I’ll cover,” I shout still focused on the horde closing in.

I feel the kick against my shoulder three more times sending three additional night runners skidding on the floor amidst sprays of blood and brain before the same, heart sickening click emits from my M-4. I have exhausted my ammo. *Why can’t this be like the hero books or comics where the last round kills the last enemy inches from the hero? Well, this definitely isn’t the happy, ride off into the sunset ending I would have liked.* The horde is still coming and closing the distance and I am now carrying a paper weight. I’m looking for the white-horsed hero to ride in and sweep away the battlefield, the enemy cowering in terror. Instead, it is my

heart that is sinking and the uh oh factor has invaded my senses. The adrenaline increases and time slows even more.

Twenty feet away becomes ten as I continue back pedaling away. I can't take the time to turn and run as I know they would be upon me immediately. They have the momentum of already running and will be upon me in the time it will take me to turn leaving me with my back to them and defenseless. I reverse my M-4 as the first one closes to within five feet, thrusting the butt forward into its face, connecting with the bridge of its nose, snapping its head backwards and bringing it to a standstill. The others behind plow into the now stopped night runner sending it crashing to the floor, slowing their rapid advance momentarily and giving me a touch of breathing space. As long as that breath is a short one that is.

They continue, running over and around the body on the floor. A sense of eagerness emits from the group as they close in on their prey. That prey being me. I can remember several times being chased by folks who were not too keen on my being in their back yard, but that feeling of uh-oh has never been this intense. Mostly because they weren't five feet away from me and I had ammo to keep them at a friendly distance. The thought of lowering my shoulder and charging into them vanishes as quickly as it arrived. I would be overwhelmed in a moment. Were these "normal people," that thought would have stuck around longer.

I step to my left and thrust the butt end of my carbine once again, the shoulder plate striking the temple of a creature with a crack snapping its head to the side and back. The night runner loses its balance and it sprawls to its left across the path of the others. My mind registers the absence of gunfire that was so prevalent inside moments ago. I have no time to figure out the why of it but can only assume that the others are safely outside or the night runners in the other directions have been eliminated. Or, everyone has run out of ammo. I log the ammo consumption away to be dealt with later and hopefully not as I am contemplating my mistakes while sitting on a cloud strumming a harp. Not that I would necessarily be a candidate for that anyway.

Night runners grab and push aside the one that had crashed into them blocking their path momentarily allowing me to gain a few precious feet towards the front door. The shelves to my right, containing a few sundry items, are illuminated by the splash of light from my flashlight but also begin to lighten from the light coming through the front door. Faint yet, but still lighter letting me know that the salvation of light is drawing closer. I've managed to keep them slightly off balance and away so far but they are so close and the action is quick. If time was not slowed, they would sweep over me like a tidal wave.

I repeatedly thrust into their heads with the butt of my rifle, feeling it connect with each thrust; each time rapidly withdrawing my M-4 only enough to switch to a different target and hit it with sufficient force. Not wanting to kill at this point but to keep them at bay as I continue inching backward toward the light amidst the shrieks emitting from horde of night runners to my front. Shrieks of frustration, pain, anger and excitement fill my ears. I hear someone shouting behind me but the words are drowned out by the din. Hands from the night runners try to fend off my repeated thrusts. They reach towards me, wanting to take hold and pull me to the ground. Wanting to rend my flesh.

I notice the linoleum below my feet is partially lit from the light streaming in from the front doors. One of the creatures knocks my gun away from its trajectory which throws my attack off target. A night runner gets inside of my M-4 that was keeping them that uncomfortable five feet away and launches itself at me. Seeing it get past and leave the ground, I brace myself mentally for the inevitable impact. Dropping my carbine, I bring my arms in close in order to keep some semblance of distance between us after the collision. Timing it right, I grab the front of its torn and ragged shirt, lean back slightly to absorb some of the impact, pivot on my left foot the moment it hits, and launch myself and it in the direction of the front door. The force and ferocity of the impact, even at such a close range, surprises me. The strength and agility of these things continues to amaze me. I am going to have to keep this in forefront of my mind at all times.

“Come on you little shit! You wanna play!” I yell as we launch through the air.

I continue the roll to my left as we sail through the air using its momentum to assist me, my hands locked on its shirt, its shrieking, gray face inches away from mine, my roar of effort and intense adrenaline combine with its shriek. I feel rage building within as we land on the floor with a grunt, with it beneath me, and we slide along the linoleum upon impact.

The night runner begins to thrash and shriek with an increased intensity. I release my grip with my right hand bringing it back to smash back down on its throat for a killing stroke, intent on punching through the throat to its spinal column, obliterating the cartilage airway. I pause when I notice the thrashing is not an attempt at defense or to get at me. Its face is turning a bright red before my eyes. It is then that I notice our flight through the air and subsequent slide has brought us into the direct light radiating from outside. A rifle butt enters into my range of vision and impacts the night runner square on the temple, rendering it unconscious and silencing the shrieks. I look up to see Horace standing by my side as she withdraws her carbine from the impact.

“Thanks,” I say jumping off of the night runner and turning quickly towards where the horde was moments before, expecting them to be right on my heels.

“No problem, sir,” she responds turning her weapon on the horde standing on the edge of the shadows where they shriek wildly in frustration.

Only the faint outlines of their heads are visible and appear to be thrusting forward, wanting desperately to get at us. Then, as if a switch were thrown, the shrieks stop and the heads vanish instantly into the dark depths of the store leaving behind only the slapping sound of shoes and bare feet on the linoleum echoing in the BX, growing dimmer before silence descends upon us once again.

We all stand momentarily shocked by the suddenness of both the onslaught and retreat. Only moments before the air was filled with the sound of gunfire, shrieks, and shouting, now only the lingering smell of gunpowder remains.

“Well, that was fun and interesting,” I say heading back to retrieve my M-4, still wary and alert for any attack.