



Literature:
Journal of
21st Century
Writings



THE BRITISH
ASSOCIATION FOR
CONTEMPORARY
LITERARY STUDIES

Bolze, Hanne. 2026. "Charged Readings and Momentous Expectations: The Curious Case of Climate Change Fiction." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 12(3): pp. 1–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.23660>



Charged Readings and Momentous Expectations: The Curious Case of Climate Change Fiction

Hanne Bolze, University of Rostock, Germany, hanne.bolze@uni-rostock.de

This article traces the inception, reception, and study of climate change fiction to show how profoundly awareness of anthropogenic climate crisis, and of the severity and scale of the collective human impact on the planet, have changed ways of reading, studying and interpreting literature. I use climate change fiction as a case study to highlight how discussions around literature's status and supposed cultural and political agency in the Anthropocene have challenged literary practice in the twenty-first century.

Climate change fiction represents a distinctive case because of the way it was critically anticipated and received. Early calls for climate change literature stressed its two main objectives: to translate scientific information into relatable narratives, and to effect meaningful change. This focus on literature's pragmatic function, and ecocriticism's tendency to 'read for the message', represent a shift in critical literary practice. The belief in climate change fiction's political and cultural agency motivated an initial focus on realist and literary fiction, which shaped a selective canon that excluded the very kind of formal experimentation critics hoped to find. Discussing these criteria critically, I challenge the focus on the realist mode and survey studies that extend the canon and examine climate change fictions not as didactic tools but as ambiguous reflections of narratives and changes that define the twenty-first century.

C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

OPEN ACCESS



Introduction

When Ian McEwan's climate change novel *Solar* was published in 2010, it had been eagerly anticipated as a novel that 'finally' addressed climate change. Ecocritic Richard Kerridge summarises these critical expectations, noting how

[a]dvance discussion in the press suggested that the novel might be a major intervention. *For the first time*, a *leading literary novelist* had made global warming *the explicit and central subject* of a work. The novel would show what *literary realism* could do with that subject. (2010b, 155; my emphases)

Solar was of course *not* the first novel to tackle anthropogenic climate change, but Kerridge emphasizes its singularity within a narrowly-defined corpus, of *literary realism* written by a *leading literary novelist*, and with global warming as the *explicit and central subject*. While the 'literary realism'-criterion excludes genre fiction and non-realist modes, literary fiction at the time had engaged with climate change in less 'explicit' or 'central' ways than e.g. science fiction (SF). The emphasis on the 'leading' novelist may simply signal relief: McEwan was not previously known for environmental themes in his writing, so his decision to engage with global warming was seen as a welcome sign that the issue of climate change had finally reached the mainstream. At the same time, this emphasis narrows the focus further, and it does a disservice to the many writers who chose to write about environmental themes before climate change fiction became a marketable category.

Solar's supposed singular status was repeatedly emphasized by literary critics: one reviewer deplored that opposition to global warming 'has failed to inspire *good fiction*. I do not claim encyclopaedic knowledge, but *Solar* is the first novel I have read to tackle it *successfully*' (Cohen 2010; my emphases). Kerridge is more critical of the novel but also employs evaluative criteria, concluding that *Solar* fails to imagine for its readers the emotional response to climate change that they may not dare to face themselves: the author 'turns away', Kerridge criticises, 'from what one might expect realist fiction to attempt in the face of climate change' (2010b, 159).

These quotes give an indication of the curious demands placed on climate fiction by literary critics and ecocritical scholars: from the start, this group of texts was described and evaluated according to markedly prescriptive criteria. In the following, I will trace the inception, reception, and study of climate change fiction to show how profoundly awareness of anthropogenic climate crisis, and of the severity and scale of the collective human impact on the planet, have changed ways of reading, studying and interpreting literature. I use climate change fiction as a case study to highlight how

discussions around literature's status and supposed cultural and political agency in the Anthropocene have challenged literary practice in the twenty-first century. The focus on climate change fiction's pragmatic function, I suggest, initially led to a prescriptive selection and evaluation of its canon.

Charged Readings: Climate Change Fiction and the Anthropocene

Whether climate change fiction should be termed a separate genre, a body of texts with a common theme, or simply a 'marketing category' (Bradley 2015) is still being debated.¹ It is generally understood to refer to narrative fiction that engages with anthropogenic climate change, either as an explicit or central topic, e.g. through prominent depiction of scientific information and debates, or in a more covert and implicit way, where climate change does not necessarily constitute a prominent or indispensable part of the narration, but where the text originates 'within the context of cultural awareness of anthropogenic agency and global warming' (Johns-Putra and Sultzbach 2022, 8).² Overviews of climate change fiction have identified several earlier examples (e.g. Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011), but climate change fiction as a literary category was arguably established in the first decade of the twenty-first century, once climate change and the Anthropocene had taken hold in public discourse and consciousness.³

The concept of the Anthropocene identifies humans as a species, a global geophysical force whose collective actions have severe and long-lasting effects on Earth and its atmosphere. While the results of human actions, such as pollution, resource depletion, or nuclear fallout, have affected the planet for centuries, awareness of the scale of their collective impact is a comparatively recent phenomenon: 'Anthropocene' was initially suggested as a name for the current geological epoch in 2000 (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), but did not gain momentum until the late noughties, when the reality

¹ Andrew Milner (2019, 149) describes climate fiction as a sub-genre of SF, whereas John Parham (2021, 16) suggests it evolved from SF. Conversely, Goodbody and Johns-Putra's *CliFi: A Companion* (2019) includes SF-novels in several cli-fi subcategories, which suggests an understanding of cli-fi as a genre, or body of work, that is not separated into SF and nongenre-fiction. Sergeant questions whether climate fiction may be considered a separate category at all, suggesting that its lack of common generic markers 'leaves open the question of what exactly might count as an instance of climate fiction, if it is not a question of generic identification, given that global warming is now bound up with every facet of existence' (2023, 4).

² This scholarly definition is wider than the popular understanding of 'cli-fi'. Derek Woods considers popular digital discourse about climate fiction and finds that this 'metagenre' stresses cli-fi's didactic purpose and normative realist form, which builds on 'scientific consensus to imagine plausible futures' (2023, 1144).

³ The 'cli-fi'-label, initially coined by freelance reporter Dan Bloom in 2007 (see Glass 2013), entered media and public discourse in 2013, after a report on US-American media organisation NPR described it as an 'emerging literary genre' (Evangie 2013). The name was taken up by other media and quickly became established, with the understanding that 'cli-fi' was a group of texts distinguished by its theme, climate change, and setting, 'in worlds, not unlike our own, where the Earth's systems are noticeably off-kilter' (Evangie 2013).

of climate change became more widely known and accepted.⁴ The twenty-first century therefore represents what Lynn Keller terms the ‘self-conscious Anthropocene’ (2017, 2). In this period, the realisation that humans are collectively responsible for the climate crisis but powerless to stop it as individuals has proven profoundly unsettling to Western self-perception. Timothy Morton compares the climate crisis to other discoveries that destabilised human exceptionalism, reading it as a continuation of ‘the great humiliation of the human’ following Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud (2013, 16–17).

Once again we find our faith shaken, and now it has clearer contours: it’s not about the disappearance of an agricultural-age god. It’s much, much worse. It’s about the flip side, the unconscious, the unintended consequences of our faith in progress, which far precedes agricultural-age gods (Morton 2021, 35).

The self-conscious Anthropocene, then, re-thinks humans as entangled in and part of the nonhuman environment, challenging long-held Western beliefs in human agency and progress: as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, ‘anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history’ (2009, 201). But climate crisis not only destabilizes established narratives, it also poses a problem of representation: its immense scales, which link places, individuals, causes and effects across time and space, make it hard to even grasp the idea on a human level. Morton therefore describes the climate crisis as a hyperobject, a thing that is so ‘massively distributed in time and space relative to humans’ (2013, 1) that we can only see pieces of it at a time (2013, 70), but which ‘contaminates’ everything inside it (Morton 2021, 63). This ‘contamination’, a characteristic which Morton (2013, 1) calls ‘viscosity’, effects a new mode of reading, in which texts become imbued with new meanings and connotations through readers’ awareness of climate crisis. To give just one poignant example: Kurt Vonnegut’s assertion, in the beginning of his 1969–novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that ‘wars [...] [are] as easy to stop as glaciers’ (1991, 3), acquires tragic connotations today. The Anthropocene thus acts as a threshold concept, ‘something which alters significantly the way that many once familiar issues appear’ (Clark 2015, 13): viewed in this light, climate change, and the Anthropocene, constitute

⁴ Tim Flannery (2008) suggests that the publication of the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, which followed former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore’s education campaign on global warming, and of James Lovelock’s *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, identify 2006 as the year of ‘the great climatic awakening’, in which global public sentiment shifted fundamentally to become aware of global heating. Adam Trexler (2015, 8–9) identifies 2008 as the point when the Anthropocene and climate crisis became more visible in public discourse and fiction.

‘a deconstructive force, undoing conventional ideas of human agency’ (Johns-Putra and Sultzbach 2022, 13).

Looking for solutions: the role of literature

The twenty-first century, then, confronts us with a dilemma: ‘how to dislodge a vision of human exceptionalism that paints us as benefactors of God-given environmental harmony and yet still retain a sense of human responsibility for reversing the profound disharmony we have visited upon the planet?’ (Johns-Putra and Sultzbach 2022, 7). Faced with this challenge, critics, writers and activists quickly turned to literature for possible answers. In the introduction to *This Overheating World*, a Granta collection loosely based around the global-warming theme, environmentalist Bill McKibben formulates an explicit demand for an inspiring work of literature to create more acute awareness of climate change:

our awareness that the world will change in every aspect [...] is muted by the future tense, even though that future isn’t far away [...]. This is a failure of imagination, and in this way a literary failure. Global warming has still to produce an Orwell or a Huxley, a Verne or a Wells, a *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or a *War of the Worlds*, or in film any equivalent of *On The Beach* or *Doctor Strangelove*. It may never do so (2003, 10–11).

Reviewing the collection, Matthew Collin (2003) notes that these texts should do more than provide information: ‘we need to be seduced or inspired into *acting*, or even *caring*’ (my emphasis). Literature is here given the explicit purpose to make sense of the crisis, to reimagine it, and to signpost new ways of thinking and acting in a changed and changing world. Early calls for climate fiction (Macfarlane 2005, Bertagna 2007, Berry 2013) thus expect literature to fulfil an explicitly didactic function.

Cognitive dissonance: bridging the gap

Yet, despite overwhelming scientific consensus that climate crisis requires urgent action, Kerridge deplors, ‘we are behaving not as if the warning were slightly open to doubt but as if it were barely credible’ (2010a, 69). He therefore argues that the main social predicament that needs to be overcome in order to effect meaningful environmental change is not ‘a lack of knowledge but [...] a disconnection between what we know and how we act. We do not behave as if we knew what we know; our behavior implies a different state of knowledge’ (2014, 363).

Faced with this cognitive dissonance between *knowing* and *acting*, stories have been identified as a possible tool to translate scientific facts and projections into relatable

narratives and help readers grasp the urgency of the situation: that is, to connect the ‘fact-finding’ and the ‘meaning-making’ (Jasanoff 2010, 248). In their introduction to an issue of *Environmental Humanities*, Greg Garrard, Gary Handwerk and Sabine Wilke describe their contributors’ shared concern

with the challenges of *representing* a concept at once wholly abstract and alarmingly material in aesthetically, rhetorically, and ultimately politically efficacious ways[, and] [...] a conviction that the humanities [...] can play a significant role in heightening public environmental awareness (2014, 149).

In this passage, the authors touch on the double function that many scholars in the fields of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities expect literature to fulfil: firstly, to *represent* the crisis in a way that makes it more tangible to individual readers, and to thereby create ‘public environmental awareness’. But secondly, and more importantly, to reach audiences in a ‘politically efficacious’ way that science has failed to do: i.e., to have an *effect* on the reader that will lead to *change*.

Climate change fiction as pragmatic discourse

When applied to the novel, these two objectives represent a significant shift in critical practice. While literature was traditionally regarded as non-pragmatic discourse, which ‘serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to a general state of affairs’ (Eagleton 1983, 7–8), climate change fiction is now explicitly read and evaluated with regard to its emotional affect and environmental effect.

Literary novels have of course always represented political positions, and been read politically. Historical and more recent attempts at book banning also suggest a widespread belief in literature’s impact beyond art for art’s sake. To claim that climate change fiction is more political or ‘practical’ than e.g. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* or Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* is therefore hardly tenable. What distinguishes ecocriticism from other critical social-justice lenses is not its ‘practical’ reference to ‘real life’. Rather, I argue that climate change fiction represents a distinctive case because of the way it was critically anticipated and received: setting their hopes on literature’s cultural and political agency, critics formulated selection criteria for this emergent genre based on its intended function and effect, and then evaluated texts, such as *Solar*, that had been selected according to those prescriptive criteria. This was at least partly due to the fact that early climate fiction criticism emerged from the field of ecocriticism, and therefore shared the latter’s focus on mimesis and didacticism. Contrary to established literary practice, which defines genres descriptively by looking

at common characteristics of an existing group of texts, climate change fiction was defined even before a canon of such texts could be identified.⁵ Roman Bartosch (2015, 64) describes ‘a critical industry determined to find and describe – even, at times, to prescribe – a literature of the Anthropocene’ where climate change is a central element, or even agent, in the plot. Early reception of and scholarship on climate fiction therefore focused mostly on establishing and evaluating a corpus of literature that portrays climate change explicitly and realistically.

Momentous Expectations: Establishing a Climate Change Canon

This instrumental idea of literature has a direct bearing on the criteria that were suggested for ‘successful’ climate change fiction: firstly, critics assumed such novels would have to be *formally innovative* in order to overcome the anthropocentric confines of the genre. Secondly, to make climate change ‘tangible’ to the individual Western reader, the novels should contain *direct* and *explicit* references and convey *scientific information*: the realist mode was put forward as best suited for this purpose.⁶ And thirdly, in order to transmit the desired urgency and motivate readers to change and to take meaningful action, such literature needed to be taken *seriously*: the focus was therefore on literary, nongenre fiction.

Selection criteria, I: formal innovation

The first criterion, formal innovation, stems from ecocriticism’s wish to relinquish the anthropocentric bias of the novel: character-focused and plot-driven, relying on anthropocentric perspectives and human scales, the inherent constraints of its form seemed to make it unsuitable for the challenge of representing climate crisis. Dominic Head therefore questioned ‘whether or not the novel [...] can be a useful vehicle for generating Green ideas, or whether this genre, this “triumph” of industrialized society, is too much a product of its social moment to ruminate usefully on the route to

⁵ Readers, writers and critics started formulating demands and passing judgments on climate change fictions’ ‘success’ or ‘effectiveness’ while simultaneously noting the lack of such texts: from the outset, the reception and production of climate change fiction was shaped by a high level of prescriptiveness. See e.g. an article by political scientist Andrew Dobson, who lists ‘essential ingredients’ of the climate change novel and concludes, ‘it’s a climate-change novel, not an exploration of middle-aged angst, teenage hormones or any of the other themes that get in the way of the topic at hand. So there’s the recipe. Who’s going to write the book?’ (2010). Surveying these popular discourses, Woods suggests that ‘climate fiction could become a case study in how older literary categories mutate through the influence of digital media’ (2023, 1150).

⁶ See e.g. Kerridge (2014), Thieme (2023). Despite repeated calls for the inclusion of other genres and modes in the climate change canon, the focus on realism is echoed widely: e.g. Bracke suggests that climate fictions set in the present ‘ – closer to realist fiction than to science or speculative fiction – may more adequately capture what it means to live in the Anthropocene’ (2021, 90).

the post-industrial world' (1998, 32). Ursula Heise agrees that 'climate change poses a challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families, or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales' (2008, 205). Kerridge therefore concludes that 'any novel that seeks to be "environmental" in a rigorous sense will have to be formally innovative in response' (2010a, 67).

Early studies of climate fiction, such as Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015) or Antonia Mehnert's *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* (2016), sought to trace and categorise such formal innovations in their corpora. Trexler proceeds from the premise that climate change has changed the very form of the novel, yet Adeline Johns-Putra observes that interestingly, 'taken together, the climate change novels surveyed by Trexler reveal a tendency to employ highly conventional literary strategies of world-building and character development' (2018, 28). Clark (2015, 181) therefore argues that rather than formal innovation of the novel genre, Trexler 'is describing a mode of critical reading newly sensitized by the demands of the Anthropocene', and questions if such innovation is possible at all:

are the limits of imaginative engagement [to overcome anthropocentrism] emerging in these [art forms] merely the limits of now anachronistic cultural conventions, capable of reinvention? Or, more profoundly, does the Anthropocene form a threshold at which art and literature touch limits to the human psyche and imagination themselves? (2015, 175–176).

Clark provides a pessimistic assessment of literature's possible contributions to overcome anthropocentric thinking – and, indeed, of the limits of the human imagination. However, this lack of formal innovation may also be explained, at least to some degree, by the criteria for corpus selection, which focused on literary realism.

Selection criteria, II: realist fiction

In his article on the 'uses' of different genres in depicting climate change, Kerridge explicitly asks for 'rigorously realist novels, with present-day settings, dealing with people's emotional responses to the threat of climate change' (2014, 373). In the same vein, John Thieme stresses the importance of the realist mode: '[in contrast to SF,], climate fiction's engagement with present and future catastrophes seldom opens the door for escapist readings' (2023, 1). He finds that the novels in his corpus 'attest to realism's vital role in communicating the present-day urgency of the crisis' (2023, 5), claiming that 'both the sudden catastrophic events and the slow attritional erosion

caused by global warming demand a realist poetics that refuses to consign them to the too-difficult box of the intangible' (2023, 6).

This juxtaposition, of realist fiction set in the present and 'intangible' genre fiction that facilitates 'escapist readings', establishes a hierarchy in which genre fiction's significant engagement with climate crisis does not receive the critical attention it deserves.

Genre fiction: SF and the problem of probability

Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra (2019, 3) date the emergence of literary engagement with global warming to SF, with Ursula Le Guin's novel *Lathe of Heaven* (1971) as the first example. They note that from the outset, the topic of climate change was 'commonly fictionalized within the framework of popular genres', stressing 'the role played by genre fiction in making early cli-fi marketable' (2019, 4). Critics have argued that SF allows for innovative explorations of environmental themes: Heise (2005, 130; 2019) notes SF's narrative resources for addressing the large temporal scales of the Anthropocene, and Alexa Weik von Mossner concludes that 'no genre would be better suited for such fictional explorations than science fiction' (2014, 204). Conversely, other critics argue that the distinct advantage of climate change SF is also its biggest weakness: while SF genre conventions seem singularly predisposed to allow representation of climate change, these same conventions are bound to make the representation appear improbable, as an inherent part of the genre rather than a fictional projection of what may actually happen. Because climate change fiction has consistently been tied to specific expectations of providing and affecting education, awareness and real-life change, SF's perceived improbability has led critics, from the start, to attempt to distinguish the cli-fi canon from SF.⁷

Amitav Ghosh discusses this conundrum in *The Great Derangement* (2016), arguing that while SF allows for the inclusion of seemingly improbable events, such an inclusion would affect a literary novel's credibility. Ghosh argues for a re-thinking of what we accept as probable in the (literary) novel, but he questions SF's suitability for representing the Anthropocene because of the genre's classification as 'wonder tales' (2016, 72): it is precisely because of SF's genre convention where more is *possible*, but not necessarily probable, that a depiction of extreme weather events or environmental breakdown may not have the same impact in SF as it has in literary fiction. The generic

⁷ In a *Guardian*-article of the rise of cli-fi, Rodge Glass acknowledges that 'there's an argument for saying [the cli-fi label] is simply rebranding: sci-fi writers have been engaging with the climate-change debate for longer than literary novelists [...] and I do wonder whether this is a term designed for squeamish writers and critics who dislike the box labelled "science fiction"' (2013).

expectations of SF may therefore lead readers to dismiss even realistic climate change projections as ‘improbable’ or ‘theoretically possible but unlikely to happen’. Although SF has long included climate change scenarios, it was thus often overlooked in early articles deploring the lack of climate change fiction.

Margaret Atwood’s insistence on labelling her own work ‘speculative fiction’ rather than SF, because they only depict things and events already possible, is a case in point. SF-writer Ursula Le Guin takes issue with Atwood’s claim, arguing that this ‘arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awards. She doesn’t want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto’ (2009). By emphasizing the *possibility* of speculative fiction, Le Guin argues, Atwood claims for her work the space of ‘realistic’ fiction rather than the genre of SF. Atwood is far from the only writer who resists the SF label: John Lanchester, in a *Guardian*-interview,

chafes slightly at the label [of SF or speculative fiction that the interviewer assigns his climate novel *The Wall*], recalling JG Ballard asking him not to mention SF in an interview he was writing, “because he felt you automatically lose half the readers”. While that has undoubtedly changed, he argues that, as a subject, global warming is already scientific fact (Allardice 2019).

Lanchester here rejects the SF label in order to emphasize the factual, ‘realistic’ basis of his climate-change scenario. These contested ideas of SF illustrate the genre’s perceived image problem, which has a direct bearing on the climate canon: while most overviews and analyses of climate fiction include SF texts, there is a notable tendency to focus on a select few authors rather than the openness to new texts that can be observed for ‘literary’ fiction. The SF-writers who are firmly established in the climate canon are Kim Stanley Robinson (US), Paolo Bacigalupi (US), Margaret Atwood (Canada, included here despite her rejection of the label), Octavia Butler (US), George Turner (AUS), and more recently James Bradley (AUS). While their prominence in the canon may be mostly due to the literary quality and pioneering nature of their works, it also indicates that efforts to expand the climate fiction canon are geared more towards nongenre fiction.

However, this preference for the realist mode is based on two assumptions: firstly, that climate change fiction can have the desired effect on the reader, and secondly, that this effect is best achieved with realist depictions of relatable storyworlds.

Do We Really Need Realism?

To address the first point, it is worth noting that early Anglophone calls for climate change fiction seemed to assume such texts to have a quasi-universally transferrable effect: by

stating the demand for texts to change readers' attitudes and effect meaningful change, they implicitly refer to readers from the Global North, for whom climate crisis is still largely located in the future, as opposed to the everyday lived experience of e.g. Pacific Islanders communities. Similarly, the calls for 'realistic' fictional depictions of climate science, which were then deemed central ingredients of *effective* climate fiction, assume a specific Western lens. Early articles on climate fiction thus show little awareness that climate crisis manifests differently in different parts of the world, and that the 'solution' or 'change of mind' they seek to engender might need to be achieved differently according to geographical or cultural contexts: as Johns-Putra and Sultzbach caution, the effect of climate change literature 'can be [...] tricky to predict' (2022, 11). Michaela Bronstein (2019, 132) therefore stresses the need for openness when considering the unknown reader's reaction. Rather than expecting literature to have an immediate effect, she suggests, fiction writing may be conceived of as a more ambiguous form of activating the reader, an act of witnessing that confers responsibility: 'What matters is not the transformation of the real into the textual representation of it but the unpredictable things that the resulting artifact might do' (Bronstein 2019, 124).

Secondly, the argument that realist novels are more 'tangible' because a (Western) reader can easily relate them to her own world has partly been undermined by the speed with which the climate crisis has become noticeable, through media coverage of extreme weather events and environmental devastation. In many ways, to paraphrase a viral bookshop notice, SF scenarios have now been moved to the current affairs section. Therefore, a novel set in the near future no longer automatically describes an 'unrealistic setting': David Sergeant argues that today, 'our near future is peculiar for being so manifestly and pressingly entangled with the present' (2023, 6). In the same vein, Veronica Hollinger observes that there 'is not much distance anymore between the facticity of realism and the subjunctivity of science fiction' (2006, 452), declaring that '[s]cience fiction's founding assumption – that the future will be different from the present – has become outdated' (2006, 465). Realist novels with present settings may therefore quickly become dated, as 'once in a lifetime' extreme weather events are now recorded in ever-shortening intervals. Furthermore, a narrow focus on the present carries the risk of omitting complex historical as well as future entanglements of the present moment.⁸

More fundamentally, there is the question whether realism itself is the best mode to 'realistically' represent the world. Nancy Easterlin criticises the way that ecocriticism has tended to favour the realist aesthetic, as well as other literary modes such as comedy,

⁸ Clarke (2015) suggests that we may read Anthropocene texts with a scale framing of 600 years – 300 into today's past and 300 years into the future –, so a novel that engages with anthropogenic climate change will need to engage not just with the present moment but must be aware of the temporal framing of the crisis.

pastoral and nature writing, which ‘have all been championed for their presumed fidelity to life and implicit conviction that their capacity to palliate the soul will culminate in an environmentally friendly perspective’, noting that ‘the favored mode is commonly celebrated for its perceived alignment with actuality’ (2012, 96). The position she describes has been challenged by several scholars who work with and advocate for econarratological frameworks, e.g. Heise, who takes note of ‘the question whether it is necessary or desirable for ecologically oriented literature to rely on realist modes of narration’ (2005, 130), or Markku Lehtimäki, who in his essay on ecocriticism and narrative theory (2013) notes ‘how ecocriticism, as advocated by [Lawrence] Buell, rather unproblematically associated realism with a grounding of literary texts in reality’ (2013, 124).

It is also worth noting that ecocritical practice has already diversified significantly in fields like ecopoetry and postcolonial literature. However, both the climate change fiction canon and climate fiction scholarship still show a preference for realist texts. Arguing against this notion, Easterlin contends that ‘the assumption that any given mode or style is inherently superior to others for raising political consciousness rests on a series of misconceptions about the nature of thought and mind’ (2012, 98). The focus on realism may well underestimate readers’ abilities to transfer complex experiences and emotional responses from a fictional storyworld to their own situation – after all, writers have always explored their respective periods’ epistemological uncertainties by reaching for metaphor, allegory and often seemingly far-fetched scenarios. For instance, Byron’s apocalyptic poem ‘Darkness’ (1816) is today read in the context of the ‘year without a summer’, a short-term ‘climate change’ caused by the eruption of Indonesian volcano Mount Tambora (Rigby 2014, 213). The premise that realism is needed for an ‘effective’ depiction of climate crisis at all therefore warrants some critical discussion.

Last but by no means least, a focus on realism and literary fiction reinforces a Western-centric canon that excludes more experimental modes, and much postcolonial writing. For example, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Climate* (2022) contains several essays that consider climate change literature from the Global South, as well as Indigenous and Black writers. The corpora of these studies span diverse literary forms such as poems, a children’s novella and a short story collection (Sankaran 2022), multi-form stories and speculative science (Streeby 2022), Keri Hulme’s collection of poems and short stories, *Stonefish* (2004), and other Indigenous poetry and stories (Huang 2022). Such formally innovative texts do not fit the close parameters identified above: ecocriticism’s early insistence on climate change fiction’s political and cultural agency, and its focus on realist and literary fiction, shaped a selective canon that excluded the very kind of formal experimentation critics hoped to find.

Before Solar: looking back

I return to the introduction's quote identifying *Solar* as the first 'proper' climate novel. As I have shown, such a claim was only possible by applying a very narrow and tenuous definition of the climate-change novel. To look a little more closely, in hindsight we can identify a significant number of novels published before *Solar* that *did* constitute early attempts to engage with anthropogenic climate crisis. Some of these novels fulfil the demand to openly address climate change as 'the explicit and central subject', such as SF-writer Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital* series (2004–2007) and numerous other SF novels (cf. Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011 for an overview), or *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2008) and its sequel, *The Carbon Diaries 2017* (2009), by British young-adult-fiction writer Saci Lloyd. Besides SF, YA fiction was one of the first genres that responded to the challenge of imagining a climate-changed world. In Britain alone, a number of YA novels published in the noughties engage with themes of flooding and sea-level rise, overexploitation of natural resources, and anthropocentrism in a climate-changed context, such as Marcus Sedgwick's *Floodland* (2000), Geraldine McCaughrean's *Not the End of the World* (2004), Bertagna's *Exodus*-trilogy (2002–2011), Gemma Malley's *Declaration*-trilogy (2007–2010), and Emily Diamand's *Flood Child* (2008). These YA novels engage with and challenge tropes and narratives that are deeply entangled with climate crisis, such as the child-as-saviour figure, ideas of guilt and innocence, utopia and dystopia, fantasies of 'safe havens', and colonial and capitalist entanglements with environmental destruction.⁹

In British literary fiction, Maggie Gee has long been engaging with environmental devastation and global warming, e.g. in *Where Are the Snows* (1991), *The Ice People* (1998), or *The Flood* (2004). Other literary novelists challenge concepts of progress and anthropocentric exceptionalism through their use of circular plots, like Jeannette Winterson in *The Stone Gods* (2007), or unreliable and fragmented narration, like Sarah Hall in *The Carhullan Army* (2007) and Sarah Moss in *Cold Earth* (2009). These novels have now entered the climate-fiction canon despite their 'failure' to explicitly identify anthropogenic climate change as a central topic. Even Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman's apocalyptic fantasy novel *Good Omens* (1990) engages with global warming, with aliens informing a nonplussed human character that 'I'm sorry to have to tell you, sir, that your polar icecaps are below regulation size for a planet of this category, sir' (2006, 208).

⁹ Somewhat ironically, YA fiction tends to be less susceptible to embracing the trope of the child-as-saviour (see Edelman 2004; Johns-Putra 2019; Sergeant 2023) than 'literary' climate change fiction, where innocent children who provide a hopeful ending can be found in McEwan's *Solar*, Maggie Gee's *The Ice People*, Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From*, Marcel Theroux's *Far North*, Katie Hale's *My Name is Monster*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Laline Paull's *The Ice*.

Despite the narrow geographic and generic focus of this list, my point is clear: initially, the emerging canon of climate change fiction was artificially restricted, as the focus on realist literary fiction overlooked contributions and innovations provided by the novels described above, and by many other texts. Running counter to, and sometimes alongside these evaluative practices, climate fiction scholars advocated for an expansion of the canon, and a return to more traditional, and less prescriptive, literary practice.

Expanding the Canon: A Return to Literary Studies?

Having earlier advocated for a widening of ecocritical practice (Bracke 2010), Astrid Bracke wants ‘to replace an evaluative approach with a diagnostic approach’ (2014, 435), cautioning that ecocriticism’s practice of ‘evaluating works on their environmental merits has excluded the majority of contemporary works from ecocritical analysis’ (2014, 424). She observes how ecocritical reading practices

have [...] tended to avoid certain aspects that are an established part of literary criticism, such as textual form [...]. Consequently, the more formal or narratological aspects of literary works have received relatively little ecocritical attention (2014, 424).

In a similar vein, Pieter Vermeulen (2020) argues for an Anthropocene mode of reading that acknowledges human entanglement in the nonhuman world, which can be applied to any kind of text in the self-conscious Anthropocene (Bracke 2018) as well as historical texts (Vermeulen 2020). While early ecocritical scholarship on climate fiction homed in on the texts’ affect and effect, this approach seeks to reveal, engage with, and criticise the patterns of thought and methods of meaning-making that are entailed, through narratives, in contemporary climate change fiction: ‘as narratives inevitably encode particular forms of agency and obscure other ones, it matters what kind of stories we tell about the world’ (Vermeulen 2020, 21). Therefore, analysing literature, and the narratives employed in contemporary texts, as participants in a reconceptualization of climate crisis discourses (Johns-Putra 2018, 6) becomes a way of diagnosing the contemporary condition.

This approach to climate change fiction has also seen scholars advocate for the inclusion of postcolonial and Indigenous texts. Johns-Putra’s article “The Rest Is Silence: Postmodern and Postcolonial Possibilities in Climate Change Fiction” (2018) analyses two postcolonial climate change novels, Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013) and Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), which question the dominance of anthropocentric master-narratives through their use of postmodernist technique

and magic realism. In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate* (2022), editors Johns-Putra and Sultzbach stress their conscious decision to include studies of Black, Indigenous, and Postcolonial climate change literatures, as well as articles that combine environmental and social justice lenses, which ‘unapologetically returns ecocritical scholarship to some of the thorny questions of value and objectivity with which it has grappled in the past’ (Johns-Putra and Sultzbach 2022, 14). Besides those contributions, several monographs on postcolonial fictions that engage with climate crisis and the Anthropocene bring to the surface issues such as the entanglement of colonial legacies and ecological crisis, e.g. Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2019) and Justyna Poray-Wybranowska’s *Climate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* (2021), and local and global dimensions of environmental crisis, in Pramod Nayar’s *Vulnerable Earth: The Literature of Climate Crisis* (2024).

This growing interest in analysing narratives with reference to other cultural contexts gives much-needed nuance to the early calls for climate fiction, which were focused on finding texts with quasi-universally transferrable affect and effect. While studies that focus on climate change fiction’s pragmatic effect rely on definitions based on content, scholarship on narratives has significantly broadened the canon of climate fiction, rereading older texts through an Anthropocene lens and widening the geographic and generic scope of the canon. The critical analysis and interpretation of climate fiction as literary texts rather than environmentalist tools, which was missing from early cli-fi scholarship, is increasingly provided in studies that combine ecocritical and narratological approaches. We can thus observe a shift, within climate fiction scholarship, from reading texts for the message based on ‘realistic’ depictions of climate crisis, towards an analysis of how climate change fiction *engages with, criticises and reconceptualises* established narratives. Such scholarship proceeds from the central premise ‘that we understand better the current state of the planet and our relationship to it by engaging with narrative’ (James 2022, 25).

David Sergeant (2023) goes yet further: in his monograph *The Near Future in Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Climate, Retreat and Revolution*, he queries altogether the assumption ‘that literature’s engagement with environmental crisis must be a constructive one and so, implicitly, a positive one, even when it falls short on one count or another’ (2023, 7). Instead, he finds that much fiction of the near future merely imagines the end of the world as ‘the kind of disruption to middle-class Global North lifestyles’ (2023, 8) identified by Claire Colebrook, who describes ‘the current vogue for imagining the “end of the world” as nothing more than the end of liberal and affluent capitalist urbanity’, where ‘the “end of the world” is this world without the luxuries and favourable conditions that have elevated some humans to think of themselves

as humanity in general' (2019, 279). Sergeant (2023, 1) finds that such novels 'are shaped [...] by a conservative desire to retreat to an unchanging domestic realm': they constitute a 'ritual exposure to climate change which allows for a therapeutic return to a reconsolidated domestic sphere' (2023, 9).

Sergeant thus expands the scholarly interest in narratives as reflection of and help to understand the current condition by exposing the texts' evasions of crisis, which belies their thematic choice: identifying such evasive tropes in texts that are ostensibly written to address and grapple with climate crisis may be a necessary first step to explain and to challenge the gap, or cognitive dissonance, that persists between knowing about climate crisis and acting accordingly.

Conclusion

Literary studies in the twenty-first century operate in a context of contaminated readings and charged expectations. The case of climate change fiction highlights entanglements between literature, reading, and the world: both its advent, and the evolution of climate fiction scholarship, can be seen as paradigmatic for the ways in which the self-conscious Anthropocene has changed modes of reading and interpreting literature.

As the self-conscious Anthropocene destabilises Western beliefs in human exceptionalism, it also triggers a rethinking of the role that literature, and literary studies, might play in dealing with these uncertainties. Proceeding from the premise that strategies to overcome anthropocentric positions *in narrative* might be transferred to real life, the study of climate change fiction initially focussed on its pragmatic function and formulated prescriptive expectations and selection criteria. Early attempts at canon building were biased towards realist and literary fiction, based on the assumption that these texts would be most effective in transmitting the required urgency.

Although it has evolved from this instrumental understanding of literature, the study of climate change fiction remains geared towards the 'practical': 'literary engagements with representations of climate change are, now more than ever, steeped in expectations of consciousness-raising' (Johns-Putra and Sultzbach 2022, 14). However, the shift to analyse these texts, not as manuals for change, but as vestiges of enduring anthropocentric and evasive positions, may eventually provide valuable impetus to living with, and thinking through, climate crisis. As such, literature's affect and effect, and the 'practical' need for literary studies, should not be underestimated.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

References

- Allardice, Lisa. 2019. "John Lanchester: 'Walls were coming down around the world – now they are springing up'". *The Guardian* 11 January, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/11/john-lanchester-interview-the-wall>. Accessed 21 February 2025.
- Bartosch, Roman. 2015. "The Climate of Literature: English Studies in the Anthropocene". *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 26.2, 59–70.
- Berry, Geoff. 2013. "Guest Editor's Introduction". *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 17.3, 195–199.
- Bertagna, Julie. 2007. "Changing the Climate". *The Guardian* 5 February, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2007/feb/05/changingtheclimate?INTCMP=SRCH>. Accessed 8 March 2025.
- Bracke, Astrid. 2010. "Redrawing the Boundaries of Ecocritical Practice". *ISLE* 17.4, 765–767.
- Bracke, Astrid. 2014. "The Contemporary English Novel and its Challenges to Ecocriticism". In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard. Oxford University Press, 423–439.
- Bracke, Astrid. 2018. *Climate Crisis and the 21st-century British Novel*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bracke, Astrid. 2021. "The Novel". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene*, edited by John Parham. Cambridge University Press, 88–101.
- Bradley, James. 2015. "The End of Nature and Post-Naturalism: Fiction and the Anthropocene". *City of Tongues* 30 Dec 2015, <https://cityoftongues.com/2015/12/30/the-end-of-nature-and-post-naturalism-fiction-and-the-anthropocene/>. Accessed 3 May 2025.
- Bronstein, Michaela. 2019. "Taking the Future into Account: Today's Novel's for Tomorrow's Readers." *PMLA* 134.1, 121–136.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses". *Critical Inquiry* 35.2, 197–222.
- Clark, Timothy. 2015. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury.
- Cohen, Nick. 2010. "Ian McEwan's Solar: it's green and it should be read". *The Observer* 14 March, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/mar/14/ian-mcewan-environment-novel>. Accessed 11 October 2024.
- Colebrook, Claire. 2019. "The Future in the Anthropocene: Extinction and the Imagination". In *Climate and Literature*, edited by Adeline Johns-Putra. Cambridge University Press, 263–280.
- Collin, Matthew. 2003. "No Way Out". *The Guardian* 22 November, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/nov/22/scienceandnature.highereducation?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>. Accessed 8 March 2025.
- Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. 2000. "The 'Anthropocene'". *Global Change Newsletter* 41, 17–18.

- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. 2019. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke University Press.
- Dobson, Andrew. 2010. "The Fiction of Climate Change". *openDemocracy* 17 September, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/fiction-of-climate-change/>. Accessed 30 April 2025.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Basil Blackwell.
- Easterlin, Nancy. 2012. *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press.
- Evancie, Angela. 2013. "So Hot Right Now: Has Climate Change Created a New Literary Genre?" *NPR* 20 April, <https://www.npr.org/2013/04/20/176713022/so-hot-right-now-has-climate-change-created-a-new-literary-genre>. Accessed 21 September 2024.
- Flannery, Tim. 2008. "Words of Warming". *The Guardian* 9 August, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/aug/09/scienceandnature.climatechange>. Accessed 23 April 2025.
- Garrard, Greg, Gary Handwerk and Sabine Wilke. 2014. "Imagining Anew: Challenges of Representing the Anthropocene". *Environmental Humanities* 5, 149–153.
- Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Glass, Rodge. 2013. "Global warning: the rise of 'cli-fi'". *The Guardian* 31 May, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/31/global-warning-rise-cli-fi>. Accessed 21 September 2024.
- Goodbody, Axel, and Adeline Johns-Putra. 2019. "Introduction". In *Cli-Fi: A Companion*, edited by A. Goodbody and A. Johns-Putra. Peter Lang, 1–17.
- Head, Dominic. 1998. "The (Im)Possibility of Ecocriticism". In *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, edited by Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammels. Zed Books Ltd, 27–39.
- Heise, Ursula K. 2005. "Eco-Narratives". In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan. Routledge, 129–130.
- Heise, Ursula K. 2008. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press.
- Hollinger, Veronica. 2006. "Stories about the Future: From Patterns of Expectation to Pattern Recognition". *Science Fiction Studies* 33.3, 452–472.
- Huang, Hsinya. 2022. "Climate Change and Indigenous Sovereignty in Pacific Islanders' Writing". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Climate*, edited by A. Johns-Putra and K. Sultzbach. Cambridge University Press, 257–268.
- James, Erin. 2022. *Narrative in the Anthropocene*. The Ohio State University Press.
- Jasanoff, Sheila. 2010. "A New Climate for Society". *Theory, Culture and Society* 27.2–3, 233–253
- Johns-Putra, Adeline. 2018. "The Rest Is Silence: Postmodern and Postcolonial Possibilities in Climate Change Fiction". *Studies in the Novel* 50.1, 26–42.
- Johns-Putra, Adeline. 2019. *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge University Press.

- Johns-Putra, Adeline & Kelly Sultzbach. 2022, "Introduction". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Climate*, edited by A. Johns-Putra and K. Sultzbach. Cambridge University Press, 1–23.
- Keller, Lynn. 2017. *Recomposing Eco-poetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*. University of Virginia Press.
- Kerridge, Richard. 2010a. "Environmental Fiction and Narrative Openness". In *Process: Landscape and Text*, edited by Catherine Brace and Adeline Johns-Putra. Rodopi, 65–85.
- Kerridge, Richard. 2010b. "The Single Source". *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 1.1, 155–161.
- Kerridge, Richard. 2014. "Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality". In *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard. Oxford University Press, 361–376.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 2009. "The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood". *The Guardian* 29 August, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood>. Accessed 9 August 2024.
- Lehtimäki, Markku. 2013. "Natural Environments in Narrative Contexts: Cross-Pollinating Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory". *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 5, 119–141.
- Macfarlane, Robert. 2005. "The Burning Question". *The Guardian* 24 September, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/sep/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview29>. Accessed 9 August 2024.
- McKibben, Bill. 2003. "Worried? Us?" *Granta* 83: *This Overheating World*, 7–12.
- Mehnert, Antonia. 2016. *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Milner, Andrew. 2019. "Science Fiction and Climate Change". In *Sci-Fi: A Companion*, edited by Jack Fennell. Peter Lang, 149–154.
- Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Morton, Timothy. 2021. *All Art Is Ecological*. Penguin.
- Nayar, Pramod K. 2024. *Vulnerable Earth: The Literature of Climate Crisis*
- Parham, John. 2021. "Introduction. With or Without us: Literature and the Anthropocene". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene*, edited by J. Parham. Cambridge University Press, 1–33.
- Poray-Wybranowska, Justyna. 2021. *Climate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel*. Routledge.
- Pratchett, Terry, and Neil Gaiman. 2006 [1990]. *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*. Transworld Publishers.
- Rigby, Kate. 2014. "Confronting Catastrophe: Ecocriticism in a Warming World". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, edited by Louise Westling. Cambridge University Press, 212–225.

- Sankaran, Chitra. 2022. "Climate Justice and Literatures of the Global South". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Climate*, edited by A. Johns-Putra and K. Sultzbach. Cambridge University Press, 114–128.
- Sergeant, David. 2023. *The Near Future in Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Climate, Retreat and Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.
- Streeby, Shelley. 2022. "Indigenous and Black Feminist Knowledge-Production, Speculative Science Stories, and Climate Change Literature". In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Climate*, edited by A. Johns-Putra and K. Sultzbach. Cambridge University Press, 203–213.
- Thieme, John. 2023. *Anthropocene Realism: Fiction in the Age of Climate Change*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Trexler, Adam. 2015. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. University of Virginia Press.
- Trexler, Adam, and Adeline Johns-Putra. 2011. "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism". *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2.2, 185–200.
- Vermeulen, Pieter. 2020. *Literature and the Anthropocene*.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. 1991 [1969]. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Dell Publishing.
- Weik von Mossner, Alexa. 2014. "Science Fiction and the Risks of the Anthropocene: Anticipated Transformations in Dale Pendell's *The Great Bay*". *Environmental Humanities* 5, 203–216.
- Woods, Derek. 2023. "Genre at Earth Magnitude: A Theory of Climate Fiction." *New Literary History* 54, 1143–1167.

