**Our House, Our Fire, Our Fiction**

“I want you to act as if our house is on fire,” the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg told world leaders at Davos in January 2019. “Because it is.”

Thunberg’s simple, evocative metaphor mobilized millions around the world: proof, if ever it were needed, of the impact language can have. As the novelist Margaret Atwood once put it, “A word after a word after a word is power.”

If the climate emergency challenges the imagination by demanding that we re-frame our relationship to the ecosystem that sustains us, then that shift of perception calls for powerful new stories, and powerful new ways of telling them.

What role can literature play?

“It’s our job, as writers, to make imaginative leaps on behalf of those who don’t, can’t or won’t,” said the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh in his 2016 lecture series *The Great Derangement,* in which he argued that literature had been shockingly slow to address the climate emergency. He cited exceptions including Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 *The Road*, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour,* Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake,* Ian McEwan’s *Solar* and my own novel*, The Rapture -*  but many criticized him for limiting his argument to “literary” fiction and ignoring Young Adult fiction and science fiction, which have long led the way when it comes to imagining the Earth’s future.

But if Ghosh had a point back then, the good news is that in the intervening years, climate fiction or “cli-fi” has begun to rise to the challenge of the times.

The sheer scale of the ongoing crisis invites a rich variety of approaches.

Inevitably, given extreme weather events and rising sea levels, much climate fiction is preoccupied with water: not enough of it, or too much. While drought is the backdrop to Edan Lepucki’s *California* and Claire Vaye Watkins’ *Gold, Fame, Citrus*, altered shorelines infuse Sophie Mackintosh’s unsettling dystopia *The Water Cure,* Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Drowned Cities* and Nathaniel Rich’s New-York-set *Odds Against Tomorrow.* Given this, it is perhaps surprising that a country as pancake-flat as Denmark has not spawned more flood and Ark narratives. Exceptions are the brilliant, but oddly overlooked 2018 movie *Qeta*, set in a semi-submerged Copenhagen, while Hanne Richardt Beck’s novel *7 Sydøst* contemplates the societal conflicts triggered by flooding and an influx of refugees.

But if there is such a thing as a landmark flood text, it is John Lanchester’s 2019 *The Wall.* Set in the UK following an event known as the Change, the wall of the title encloses a territory that could equally be Denmark, or any other nation with a coastline. In the space of a generation, sea levels have risen dramatically, and the disruption of the Gulf Stream has brought on freezing temperatures – and exacerbated inequality.

*“None of us can talk to our parents,”* reports the novel’s young protagonist. *“By ‘us’ I mean my generation, people born after the Change….The old feel they irretrievably fucked up the world, then allowed us to be born into it. And you know what? It’s true. That’s exactly what they did. They know it, we know it. Everybody knows it.”*

Humankind has always created - and indeed reveled in – crisis narratives. Watch any climate disaster movie and you will see how it operates on a scale that reflects the extremity of our accelerating times: a hyperactive roil of events in which humans struggle to survive the wrath of an angry, abused ecosystem. Post-apocalyptic scenarios paint a more elegiac picture of a Lost Eden: while *Wall-E* mourns a planet converted into a titanic trash-heap, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* imagines a waterlogged delta community in which humans must re-invent themselves, their myths, and their relationship to nature if they are to survive.

While peri-apocalyptic landscapes vary dramatically according to local geography, two of its most enduring props are the shopping trolley and the shipping container: the displaced person’s equivalent of the vehicle and the dwelling. Today’s shopping trolley symbolizes the abundance of the globalized world: as capitalism’s hunter-gatherers we search the aisles for bargains, collecting avocados from Israel, mangoes from Peru, coffee from Ethiopia, plastic houseware from China, or pork from Denmark. In the climate-altered world of a fictional tomorrow the trolley’s purpose is a simpler one: to transport the few possessions we have left. Meanwhile the shipping container, today a symbol of global movement, becomes its opposite: a sign of stasis. In Omaar El Akkad’s *American War,* the metal boxes are the only homes that the vast communities of refugees and the internally displaced will know.

But there is also room for optimistic, if not Utopian fiction in the mix: Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140*, whose huge cast of characters duck, dive and thrive in a watery metropolis reminiscent of the last scenes in the cult movie *A.I*, has been hailed as a pioneer of the emerging sub-genre Solarpunk, which celebrates the notion that whatever fine mess we have gotten us into, our ingenuity and adaptability might just see us through.

If climate fiction is catching up with the times, then ecocide has taken longer to percolate. While threatened ecosystems have sparked an explosion of powerful, elegiac non-fiction by Helen McDonald, George Monbiot, Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane, Katherine Norbury and others, novels about wildlife have stuck largely to their traditional habitat of the children’s and Young Adult shelves.

But here, too, change is afoot. Jeff Vandermeer’s haunting *Southern Reach* trilogy explores the notion of the natural world developing a hive mind with its own colonizing agenda, while Polly Clark’s *Tiger,* about threatened tigers in Siberia, joins a small vanguard of recent novels – including Sarah Hall’s *Wolf Border*, Laline Paull’s *The Bees*, and Richard Powers’ tree epic *The Overstory* - which approach non-human life in diverting new ways.

As the environmentalist and novelist Gregory Norminton puts it, “In order to change our behaviour, we must widen the circle of our compassion to include the non-human….shedding our illusions of superiority to acknowledge our kinship with the rest of nature.”

This is hard for us to do. We are, after all, a storytelling species. Which perhaps explains why some 50 million Americans believe in a religious event called the Rapture in which, come Doomsday, the pure in heart will be airlifted to heaven while the sinners will remain on Earth suffering the consequences of their depravity. It was this idea that inspired me to write about the sub-sea fracking, belief systems, and the “magical thinking” inherent in climate change denial.

It was the poet WH Auden who said, ‘How can I know what I think until I see what I say?’ I suspect that like him, one of the reasons I write fiction is in order to work out what I feel about an issue. But when I wrote *The Rapture (Varslet,* Politikens Forlag*),* I already knew what I felt. The problem was that anxiety didn’t seem like a good starting-point for a novel. Before writing the book, I spent a lot of time puzzling over how to square that circle. Yes, I wanted to share my sense of urgency about frozen methane being released into the atmosphere as a result of rising temperatures and sub-sea fracking, but I also knew that if my readers sensed an agenda, they would run a mile. The solution, I decided, was to let the science take a back seat, edit out any whiff of didactism, and concentrate on the characters. And that’s what I hope I did. The novel has two main protagonists, but there is a third character, which also serves as both narrative engine and backdrop: the climate itself.

I believe that if fiction has a role in our uncertain future, part of that role will be to intelligently explore the challenges and injustices that you, the planet’s youngest humans, have already begun to face.

Historians will look back on this era and note its defining paradox: that while the public imagination was increasingly occupied with the dangers ahead, those in power were either in active denial, busy plotting how best to profit from a range of oncoming disasters, indifferent, or – at best - doing far too little, far too late.

But those same historians may also note that today´s storytellers, inspired by solid science and the evidence of their own eyes, began to reclaim the power of the prophets and seers of past ages by resuming their almost forgotten role as the cognitive avant-garde.

And that collectively, they bear a message that the world ignores at its peril.

**Liz Jensen** is the Anglo-Danish author of eight novels, including the eco-thrillers *The Rapture* (published by Politikens Forlag as *Varslet*) and *The Uninvited* *(De Ubudne*).  She lives in Copenhagen where she runs creative writing courses. For more information visit

<http://www.lizjensen.com/>