



## What is Speculative Climate Fiction?

*Juha Raipola*

Here, at the end of 2010s, it is relatively safe to say that climate fiction is here to stay. Born as the unfortunate love child of global environmental crisis and narrative imagination, climate fiction is a timely cultural reaction to the growing societal awareness of human impact upon the planet and its climate system. During the last ten years, global anthropogenic climate change has become a stable theme in new narrative fiction, and climate fiction (cli-fi) has been recognised both academically and popularly as a legitimate narrative genre. As the increasing concern for climate change still has not led to adequate changes in the global consumption of fossil fuels, this kind of cultural interest in the worsening environmental situation can only be expected to grow in the near future. The emergence of global warming and other global-scale environmental issues as themes of fiction highlights the common need for a narrative experience of the changing world. Besides scientific explanations of the causes and effects of ecological change, we yearn for imaginative and affective narrative responses to the shared concern over our future as a species on a warming planet.

Climate fiction comes in many shapes and forms, however. Without the generic category of climate fiction, most of these narratives would usually be categorised as science fiction, science thrillers, science horror, Weird, (post-)apocalyptic fiction, or dystopian fiction. While authors and critics have been doubtful about the abilities of “serious” fiction to tackle the problem of climate change,<sup>1</sup> recent “literary” novels have also become increasingly concerned with the ongoing ecological crisis. Due to the large generic variety of fictional climate narratives, it might even be argued that despite forming a distinct thematic category of fiction, cli-fi seems to lack the formal characteristics of a genre proper. There is no common plot form, no shared setting, no recognisable genre-specific characters in the many fictional worlds of climate fiction that would properly tie the entire group together, even by family resemblance. The common denominator of all these narratives is merely the theme of climate change, which can manifest itself in a variety of ways in different genres and modes.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ghosh (16–21) and Trexler (240–51).

Despite forming such an incongruous group of narratives, climate fiction may typically be examined as representing either a “realistic” (mimetic) or a speculative vision of climate change. While neither can be described as representing the effects of climate change more accurately than the other, these two modes of cli-fi differ in their basic narrative orientation. For instance, in realistic climate novels, the theme of climate change is usually examined in a rather subdued manner. To support the illusion of literary realism, these narratives are set in relatively familiar surroundings of the present day or a very-near-future world, where recognisable human characters ponder the effects of global warming. Questions relating to climate change are usually brought up by the narrator or the characters in their dialogue, while the fictional world itself remains mostly quotidian.

In speculative climate fiction, by contrast, the entire fictional world characteristically functions as a synecdoche for the changing climate. Speculative visions of flooding cities, melting glaciers, catastrophic storms, or drought-suffering environments demonstrate the potentially disastrous effects of climate change on the global environment, while the plot-level events of the narrative focus on the experience of living in a changed world. For example, in Emmi Itäranta’s crossover young-adult novel *Memory of Water* (2014), a catastrophic change in the global environment has altered the availability of fresh water all around the world and turned the depicted societal setting into a dystopia of tightly controlled water sources. This kind of emphasis on the fictional world instead of the protagonists and their inner worlds is, of course, characteristic to speculative genres more generally, but in climate fiction, specifically, it can be productively used to represent sudden shifts in the global environment.

Realistic and speculative climate narratives also typically differ in their basic approach to the theme of climate change. In realistic climate novels, the focus is often on the various affective and cognitive responses – such as eco-anxiety, climate sorrow, or climate change denial – evoked by the global environmental situation. In speculative climate fiction, more attention is usually paid to the actual dynamics of climate change as a social-material process. There is often more than a hint of didacticism involved in these narratives as they pursue the complex entanglement of human and nonhuman causes of climate change and try to dramatise its potentially disastrous effects on life on Earth.

The emergence of climate change and other global-scale environmental issues as significant themes of speculative fiction has also altered some of the basic expectations of speculative genres. For example, in earlier decades it was common knowledge that science fiction is primarily a tool for societal self-diagnosis, with a rather limited capacity for speculation on hypothetical futures. For example, Fredric Jameson famously argued that SF’s “deepest vocation” is to “dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future” (153), and in SF criticism more generally, futuristic narratives have been typically approached as deformed versions of science fiction proper. In speculative climate fiction, however, the predictive scenarios of climate science are routinely used as a backdrop for the imagined fictional worlds. Consequently, while speculative climate fiction can usually be interpreted as a form of societal diagnosis, it also habitually reads like an ecological prognosis. Part of its value thus stems from its ability to transform abstract scientific information into understandable and relatable “human-sized” narratives. This can be achieved either by representing the speculated direct consequences of climate change, or by analogy, where the fictional world can be

fruitfully examined as somehow relating to the present or future material conditions of the planet Earth.

The emergence of environmental problems as a major theme in recent fiction has also transformed the utopian propensity of speculative fiction. There is a widespread cultural acknowledgement that the human impact on Earth systems has made the future far more fragile than before, and with the collapse of the modern distinction between Nature and Culture, the future can no longer be approached as a question of mere human imagination, choice, or will. Contemporary visions of the future need to be aware of the causal role of both human and nonhuman components in the making of our social-material reality, and neither utopian or dystopian modes of speculation can do without a proper recognition of the environmental limits of our planet.

Is speculative climate fiction thus an effective weapon in “saving the planet”, to use the common hyperbolic expression of the environmental movement? The answer is a hesitant “no”. Its material agency – meaning its capacity to induce measurable change in the material practices of human individuals or social groups – is unfortunately quite limited. As Timothy Clarke has rather convincingly argued, the “power of material modes of production, food habits, reproductive trends and so on” generally overpowers the role of “cultural imaginary” (19) in affecting the impact of climate change. Even an “ideal” climate narrative – one that would perfectly capture the complex and abstract nature of climate change in an emotional and thought-provoking story – would probably still have relatively little impact on the global consumption patterns of the human species en masse. In the current situation of climate change denial as part of identity politics, it also seems like an increasingly misplaced idea to assume that climate change is mostly happening due to lack of proper information or that it could be mitigated through didactic instrumental narratives about the effects of the ongoing environmental transformation.

Yet, one would also be misinformed to judge speculative climate narratives as completely pointless because of their apparent inability to alter the progression of climate change. At this very moment, the metaphoric and analogical powers of speculation could prove to be an indispensable cognitive and emotional toolbox for adapting to life on a warming planet. If speculative climate fiction can keep itself from regressing to repetitive survival tales in the post-apocalyptic desert, it has at least the potential to detox our thinking from the automatisms of perception brought on by the current cultural paradigm of consumer capitalism. As the average temperatures keep rising, we need to adapt to the new situation by a shift in our utopian imagination: instead of continuing to nostalgically lament the now foreseeable end of the current cultural order and its future promises, why not start to imagine alternative ways of living with the catastrophe in the coming era of a post-climate change planet?

*Biography:* Juha Raipola is a postdoctoral researcher at Tampere University, Finland. His current research is centered on questions of narrative in the field of environmental humanities, with a special focus on the limits of narrative form in relationship to the complexity of global ecological issues. Raipola has published articles on posthumanism, ecocriticism, and genre theory. He is currently working on a monograph about the current trend of eco-dystopian sensibility in contemporary Finnish fiction.

## Works cited

- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. U of Chicago P, 2015.
- Itäranta, Emmi. *Memory of Water*. HarperCollins, 2014.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Progress versus Utopia; Or Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1982, pp. 147–58.
- Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. U of Virginia P, 2015.