

What is 'Cli-Fi', and Why are Stories about Climate Change Important?

Axel Goodbody

[Text written for the launch of *Cli-Fi: A Companion*, Oxford, 11 March 2020]

How did the book come about?

It was Laurel Plapp's idea for Peter Lang to bring out a crossover series of Companions to popular literary genres, written by teams of experts, but in accessible language. The volumes are intended to appeal to students, scholars, teachers and potentially non-academics, to offer a general overview of the field, and to give ideas for teaching. In short, the aim was to provide books which would be of practical use to teachers and students, but which fans of the respective novels and films can also read and get excited about. They are illustrated, and priced so as to be potential purchases for undergraduates.

In 2016 Laurel asked me if I'd be interested in editing a volume on Cli-Fi. I couldn't do it on my own, because although I'd been working on climate change novels for some years, my research is mainly in German literature. So I asked Adeline Johns-Putra, a scholar of English literature who had published an excellent overview article on Climate Fiction back in 2011, and was working on a monograph and an edited volume on *Climate and Literature* for Cambridge University Press. We started work in May 2017, shortlisting 30 key works – 25 novels and 5 films – and writing to colleagues who had published on the authors in question. We requested short chapters (2000 words), presenting a single text and offering a way of understanding it. To ensure consistency, we imposed a common structure, beginning by addressing the themes of the work, the approach, and its formal qualities (genre, narrative structure, characters and plot), and going on to discuss its reception and contribution to debates on climate change. Finally we asked for ideas on how the book or film might be used for teaching. We edited the essays and wrote an introduction. After the manuscript had been double-blind peer reviewed, we put together a bibliography with 50 titles, drew up an index, and chose illustrations.

With so many interesting works, it was difficult to decide what to leave out. Some of the more important titles which had to be excluded are referenced in the Introduction. The essays are grouped in six sections: 'Predecessors of contemporary climate change fiction'; 'Dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction'; 'Realist narratives set in the present and near future'; 'Thriller, crime and social satire'; 'Children's films

and young adult novels'; and 'Literary fiction'. Each individual essay is also labelled with a term reflecting its nature, e.g. 'Political cli-fi'; 'Biopunk'; 'Activist Cli-Fi'; 'Documentary film', 'Denialist Cli-Fi', 'Nordic crime Cli-Fi'. These labels are inserted vertically on the outsides of the page so that someone thumbing through can easily find the type of writing that appeals to them.

What is Cli-Fi?

This is essentially a thematically defined category of fiction, but one with certain formal characteristics. We were looking for novels on anthropogenic climate change, and ones in which it is more than mere background. Blending fact and fiction is particularly common in young adult novels with strong educational aims, and in docu-dramas. The authors of climate fiction for adult readers also often see it as their responsibility to communicate key scientific facts about the causes of climate change and its dangerous consequences. However, the focus of cli-fi is usually on the social, political and psychological impact of climate change, and its ethical implications.

Cli-fi comes in the form of short stories as well as novels, also poems, plays, comics, computer games (and of course films and tv dramas). Speculation about the climate-changed future, experimentation with different scenarios, the depiction of conflicts between different standpoints and reflection on our relationship with nature and our responsibility towards future generations are common denominators. A wide range of writing strategies have been adopted, most writing drawing on popular generic forms such as thriller, crime fiction, science fiction, and the disaster novel, and blending these with elements of romance, satire, or even horror. Some novelists have used modernist techniques, substituting fragmentation and multi-focal narration for traditional forms of narrative, but there are few examples of sustained social or psychological realism, and so far there is no one great work of climate fiction.

The first novels on climate change already came out in the early 1970s (Ursula LeGuin, *The Lathe of Heaven*), however 'Cli-Fi' only emerged as a publishing phenomenon from 2000 on. (The term was coined by the American journalist Dan Bloom in 2007.) A breakthrough came in 2013, when articles on the new genre appeared in leading newspapers in the US and UK, and it began to be used as a marketing label. In 2015 Adam Trexler noted that over 150 titles had been published, and since then there has been a further steady stream. Most works of climate fiction are American (and Canadian!) in origin, with a significant contribution from British

and Australian writers. However, Scandinavian, German, French, Spanish and other authors are also increasingly publishing cli-fi.

Why are stories about climate change important?

At the risk of oversimplifying, we know what we should be doing about climate change, but we're not doing it. The need for greater insight into the political, social, and psychological dimensions of the problem is now widely recognised, as well as its chemical and physical causes, and its biological and meteorological effects. But it's not immediately obvious that reading fiction has a role to play in helping society face the environmental challenges of our day, and work towards a more sustainable way of life.

In *The Origin of Stories. Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, Brian Boyd argues that stories have helped us to survive as a species. We have, he says, gained our evolutionary advantage over other species largely through group cooperation. Cooperation depends on empathy, on understanding how others see and feel about events. Stories help us with this as a form of 'cognitive play': they develop our capacity to see from different perspectives and enhance our mental flexibility. As Boyd puts it, "stories help train us to explore possibility as well as actuality, effortlessly and even playfully, and that capacity makes all the difference".

Stories work by triggering the firing of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons, whose function was discovered only in the early 1990s, fire when we see others act or express emotion as if we were making the same action, and allow us through a kind of automatic inner imitation to attune ourselves to their feelings and understand their intentions. Our liking for fiction seems at first glance counterproductive in biological terms: as Boyd says, we might expect an "appetite for the true". But fictional stories offer more intense satisfaction than most true ones, because they are designed to do so: they gain and hold our attention by working with strategies of exaggeration, repetition and surprise.

Stories typically feature characters demonstrating readiness to help others, perseverance, or courage serve as role models. These encourage resilience and determination in readers, openness and independence of mind, tolerance of others, and efforts in support of the common good. Stories are particularly effective vehicles for such moral lessons because "Our guard is down, our moral emotions are engaged, our imaginations stirred", as Boyd writes. In the words of the novelist Philip

Pullman: “‘Thou shalt not’ might reach the head, but it takes ‘Once upon a time’ to reach the heart.”

In the past, then, these functions of stories would seem to have combined, making them a means of increasing our chances of survival as a species. It may not be entirely fanciful to think that reading fiction might also help us survive in the age of climate change and mass extinction. Not only by attracting public attention to this particular problem, but also by refining and strengthening our sociality, making us readier to use the resources of the imagination, and thereby raising confidence in our ability to shape life on our own terms.