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Science Fiction Could Help the Climate Crisis, But Has it Risen to the Occasion?

If I had to guess, when asked why we hadn't solved the issue of climate change already, the answer environmentalists would give you wouldn't be technology or money. Their answer would be people. What should be a globally agreed upon issue has been politicized and second guessed. Every day it becomes increasingly apparent we will likely be unable to save ourselves from an issue we have created and have the means to undo. The only way to fix the issue is to change people's minds. Illustrating the damage we are currently doing to the planet, showing the future that may be in store for us, and providing creative technological solutions are all things science fiction is incredibly adept at, and are needed now more than ever to convert a broad audience into climate activists and believers. And it only makes sense that science fiction would be equally drawn to the topic of climate change. Sci-Fi was defined by Isaac Asimov as a "branch of literature that deals with the reactions of human beings to changes in science technology." It is a rebellious genre that tries to reimagine the way things could be and is therefore ideal to take on these issues and inspire change.

Before climate change had even been introduced as a major issue and before science fiction authors began to weave environmental messages into their texts, the genre began introducing tropes and themes that would go on to play a role in climate fiction. From the 1920s to 1950s, science fiction was getting its start in popular culture during what is referred to as the Pulp Era. While works from this era are generally considered less intellectual when compared to its successors, it was during this time that the cautionary tale and thought

experiments were brought into the world of science fiction. This is also when the character of the Capitalist is introduced. These are all tropes that were not intended to be used for climate fiction, but ended up being useful devices in later works attempting the topic. This also sets the stage for what becomes a theme for those attempting to find environmental messages in science fiction. Without even trying, science fiction tends to make a political statement on climate change, likely because the issue and the genre coincidentally have so much in common.

That is not always the case though. Sometimes climate fiction is created very intentionally. One story that demonstrates the effectiveness of science fiction as a medium to tackle the issue of climate change is *The Future is Blue* by Catherynne Valente. Her story draws from current issues connecting to climate change and the science fiction theme of dystopia to imagine a world in which sea levels have risen to drown the entire planet. While this is an exaggeration of the future science has predicted for us, and Valente's focus on imagery pushes the story into the absurd, the author still manages to convey an important message through a very creative, plot drive story. An interesting novum featured is the towns made of various types of garbage. Inspired by the current Great Pacific Garbage Patch, people of the future have been forced to live on an island of garbage floating through an entirely drowned world. While the reader logically realizes this is not where our world is headed, it still paints a grim enough picture for us to fear anything that comes remotely close to this lifestyle. Not only does fear compel the reader to consider the current gravity of climate change, but also the unmistakable guilt trip. Characters living on trash island frequently reference the "Fuckwits", who you eventually come to realize is us. A particularly hard-hitting moment of the story is when Tetley, the main character, recites a song she learned in grade school: "Who liked it hot and hated

snow? The Fuckwits did! The Fuckwits did! Who ate up everything that grows? The Fuckwits did! The Fuckwits did!”¹ (Valente, p. 360) People of the future living in the aftermath of our mistakes provide an especially good perspective.

While Valente focuses on sea levels rising, the short film *Pumzi* focuses on drought- an issue that will have a large impact on certain part of the world as temperatures keep rising. The film is set in a dystopian future where water has become scarce and humans have abandoned the dead world to live in a confined facility. This film serves as the perfect example of how science fiction can be a powerful tool in speculating the social and technological future of the post-climate change world. Unsurprising, in this futuristic society where water has become a luxury, access is greatly class dependent. A novum in this story are the purification devices that have been implemented in all public restrooms to instantly transform urine into drinking water. Not only is it important to imagine technological solutions to issues that would come with climate change, but science fiction allows us to imagine and fully feel out how that technology would fit into society. We can see how people would interact with it and how it would fit into daily life.

Yet in the numerous works of science fiction I have read and viewed in the past three months, these two have been the only ones to examine the issue of climate change so directly. While the number of ecofiction and ecological science fiction works have increased as climate change becomes a more popular issue, for whatever reason it has not become as widespread as environmentalists would hope. Rather, many works of science fiction choose to critique humanity in ways that could be applied to climate change. These works may require an

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ecocritical approach to the text to discern the environmental messages, while others are more obvious in their critique.

While *Pumzi* and *The Future is Blue* focus on the theme of scarcity and force us to consider what climate change may force us to give up, *Stuntmind* by Braulio Tavares comments on our lifestyle of overconsumption. However, rather than single use plastics or fossil fuels, it is humans that are quickly used and discarded here. People in this story that can communicate with aliens are taken advantage of and return to Earth shells of the people they once were. Tavares writes that their mission has “been fulfilled” (Tavares, p. 218). A seeming critique of our capitalist culture, the narrator goes on to describe how companies continue to invest millions in “Stuntminds”, as each contact “requires a new, untouched brain” (Tavares, p. 219). Descriptions of gross abundance continue as the narrator describes his lavish mansion. But he explains that it is the alien, still living inside his mind, that “now lives in this world and indulges itself in every excess” (Tavares, p. 221). The story closes with the line, “I cannot understand this human greediness for space, since the Abyss is only the Abyss, and nowhere is there a planet so full of perverse beauty as this world of yours” (Tavares, p. 222). We can see this paralleled today, as begin to look towards colonizing Mars to escape the planet we are making uninhabitable. This story says quite a bit about human want- our constant need for more and newer things. However, this final line reminds us what a lovely world we have, and how our wants are getting in the way of us cherishing it.

Science fiction has a unique opportunity, compared with other forms of fiction, to look at humankind from the perspective of other beings within our universe, but with a fresh perspective on our lifestyle. Aliens in science fiction are often portrayed as superior to humans,

and this pushed us to question the actions of humanity. In *The Mirror Image of the Earth*, the narrator comments on this by writing, “In studying our own history, can we be as unbiased, level-headed and impartial as the cosmic beings?” (Wenguang, p. 228). In this story, astronauts who discover an alien planet ponder why the aliens wouldn’t want to meet them, before realizing they’ve been watched for centuries, and aliens have concluded they are violent savages (Wenguang, p. 229). This could be a powerful storytelling device to apply to climate change as we have normalized the way we treat the planet.

The Hungry Earth, through description of the death of humanity after humans have mutated animals that eventually starve them out, introduces the idea of climate change being a way of nature healing itself. The line, “As the last crop of humans failed, the splices said to us via the terminal screens, ‘We are sorry. This is all part of the natural cycle. It was always supposed to happen this way. A normal flux. Evolution’” (Machado, p. 62) “A normal flux,” could suggest climate change is just a natural cycle (rather than man made, as some climate deniers argue), however, it is undeniable in this story that humans have created their own demise. Machado writes, “Where the soycorn and hydroponic lettucesmelons had once grown, where we had built our cities, nature reclaimed her skin” (Machado, p. 62) It not hard to imagine the earth going through a similar process in a post climate change world, and Machado is not subtle about her romanticizing of this phenomenon. Although we are the ones who would go extinct in this scenario, when we recognize the damage we are inflicting on all plants and animals it’s easier to see the justice of the earth eventually reclaiming itself, as Machado illustrates. *The Hungry Earth*, in addition to its indirect stance on climate change, makes a more blatant point on genetically modified organisms. The mutated animals are GMOs in their own

sense, a mix between humans and farm animals, and the narrator comments that it is unsurprising that they would burn the farms and fields of genetically modified crops (Machado, p. 61). GMOs are certainly an environmental issue, and Machado's creative cautionary tale on this issue demonstrates the ability of science fiction to explore environmental issues from a new lens.

A Series of Steaks similarly investigates the future of food. The main character illegally deals in digitally printed beef. Similar to *The Future is Blue*, this story takes something that currently exists, 3D printed food, and expands on what its future may be. Looking at *A Series of Steaks* and *Hungry Earth* through a sociological lens, we can see how in the future of food, just like with the climate crisis, those with more money will be better off. In *The Hungry Earth*, you die when you run out of credit to pay for food (Machado, p. 61), and in *A Series of Steaks*, meat is a luxury enjoyed only by those who can afford it (Prasad, p. 6).

However, the ability of these stories to draw attention to environmental issues is not the only reason I'm so convinced of science fiction's ability to aid in the climate crisis. It is also because science fiction has taken a political stance throughout history, and climate change has become a highly politicized issue. After atomic bombs are used to end World War II, *That Only A Mother* by Judith Merrill used science fiction to bring up the biological consequences of radiation to an audience, specifically mothers, who may not have otherwise engaged with the issue. Similarly, after the US exploded the first hydrogen bomb Julian Kawalec wrote the story *I Kill Myself* about the Zeta bomb and how one man intends to prevent its use to save humanity. Stories like these prove that science fiction has historically been a medium that forces people to consider humanity's mistakes.

In many ways, science fiction has already contributed significantly to the climate crisis by drawing the reader's attention to the dangers humanity creates, often in subtle and nuanced ways. However, I am convinced science fiction can do more, as it is the perfect vessel for authors to breach the topic of environmental issues. In a world, and especially a country, where conversation is difficult and so many are already cemented in their ideals, climate activists may need to turn to cultural outlets to make people think about our future in creative ways.

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