

Analysis of the Cli-Fi Form



Key Themes in Cli-Fi

This section explores the key themes and genres found in climate change fiction and provides an analysis of three exemplary texts.

The following key themes are present in much cli-fi:

- Changed weather, particularly flooding, drought, or extreme heat
- Adaptation to environmental change
- Adaptation to governmental change
- Lack of social boundaries, for example looting, anarchy, and destruction of property
- Changes to the availability and quality of food
- Changes in the availability of electricity
- Focus on, or recognition of, the sins of past generations
- Alternating feelings of hopefulness and hopelessness
- Extinctions or mutations of species

- Changes in the health of humans
- Scientific experimentation

Genres of Cli-Fi

Climate change literature can span a wide range of genres and forms. While some researchers only classify a work as cli-fi if it has climate change as the driving narrative, others also include works that use climate change as a setting or background element. In this project, I have included short stories that use climate change as both a narrative and a background where climate change has some impact on the characters and story. I have separated the short stories highlighted in this project into three different groups:

- Stories from the speculative fiction genre.
- Stories with an element of dystopia or stories that are set in a post-apocalyptic world as a direct result of climate change.
- Stories of general fiction.

Many of the stories in these groups could arguably have some overlap with one of the other groups or fall into another genre entirely, but they have been separated by their main theme. While climate change stories can be written in any genre, including romance, thriller, and horror, the three categories outlined above are dominant in the current writing culture.

What is Speculative Cli-Fi?

Speculative fiction is an umbrella term for all works of fiction with a fantastic, fantasy, science fiction, or supernatural component. In cli-fi, these genres tend to imagine a world following significant, often catastrophic, climate change. The role of speculative cli-fi is to envision the ‘physical and cultural landscapes facing uncertainty through processes of transformation and adaptation’ (Sparks 20). Stories that fall within this genre take on the task of imagining the future with alternative technologies, changed environments, and adapting cultures.

What is Dystopia and Post-Apocalyptic Cli-Fi?

The term dystopia, which comes ‘from the Ancient Greek for *bad* and *place*’, is used to describe a story set in a bleak, often futuristic, society (Adams). These stories place their characters in a world with shortages of necessary resources, such as food and water, outbreaks of diseases, and oppressive societies. They are set after a world-changing event. Many cli-fi short stories could fall into this category as they imagine the worst-case scenarios resulting from climate change. These stories are important as they can have the greatest emotional impact and show readers how it is possible to survive in the face of adversity.

What is General Fiction Cli-Fi?

In this collection, those short stories that do not fit under the genres of speculative fiction, science fiction, dystopia, or post-apocalypse have been put into the category of fiction. They are generally set in the present or near future and deal with issues such as coping with increased changes in temperature and weather, refugees, displacement, extinction of species, and

illnesses.

Analyses of Key Works

The Right Side of History by Jane Rawson (2017)

SPECULATIVE FICTION

The government is offering people an ‘Ultimatum’: to relocate to the eco-friendly Towers or to transfer their souls to an animal species. Art and Lally, a married couple, are given the ‘Ultimatum’: ‘theirs was the last cul-de-sac to go, the last street in the suburb to get its Ultimatum.’ Lally assumes that they will, of course, move to the Towers. Art, however, transfers to a kangaroo without telling her. As Lally packs up their belongings and moves to the Towers, she wonders where her husband is and tries to find him. But the privacy issues around transference make it impossible for her to know for sure what has happened to him: ‘he’s disappeared and he’s not in hospital and he’s not dead and he’s not in gaol. And it’s been two weeks since they executed out Ultimatum and here I am in the Towers and here he isn’t. I know you Transferred him and I know you can’t tell me that you did and you’re certainly not going to tell me what he is or where you put him, but I just want you to know I know.’

This story focuses on government initiatives to reduce the impact of humans and to give back to the land. Humans are moved into towers with eco-friendly features and common rooms to reduce unnecessary waste. There is a focus on reusing materials. When Art and Lally move from their house, their possessions will be given away or split into their ‘component parts for reuse and recycling.’ As she packs, Lally watches ‘the demolition crews working in the next street, dismantling houses and trucking away the reusable materials, landscaping plots and planting native trees and grasses.’ The government has issued a ‘Half the World for Habitat’ target and, despite a few people protesting, most believe that this new way of life is for the best.

The themes in this story—a focus on prioritising nature, on reducing waste, and recycling—are common themes among optimistic climate fiction. These stories aim to show the world changed in an attempt to right the wrongs of the past. It also goes one step further with Art who wants to leave behind the sins of humanity altogether: ‘Art had cried the first time they’d heard about the Rollback, the Ultimatum. Lally had thought he was scared, sad to lose the house where they’d spent nearly twenty years, scared to move to the city where they’d be packed in with every other human. But he wasn’t.’ Art sees transference as an opportunity to ‘be on the right side of history [...] to have a chance to do something just.’ As the city’s suburban sprawl shrinks, Art longs to join the kangaroos he sees bounding through the native grasses. He explains: ‘I’m tired of the weight of being human, of always making things worse. I want to be part of nature. I just want to be innocent.’

Mr Mycelium by Claire McKenna

DYSTOPIA

After an anti-environmental terrorist group poison and then burn their farm to the ground, Jack, his mother Eliza, and a transgenic cow called Fiddy are the only survivors. They take up refuge with a neighbouring farming family and help work their land. Out of desperation, Eliza sends Jack to the market to sell Fiddy to ‘reclaim what little could be had from the

cow's sale'. Jack makes a bad deal and trades the cow for some black market fungus spores. In a fit of rage, Eliza throws the fungus spores on to the poisoned ruins of her old farm. After a night of heavy rain—'a big thunderstorm deluge like they get in the tropics, except it wasn't the tropics but we got it anyway'—the old farm and has been utterly transformed: 'on the ruins of the Dunfries farm a forest had sprouted [...] even as we watched, we could see it grow in height and heft. The drizzling rain appeared to feed the mat, give it shape and substance.' Soon, the fungal forest dissolves and fertility is restored to the land.

This futuristic retelling of *Jack and the Beanstalk* explores the complications of agricultural farming in a climate-changed world. The reader is placed directly into the middle of this changed world, which has land degradation—'our soils lacked cobalt, caused vitamin B12 deficiencies in ruminants. We couldn't afford supplements'—and unhealthy livestock—'some vaccine starter chickens minus most of their feathers huddled in the dust'. While we are not given a clear source of when and how this world came about, we are given a clue by the terrorist group that attacked Jack and Eliza's farm: '*Husbands of Earth*. An anti-environmental terrorist group. The last gasps of the old order. People who had for generations denied and cajoled and ignored had since dwindled down into small, random packs of hate. [...] The HOE terrorists made a point to only use fossil fuels in their vehicles.' The *Husbands of Earth* represents the sins of past generations who refused to acknowledge climate change and continued to use damaging fossil fuels.

The story also includes other themes that are common in climate fiction. There is societal chaos, represented by the *Husbands of Earth*, and the prevalence of toxins in the environment: 'the carcasses of rabbits lay in various degrees of rot, having barely made a few bites before the remnant toxin chafed away their gut lining and made them shit out half their bodyweight in blood.' The story contains a message about the fragility of nature through the use of the fungal forest. The narrator describes the collapse: 'like all beautiful and fragile things that have reached the end of growing, entropy took over. The delicate construction of fungal hyphae, all the whorls and fingers and articulated branches that had made a forest in the air began to disintegrate like an enchanted coach at midnight.' The reader is left with an appreciation of the fertility of the Earth as it currently stands, but also an acknowledgement of its precariousness. We are left with a final thought, which sums up the story nicely: 'there's more to civilisation than just agriculture. Survival is all about persistence, after all.'

Dry Land by Steven Amsterdam (2009)

FICTION

Dry Land is a short story by Steven Amsterdam from his collection of interlocking stories *Things We Didn't See Coming*. The collection follows its narrator over the course of three decades as he tries to survive in, and adapt to, a post-apocalyptic world. In *Dry Land*, a government employee rides his horse through the constant rain in flooded terrain to evacuate people who refuse to leave their houses: 'I'm supposed to cover the low areas, look for the shaky light of candles burning in dark houses and evacuate whoever's still thinking the sky's about to clear. Land Management send me in to protect them from starvation and flooding' (253). When his horse suddenly bolts, leaving him behind and taking with her his food and medicine, he is forced to take shelter with a mother and daughter who are squatting in an abandoned mansion. He tries to convince the pair to leave with him the following day and to get to higher ground, away from the rising water.

This story explores many of the themes that are common in climate fiction. The most notable theme is the change in environmental conditions. The rain in this world is constant: 'there's no wind, so I just hear the rain crashing and crashing onto the roof like pebbles' (256). It is the change in the weather that provides the plot. The government is forcing people to

leave their homes for their own safety. They send emissaries to convince people dwelling in flooded areas, but if they still will not move, other officials will come along who, according to the narrator, ‘won’t be nearly as nice as I’m being about asking you to leave’ (266). Society has changed as a result of the weather. The mother in this story was once a nurse, but she is no longer of use to the new society because she is too old: ‘they don’t want women her age while they’re building. She’s forty-six, over the cut-off’ (261).

Another prevalent theme in the book is changed health conditions to a majority of the population. Because of the rain, rheumatism is affecting people of all ages: ‘she’s standing weirdly, continually shifting to get her bones comfortable, the way people get after a few weeks in this climate without meds’ (256). Hunger is also a big concern in the book. The constant rain makes it very difficult for food to grow. At one point in the story, the narrator slices into a cushion to ‘eat a few bits of golden foam, just to have something in my stomach so I can sleep’ (256). Electricity is no longer in use ‘since the grid went down’ (256), and many government employees loot the properties as soon as they have convinced the owners to leave: ‘the real reward is having the pick of abandoned property, and then hauling away whatever the horse can carry [...] The government trucks are a few days behind us, harvesting the bigger prizes—basically all the construction material that isn’t soaked through’ (254).

The ultimate feeling at the end of this book is one of hopelessness for the mother and daughter. At one point, the mother says, ‘I *get* that we can’t stay here like this. But we’re just as defenceless if we walk out into the forest. Couldn’t protect ourselves from a rat, let alone any larger mammal. If we stay here and stay drunk, I don’t know what comes to us, but at least I don’t have to say goodbye to my daughter’ (263). However, we are curious about the fate of the narrator and are interested to find out more about this changed world that is so similar to our own. The story is uncomfortable and filled with hunger, cold, and damp, which encourages us to investigate ways to prevent this future for ourselves.

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