

Climate Change Novels: Young Adult and Children



How do we define the climate change novel?

How do we best define a climate change novel? Given the complexities of climate change, as a real, scientific and cultural phenomenon, global warming demands a corresponding degree of complexity in fictional representation. Recent popular debates here and overseas raise further questions about what exactly constitutes a climate change novel. Does a climate change novel need to be set in the present? Or set in the future? Set during the time of climate shift, climate change and extreme weather events, and the associated food scarcity and water wars, or can it be well after that—such as in [George Turner's](#) iconic *The Sea and Summer*? Are these novels best framed in context of utopian studies and science fiction studies? [Andrew Milner](#) has contextualised *The Sea and Summer* in terms of understanding the history of Australian science-fictional dystopias. For him, science fiction, whether utopian or dystopian, is 'as good a place as any' for 'thought experiments about the politics of climate change'. He rejects the widespread 'academic prejudice in literary studies against science fiction dystopias', arguing that science fiction cannot readily be assimilated into either high literature or popular fiction (as genre) (827-838).

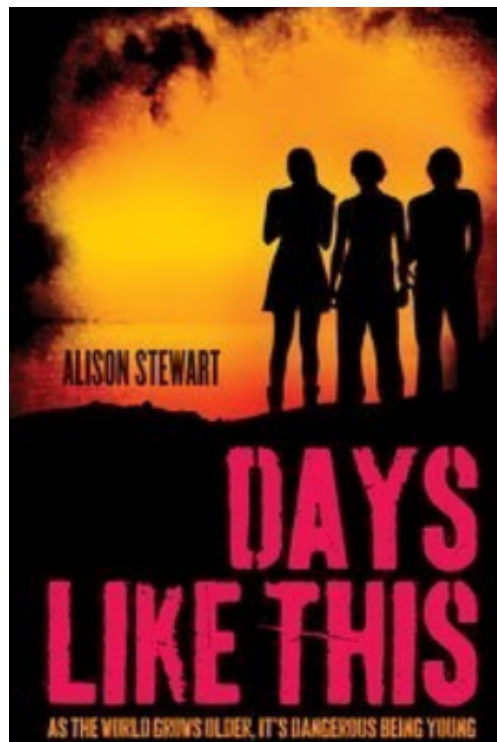
Why are there so few adult novels to date identified as climate fiction? [Andrew Dobson](#) wants 'liberal values tested to possible destruction' and characters that show the 'evolution of sensibilities' 'under the tremendous strain of environmental collapse'. For him, a climate change novel is simply one where the theme of climate change drives most of what happens in the text. And this is a very useful definition. When we use such a definition of climate change literature, there are very few Australian, let alone world-wide, novels about 'climate change'.

Young Adult Fiction and Stories for Children

What we do find is that most of the recent global warming novels are overwhelmingly written as Young Adult fiction, and for children and adolescents (Purdon). Writing for children is highly responsive to global changes. My emphatic young niece, who teaches English Literature in secondary schools, declares that is exactly how it should be, as it will be this generation caught in the coming maelstrom, not us elder bodies. At the other end of the age span, a retired very senior editor thinks that our current authors are not writing 'climate change' novels because it is 'not part of life'. Not part of life! Climate, as distinct from weather, is an abstract concept. Do authors, she continues, write what the public (and/or publishers) wants them to, or do they write what they feel driven to express?

Only a couple of books will be mentioned in this section to indicate more the range and extent of writing for children about climate change, rather than any attempt at being comprehensive. Some of the novels for children are very similar to those apocalyptic thrillers written for adults; other are more interesting attempts to find solutions and inspire children to find answers to the problem of excessive carbon in the atmosphere and oceans. There is an 'abundance' of texts 'advocating positive action to manage an endangered environment' and endangered species (Bradford *et al* 89). [Virginia Lowe](#) has examined a number of picture story books for their metanarratives in terms of the environment, in particular, the impact of Annette Tison's *Barbapapa's Ark*. Australian children's literature has a very strong tradition of stories about the habitat, the flora and fauna of Australia and its islands. And writing from the perspective of gumnuts, dugongs or koalas, by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, is available for a mainstream audience.

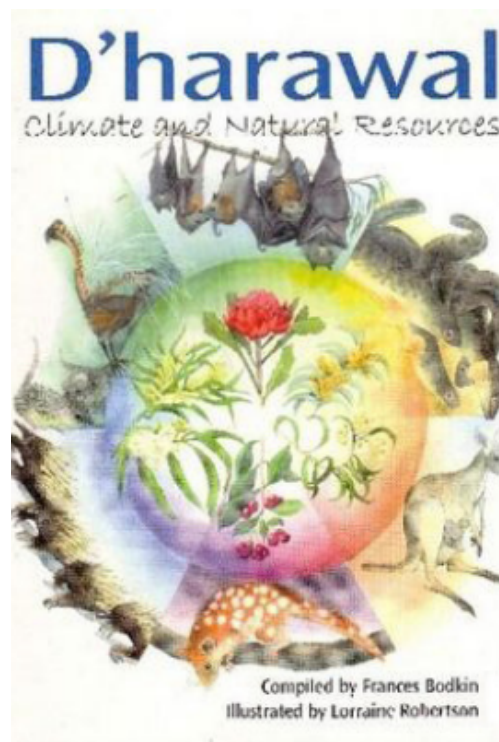
Days Like This: As the World Grows Older, It's Dangerous Being Young by Alison Stewart
(2011)



2011, Penguin Australia

Alison Stewart's young-adult dystopian fiction *Days Like This* is set in Sydney post sea level rises. The city is divided by a huge wall. Lily, Daniel and Alice, restricted to their parents' house for the past three years, are subject to the rule by the anonymous Central Governing Committee, and the Blacktroopers' regular weekly drug regime. Children either become breeders or are harvested for serum from the pituitary gland for their growth hormones. After her twin Daniel disappears (and the parents, becoming younger, do not seem to care, as they lose attachment to their children), Lily attempts to escape over the wall. She is found by a group of children who eventually lead her to the underground cave network they live in. When she returns to rescue her siblings inside the wall, a tsunami wipes out the city. The 'warming' is never referred to as 'global warming', but in her publisher's outline '[About the Author](#)', Stewart tells how she was inspired by a 'growing unease about our diminishing natural resources, combined with the rise of heartless individuality'.

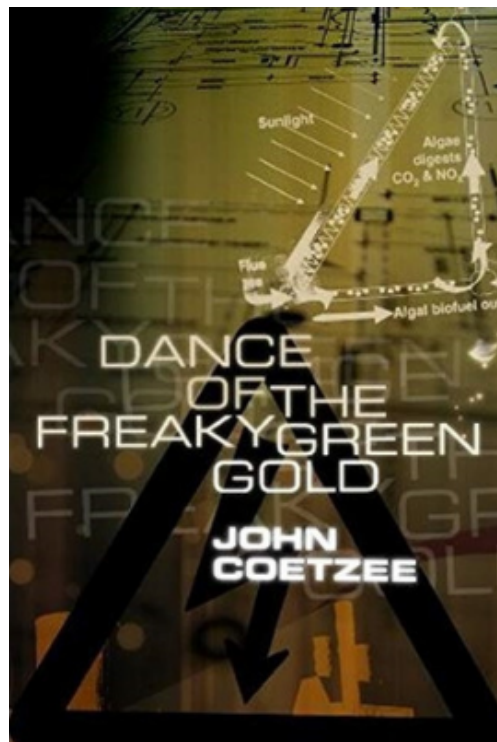
D'harawal Seasons and Climatic Cycles by Frances Bodkin (2008)



2013, self published

For 'thousands of generations', Aboriginal society has survived and adapted to the changing environmental circumstances, developing an intimate knowledge of the Land and seasons (Bodkin 109). Frances Bodkin's extraordinary *D'harawal Seasons and Climatic Cycles* contains some 'Indigenous stories': that is, Indigenous creation stories or 'Law stories' for children about weather and climate fluctuations. These wonderful narratives about the behaviour of certain birds before the rains, for instance, spell out the movements of the animal kingdom in relation to their habitat. In amidst the Law stories is a compendium of information about natural climate changes, the time cycles of the day and the kinds of activities best undertaken, and the seasons and the activities of the plants and animals triggered by the weather changes. Late afternoon, for instance, for the Managanbi, was the time to collect firewood in a culture where it was forbidden to cut down any living tree (Bodkin 19). The season of Marrai'gang, when it is still wet but becoming cooler, was the time of the year for firestick farming, and making or mending cloaks (Bodkin 49). D'harawal knowledge of climatic cycles is disseminated through D'harawal people; there is knowledge of major cycles of which European scientists pay little heed, as well as minor cycles. There is concern expressed that, with the effects of global warming on naturally occurring climate change, the Land will 'be forced straight into the next Time from the Cooling Time of Renewal to the time of Cold, that is without the proper preparation of the earth and people' (Bodkin 99).

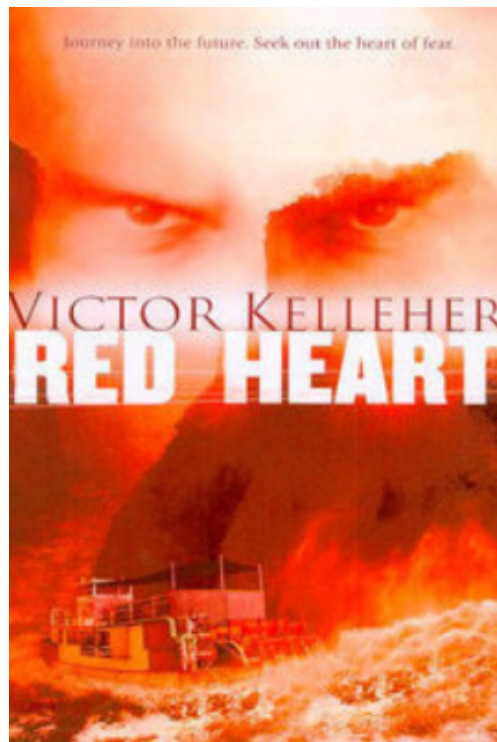
Dance of the Freaky Green Gold by John Coetzee (2008)



2008, Tafelberg Publishers

J. M. Coetzee's *Dance of the Freaky Green Gold*, published in 2008, explores the development of alternative bio-fuels through growing a green algae (which resonates with ideas about carbon scrubbers and other options to remove carbon from the air) (Kunzig and Broecker). When his parents separate, Rick Williams, with his sister Susie and his mother, moves to a small town (Ashby in South Africa) to live with a relative. The strange Uncle Bert works as a shift engineer at the local power station. Rick and his new school friend Siphon Khumalo follow this uncle to see what he is up to and watch him experimenting with transparent tubes of bubbling green goo. At the camp of two supposed gypsies, Rick watches entranced when the beautiful 'gypsy' Gonzales dances flamenco with a python. Later, he meets both Inez and Antonio to learn they are from Florida, working with his uncle to research carbon-absorbing green algae, which produces oil for industry. The two boys join a school tour of the power station where the teacher challenges the industry employee on clean energy. The school bullies attack the 'gypsy' camp, there is an explosion at the power station, the researchers put their case to the power station, and Rick is inspired to become a microbiologist 'to save our planet before it is too late' (Coetzee 102). While not set in Australia, the author now lives here, and the novel is an interesting example of the attempt of imagining a cleaner future.

Red Heart by Victor Kelleher (2001)



2001, Penguin Australia

Victor Kelleher's novel has been described as critical of imperialism; the 'paradise of the new worlds' in Australia is revealed, rather, to be a 'hell', especially after the 'Greenhouse' event (Weaver 123). Young Nat's family farm is nearly inundated by the rising waters of the Darling River and the Company, 'the only real law', is demanding payment from the Nat's father. Nat must journey along the vast reaches of river to search for his wealthy uncle, and is plunged into the interior of the disease-stricken and flooded Australia. There is 'no answer' in *Red Heart* or another of Kelleher's books, *Taronga*, finds Weaver to the issues of 'limited resources', 'border protection' and 'possession', stemming from colonisation and occupation (125).

Conclusion

New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature (2008) is one of the best of many excellent surveys and research books on children's literature. It includes not only a discussion of children's literature and the Australian environment, but also an examination of global warming texts from across the globe. Key to their interpretation of the role of children's literature is the concept of 'transformative utopias' and the understanding that the process of reading equips children with political ideas and values about future world orders. The primary purpose of environmental texts is to shape attitudes by contrasting utopian and dystopian possibilities. In the chapter on environmental issues, they find the key themes addressed in children's texts are habitat protection (and celebration of wilderness), ecosystem conservation, pollution prevention, resource depletion, and the advocacy of harmonic balance between nature and culture.

In their prescriptions for children's books, the authors argue that the 'future well-being' of the human species on the planet will depend on 're-weaving' the culture/nature duality by 'incorporating embodiment': that is, not 'situated' or 'embedded'

knowledges but the understandings of how bodies may function in the construction of socialities—places, spaces and processes of all kinds, cultural, political, and economic, in conjunction with the natural world. In this context, [anthropocentrism](#) must be addressed. And here they note the paucity of children's books attempting to deal with [anthropocentrism](#). They point to [Justin D'Ath's](#) very popular *Shadow Master*, published in 2003, to the British authors Anthony Browne and Philip Reeve, and to Chilean writer Isabel Allende. Beyond [anthropocentrism](#) can be addressed in fantastic dystopias or through magical realism.

In a more detailed critique of [Tim Winton's](#) *Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster*, the story of an eco-warrior's battle with civil pollution, it is argued that all the environmental problems are caused by human greed and disregard for the natural world, and are to be sorted out by humans; in this case, through Lockie Leonard's intervention. In this analysis of Winton's eco-warriors in liminal spaces in the realist mode, they find that as a whole the novel can be categorised as 'shallow [environmentalism](#)', given its privileging of culture over nature. Some of these issues will need to be addressed more directly in context of adult fiction. This view implies a 'climate change' novel needs to be an environmental text, which is clearly at odds with other perspectives and, for instance, the importance of [The Sea and Summer](#), and those emerging climate change literary critics who argue that climate change novels must be global, controversial, and have networked solutions.

Over the last three million years of the Earth's history, there have been major shifts in climate. What is important about the climate change that we are experiencing now is that it is a result of human intervention, it is happening faster than at any other time in the last million years, and the globe is warmer than any other time since mammals have inhabited the earth. The broader view is that 'climate change is not a new phenomenon', the point [Catriona McKinnon](#) makes in *Climate Change and Future Justice* (1). And just as climate change results from human action, it can be ultimately changed by human action.

Is climate change primarily a human problem or an environmental one? Surprisingly, little critical climate change research has drawn on the burgeoning studies in [ecocriticism](#) until recently, especially on the diverse traditions of Green Romanticism, with its engagement with phenomenology and evolutionary biology. Within literary studies, climate change issues are addressed in context of utopian and dystopian writing, notably by [Kate Rigby](#) or [Andrew Milner](#) in Australia, and more recently in 'Extinction Studies' by [Deborah Bird Rose](#). Increasingly important are questions on how the causal [agency](#) has been distributed within and between the human and non-human worlds. Attempts to extend thinking about the postcolonial to include the ecocritical have been fruitful in the work of scholars such as [Anne Maxwell](#) or [Graham Huggan](#). Yet for some climate change novels, to repeat, the environmental imagination, the eco-sensibility, is hardly relevant. [Buell](#) distinguishes between first-wave and second-wave [ecocriticism](#), with the shift from 'individual person/experience orientation' to a 'sociocentric or collective orientation', and questions are at last being asked about long-term intersections of history, environment and writing: that is, climate change is being addressed more widely by ecocritics (103).

D'harawal elder, [Frances Bodkin](#), clarifies the startlingly simple distinction between natural climate change and climate disruption bought about by human behaviour, primarily by industrialisation and consumerism (7). Global warming, the result of climate change, is a 'new' phenomenon, but only in the sense that it is an escalation and result of the historical processes that have gone on for centuries of industrialisation, with the associated increased demands for energy from coal-

based sources and increased use of oil-based transport systems; colonisation, with the depletion of resources through extraction industries and dependency on imported consumer items; agriculture (methane emissions from livestock); and changes in land use such as large scale de-forestation and land clearing, depriving the planet of carbon sinks; the acidification of the oceans and more. The problem of climate change is not natural climate change; the problem is what we do on the Earth stemming from European hegemonic representations locked in binary oppositions between nature/culture, female/male and so on. The question is not to seek new definitions of Anthropogenic collective human *agency*, including us all together as geophysical forces, as Chakrabarty challenges us to re-think (10). Most of all, we need to acknowledge our complicity as Westerners—but we are not the lawmakers, merely the manipulators within the laws of geophysics.

As Aboriginal elder Frances Bodkin finds, climate change is not just a recent affliction, but rather a continuous event. The affliction is what 'modern society's commercialisation and industrialisation have done to natural climate change' (7). Thus, climate change *is* an extension of 'more traditional forms of industrial pollution', which is the reverse of what Anthony Giddens, the important American sociologist, argues. He believes 'Scientists, and scientists alone have directed our attention to it' (Giddens 55). This is not the case, given the chorus of past and present warnings.

Let's open up the debate as fully as possible and not foreclose it too soon. Climate change or environmental devastation? Global warming or the consequences of unregulated industrialisation with no accounting of the environmental costs? The 'Long Anthropocene'? How does our reading of novels, in particular, shape our ethical values and how do those in turn concretely affect our environment? Is it the instrumental values of literature or its inspirational values that are important? Already we have two slightly different versions of climate change: changes in the planet's history and climate change as identified by scientists and others in the last century as a result of the 'greenhouse effect' (McKinnon 3).

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