

Human's Changing Relationship to the Non-Human World



This section continues to interrogate the nature of a climate change novel.

The diversity of modern Australian writing includes a powerful strand of writing about associated issues: that is, environmental activism, especially about forest blockades. The human's changing relationship with the natural world is explored in writings notably by [David Foster](#) and [Katharine Susannah Prichard](#). Extreme weather events increasingly associated with climate change, such as cyclones, and 'unnatural' events leading to environmental pollution, such as weapons testing, are considered. More recently, droughts, floods and the war waters are all being brought into focus.

The environmental crises the human species faces are urgent. When the climate change literary critics Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra argue that climate change calls for a fundamental re-valuation of ourselves, even while it challenges us to put to use the critical cultural tools we have, they are right (185). A fundamental re-evaluation is needed in face of the urgency, seriousness, complexity, immediacy, duration and global scope of the problems facing the human species. In the previous sections, we have looked, albeit briefly, at some of the key novels addressing climate change scenarios that we can identify in Australian writing. Can the critics help us refine our concepts a little further?

There is a current international scholarship on what constitutes climate change literature, yet it is in its very early stages. Given the urgency of the issues, scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds have entered the debate. Most of the pertinent discussions about more than one text have been not by literary critics, but by political scientists. We have already noted the very useful general definition by Andrew Dobson: a climate change novel is simply one where the theme of

climate change drives most of what happens in the text. Only recently are longer cultural studies starting to appear.

To date, most academic discussions are limited to a single analysis of individual books and authors. Contemporary literary criticism narrows its focus to the analysis of literary fiction, rather than taking a broader focus on popular or genre fiction. The question is often raised about the different genres of writing. A wider range of texts, including science fiction, genre fiction, and trade fiction, could well be considered by the academy.

Pivotal in any reading of climate change fiction is often some notion of realism, or realistic possibility; the textual world, even if futuristic, usually draws on some notion of authenticity, or realism. Yet, as we have seen in the discussion of children's literature, realism often fails to address [anthropocentrism](#). Neal Bukeavich takes this up, to find that imagining 'an alternative to anti-ecological forms of global capitalism... requires a more inclusive mode of ecological literary criticism that attends to speculative, postmodern, and satiric fiction as well as realist fiction'. This is an important issue, given that global warming is readily addressed in science fiction. Within the conventions of literary studies, there are extended studies on utopia, dystopia, anti-utopias and eco-apocalyptic writing. Climate change scenarios usually, but not always, fall within dystopian frames, the *what if* novel. The ecotopian novels seek positive futures through changing human relationships with the natural world and non-human realm.

Does fiction addressing climate change and global warming need to be 'new', a global, networked and a controversial phenomenon, as literary scholars Trexler and Johns-Putra suggest (185)? Surely not, as we have seen in looking at earlier novels, such as *A Rainforest in Time* or *Salt*. Global? 'Controversial' but invariably political? Is a climate change novel set in the present? In the future? At the time of the impact of global warming or in the period leading in to it? Trexler and Johns-Putra's call that climate change literary criticism, or [ecocriticism](#), move beyond its long-standing interest in concepts of 'nature' and 'place' to embrace a new understanding of the local in relation to the global is more urgent. In the earlier outline of Australian climate change books, how well they are located in nature and place has emerged as an issue. Do we need to consider a new relation of the local to the global?

Other critics and scholars have named a new genre 'cli-fi', [Anthropocene](#) fiction. Dan Bloom is reputed to have first used the term in 2007 about writing which addresses climate change in various ways, mostly from the position that it is 'real'. Margaret Atwood, the senior Canadian writer, adds that cli-fi describes 'books in which an altered climate is part of the plot'. She continues, 'dystopic novels used to concentrate only on hideous political regimes, as in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Now, however, they're more likely to take place in a challenging landscape that no longer resembles the hospitable planet we've taken for granted' (Atwood). So far, finds Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, cli-fi gravitates 'toward catastrophes and end times' (58-31). When novels are equated with dramatic scenarios and page turners (as in thrillers), Tuhus-Dubrow points to the difficulties in maintaining tension: 'the novel may not be the most appropriate form to convey what climate change, in its subtler, everyday manifestations, feels like now... The experience of seeing the climate gradually change and knowing we are implicated—collectively and in some small way individually—is not especially conducive to dramatic plot.'

Rather than addressing climate change fiction in the apocalyptic tradition, [Graham Huggan](#) suggests that it might just as readily be ascribed to the more general type of 'dwelling-in-crisis' [narrative](#), as defined by Buell, in which 'risk scenarios

menacingly gather and emergent crises—domestic, regional, global/cosmic—fan out across a wide variety of temporal and spatial sites' (2013). He considers in detail two examples—Tim Winton's *Breath* (2008) and Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* (1999)—which are both 'multi-scalar texts that use the conventional narrative techniques of the social realist novel to illustrate some of the ethical dilemmas opened up by today's era of accelerated climate change'.

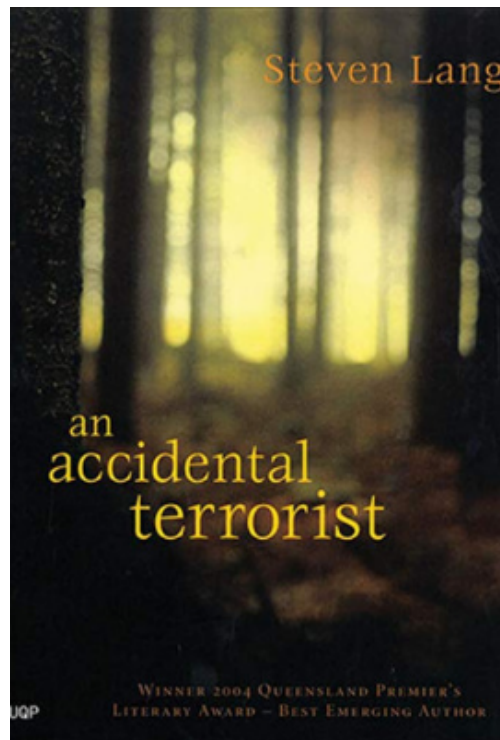
What are the effects of climate change that might be considered by writers? Extreme weather events such as more intense cyclones, increased drought and bushfire, floods, glaciers melting, rising sea levels? Loss of habitat, loss of food production areas, food scarcity, water wars, with associated power struggles counterpoised against the human species' capacity to create and adapt and to find new avenues of exploitation, are all important. More recently, in the IPCC report, the authors consider the impact on global economies and business. And what about dissenting novels, fictional worlds that explore environmental issues such as habitat devastation through de-forestation, but not specifically 'climate change'?

Environmental Activists: Saving the Forests



How might we frame the rich stream of novels addressing environmental politics in the last four decades? *Blockade*, *The Glade Within the Grove*, and *An Accidental Terrorist* are just three very different books of a diverse field, and are all an exciting addition to the literary landscape addressing deforestation, logging and the opposition to it. With very different narratives, diverse focus and plots, readers are privileged to gain access to the world of the activists in the camps in the forests, their thoughts, foibles and strategies, in this extraordinarily unreported battle to save old-growth forests across the continent.

An Accidental Terrorist by Steven Lang (2005)

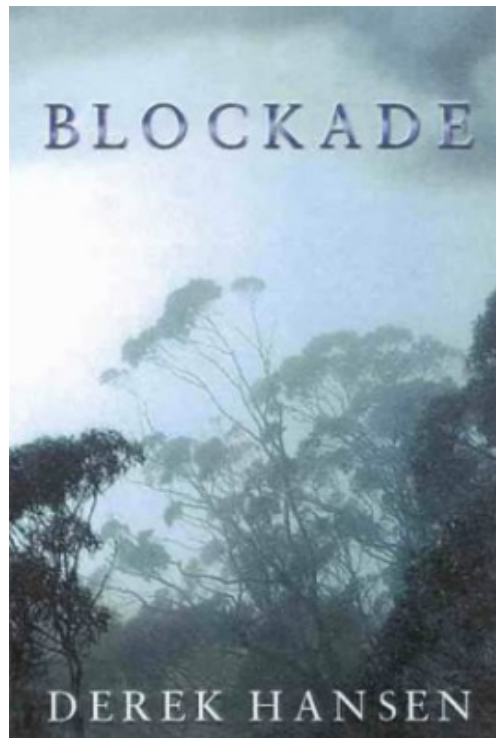


2005, UQP

An Accidental Terrorist, published by the University of Queensland Press in 2005, is a landmark book, as Ruth Blair finds, in stories of human engagement and action in relation to the land (41). Steven Lang is prepared to ask hard questions about the personal and political in environmental politics, in this case about the struggle to preserve the old-growth forests. When Kevin returns to Eden, on the southern coast of NSW where he grew up, he is drawn to Jessica, a passionate 'greenie' living on a 'hippie' community. Her ex-partner, the American Carl, lives next door to the community, and gives Kevin some work. Carl has a past as a former member of the underground leading draft dodgers across the Canadian border during the time of the Vietnam War and is still being hunted by American military intelligence. The key relationships explored in this literary thriller are those between Kevin, Jessica and Carl. Kevin's story emerges. Growing up in Eden, he ran away from his parent's domestic violence, meeting Shelley, a prostitute child, with whom he worked until they escaped to Brisbane. Always moving on, he has short-term relationships. In comparison, Jessica's parents wanted her to be a 'good Jew', although she is a would-be author. She goes to Sydney for negotiations about stopping the logging with the politicians, and through her activities questions about power and the deployment of power (rather than empowerment) are raised.

Andy, an incompetent police spy, urges the naïve community to put sugar in the diesel of loggers' equipment, and Kevin and Jim, another 'hippie', join in with him. Jim is unable to cope emotionally with the consequences. Kevin confides in Carl, who is aware that Andy is a police informer. The main plot is about the environmental struggle between conservationists, loggers and politicians; in part, it is a critique of the hippies, but it is equally critical of the authorities, workers, and local communities.

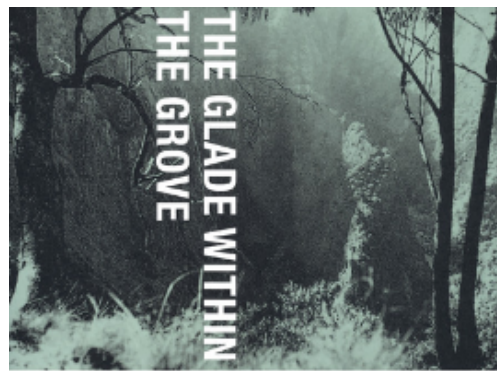
Blockade by Derek Hansen (1998)



1999, HarperCollins

Derek Hansen's *Blockade* is another important fictional representation of the struggle to preserve old-growth forests and the responses of the loggers and their families to the eco-warriors. In a vivid account of the non-violent struggle to stop the devastation of the forests, the activists' lives and politics are revealed as they travel from Melbourne to take up their positions at the blockade. Yet the key motivators for social change in this novel are not necessarily the combined actions of the greenies; rather, the plot is complicated by the love affair between one of the key activists, 'God', and the wife of a chief woodchipper.

The Glade Within the Grove by David Foster (1996)



DAVID FOSTER

'It is a peculiarity of the genre that a significant novel will always appear to stop the traction in its tracks. *The Glade Within the Grove* tempts us to feel that here the work of the novel is done so well there can be no achievement beyond it.'
TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

'The unusual subject, the rich and complex language, Foster's intelligence and daring imagination make this an important and stunningly original novel.'
E. ANNIE PROULX

1997, Penguin Australia

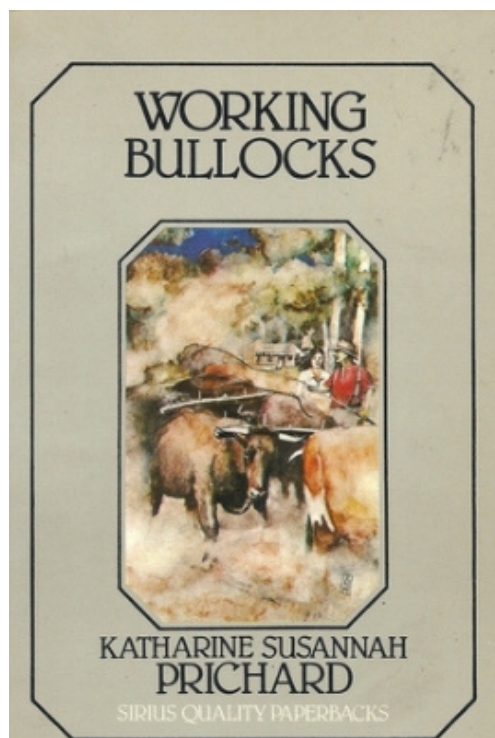
The Glade Within the Grove is perhaps one of the most exciting and challenging novels to be considered here. It is a sustained meditation on the destruction of the old growth forests. [David Foster](#), an extraordinary writer, has come to see the masculine impulse that has led to much violence, perversion and destruction since white settlement as destroying civilisation, and as an impediment to the spiritual. He proposes voluntary castration. First published in 1996, *The Glade Within the Grove* is a complex, many-layered environmental novel that defies easy summary. Above all else is the valley, a hidden valley, inaccessible and impenetrable, and a paradise of messmate, mountain gum, manna gum and more. Ostensibly set in a forest on the Victorian/NSW border, writes critic [Susan Lever](#), it clearly references the Eninundera forest of north Gippsland, and also the valley of the Shoalhaven river near Bundanoon and the valley immediately south of Katoomba. It is hardly populated. E. Annie Proulx finds the novel a 'brilliant retelling of the blood-soaked Attis myth strained through Australian life'.

When the young rock guitarist Michael Ginnsy, with his red waist-length hair, stumbles after his lost dog, he meets two ageing hippies, Phryx Pflingstl and Gwendolyn Mayall, mother and father of the alternative revolution. Michael returns to Sydney to marshal a group of hippies to settle in the valley. The novel is set in 1968, in the heady days of the anti-Vietnam movement when a lottery system for call up to military service was in operation. Seeking alternative ways of living collectively, a commune is the answer. Diane Zoshka is in her mid teens. She is the youngest and most radical of the city group, 'High school dropout anarchist'. She meets Attis, reared by a logging family, at a rodeo and they fall in love. The group find the abandoned ménage of Phryx and Gwen to discover 'they were killed by a lone anti-logging terrorist, who has found a Sacred Grove of thousand year old cedars deep in the valley and is trying to protect them from the outside world' ([Readings](#)).

Lever finds *The Glade Within the Grove* is 'devoted to the task of reconciling Australians to their forests'. She goes on to raise a number of important questions that deserve greater attention than is possible here. She represents much of Foster's

predominant tone in his writing about the mountains as 'melancholy, ennui, even despair' and seems surprised at this. Yet when white individuals acknowledge, deeply, the immensity of the destruction of forests centuries old on the Australian continent in a timeframe that we can still imagine and even have memories of through our grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and given it is not only the loss of the trees but the associated fauna and flora, surely despair is hardly surprising. This is even more so given the importance of forests, in the context of global warming, in their capacity as carbon sinks.

Working Bullocks by Katharine Susannah Prichard (1926)



1926, Sirius

These novels invite comparison with a much earlier novel, *Working Bullocks*, Katharine Susannah Prichard's landmark literary text. *Working Bullocks* is about the Karri forests in South-western Australia. The Karri tree, *Eucalyptus diversicolor*, grows to 90 metres, making it one of the tallest species in the world; de-forestation is one of the drivers of increased carbon in the atmosphere. *Working Bullocks* can be read as Deb's vision of the Karri: Deb, an early representation of primitive Australian femininity, the woman who is more spiritually 'at home' than any of the other characters. The novel is both a political allegory and the love story of Red Burke and Deb Colburn. The desire that Red and Deb feel for each other, finds Ivor Indyk, one of Australia's foremost contemporary critics, moves within them like a natural force: 'it holds them in its sway, in what is, therefore a kind of subjection' (vi). The timber industry is shown in the various kinds of work of 'falling' in the forest and sawing in the mill, of cooking and cleaning in the boarding house, 'in the contemplation of our relationship with nature, in social relations and communal rituals'. When Red's partner (and Deb's brother), Chris, is killed when a log rolls on him, Red retreats to the unlogged 'wilderness'. He forgets his girlfriend, superficial slick Tessa who 'saw herself behaving as though she was a girl in the pictures' (Prichard 55). Tessa is contrasted with Deb, whose 'being flowed

pure and strong from its sources' (Prichard 32).

Other critics address the novel as an exploration of political possibilities. When Deb's brothers are killed through the impossibly dangerous working conditions, the workers organise a strike. Yet these readings assume Prichard's primary concern was about the working lives of these battlers and the possibilities of revolutionary struggle. If we read her as asking questions about the Karri, and how the Karri forests can be protected, before the days of the environmentalists involved in direct action, where can hope for social change lie?

Deb's vision of the Karri is described as a time of heightened awareness, a being at home in the land. She was alive in harmony with the trees:

Deb knew nothing of ancient philosophies; but she had a sense of being close to the life about her, a knowledge of oneness with it, profound and serene. She could not have put it into words, but the feeling was like a benediction. The great trees with their power, the flame of their lives, the fate they were moving towards, she was akin to them; and to the earth, sombre and fecund, thrusting forests from her deep soil, holding them in the air through all the years. The processes of growth had always been a miracle to her, and no one had been able to tell her much of them (Prichard 248).

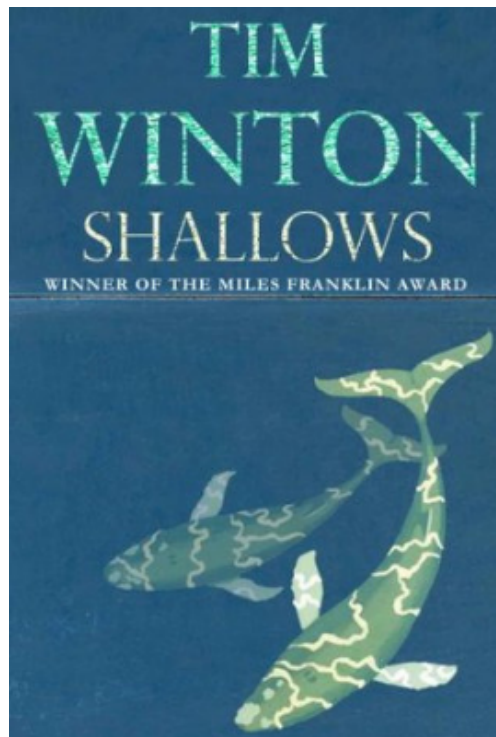
Deb 'understood and respected' 'the power of the trees' (Prichard 183). Prichard tells us that she grew up with something akin to an anthropocosmic view of the forest: 'As a child Deb had believed the trees would never forgive what man had done to them'. She sensed the 'rites to appease' dead trees and their 'worship' in the forest by the fallers, bullock-drivers and men at the bush landings, but she was 'dazed and amazed' by the way 'tree corpses' were handled brutally and callously in the mill (184). In an ecocritical reading of *Working Bullocks*, the constant movement of association between the natural and the human worlds of the novel embodies key themes of human earth relationships, human animal relationships, human non-human relationships, as Indyk foreshadows. Even while Red and Deb are united at the end, Prichard implies the future of the Karri resides in the vulnerable hands of women like Deb trapped in the powerful struggle between the sexes.

When we think about the wider challenges facing the Australian environmental movement in the age of the 'Long Anthropocene', as [Peter Christoff](#) does, questions about identity and authenticity come up for non Indigenous Australians. He finds 'Romantic protectionism' and 'preservationist environmentalism' are the roots of the movement shaping their need to find hope, not calling it how it is. Given the urgency of addressing climate change, Christoff calls for a paradigm shift. We need to develop narratives, he believes, that reflect, mourn and mobilise around such tragic developments as coral bleaching (1045); indeed, there is an emerging field of studies, 'Extinction Studies'. More, he wants 'pluralistic' environmental politics based on 'precaution', avoidance of suffering and 'protection of the most vulnerable'.

When we address disasters, such as the Darling and Murray rivers and environments, declining rainfalls and a drying continent, there is an extremely rich lode of climate fiction about droughts and water wars. Water rights, inappropriate farming techniques, and drying rivers are explored with different levels of sophistication. In *The Last Pulse*, on board a boat catching the flood surge are Merr Rossiter, the guy who blows up the dam wall; his young daughter, Em; the Queensland Minister for Environment and Resources, Bridget Wray; and Barwon, the eleven-year-old Aboriginal boy who sang up the

river. In a hilarious, heart-warming yet black story, Anson Cameron shifts the notion of activism and places it into the hands of an ordinary farmer. *The Waterboys* by Peter Docker is an extremely powerful and sophisticated account of past and future times, when violent struggles over water, as Conway fights the insidious Water Board, echo through the centuries. It is part revisionist history, part dystopian thriller. In *Billabong Bend*, through the romance between Nina, land-owning conservationist, and Ric, cotton farmer, Jennifer Scoullar gently introduces the reader to some of the issues facing the riverland with climate shift. What about portraits of our more classic environmental activists saving the whales?

Shallows by Tim Winton (1984)



2009, MacMillan

The works of Australia's much-loved novelist, Tim Winton, have a strong environmental imperative and they are the subject of a number of critical studies. Suffice here to mention *Shallows*, which can be read as a meditation about whaling and opposition to it. John P. Turner finds the novel is concerned with 'spiritual malaise', 'failure of leadership' and the 'plundering' of the earth's resources (79-85). The novel is told through the lens of several generations of the Coupar family living in Angelus on the West Australian coast. The struggle of the American whaler Nathaniel Coupar to make sense of his harsh life at the height of whaling in Australia in the 1830s, and his responsibilities to his family and to his God, provides one touch point of the work. His grandson Daniel lived and worked and is dying out on the farm near Angelus. Then there is his grand-daughter Queenie, just married to Cleveland Cookson; the young couple are facing all the tests of their young love and of the rebellious 1970s generation. When a group of ecoguerrillas, Greenpeace, led by a glamorous Frenchman, arrive to protest the slaughter of the whales, Queenie becomes passionately involved in direct action. Winton bases some of his novel on the Canadian Greenpeace involvement at Cheynes Beach in Western Australia in 1977. The once-profitable flensing works is closed, and as a result the town's economy collapses. But as Turner points out, there are no easy answers

in this book to the issues of alienation and involvement, release from suffering and from guilt; 'religious questions' make the 'climatic moments' in the book ambiguous (88). 'A sobering novel which challenges complacent beliefs', finds [Veronica Sen](#), in a review of *Shallows*, and opening up, as Huggan would have it, ethical dilemmas about the future (Pollak and MacNabb 102).

Other authors directly address questions about what kind of people, what kind of social organisations, and which individuals with what kinds of spiritual capacity or power can lead the world out of our present morass--such as [Rosie Scott](#) in *Feral City* or Noel Wilson in his extraordinary unpublished novel addressing similar themes.

Writing About Extreme Weather Events and Climate



What about novels that address rapid environmental change, extreme weather events and other so called 'natural' disasters, that now are recognised as having an anthropocentric base? The Australian preoccupation with climate and weather comes from remnants of a deeply held and felt ancient belief, [Alexis Wright](#) hopes in an article for *Meanjin* (70). Do Australians sense a different, more powerful law of nature than the Australian law? she asks. She also raises the question of whether we see 'Mother Nature' as destroyer or provider, a question she picks up in *The Swan Book*. Wright challenges us to find a space of respect and acceptance to be able to hear the ancient stories from Australia's Indigenous elders about how to understand the weather. And there are others who also write of the contribution of Indigenous knowledges to climate change science, an avenue worth pursuing.

What is demanded, on the other hand, by the emerging northern hemisphere climate change literary theorists, in the representation of climate change in novels, is a text which 'moves beyond simply employing the environment as a setting but begins to explore its impact on plot and character' (Trexler and Johns-Putra 185). Environment as 'a setting' or

something more? Is this the important distinction between 'place' as setting and 'place' as 'space'? Here we have a key prism through which we can view fiction, but a prism that needs further interrogation. It seems particularly well answered in past and present writing in Australia, past and present tropes in Australian myths of origin, and [narratives](#) of national identity.

Extreme weather events vary across the continent and associated islands—such as through drought, floods, heat waves, storms and bushfires. To take just one thread about extreme weather events, the following section will look at cyclones as represented in Australian writing. Cyclones are seen as a passive response to climate forcing (Elsner and Jagger). Tropical cyclones are increasing in intensity, if not in number. With climate change, the Bureau of Meteorology warns that, with ocean surface temperatures rising, there is a correlation in the potential intensities of cyclones ([BOM](#)).

In the aftermath of the recent cyclones in north Queensland, concerns were expressed about the loss of public memory of the experiences of living through cyclones, even though there is a long history of cyclonic activity. Before the event, the media generated terror among the people who were living in the path of the cyclone, waiting for its onslaught, or running from it. Affronted tourists caught on coral cays complained bitterly on our television screens amid other shots of gyrating palm trees.

The impact of cyclones on communities and individuals, at first glance, seems hardly well represented in the literary imagination, that is apart from the English classics, notably *The Tempest* and Joseph Conrad's *The Typhoon* (1903). [Vance Palmer's](#) *Cyclone* was published in 1947 in Australia; [Robert S. Close's](#) banned *Love Me Sailor* in 1945, and a vivid film, [Charles Chauvel's](#) *Sons of Matthew*, was released in 1949. They are three very different perspectives on extreme weather events. The film is a classic of heroism and drama, and offers a counterpoint to Palmer's more understated work; the storm in Close's novel, an extraordinary misogynist account of an all-male crew on the windjammer, is used as a literary device merely to heighten the abjection of psychotic femininity.

There many many accounts of cyclones across the decades. [Patrick White's](#) Elizabeth Hunter achieved a state of grace in the midst of resting seabirds when she emerged from her bunker through the cyclone's eye in *The Eye of the Storm*. Novels by [Nene Gare](#) or [Thea Astley](#) include cyclones; so too, numerous young adult fictions and, especially, memoirs. [Susan Hawthorne's](#) 'cyclone inside' is expressed in poetry in *Earth's Breath*. [Alexis Wright's](#) extraordinary *Carpentaria* tells of the cyclone which goes inland to the township of Desperance to seek out the law-breaker.

Cyclone by Vance Palmer (1947)



1947, Angus & Robertson

The possibility of a catastrophe weaves its way throughout the early section of Vance Palmer's *Cyclone*, which opens with a quiet moment in Fay and Brian Donolly's marital life. The very first paragraph introduces the cyclone: 'That wind, Fay Donolly was thinking as she woke, it was like a spiteful bird, swooping down and lifting away' (Palmer 1). Brian works on a trading boat, the *Gannet*, with his war-time mate, Ross Halliday, and they are scheduled to deliver stores up north. Fay hopes that Brian will spend the Easter break with the family and not head out to sea. As a seafaring community dependent on their capacity to work with the oceanscapes, to respond and adjust to different moods of the sea and weather, to connect with the deeper rhythms of the natural world, the threatened cyclone invariably brings to a head the tensions between the two men and a third sleeping partner, Randall. Brian is forced to make a choice between his holiday promises or his responsibilities to Halliday, who cannot find anyone else willing to crew in the impending storm.

The cyclone, when it finally sweeps down the coast and makes landfall, 'purges the human conflicts it has both intensified and symbolised', as critic Harry Heseltine describes it (119). The *Gannet*, with Halliday and Brian, is caught directly in its path and wrecked. Halliday is lost; Brian survives. The third partner, the only person in the region with light aircraft, flies north to search for them, and Heseltine defines this passage as the climax of the story:

And then at the next strip of beach, Randall stopped dead, hardly daring to believe his eyes. Three hundred yards away a big figure was moving towards him, head down—a ragged figure that rolled in its walk yet kept doggedly on... It was life itself that was driving on through the sand; blind, battered, yet moving to some pulse in its secret core (Heseltine 119-120).

A very different reading is possible when the cyclone itself is given centre stage and seen as impacting on plot and character (Jordan). The study of a variety of human responses—male and female, white and black—to their environment, in the

process of adaptation, is characteristic of many of Palmer's novels. Fay's experience of the cyclone is markedly different from that of Brian's; it is she who galvanises the air search for him, it is she who convinces Randall to use the plane to look for Brian, and she has some *agency* in the events as they unfold both in the real and psychic realms. Her cyclone is likened to an enormous wounded snake:

Convulsive in his death-agony he swept his tail over cays and coral reefs, sending the tides roaring up little rivers and swamping the mangrove beaches. The great head twisted and swayed; the forked tongue shot out in lightning against the sky. (Palmer 160-161).

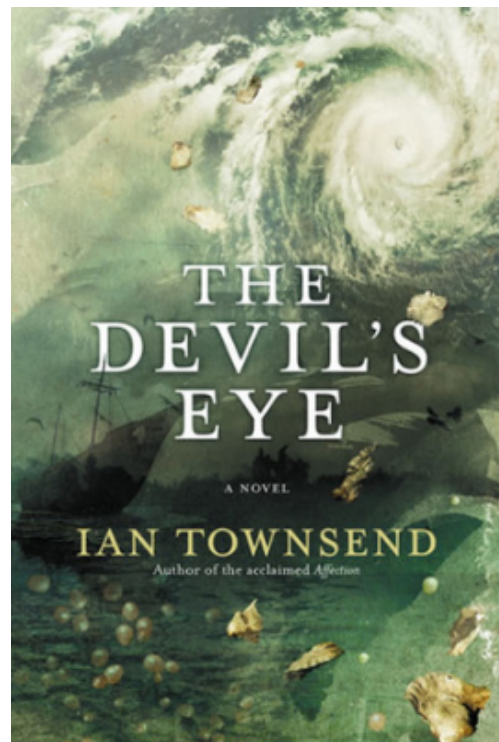
Palmer is interested in his character's emotional and psychic responses as well as how she resolves her visions; he is suggesting something much more inchoate through Fay, some notion of the realm of nature as part of the unconscious, tied in with notions of death and destruction, as so too, the will to live. Through personal alignment with 'the secret pulse of life', that is, through being grounded and clear in one's relationships, Palmer's characters survive disaster. This is normalised; when Brian finally relies on his intuition and sense of portent, and retreats from a long drawn out and exhausting confrontation with Halliday, his energies are marshalled to survive the forthcoming disaster.

The cyclone is seen through the (Cairns) newspaper editor's imagination, which 'soared to a point in the sky from which, secure against a background of stars, it could look down at the dark cataract rolling in upon the coast.' Corcoran is a representative humane fence-sitter:

A cataract was it, or a leviathan bat, awakened from some cave in the night's heart? He could see its wings spread out a hundred miles over reefs and little islands, see the whirling head alive with evil power. As it swept on it sucked up the seas beneath it and threw them into chaos: it tore up coral reefs, swamped islands with its tidal floods, snapped the anchoring-chains of little boats and sent them to their doom (Palmer 151).

Here we have what the ecocritics now call the view of the blue planet earth, even a sense of planet. An eco-cosmopolitan sensibility? Fay's younger brother, Tod, a poet in the making, camps with the unemployed workers at the local showground. Like all the other characters, he too has to make choices and is being tested. With his pocket full of cash, he could pursue the girl who has been eluding him, or stay solid with the unemployed who face a town vigilante group, stirred up by the local businessmen. Tod stays in the camp. The planned violence fails with the onslaught of the weather. Tod is euphoric, youthful idealism affirmed through the intervention of the cyclone.

The Devil's Eye by Ian Townsend (2008)



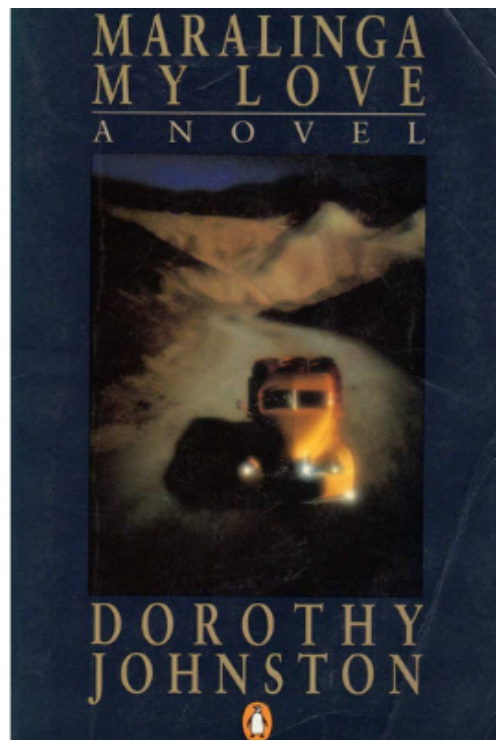
2008, Fourth Estate

Ian Townsend's *The Devil's Eye* is an attempt at pathos in a dramatic historical narrative of the 1899 cyclone Mahina that decimated the northern pearling fleets. It traces the story of John Douglas, senior ranking government official. He has two daughters: Maggie Porter, pregnant, is the wife of the captain of the mother ship for the pearling fleet; the second daughter Hope works as a midwife in Townsville. Her lover Kenny is a policeman, investigating a murder of a pearl buyer, and he is accompanied by Dr Roth, Protector of Aborigines. Although well told, well researched and full of intrigue and tension, the account of the cyclone itself, the extreme weather event, is mere setting and background, in context of its physical impact on the characters and plot. The author lists the names of the 300 men killed.

In this discussion on novels where environment shapes and impacts the plot and characters, a crucial entry point is through the representations and the study of the bio-regions. Let us take for instance the Great Barrier Reef. Stephen Torre has examined the shifts in discourse as 'naturalists become scientists and ecologists, as maritime navigation becomes less dangerous, as explorers become industrialists and tourists, and as poets, novelists philosophers and other imaginative thinkers begin to turn their attention to exploring the beauty of the reef' (9). He addresses literary representations in Mark O'Connor's *Reef Poems*, Rosaleen Love's *Reefscape : Reflections on the Great Barrier Reef*, and Naomi Mairou's children's story, *The Dugong Meadow*, told from the point of view of the dugongs, not the fishers who lose their vessel. He notes the shift from 'dangerous' to 'beautiful' sublime. Places and regions can clearly be represented from diverse perspectives, and the history of these representations opens up important insights into not only cultural meanings but the environmental history of the place itself.

Not only 'natural' weather events are the focus of important novels addressing our concerns. What of man-made environmental disasters such as through mining? Or weapons testing? And the study of novels where the characters respond differently, or take up different positions, becomes important.

Maralinga, My Love by Dorothy Johnston (1988)



1988, Penguin Australia

Dorothy Johnston, with her nuanced readings of the processes of obstruction, corruption and bureaucracy in *Maralinga, My Love* (1988), can be read in this context. It is an evocative novel about bureaucratic and institutional hegemonic cover-up in the horrendous nuclear weapons tests carried out by the British in the 1950s and 1960s in the remote South Australian desert. The character Graham Falconer is attuned:

The feel of the desert air, the dry smell of the bushes, the boundaries of hills in the distance, these things he knew existed, precisely, effortlessly, without strain. He was at home with them. (Johnston 157)

'What came sharply across all this' for him, 'across the emptiness of the Village and the presence of those who had gone, was that the British were doing very much their own thing. They did not want the Australians to have any part of it' (Johnston 158). As Johnston describes the hero, he is 'a young, working-class Melbourne man who finds his life altered and his assumptions questioned by his involvement in a scientific experiment that has dramatic and lasting consequences'. Johnston makes it clear there will be no simple answers.

Maralinga, My Love alerts us, once again, to look at the connections between political phenomena and habitat destruction. Climate change negotiations can be broadened to include foreign policy, trading policies, financial affairs, even intellectual property rights. Other attempts, a decade ago, directly address the climate shifts, but hesitate to name *global* warming. In Kate Legge's *The Unexpected Elements of Love*, one of the author's central characters, Janet, is a television nightly weather presenter, and her son Harry is increasingly petrified by storms, but the warming is never global. Much contemporary climate fiction, in comparison, is getting blacker, about living in the end times.

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