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Happily ever after in the age of climate crisis: The argument for "cli-ro"

Abstract:
As a research team formed of creative writing scholars and practitioners, we investigate climate change fiction, exploring the artistic and emotionally supportive possibilities of storytelling. In this article we explore the intersections between climate fiction and commercial romance fiction by analysing three case studies: Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You,* Rachel Griffin's *The Nature of Witches* and Aya de León's *Side Chick Nation.* We examine the ways in which they explore, challenge and offer strategies for engaging with the climate crisis in an optimistic relationship-oriented genre, considering the complications of subgenre and positionality.

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Keywords:
Climate fiction, romance, climate anxiety, climate optimism, genre fiction

> I want to be fighting for a better world for the rest of my time on this earth and I am hopeful that you do too…We need to be plugged into a movement of people who will encourage, challenge and hold us. We need to fall in love and hold our friends' hands, kiss their faces and laugh until our stomachs hurt… I need to live a life that feels like it's worth fighting for.
> – Mikaela Loach, 2023

Introduction

As a research team formed of creative writing scholars and practitioners, we investigate climate change fiction, exploring the artistic and emotionally supportive possibilities of storytelling. In this article we explore the intersections between climate fiction and commercial romance fiction, a nascent genre we call "Cli-Ro". We consider three case studies: Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021), Rachel Griffin's *The Nature of Witches* (2021), and Aya de León's *Side Chick Nation* (2019). We investigate the narrative structures of each novel and the ways in which those structures explore, challenge and offer strategies for engaging with the climate crisis in an optimistic relationship-oriented genre, considering the complications of subgenre and positionality. As climate change looms, a topic too big to ignore, these romance texts successfully embed depictions of a planet in crisis into the familiar narrative structures of a romance novel, in which two characters meet, fall in love, face barriers and ultimately end up happily together. Crucially, they do so without reducing climate change and its various manifestations to a mere contemporary backdrop, before which the standard courtship and consummation plays out. Instead, these texts demonstrate how the romance genre's commitment to an eschatology of love (Roach, 2010) can offer deeper commentaries on pathways out of our climate crisis, with loving relationships the wellsprings from which serious change can begin. At a time when most climate fiction remains rooted in dystopian future-disaster, this dedication to the positive potentialities of human relationships casts climate fiction romance—or "Cli-Ro"—as a radically optimistic subgenre. We acknowledge that these issues of climate and climate narratives are freighted with inequalities, and we recognise the disproportionate effects of climate change on the Global South. Aya de León's *Side Chick Nation* (2019) is a text emerging from the frontlines of the climate crisis in the Global South and was chosen to challenge the hegemony of the Global North's dominance in literary discussions of climate fiction and the climate crisis.

Romance as an activist genre

Romance has always been a political and even activist genre, Trojan-horsing important issues within pleasurable entertainment fiction. In her book *Dangerous Books for Girls*, Maya Rodale observes that romance texts "tackle diverse issues like class, love, women's sexuality and pleasure, rape, virginity, money, feminism, masculinity, and equality" (2015) and now, we suggest romance may also be a useful genre in which to write about the climate crisis. Our previous research (Cothren et al., 2023; Hennessy et al., 2022; Hennessy et al., 2024) discusses the limits of dystopian Cli-Fi which, we posit, engenders a turning away in the readership, tending towards an affect of despair by fixing the future in apocalyptic imaginaries. The climate activist Zahra Biabani claims that "climate doomism – a fatalistic view of our future centred on the belief that the earth is too far gone – is now so pervasive that it rivals climate change

denialism" (2023) and Cli-Fi authors, from Margaret Atwood with her *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003; 2009; 2013) to, most recently, Tim Winton with *Juice* (2024), have leaned into the doomism, producing fictions that read as uneasy cautionary tales. Apocalyptic fictions once functioned as a strategy for consciousness raising, attempting to convince a divided public that the climate crisis was both real and imminent. In 2025, however, we are living that future. It is our now, an age of once-in-a-century-storms and bushfires occurring near-annually. We are living through global warming, rising seas, droughts and floods, pandemics, geo-political instability and waves of climate and crisis refugees. This is an existential age and it is possible we need more from our fictions than scares and scolds.

Fiction has the capacity and, dare we say, the responsibility to imagine the ways in which we can face the future head-on; the ways we can change, challenge, grapple and cope with the climate we continue to create. Climate activist Mikaela Loach argues that "our radical imaginations are so deeply powerful […] we have to imagine something so exciting that we cannot help but do all we can to get there" (2023, p. 222). The authors in our three case studies endeavour to create positive climate narratives, whether through foregrounding connection with others, or through the wish fulfilment of magic, or direct activism. For example, de León's *Side Chick Nation* tackles the crisis head-on through a Latinx couple successfully uncovering the truth about Hurricane Maria's death toll, and the author has explicitly rejected climate doomism and dystopia, arguing:

> I think we are at the point where there's one critical message: If we fight we can win. I think dystopia is not what we need right now. We have seen some of how bad it can get, and don't need to envision more devastation. We need to envision people banding together to fight for justice and winning. (de León in Woodbury, 2020)

Up to the present time, Cli-Fi has been firmly located in the genres of literary fiction and speculative fiction. But what roles can other "entertainment" fiction play in the climate fiction imaginary? Romance, as a genre built on foundations of idealism, hope and comfort, may have unique tools to help us write new climate fictions, tools that centre relationships, communities, love and an ethics of care. Genres have different narrative possibilities, tones and perhaps, very importantly, affects. Fiction is an emotive genre of writing and emotion is a key driver of engagement with, or denial of, the "Problem", as Daniel Sherrell calls the climate crisis in his memoir, *Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of Our World* (2021). The author Michael Chabon argues for the connective value of entertainment fictions, claiming they provide "mutual support through intertwining, like a pair of trees grown together, interwoven, each sustaining and bearing up the other" (Chabon, 2008, p. 3). As Francesco Ferrando writes, "interdependence, symbiosis, affinity … are as fundamental as the category of alterity" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 70). Moving stories away from individualist and modernist despair towards collectivism is to pursue projects "aimed at the affirmation of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 192). Might romance fiction have this capability to affectively engage with the climate crisis in a manner that intertwines pleasure with urgent questions of sustainability?

Romance fiction is a genre which traditionally generates an affect of joy, comfort, and optimism. Christina Figueres, founding partner of the civic organisation Global Optimism, writes that:

> Optimism is not the result of a success; it is the necessary ingredient. To address a challenge if we want any chance of success. Optimism is not blind to reality. It is not oblivious to the hard facts. Optimism is a choice. (Global Optimism n.d.)

Lauren Berlant holds that "[a]ll attachment is optimistic, if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something*" (2011, pp. 1–2). In the case of romance fiction, that *something* is romantic attachment and happiness through love; in the case of climate activism, that *something* is addressing climate change in order to save the planet, the lives of animals, humans and other living beings, and to give humanity opportunities to thrive. Loach believes "we *also* need to find the thing that mends us; the hope for something better that excites us so much that our hearts feel huge and full" (2023, p. 214). Rosi Braidotti maintains that "hope is a way of dreaming up possible futures: an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them" (2013, p. 192) and romance is a genre centred on hope.

"Romance storytelling," Roach tells us, "is a safe, imaginative space to explore the meaning and shape of [the] landscape of risk" (2015, p. 24). This sense of "safety" for readers largely derives from the consistency with which romance texts hit familiar and uplifting narrative beats. Pamela Regis' (2003) formalist examination of the genre extracts "eight essential narrative elements" that define romance texts, including "the meeting", "the barrier" and "the betrothal". While modern romance texts have shaken off this slightly rigid framework – in particular the expectation that the narrative ends with marriage – a constant throughline is a happy ending in which the characters have overcome their difficulties and are free to express their love in whatever form that may take. This is the narrative contract writers and readers of romance fiction co-sign, and all three of our case studies adhere to it. However, as we expand upon below, this does not preclude these novels from exploring dark and challenging material, with depictions and discussion of the climate crisis as sobering as the latest climate report in the news.

This mixing of social criticism and entertainment is not new to romance, although it is an element that critics of the genre have long ignored. Romance novels have often been dismissed and culturally ridiculed, partly for their aspirational, idealised, and some would say conservative, romanticism; for aligning hope with romantic love. Catherine Roach argues that "romance novels … do deep and complicated work for the (mostly) women who read them" and that there is "a transgressive and empowering nature to this work" (2015, p. 11). These texts are cultural conversations that for the most part fly under the radar of cultural criticism. Roach's work explores feminist concerns but we suggest the "deep work" of romance extends beyond the power dynamics of cis-het women in patriarchy and, as Rodale posits, actually embraces a plethora of social challenges (2015). The romance plot is a leavening of the conversation, foregrounding pleasure in order to enable us to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway,

2016) and opening cultural conversations around how we will face the challenges of the climate-changed world. Roach feels the romance narrative "functions as a foundational or idealized story about the meaning and purpose of life" (2016, p. 4), offering an eschatology of love that values connection through romantic, sexual and emotionally intimate relationships. She tells us that "the basic plot of the romance narrative [is to] find somebody to love, work through problems, be happy" (2016, p. 4).

What if the problems to be worked through are bigger and more existential than interpersonal issues or self-actualisation? What happens when the narrative problem is the climate crisis? How can romance help us imagine ways to work through the problem of living in a climate-changed world and even to imagine happiness in the face of it? Jean Radford, quoting Northrop Frye, claims the popular appeal of romance is "that it dissolves the boundaries between the actual and the potential, offering a vision of 'the possible or future'" (1986, p. 9). Romance is always aspirational, striving for an ideal future which is located in a state of loving and being loved. That ideal future does not necessitate a perfect world, rather it requires a partner who offers the comfort and support of enduring love in the world as it is. We acknowledge this opens up issues of power and imbalances of experience, but for the purposes of this article we will explore the possibilities of Cli-Ro by considering three case studies of climate-concerned novels that feature love/romance plots.

These case studies are tethered by their intertwining of romantic relationships and the wider climate crisis, yet differentiated by the subgenres and locations in which they occur. In Sally Rooney's realist literary romance, *Beautiful World*, *Where Are You,* the characters actively worry about climate change, writing wonderfully complex and nuanced letters about capitalism and their implication in it, despite never actually being directly affected by the crisis; in the end, they are disconcerted to find love and happiness can co-exist with existential anxiety. In Rachel Griffin's *The Nature of Witches*, a young adult (YA) romance-fantasy novel, magic softens the starkness of the climate crisis, and love, friendship and community become an integral part of the effort to combat the crisis (quite literally). *Side Chick Nation* is a romance-thriller set during Hurricane Maria and is more grounded in the realities of how climate change impacts those in the Global South, yet it is also arguably the most optimistic of the three novels, exploring how love can be a powerful tool for activism.

Considering this trio of novels as an entryway to the wider possibilities of Cli-Ro, we argue that in an expanding landscape of risk, these imaginative spaces are needed to help readers grapple with the hard truths of our present and our future, without surrendering to apathy-inducing despair. Romance does not deny reality; it is an inherently optimistic and uplifting storytelling tool with which to navigate the challenges of reality, and each of our case studies wrestles with how to deploy the optimism of romance without succumbing to a Pollyanna-ish side-stepping of the stark existential nature of the crisis.

Beautiful World, Where Are You

Sally Rooney's third novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You,* tackles the connection, or possible disconnection, between romantic relationships and climate change, specifically focused on the experience of people in the Global North. The protagonist, Alice Kelleher, is a successful novelist who has retreated to rural Ireland after an emotional collapse. She goes on a humorously bad Tinder date with Felix, a local warehouse worker, whom she nonetheless slowly falls for. Scenes depicting this burgeoning relationship are spliced with emails between Alice and her best friend, Eileen, an editorial assistant at a Dublin literary journal who has her own relationship drama in the form of a long-term crush on her friend, Simon. In their correspondence, Alice and Eileen mix updates on their love lives with discussions about climate change, capitalism, right-wing extremism and system collapse. The erudite and passionate writing on these topics could easily be clipped from the novel and published independently as essays. But by choosing to embed them in a novel alongside the characters' romantic dramas, Rooney explores how finely intertwined the personal and political feel in contemporary life. Love and romance cannot exist independently of solastalgia and the novel soaks in the simultaneity of feeling. Numerous emails move from grand political statements – "If we have to go to our deaths for the greater good of humankind, I will accept that like a lamb" – to gossip: "I don't know why you're being so coy about this person Felix. Who is he? Are you sleeping with him?" (Rooney, 2021). This dizzying blend occurs outside the emails, too, such as when Eileen finally admits to Simon the depth of her feelings for him, a pivotal breakthrough moment in any romance narrative, by comparing his absence to bad political news: "Every election everywhere on earth makes me feel like I'm physically getting kicked in the face. And then not to have you in my life? … It's hard for me to imagine going on in those circumstances" (Rooney, 2021).

Rooney successfully depicts how relationship drama and awareness of world crises can *feel* the same or at least be inextricably entangled. The obvious retort is that Alice and Eileen's privilege as white, middle- to upper-class citizens of the Global North means the various crises discussed never actually impact their physical reality. If anything, the maintenance of their relative comfort is the cause of the world's ailments. This truth comes crashing down on Alice when she enters a shop and considers the human and environmental cost required to provide her with this abundance:

> This is it, the culmination of all the labour in the world, all the burning of fossil fuels and all the back-breaking work on coffee farms and sugar plantations. All for this! This convenience shop! I felt dizzy thinking about it. I mean I really felt ill. It was as if I suddenly remembered that my life was all part of a television show – and every day people died making the show, were ground to death in the most horrific ways, children, women, and all so that I could choose from various lunch options, each packaged in multiple layers of single-use plastic. That was what they died for – that was the great experiment. I thought I would throw up. (Rooney, 2021)

Alice is temporarily nauseated by this knowledge, yet self-aware enough to acknowledge it is only a fleeting discomfort: "Of course, a feeling like that can't last. Maybe for the rest of the day I feel bad, even for the rest of the week – so what? I still have to buy lunch" (Rooney,

2021). More permanent is the sense of guilt that lingers over her dialogue with Eileen, as they abrade themselves for focusing on the ups-and-downs of their relationships in light of the world's ongoing disintegration: "It seems vulgar, decadent, even epistemically violent, to invest energy in the trivialities of sex and friendship when human civilisation is facing collapse. But at the same time, that is what I do every day" (Rooney, 2021).

While still far outnumbered by the deluge of future-set dystopian novels about climate change, there have been previous works exploring what the knowledge about climate change and other crises (and one's implication in them) does to the interior lives and exterior relationships of those in the Global North, with Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) and Ali Smith's *The Seasonal Quartet* (2021) being notable examples. But Alice's status as a best-selling novelist (whose meteoric career trajectory neatly mirrors Rooney's own) gives *Beautiful World, Where Are You* a metafictional element that is particularly relevant to our questions here about the potential for romance plotlines and explorations of the impact of climate change to coexist. At least according to Alice, they *cannot* coexist, as:

> Who can care, in short, what happens to the novel's protagonists, when it's happening in the context of the increasingly fast, increasingly brutal exploitation of a majority of the human species? Do the protagonists break up or stay together? In this world, what does it matter? (Rooney, 2021)

The structure of *Beautiful World, Where Are You* underlines this disconnect. The bulk of the discussion around climate change and other crises occurs in the novel's early chapters, when both Alice and Eileen are romantically adrift. With little to speak of in terms of serious relationships, they turn to the world's problems with a sense of nihilism: "No one wants to live like this. Or at least, I don't want to live like this. I want to live differently, or if necessary to die so that other people can one day live differently" (Rooney, 2021). Aside from these vague ambitions for martyrdom, the only specific action the characters can come up with to intervene in these problems is to refuse procreation: "I don't particularly want to have children"; "Considering the approaching civilisational collapse, maybe you think children are out of the question anyway?" (Rooney, 2021).

Just as Rooney's characters are haunted by the question of possible children, romance narratives are haunted by the spectre of reproductive futurity (as defined by Lee Edelman, 2004), something queer scholars have particularly wrestled with when they try to queer the heteronormative structure of the romance genre. What does it mean to love when reproduction is in question? What is sexual/romantic love when it is divorced from begetting children? Pure hedonism? In *No Future*, Lee Edelman observes that political systems construct "the Child as the image of the future" (2004, p. 22); the Child is employed to rhetorical effect in democratic elections, in demonstrations and during acts of activism and protests, in moral debates and panics. The Child bears many burdens. Often discourse about the climate-changed world is dominated by reproductive futurity, and this includes climate fiction texts. In their analysis of Australian climate fiction novels by non-Indigenous writers, Jack Kirne and Emily Potter note the frequency with which these texts centre their narratives around protecting (white) children

from the worst effects of the crisis, and they tie this to a settler/colonist mindset in which "the mark of success is to leave a better life for your children" (2023, p. 961). Kirne and Potter argue that this tendency undermines these novels' critique of neoliberalism and its effects by "paradoxically reinvesting in particular tropes that privilege the white nuclear family and the pursuit of a secured futurity as a central response to climate crisis" (2023, p. 954). Romance is also inherently in conversation with reproductive futurity because couples lead to children in a heteronormative framework. In critiquing its heteronormativity, Jonathan Allan stresses that in romance fiction, sex is "not just the merely pleasurable but also [demonstrates] the (re)productive potential of that sexuality" (2016, p. 30). In *Beautiful World, Where Are You* we see Rooney addressing the tension around reproduction and climate change. Embracing sexual/romantic relationships means making choices about the future, and the choice to reproduce (or not) hovers, waiting to be addressed.

The novel's focus shifts as both Alice and Eileen start to fall more deeply in love with their respective partners, at which point they begin to drop their earlier guilt over foregrounding relationships as the world burns: "Maybe we're just born to love and worry about the people we know, and to go on loving and worrying even when there are more important things we should be doing" (Rooney, 2021). While still acknowledging the existential threat of climate change, they now argue that humans' myopic focus on personal relationships is an endearing feature, one to be cherished despite its potential consequences:

> If that means the human species is going to die out, isn't it in a way a nice reason to die out, the nicest reason you can imagine? Because when we should have been reorganising the distribution of the world's resources and transitioning collectively to a sustainable economic model, we were worrying about sex and friendship instead. Because we loved each other too much and found each other too interesting. (Rooney, 2021)

This argument acts as a permission structure for the novel itself, as the characters' "interesting" relationships take over in a third act in which the couples gather for a weekend at Alice's house and the emails (and their political content) drop away. This shift is cheekily acknowledged by Rooney when Felix tells the women, at the doorstep to a house party: "Now just be normal, alright? Don't go in there talking about like, world politics and shit like that. People will think you're freaks" (Rooney, 2021). Concerns for the exterior world are absent from the characters' thoughts during this period, replaced with more typical narrative tension around the miscommunication and trust barriers that the couples must overcome to achieve romantic satisfaction. And yet, Rooney ends a number of the chapters in this section with brief descriptions of nature, as if a camera is zooming back from the relationship drama to remind the reader of the wider world the characters have momentarily turned away from: "Outside, astronomical twilight. Crescent moon hanging low over the dark water. Tide returning now with a faint repeating rush over the sand. Another place, another time" (Rooney, 2021).

Both couples end the story in a contemporary "happy for now" situation, unmarried but secure in their coupledom. The earlier nihilism is gone, replaced with an appreciation for the

transformative effect of love: "To live with someone I really love and respect, who really loves and respects me – what a difference it has made to my life" (Rooney, 2021). At this point, the emails resume with the news that Eileen is pregnant. This life change forces Eileen to readdress her earlier doubts about the importance of relationships in the face of ongoing crisis: "Alice, is this the worst idea I've ever had? … Neither you nor I have any confidence that human civilisation as we know it is going to persist beyond our lifetimes" (Rooney, 2021). But those earlier doubts were based on hypotheticals; now that she has successfully obtained a loving relationship and child, Eileen no longer believes in sacrificing herself for the greater good: "I could not stomach the idea of having an abortion just because I'm afraid of climate change … it would be a sick, insane thing to do, a way of mutilating my real life as a gesture of submission to an imagined future" (Rooney, 2021). In fact, instead of feeling guilty for focusing on relationships, she now argues that they are her best method for positively affecting the world: "I want to be on the children's side, and on the side of their mothers; to be with them, not just an observer, admiring them from a distance, speculating about their best interests, but one of them" (Rooney, 2021).

In his memoir, the climate activist Daniel Sherrell struggles with the ethics of bringing children into a future blighted by the climate crisis and also struggles with his despair at the thought of resigning himself to failure and childlessness. Here the lack of Child and lack of future blur, underlying Edelman's observation about the figure of the Child as Future. Sherrell ends his memoir by explicitly encouraging his future Child to hope: "Do not accept the vision of our future as a single road leading to a burning city … Compromised as it is, it still seems to me more like a fan, stretching out in front of us in a swath of possible outcomes … In this indeterminacy, there is potential" (2021, p. 242). Rooney enters this fragile space of potential hope too as her characters contemplate children, although she does so more tentatively in her fiction than Sherrell does in his memoir. Acknowledging the instability of the future Rooney's character's Child will inhabit, her characters take the leap of blind optimism into the fraught unknown.

By successfully traversing the traditional romance structure, Eileen ends the novel washed of her earlier angst: "As I write you this message I'm very happy" (Rooney, 2021). While this closing line adheres to romance's structural demand for a happy ending, the effect on the reader is likely to be much more complicated. Some critics have described this closing image of domestic happiness as an evasion of the novel's earlier explorations of world crises. By forcing the "politics and the real [to] fade into background noise", Annabel Barry (2023) argues that "the final emails offer the sentimental relief of the love plot in a form that makes it feel flat, even as it claims to be a resolution". Yet this criticism could arguably be made of *any* contemporary romance novel or, for that matter, any contemporary fiction that has positive outcomes for privileged characters. By at least acknowledging the poverty and misery that Alice says are typically suppressed in such stories, Rooney muddies the positive affect of her characters' happiness. She does so in a way that realistically mirrors how many citizens of the Global North particularly juggle personal relationships and their concerns for world issues such as climate change. Amelia Ayrelan Iuvino writes that "there is something incredibly relatable in the amount of energy the millennials in *Beautiful World* devote to thinking about the twin

problems of global capitalism and their love lives" (2021). In Ayerlan Iuvino's view, the characters – and Rooney – successfully achieve a balancing act between "loving and caring and being wrapped up in what may seem quotidian, without allowing our knowledge of the exploitation and suffering our daily life rests on to fade into the background" (2021). As climate change is increasingly impossible to ignore, even for those of relative privilege, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* offers a glimpse of how romance can coexist with crisis.

The Nature of Witches

Situated in the fantasy genre, Rachel Griffin's YA novel, *The Nature of Witches* pushes past realistic portrayals of balancing concerns for the world and personal relationships, and instead offers a narrative in which love and relationships are at the frontlines of the fight against climate change. The novel follows Clara, a young witch enrolled at the Eastern School of Solar Magic, where she is trained to use her magical powers to fight against a climate that is increasingly out of control. In this world, magic is linked to the seasons, with most witches only capable of using their full power in the season in which they are born. Clara, however, is a rare "Everwitch", capable of harnessing every season's power, and therefore always in her full power. This makes her invaluable at a time when the world's atmosphere and weather is deteriorating at a rapid pace, due to the environmental mismanagement by non-magic humans, called Shaders, who have been "behaving as if magic were infinite … as if this planet were infinite" (Griffin, 2021). Despite the fantastical premise, the allegory for *our* climate change is clear, with the Shaders representing older generations who denied climate change, and Clara and her friends representing Gen Z, the generation on whose shoulders the burden of solutions lies. The "extreme atypical weather" (Griffin, 2021) facing the witches includes unseasonal heat waves, flash flooding, stronger than usual storms, and other realistic examples of climate change that feel pulled from our real-world news feeds.

Clara expresses a generational outrage at having to solve a problem (the Problem) she didn't cause: "We'll all graduate soon and be left to deal with the consequences of an atmosphere that's falling into chaos…It's terrifying, this intense heat we had nothing to do with creating" (Griffin, 2021). *The Nature of Witches* functions in many ways as a cathartic expression of generational pressure, speaking to a generation facing an uncertain and dangerous future, one which they will have responsibility for addressing. The novel expresses fear, rage, and a deeply felt sense of the unfairness of the burden. The pressure is embodied by Clara, as her unique powers come with disproportionate responsibility for fixing the crisis: "The school pushes me as if I'm the answer, as if I can single-handedly restore stability in the atmosphere" (Griffin, 2021).

Clara is further singled out because of the ways in which her powers can damage those she cares about most, with previous accidents causing the death of her parents and her girlfriend. Loving relationships and serious action cannot (for Clara) coexist. Living alone in a cabin at the school's campus, Clara engages in season-long romantic flings with little emotional depth, allowing her to temporarily "pretend I'm not so lonely that it has practically hollowed me out" (Griffin, 2021). Clara is isolated in her existential despair, crippled by the pressure of being a

saviour, and without hope. Secretly, she wishes to expose herself to an eclipse, which will strip her of her powers and release her from the burden of being the world's best hope for salvation: "All I want is to shut off my brain, shut off my worries and expectations and crushing guilt that rule my waking thoughts" (Griffin, 2021). Her inner monologue in these early scenes feels akin to Alice and Eileen's emails in *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, particularly when she expresses guilt over wanting to prioritise relationships over climate action: "I'm a messy, complicated human, and I'm selfish and tired and want more for myself than a life of longing and isolation" (Griffin, 2021).

Clara's life of isolation begins to change when she meets and falls in love with Sang, an older student who has arrived to help her control her powers. The fact their "meet cute" moment occurs in the middle of a devastating storm symbolises the difficulty of developing romantic relationships in the shadow of crisis. However, Clara's connection with Sang grows as she discovers that he "has a type of magic that calms me down as I'm using my own" (Griffin, 2021). In fact, Sang's calming effect on Clara mirrors the potential effect optimistic genres such as romance can have on readers anxious about the climate crisis:

> There's something about the way he talks about hard things that makes them easier to approach, and I feel the tension rush out of me…even in the worst conditions, he can make everything pause—my worries, my fears, the whole world. (Griffin, 2021)

The romance structure calls for a barrier to temporarily separate characters; this barrier arrives in the novel when Clara accidentally strikes Sang with lightning and her paranoia over hurting those close to her resurfaces. At this point in the narrative, Clara's central choice between focusing on the climate crisis and having a satisfying relationship is foregrounded once more. However, Griffin uses a fantastical twist to expose this choice as a false binary. During a fight with Sang, Clara discovers that she has the ability to help *other* witches use their powers out of season and this power is increased according to the quality of the relationship. In other words, love and connection are the *answer* to the climate change problem, not a distraction: "You were *amplifying* magic – everyone's. You made us all stronger" (Griffin, 2021). The power of romance in the face of crisis is emphasised by how Clara describes this feeling of amplifying another's power: "The first time it happened, it felt like I was falling in love" (Griffin, 2021). In the closing scenes, Clara mirrors Rooney's characters' conviction that to dedicate oneself to relationships is to turn *towards* crisis, not away:

> I used to think being alone was the answer ... [but] being kept from other people was the very reason it took me so long to learn about this power, a power that is wholly dependent upon the strength of others. (Griffin, 2021)

Despite this parallel, the ending of *The Nature of Witches* is more unambiguously positive than the ending of *Beautiful World, Where Are You.* Clara's discovery not only allows her to reconnect with Sang but also gives her agency to make real change in the world, as exemplified in a late scene where she and other witches use their new collective power to save lives at a music festival hit by flash flooding. Adding to the positivity is the change in the Shaders'

attitude to the climate crisis, with a late coda describing how they are "putting in the work to reverse some of the damage they've done" (Griffin, 2021). Aimed at a younger audience, the novel is ultimately about coping and hope, and about how future solutions will come from collective efforts. Michelle Deininger describes how the novel flips the lone hero trope to instead "point toward the community as the source of power, rather than individuals – collective action is the only way to save the world" (2022, p. 452). Clara decides to write a guide to being an Everwitch so that future generations will not be tripped up by the same false binary between activism and love that she has overcome. Quotes from Clara's book, we finally realise, have been used as epigraphs to each chapter, one of which – "You weren't born to be isolated" (Griffin, 2021) – feels like the novel's central message.

Roach tells us that in romance "giving up individuality for coupledom requires a willingness to make changes in one's life for the sake of another and generally involves sacrifice … It requires trust, self-love, and a willingness to take on risk" (2015, p. 23). In other words, it requires being able not just to work with others, but to engage with them fully and openly in loving kindness; it requires genuine cooperation and collaboration for mutual thriving. *The Nature of Witches* moves Clara from a state of isolated despair, where she is helpless and unable to engage successfully with the climate crisis, to a state of being entangled with others, a state which grants her strength and power. Falling in love with Sang is her gateway to that state of entanglement and empowerment. Individuality is privileged in patriarchal capitalism and is part of the Problem – it is embedded in hyper-capitalism, which has been a major cause of climate change, but *The Nature of Witches* opposes the idea of the individual, constantly reminding us that Clara is fundamentally connected to the natural world, the weather, and to other humans. She doesn't save the world, she merely becomes a focal point for humanity's power to do so, and it's her capacity to love and be loved, and the joyful magic of romance, that enables her to *want* to do so.

Side Chick Nation

Side Chick Nation manages to match *The Nature of Witches'* optimistic belief in the power of love to fight against climate change while remaining grounded in the real world. The novel, which won the International Latino Book Award in 2020, is the story of Dulce, a former sex worker who escapes an abusive relationship only to get caught up in the middle of Hurricane Maria, a real hurricane that devastated Puerto Rico in 2017. Along the way, Dulce falls in love with Zavier, a Latinx journalist covering the disaster, and the two help expose the false death tolls provided by the US in the hurricane's aftermath. Dulce's growing awareness of the climate crisis and the US's damaging activities in Puerto Rico also see her write a viral essay, braiding these issues together with the exploitation and violence she has encountered as a marginalised woman of colour. This in-text essay neatly matches de León's achievements in the novel itself, beginning immediately with an opening prologue in which the flood waters of the hurricane are likened to the violence of a pimp: "She flashed back as the water choked her. She recalled his hands around her throat" (de León, 2019).

When the novel opens, Dulce is in a drastically different position to the characters in Rooney and Griffin's works, whose privilege allows them to focus on finding meaningful relationships while intellectualising world crises. Groomed as a teenager into the sex trade, Dulce has been forced to view relationships as a means to survival:

> You don't think about who you want to be with, you just think about survival. Who can keep you off the street. Who can make sure you get food in the fridge. You follow the money. (de León, 2019)

When she first meets Zavier, she is attracted to the calmness and trust she feels in his presence, but chooses to spend her time with a series of rich venture capitalist businessmen instead, as they can offer her temporary security: "She didn't have time to be all starry-eyed for some boy … She needed someplace to stay tonight" (de León, 2019).

A side-plot involving a heist on one of these businessmen illustrates how the men using Dulce are the same ones who are exploiting Puerto Rico and damaging the planet, resulting in what a character later describes as "the biggest ecological disaster of our time" (de León, 2019). Here, we see a holistic system that exploits both people and the planet, as described by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*: "The uneven effects of climate change are the result of systems that were set up by brute force to ensure that poor nations remained always at a disadvantage in terms of both wealth and power" (2017, p. 110) As Dulce herself admits at the novel's end, her precarious situation has not previously given her the space to consider how climate change might impact her community: "I used to think that environmentalism was some white people drama until this climate change practically fucking killed me" (de León, 2019). The foreign businessman flees the island as the hurricane approaches, stranding Dulce and causing her to regret her choice: "If she had not turned him down, she would have a boyfriend like Zavier who would have called her from New York to check on her, instead of someone who was married and didn't really give a damn" (de León, 2019). The businessman treats Dulce as disposable, while Zavier sees her value. But importantly, the novel is about Dulce's realisation of her own value, and the value of her world and the people she loves. This growing realisation of the deadly effect of capitalism on both the island *and* herself is neatly symbolised when she gets caught in a flash flood and nearly drowns after her Cartier necklace, a gift from one of her sugar daddies, snags on debris.

Awakening to find that Zavier has been trying to reach her, Dulce foregrounds love for the first time in her life and sets off to find him. That the two eventually reconnect is never in doubt for readers familiar with the romance structure, and yet the devastation Dulce encounters on her journey to Zavier is rare in mass market romance, where the ideal is privileged over the real. Dulce witnesses a child dying in an under resourced shelter, a domestic abuser tracking down his wife amid the chaos, corpses being loaded into trucks, and the threat of sexual violence from U.S. military personnel. Alice's doubts, expressed in *Beautiful World, Where Are You,* that readers can care about a romantic relationship while also being confronted with misery, feels pertinent for this dark middle section of the novel. De León believes in the romance genre's ability to use optimism as a gentle way of broaching difficult topics, saying in an

interview that "there's something about the genre of romance with its promise of a happily ever after ending that allows people to look at things that are really hard – to look at tragedy and disaster" (de León in Smith, 2019). Similarly, in her review of *Side Chick Nation,* Bobbi Dumas observes that "one of the most amazing things about romantic fiction is that we can explore devastating events with the promise of [a happily ever after]" (2019).

Dulce and Zavier's blossoming relationship offers readers joy and hope amid the truth of the tragedy. As in *The Nature of Witches*, this positivity is multiplied by the way the characters' use their connection to help others. Zavier's media access and Dulce's on-the-ground connection with the community allow them to uncover and then expose the US's false death toll numbers, challenging the colonial power's climate change denialism (Varela, 2018). The final chapter sees Dulce and her love in bed together, a familiar ending in the romance genre, yet the last image is of the ping of a message on Zavier's laptop: "I'm greenlighting your Puerto Rico story. How soon can you leave?" (de León, 2019). Dulce and Zavier are together, but the positive affect from this is more than just their personal happiness; they have been shown to be a powerful team that empowers other voices. As in *The Nature of Witches*, love and collective action are shown to be intertwined, yet the grounded nature of *Side Chick Nation* presents this as more than just a fantasy. Love, in de León's novel, is an act of radical empowerment, speaking to value and agency. Dulce is not a disposable commodity, she is actualized and self-actualised by being loved and loving. Unlike oppressive fantasies of romantic love – where sleeping princesses are kissed awake by a rescuing prince – in this narrative, Dulce is partnered, not won. And in partnership, she and Zavier have the capacity to address the systemic issues that rendered her objectified, subject to violence, and at risk of death on the frontlines of patriarchal, colonialist capitalism and the climate crisis. De León notes that the romance narrative propelled Dulce's eventual activism: "I liked the idea of a romance/heist that also helped bring home the reality of climate change, and the idea that this AfroLatina young woman was moved to activism about both climate change and colonization" (de León in Latinx in Publishing, 2019).

Considering Cli-Ro and positionality

Aside from gesturing at different narrative pathways, these case studies also demonstrate the part positionality plays in our experiences and responses to the climate crisis. *Beautiful World, Where Are You* is located in a developed nation, Ireland, and features white European characters for whom the climate crisis is still imminent, an existential but intellectual problem. *The Nature of Witches* has a more racially diverse cast but flattens their economic and geographical diversity into an homogenous experience at a private school for witches on the east coast of the US. The novel is primarily concerned with Gen Z emotional responses to the notion of inheriting responsibility for fixing the Problem. The characters in this book are positioned as economically privileged and race is not shown to be a driver of disadvantage. While both Rooney and Griffin's novels are culturally from the privileged Global North, *Side Chick Nation* is very much set in parts of the Global South, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, where intersections of race, colony, gender and economic disadvantage are central to the characters' experiences of the climate crisis.

As *Sick Chick Nation* shows, love, romance and happiness are not exclusive to those in privileged positions, only able to be experienced when we are cushioned from the immediate effects of climate disasters. Love and solastalgia are not binaries: they coexist. Love and disaster coexist too. The people who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate, who have borne the heaviest impact of imperialism and economic oppression, should be able to imagine a future that includes happiness. Romantic happiness can be more than a frippery and can be considered integral to the fight for change: a strength, a bolster, a reason for courage and hope. Optimism is an inherently radical act, in which we imagine a future better than the present and/or the past. Loach encourages us to "learn from communities of the present who are striving against all odds, in the face of powerful opposition" because the "necessity to believe in and act on a radical imagination of the future is not new" (2023, p. 217). Communities of colour, women and queer people, and people on spectrums of (dis)ability and divergence have always navigated the world by engaging radical imagination and stubborn optimism, and romance has often been employed as a storytelling tool to imagine happy endings in the face of hardship and oppression.

bell hooks observed that "popular culture is the one domain in which our longing for love is talked about" (2000, p. xvii). She was an advocate for a "love ethic", which she held "all great movements for social justice" are centred around (2000, p. xix). While the love ethic is not limited to romantic/sexual love, hooks often focuses on the power of romantic love. "To love truly," she writes, "we must learn to mix various ingredients – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (2000, p. 5). These are the ingredients romance fiction focuses on. They are also the ingredients that may help us counter the systemic forces that have led to the climate crisis. In the twenty-first century, we have seen increased discussion of love ethic and care ethic approaches, drawn from the work of Black Feminists and Third World, Transnational and Global Feminism, which have sought to speak back to colonial hegemonies and to decenter the imperialist Global North and West. *Side Chick Nation* is an embodiment of these goals, all packaged in a single mass market romance paperback.

Conclusion

Mikaela Loach tells us that the "future is not set in stone, it is up to us to build it" (2023, p. 215). Storytelling is one way creative writers can help build the future, imagining possibilities and ways to find and make change. These three case studies have informed our thinking as we turn to writing our own fictions of climate crisis. In recent decades authors have defaulted to dystopic storytelling as a way to navigate anxieties and fears about the climate crisis, but these are not the only stories that can be told, as our case studies show. We can also tell tentative stories, as Rooney does, testing the waters of hope and optimism, while acknowledging the rawness of our emotions in the face of the climate crisis. We can tell fantastic allegories about magic and witches, comforting ourselves with the familiarities of narrative tropes, such as boarding schools and heroic journeys, as Rachel Griffin does, as we strive to build communities to work for our salvation. Or we can balance the harsh realities of climate disaster, hurricanes

and destruction and the disadvantages of racialised poverty, with the fun and delight of sexy mass market romance, coupled with the power of intersectional care ethics, as Aya de León does.

We have a bounty of narrative genres to choose from, or blend, in order to imagine and feel our way to the future. Indeed, further research can undoubtedly reveal new avenues explored in subgenres of climate fiction romance, such as the rural romance and its frequent use of climate disaster as a barrier to relationships, or the future-looking yet optimistic solarpunk genre that "intertwin[es] issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and colonialism with an ecological ethic" (Johnson, 2020). We hope that this introduction to Cli-Ro, still a bud of possibility more than a genre in bloom, opens up narrative pathways for climate fiction writers, as it has for us, allowing them to story the future with radical hope and stubborn optimism.

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