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When the world gets worse: Form and feeling in Australian climate fiction

Abstract:

In a political context of climate inaction, Australian fiction writers have increasingly focused on the emergency; drawing attention to how the political and environmental processes underway might play out and exploring attendant emotions. The novel form – with its foregrounding of private feelings and individual agency, and its historical alignment with the development of the extractive capitalism it may wish to critique – occupies an ambivalent position as a tool to bring about change. If the task is to refigure the social imaginary towards interconnection with all forms of life, is the novel an inadequate means of social engagement? I hope to make the case – by referencing debates in climate change literature and through discussion of *Scary Monsters* by Michelle de Kretser (2021) and *This Devastating Fever* by Sophie Cunningham (2022) – that writers are using the distinctive capacities of the novel to think through contemporary challenges. These novels, distinct in tone and narrative content, both treat climate change as inextricable from other forces – such as colonialism and misogyny – and emphasise interconnectedness with other beings. Through a commitment to play, via formal experimentation and humour, they help readers to engage with the intellectual and emotional challenges of a changing world.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Climate fiction, Michelle de Kretser, *Scary Monsters*, Sophie Cunningham, *This Devastating Fever*

When the world gets worse, it's because there were energies in the past that weren't fully realised.
– Michelle de Kretser, 2022

Introduction

In Australia, as recently as the 2019 federal election, it made political sense to downplay, and in some quarters deny, the escalating consequences of human-induced climate change. Denialism and derision at the highest levels of politics [1], enabled by an economy organised around fossil fuel extraction, have in recent decades contributed to an atmosphere of frustration and sometimes despair among those feeling the need for action. In this political context, Australian fiction writers have increasingly focused on the climate emergency; drawing attention to how the political and environmental processes underway may play out and exploring the emotions attached to the situation, such as anxiety, grief – and in small ways hope [2]. These works implicitly or explicitly emphasise human embeddedness within an ecology of responsibility and effect. Yet the novel in particular, with its emphasis on private feelings and individual agency, and its historical alignment with the development of the extractive capitalism it may wish to critique, occupies an ambivalent position as a tool to bring about change. If the task at hand is to refigure the social imaginary towards interconnection with all forms of life [3], is the novel an outdated and inadequate means of social engagement? Referencing debates on form and feeling in climate change fiction, I hope to make the case, via discussion of two recent novels – *Scary Monsters* by Michelle de Kretser (2021) and *This Devastating Fever* by Sophie Cunningham (2022) – that writers are using the distinctive capacities of the novel to assert the necessity of imaginatively thinking through contemporary challenges. These novels, distinct in tone and narrative content, share important emphases and strategies. By treating climate change as inextricable from other forces, such as colonialism and misogyny, and foregrounding interconnectedness with other beings, including the nonhuman, they encourage attention to difficult subject matter. Through a commitment to play, via formal experimentation and humour, and in an atmosphere in which it is often easier – and even politically sanctioned – to turn away, these novels' innovations and pleasures help readers to engage with the intellectual and emotional challenges of a changing world.

Social imaginaries

How we think and feel circumscribes what we do, and these thoughts and feelings are not formed in isolation. We share “social imaginaries”, which philosopher Danielle Celermajer describes as “shared backgrounds through which we experience ourselves and the world and form our expectations and projects”, making explicit the connection between thinking, feeling and doing (2021, p. 163). As philosopher Charles Taylor points out, cultural objects like novels are significant because social imaginaries “are carried in images, stories, and legends” (2004, p. 23). We tell ourselves and each other stories about ways to live, and novels are a sophisticated and often inventive (entertaining, even) way to do this.

For Celermajer, an environmentalist committed to ways of thinking about the world that allow us to change it, there is a problem with contemporary dominant social imaginaries in that

mainstream ways of thinking and feeling have not equipped us to transform the structures that brought our world to this pass. She suggests that as individuals we may well align with some in different ways and at different times – as “business as usual” (denial, or a sense that “we” will be okay); “rescue and escape” (technology or God will save us); and “apocalypse or doom” (it’s too late to make a difference) (2021, p. 167). The playing out of these imaginaries in political and representational forms prevents the action necessary for meaningful survival. “An alternative imaginary is needed”, she argues, “one that does not turn away from the inevitability of difficult futures, does not fantasise an intervention from above and does not catapult us from anxiety to a cataclysmic end” (2021, p. 171).

Novels that take climate change as their subject [4] may enact or espouse some or all of these forms of thinking through their capacities for escapism, fantasy and in the dramatising of anxiety, often via dystopias. In 2017, critic Jill Lepore, writing for *The New Yorker* under the title “A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction”, surveyed a large number of recently released novels. She was ultimately disappointed by the passive impulse, as she identified it, of “dystopian despair”. Dystopia, once “a fiction of resistance” had become “radical pessimism”, or a “fiction of submission”; “it cannot imagine a better future, and it doesn’t ask anyone to bother to make one ... Its only admonition is: Despair more” (2017). In thinking about the role of novels in forming a useful social imaginary, Lepore is implicitly asking them to help readers engage intellectually and emotionally with climate change and, ultimately, to act to address the challenge. The focus of her frustration is dystopian thought drained of political impetus.

Hyperobjects and the novel

Novels, like other modes of telling stories about life, grapple with a distinctive intellectual and emotional challenge that comes in part from the disjunct between experience and reality (although for many, that gap is closing or has long closed – and the fires, floods and pandemic in Australia sped up and broadened that process locally). Philosopher Timothy Morton has coined the phrase “hyperobjects” for “things that are massively distributed in space and time relative to humans”, such as climate change, and that are “changing human art and experience” (2013, pp.1-2). Literary critic Marco Caracciolo, picking up this concept in his work *Narrating the mesh: Form and story in the Anthropocene* (2021, p. 9), writes that “climate change confronts us with planetary rhythms and cycles that ... we struggle to know experientially. Our sensory apparatus is attuned to our immediate surroundings, not to atmospheric carbon dioxide or global sea levels” and this abstraction is a fundamental challenge to finding a solution. Writing of the psychological barriers to climate change action, social researcher Rebecca Huntley conceptualises the problem in terms of bodily response to threat:

To feel fear, we must observe and register a threat, such as the sight of a predator. That will then activate our “fight or flight” response. Climate change seems to defy nearly all the evolutionary and cognitive triggers for urgent action. (2022)

Famously, novelist Amitav Ghosh proposed in *The Great Derangement* (2017) that what he called “serious fiction” (p. 11) including his own, had not to date found ways to process this

cognitive dissonance. The scale of abstraction required to apprehend climate change, he argued, is at odds with personal drama, especially in the small-scale settings of literary realism as it has been understood. As soon as floods, fires or pandemics enter the scene, genre boundaries destabilise, as though these events are not realistic. Ghosh's book was a significant and widely read call for novelists to pay attention to climate change, but from the outset, critics have taken issue with the framing and content of this argument as well as his dismissal of science fiction (Hiskes, 2017) and other omissions such as novelists writing about the effects of climate change "such as civil war and ethnic cleansing" (Mishra, 2016).

Climate change novels are framed differently in Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene fictions: The novel in a time of climate change* (2015), which appeared shortly before Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*. For Trexler:

In contemporary literature, melting ice caps, global climate models, rising sea levels, and tipping points have altered the formal possibilities of the novel. To argue thus is to challenge the yet-pervasive origin story of literature, shifting attention from author-geniuses to texts in a complicated material world. (p. 13)

Where Ghosh argued that such events had been treated as unassimilable in literary fiction, Trexler said that the pressure on literary form had forced change, making an explicit causal connection between planetary disruption and a productive rupture of genre: "literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire" (p. 13). The gap he sought to address was in criticism, which he challenged to meet the "imaginative capacities of the novel [which] have made it a vital site for the articulation of the Anthropocene" (p. 22).

Australian novels of the late 2010s

A clear reason that the borders of realism tend to dissolve when novels engage with climate change is that in order to stage what it means, it has been necessary to show what the world will become. For a novel to engage with contemporary reality in this context, the future made in the present must be imagined, and the message brought back to us living in the now. However, as the results of climate change make themselves felt globally, the prophesy function may, awfully, seem less necessary. In an Australian context, the sequence of events from late 2019 onwards: terrifying bushfires, a global pandemic caused by encroachment on species habitat, massively destructive floods, and an election in 2022 fought explicitly on climate concerns (Morton & Murphy, 2022) have altered the social context with which novels of this kind are in dialogue. To give a sense of how climate fiction relates to such contexts, which are era-specific and dynamic, it may be helpful to reference briefly two significant Australian novels from the 2010s: James Bradley's *Clade* (2015) and Lucy Treloar's *Wolfe Island* (2019). Both novels were written and published during a period of frustrating culture wars over climate change in Australian politics [5].

James Bradley has long been distinctive in Australian literary fiction for enlisting the possibilities of speculative fiction within his novels, beginning with his 1999 novel *The Deep*

Field. Clade, published in 2015, imagines the next half century and the collapse, or transformation, of major environmental systems. It makes use of structure – through a series of convulsive episodes in the functioning of the earth’s systems, set several years apart and generally showing the progress of the members of a family [6] – to offer a deeply moving picture of what is being lost on different scales (and at differing speeds). The novel demonstrates dramatic planetary change while maintaining a close sense of the people experiencing it. In a pair of brief but memorable scenes, a young woman, Li Lijuan, has fled Sydney as a virus spreads alarmingly across the world. As she waits for news of her mother in China, she walks in the eerily silent woods. After some days she decides to access the sound and vision of the forest from “before the change began”, using technology called “overlays” (2015). “The noise was incredible. Birds shrieking and singing, things moving in the undergrowth. Even the light was different, thicker somehow, full of smoke and colour” (p. 163). On a personal note, and as a reminder of the real-world resonances of reading fiction, when I am walking in the bush, I think often of this scene. It deepens my attachment to the birds squawking and calling among the trees, enriching the world in which they live. One of the difficult things to take in about climate change that a novel like *Clade* might help a reader to think through is the simultaneous knowledge that although our natural world is at this stage dramatically depleted, these times may seem Arcadian in the future.

In terms of technique, Bradley focuses on the sensory aspects of these moments of change: rims of fire around Australian cities and a violent flood in the lowlands of Eastern England to immerse his characters and the reader in the personal sensations of global transformation. By accessing the general through the particular – combining closeness to character and economic, illuminative detail with an ambitious structure and chronology – the novel allows us to grasp something immense at a personal level, through specific and sympathetic treatment of character and place. He has spoken about the challenge of writing about climate change: “the way its immensity and complexity resist the sorts of tools the novelist has at their disposal” and that how writing episodically about a family “meant it was possible to explore the effects of climate change in a very personal way, and the generational nature of the story meant it was possible to talk about a whole series of questions about time and loss and deep time” (Brady, 2017). He also discusses the emotions of climate change: that despair, while in some ways rational as an intellectual response, is “really only an option for the privileged” and that the differences that we can make are important (Brady, 2017). What he was trying to “think through in *Clade*” was “a realistic assessment of the scale of the problem and the desire to preserve some space for change” (Brady, 2017).

Lucy Treloar’s *Wolfe Island*, a dystopian novel set on a version of the disappearing islands of Chesapeake Bay between Maryland and Virginia, appeared four years later in 2019. A radio interviewer asked Treloar if *Wolfe Island* was a “cli-fi novel”. She responded that “all modern novels that are set now or into the future must acknowledge that that is part of the world we live in” (2019). Global scale problems, as for Bradley, created writing problems. In an interview with Melanie Kembrey in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Treloar said: “It was a very difficult book to write – much more difficult that [sic] I thought it would be ... because of this

tussle that I was having with Trumpism and that feeling of the world lunging off centre much faster than I anticipated”. As Kembrey writes, the novel is difficult to locate definitively in space and time “yet it’s disturbingly close enough to the contemporary world to be believable as the near future” (2019). There is a productive indeterminacy about this novel’s status as historical, contemporary or futuristic, with old ways of life: fishing, folktales and folk art, drones, a sinking island, and hard men wearing caps and carrying rifles.

As Trexler proposed, literary novels “bleed” in form (2015, p. 14) in the context of climate change. In their essay “Reading crises, writing crisis” (2021) writers Rose Michael and Jane Rawson assert that *Wolfe Island* is a realist novel that exposes the assumption behind genre distinctions.

In its contemporariness Treloar’s novel acknowledges that dystopia and apocalypse are already part of many people’s lives...By saying dystopian fiction is futuristic, by designating it as speculative, the literary establishment has refused to acknowledge many peoples’ present realities ... Hers is a tale of a slowly encroaching environmental collapse that first reaches those who are most precarious but eventually laps at the doorsteps of even those better off. Once touched, everyone is turned into members of the underclass.

‘Is this now?’ the reader asks herself. ‘Is this real? Is this happening today?’ (2021, p. 64)

Writers like Bradley and Treloar are thinking through the cognitive dissonance and emotions of climate change via literary form, and in the process, changing our ideas of what literary realism is and what it might encompass. In the late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant’s terms, such writers use representational tools to work through “dramas of adjustment” (2011, p. 3). In an interview, Berlant described this work in the following terms:

Capitalist crisis has tightened up the time of the world: all over, people are in sync in their sense of contingency and social fragility, even if they might have wildly different accounts of it ... *we know the change and the loss has already happened, and yet it is unbelievable and unbearable, while being borne. Cruel Optimism* attempts to chronicle the dramas of adjustment – the dramas of consciousness and of mediated life – that force into being new recognitions of what a life is and ought to be. (2012)

Berlant anticipated the Trumpian politics of aggrievement, but also the lost feeling of security in our natural world and its capacity to shelter and feed us. Contemporary fiction can be read as an attempt to work out what is happening and our attendant feelings; to find forms that express the difficulty of adjusting to assumptions about what the world has in store.

The nature of these adjustments can take various forms, one being avoidance. Rachel Hennessy, Alex Cothren and Amy Matthews write in their collaborative *Text Journal* article, “Rather than feeling galvanised by novelistic narratives engaging with the issue of climate change ... our affective responses were to feel overwhelmed by the scale and enormity of the

issue”, leading them to “turn away” (2022, p. 3). Their response is to write collaboratively, an innovative response to this impulse and one that references Donna Haraway’s thinking on interconnectedness in creativity. Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) has indeed become shorthand for resisting this impulse towards avoidance [7].

Two recent Australian novels, Michelle de Kretser’s *Scary Monsters* and Sophie Cunningham’s *This Devastating Fever*, both published during the anxieties of the pandemic, continue to disrupt narrative form and importantly work as a counterpoint to readerly despair not only through formal innovation but also through the enlivening and engaging use of different kinds of humour. Notably, they both enlist a historical perspective through which to envision a contemporary crisis. They invite readers to sit with difficulty, contributing to a social imaginary that allows for the possibility of ethical, connected and collective action – counter to the forces that have desecrated the habitat of human and non-human inhabitants and created vast inequity between and within societies. Climate scientist and writer Kate Marvel writes that “Courage is the resolve to do well without the assurance of a happy ending” (2018). In their lively experiments with structure and tone, they play perhaps not hopefully but courageously.

Serious play: *Scary Monsters* and *This Devastating Fever*

Michelle de Kretser’s novel in the form of two novellas, *Scary Monsters*, is an experiment in form and a provocation of reading choices. There is no guidance as to which novella to read first – “Lili”, set in France in the early 1980s, or “Lyle”, set in a dystopian but recognisable Melbourne of the near future. The book design, with a front cover on both sides, allows you to begin with either. My first reading was in chronological order. When read like this, sweeping from the past into an unwelcome future, the story has an unsettling proleptic effect, a lurch forward out of the sequence of time. When read in the other direction, moving from a satirical but recognisably grim future to the possibilities of youth and the past, it foregrounds a complex nostalgia.

“Lili” tells the story of a young English teacher in Montpellier who migrated earlier to Australia from an unspecified Asian country. She is threatened by the scary monster of masculine violence and witnessing another in the form of Islamophobia against the North African migrants in the city. It is recounted in the realist mode, and with its French setting, literary references and incisive wit, it does not at this stage alert the reader to the possibility of a radical departure from de Kretser’s other novels of contemporary diasporic reality such as *Questions of Travel* and *The Life to Come*. A note of retrospection – of historical comparison – is sounded when Lili tells us early on: “Napoleon said that to understand a man you had to know what the world looked like when he was twenty. I was twenty-two and Minna was twenty and it was 1981” (p. 4). What does this world look like to Lili? Fear of violence and a critical knowledge of western history and literature are threaded through a life that is nevertheless hopeful and excitingly modern, fashioning itself after the models of Simone de Beauvoir and Debra Harry. Nostalgia is present but its complexities resist conservatism.

The textures of Lili's youth have a yearning quality. She wants to transform her loneliness into the "lofty", "literary" solitude of men, and "exceptional women" like De Beauvoir, who "was philosophy, Paris, politics, progress ... She was Bold, Intelligent Woman" (p. 18). Later, as she recalls afternoons of music and talking and playfulness with her English friend Minna, we hear that Debbie Harry was "plastic, photos, pocket computers, phones. She was sexy, Modern Woman. I wanted to be her. I wanted her life" (p. 44). These longings infuse life with a desirous joy. In this sequence, Lili recollects lying on the floor of her friend's room, recognising her own intense happiness, but is overcome by a "A faint, pleasurable ache ... a nostalgia for the present" (p. 44). Radiating from Lili's complex longings is a nostalgia for those times; of youth, travel and becoming, when one's self and the world might seemingly be anything. This is particularly pronounced when read after the "Lyle" section, a satirical nightmare vision of the near future.

"Lili" is marked by the fear of her ridiculous but encroaching neighbour Rinaldi and of walking home from the cinema in the suburbs alone at night – these local fears informed by the broader weather of news of the Yorkshire Ripper in England. She is troubled by the rounding up of North Africans in the market square and is herself subject to low-level but continual harassment by authorities, unlike Minna with her white skin. Nevertheless, her narrative emits a "pleasurable ache" akin to that which Lili feels lying on her friend's floor. The future is open and assumed to be better, filled with possibility. Her desires stretch towards a better world and self. This is the world of a young person on the brink of becoming, and what she will become is undecided. The stories she grabs hold of are marked by longing and hope. It is not an uncomplicated longing. The scary monsters of misogyny and racism stalk her. We are reminded that the past was difficult and dangerous too, and that to be a young woman is anxiety-ridden as well as dreamy and desirous. And yet, Lili tells us: "there was a quality to conversations I had when I was young that resists capture – call it shimmer, call it spring ..." (p. 63).

After the complex but tangible possibility of this world, it is a shock to swoop past our present, where the possibility of positive change resides, into the dark satire of Lyle's section. Now we are in a Melbourne of the near future, its dystopian features only more fully realised aspects of our society. The anti-migrant cruelties of the past decades have hardened into a society-wide rejection of foreigners and forced assimilation through surveillance of those migrants who have made it through the net. The narrator Lyle is both subject to and an administrator of this surveillance. He and his wife Chanel are migrants who try to assume bland Australianness under the veneer of new names, a "heartstopping mortgage" fundamental to their "journey to belonging" (p. 32) and the adoption of a dog, Alan. Lyle works for "the Department", where he assures his son that he is not part of the surveillance regime: "I simply recommend ... Security makes all the decisions that count" (p. 39). There is a tonal shift in this section, as though we are moving in a direction that can only be understood through intensified satire, a kind of petrified hilarity. Whereas in Lili's section, Islamophobia was made apparent in the harassment and arrest of North Africans at the market, Lyle overcompensates for his migrant status by increased activity on the "Whack-a-Mullah" app, hoping this reads as enthusiastic patriotism by the Australian authorities (p. 53).

In this near-future dystopia, the shadow of the pandemic infiltrates crowded places such as trains. Lyle and Chanel stock up for “the Next One” (p. 37) and an Amendment is signed into existence, by which the old are persuaded to make way for the young (p. 47). Physical frailty, in Lyle’s mother Ivy and his dog Alan, marks them as not just expendable but undesirable. Alan’s fate is significant – the family’s treatment of him suggests a moral failing that stands in for a larger failure to care properly for other people and the non-human world. There is constant smoke, and no solace from the degraded natural environment. Sydney is crumbling into the sea – you’d have to be mad to live there.

The break in time between novellas creates a lurching feeling, as we fly over our lifetimes and the gradual change that has allowed us to adjust, after a fashion, to our changing world and prospects, and perhaps to accept daily the horrors perpetrated in our names. In a conversation with de Kretser in a postgraduate class I was teaching, I told her that I found “that chasm of time, without the softening of the present, really shocking”. “When the world gets worse,” she replied, “it’s because there were energies in the past that weren’t fully realised ... I did want people to think seriously about the kind of world we might be moving towards but I did also want to remind people that hopeful change can come at the ballot box” (2022). Form is employed to a specific end in this articulation. Placing the unwanted future next to a past that contains possibility jolts the reader into aversion, and potentially, political action.

Other local examples demonstrate the effects of breaks in time in a speculative narrative. *Clade* and Steven Amsterdam’s earlier collection of stories *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (2009) also use breaks in time to encompass the seismic shifts of the future, laying out a sequence of responses to catastrophes in which we don’t see the connective tissue. In Amsterdam’s collection, this is threaded together by a single protagonist. Both books begin in a recognisable era close to the time of publication and make use of gaps in time to give a sense of a spasming world, rather than one of steady continuity and progress. But in *Scary Monsters*, the shift is radical; between locations and characters, between the genres of realism and speculative satire. There are no stages or steps in the shift and only a brief, disconcerting reference to a common character. Lili’s section narrates past events in a recognisable setting and period of history, France in the early 1980s, while Lyle’s immerses the reader, in the present tense, into a recognisable but unwelcome future. Michelle, in her talk with our class, said that she wanted “to put pressure on the novel form, to have radical discontinuity as my principle”, asking “how much discontinuity can it [the novel] bear?” The radical discontinuity between novellas expresses the break in time and being for migrants, a central concern in both narratives, but particularly Lyle’s, who seeks to banish his personal history and all inflections of coming from elsewhere. “The past should weigh less than a photograph,” he says (p.32). In its shift from complex optimism to bleak satire it also dramatises the lurch between the belief in a better world many may have held in the 1980s and its contemporary loss.

The enmeshment of Lyle’s position has many strands, personal and systemic – but in his swallowing of messages of Australian success and his sacrifice of his mother Ivy to his material

desires, he might be seen as an embodiment of Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism"; the ironic structuring of one's life around visions of the future that create impediments to one's wellbeing. Lyle and Chanel's children are physically and emotionally distant from their parents. Their son, Sydney, lost in the PFZ, or Permanent Fire Zone as it is secretly called, works with dissident groups to save the environment in the face of Australia's "no-climate policy", an oppressively maintained narrative that all is well in spite of constant smoke, rural refugees in the cities and all other evidence to the contrary. Their daughter Mel is spoilt, vain and manipulative, and they are forced by their own narratives to read her as pleasingly aspirational, showing a "focus on her goals" (p. 76). Perhaps the cruellest irony of all for Lyle is that his deepest fears present a truth he cannot escape: that beyond his mother, and the fate he and his wife have planned for her, he can imagine no future at all.

Scary Monsters is an articulation of the passage of our desires over time, the trap that is closing around us, the clear links between material desire and self-sabotage, and the personal and structural interactions that entrap us further. That lurch between past and future is an expression of a generational drama of adjustment, one of the features of which is an "impasse" or experience of stuckness. But as Australian writer David Carlin writes in his essay 'Lyrebirds in the impasse' (2017), in which he considers narrative and ecological obstructions, the impasse, as Berlant formulated it, might also be a productive interruption to the *modus operandi* of daily life and its forms of expression. Carlin explains:

The impasse, perversely, can be viewed as an opening of creative potential. It is a blockage in the ongoing, breathless flow of life in which we are otherwise consumed and consuming. It is a forced interruption to normal life within which, otherwise, we occupy ourselves by attaching to objects that won't in the end lead to the emotional satisfaction we seek.

The ironies and satire of the "Lyle" novella, the stretching of familiar modes of encounter with our desires, forces this interruption. In both sections, there is an opening up of the territory, a resistance to the bind, that happens in how dark realities are played with and played out in their narrators, consciously and unconsciously.

The play, or the comic tone of the two sections operates distinctly. In Lili's section, there is a narrative structure at work in her imaginings that works through exaggeration. This is seen most clearly in her application of the genre of true crime – close and present as the Yorkshire Ripper narrative plays out in real time while she negotiates the perceived threat of her neighbour Rinaldi on the dark landings of her old apartment building.

I spied Rinaldi in the local mini-mart ... buying a pack of frozen peas. He was at least forty, but his springy hair was still lavish and dark – even his hair thought well of itself. One half of his shirt collar was tucked into his jumper while the other protruded. It was the kind of detail that would appear in newspaper profiles when he was finally arrested. His freezer would contain nothing but peas and an assortment of body parts. (p. 38)

Signs are given a melodrama that fuels play, and Lili's imagination takes a central role: "I scared myself" she tells us (p. 38). She tells stories about her life that feed on other stories. She is dextrous, playful and attuned to stimuli. She is aware of her exaggerations and paranoid readings, she takes some pleasure in them and uses them to bond with her friend, Minna.

In "Lyle", ironic humour often emerges in exchanges with his mother, Ivy. The family has adopted a dog and learnt that they should leave him in the yard while they're out. "It's called Set and Forget" (p. 5). When his mother Ivy arrives he explains this to her:

The news was on, and a government hatespokesperson was telling us why it was necessary to detain asylum-seeking queue-jumpers on an offshore island forever. Ivy said, "I suppose that's called Set and Forget, too." (p. 6)

Ivy, with her stubborn moral sense, forces him to tell on himself – puncturing his narrative of assimilation, of correctness – forcing the reader, and on some level, Lyle, as expressed in his verbal confusions and moments of vertigo, into an encounter with the impasse, towards some kind of reckoning.

Lyle may be fatally stuck, but the reader is not. De Kretser told us in class that "It's a novel in which the reader has a lot of agency." This applies in many respects, including in what you consider to be the ending of the novel. If you read Lyle's section first and finish with Lili's, you end in that ambiguous but bright moment of possibility:

That was what the world looked like when I was twenty-two. We chanted, "They shall not pass!" and believed that the monsters had been put to rout. All round me, people were striking matches and flicking on lighters that they raised high, hundreds of dithering little flames. (p. 152)

There is the singing of the Internationale, matches held up in the prison windows, an image of an orchard "breathed into new life by white blossom" (p. 152) – reminders that collective action brings change, that life is cyclical. And throughout the novel, in whichever order you read it, there is the resistance of play to despair, that assertion of the human in the face of the inhuman expendability of the life of people and of our home.

More recently, Sophie Cunningham's *This Devastating Fever* writes out of the now and about the problem of writing out of the now – of finishing an endless novel amid a present that never stabilises or resolves, in which there is no hope for better, only for outcomes not as bad as the worst-case scenario. This innovatively designed novel about the life of Leonard Woolf works with a kind of shuttling structure, moving back and forth between the lives of Leonard and Virginia and that of the novelist-protagonist Alice. It is a novel interested in many subjects, and it weaves its way through the Woolfs's times and our own to access them: climate change, colonialism, natural disasters, the lives and extinction of animals, the care of others, the importance of writing in difficult times and of resisting historical solipsism, and narrative

determinism. Its subject matter is wholly serious and yet in its inventiveness and disposition of solidarity and play, it creates a productive space through which to think through difficulties.

The protagonist Alice is an Australian novelist writing about Leonard Woolf. This layering of a real-life writer, Cunningham, writing about a fictional writer, Alice, writing about a real-life writer, Woolf, means that we are instantly in a metafictional world in which the question of what writing does and might yet do is ever-present. One of the things it can do, this novel shows, is slip through time, enlarging the reader's sense of what pertains to their present. Leonard's colonial service in Sri Lanka, his marriage to Virginia, and his post-Virginia life with "Trekkie" are interleaved with Alice's years-long journey through the Woolfs' archives and the places Leonard has lived. Further slippage occurs when Leonard begins to escape his own time and appear in Alice's. On a research trip to England in 2004, she sees two men swimming in the C", one announcing to the other the outbreak of the First World War. It is Leonard and the local policeman, she knows because they have emerged from her endless research to swim about in the sea in front of her. "The conversation carried clearly, through time and over distance" (2022, p. 26). From this point on, distinct timelines fold in on each other as Leonard and the skeleton of Virginia appear in Alice's car, at her desk and as she pushes her friend Hen's wheelchair through a Melbourne park. Times are placed alongside one another, interwoven on the page, and at one point the figures of different periods appear in the same scene, jostling for the primacy of their era. As Alice sits in a plastic chair in the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, waiting to see if she has side effects from her COVID vaccination, the scene transforms. Stretcher-bearers move between beds. A nurse in a starched cap appears next to her:

"What year is it?" Alice asked.

"1919", the nurse replied.

"Bollocks! It's 1930," yelled out a man who looked as if he was starving ..." (p. 249)

The impression this creates is of a collapse of history, a confusion from which it is difficult to trace a narrative, but also, a sense that things have been much worse – war, plague, anti-Semitism – and they will be again. Alice is reminded to step out of the sense of her era's exceptionalism. Leonard, in one of his appearances, tells her:

"I am merely attempting to put your choices into some kind of perspective. We never know what will happen next. You lost your parents, and Hen. I lost Virginia and many others beside. Writing is not so important in the greater scheme of things, however the act of writing" and of reading can give us reason to live. It is a contradictory pursuit." (p. 230)

There is a steadying influence in this novel's insistence on historical perspective, foregrounded through a radical sequencing of chronologies. A knowledge of the past provides ballast, a grounded position from which to think through our present and future. Implicit in Leonard's words is the sense that there is no choice but to find a way through, a sentiment Cunningham

has expressed in an interview: “I’ve been thinking about the importance of hope ... Giving up is a kind of luxury” (qtd in Westcott, 2022). This imperative is foregrounded with particular force in the sequence in which Alice visits Sri Lanka soon after the devastation of the tsunami. Those who have survived but must go on surviving, and Alice’s presence among them – asking questions, and yet providing income – is necessarily complex.

Writing is an active response to difficulty. As this novel’s metafictional play and Leonard’s words to Alice make clear, it is a valuable means of thinking through. This is very much a book about writers – not just Leonard and Virginia, but Alice the writer making sense of them. And we are consistently aware as we read of Alice’s troubles with writing that Cunningham the novelist, who shares some biographical details with her character, is puzzling over the questions she presents through her characters and the fractured timeline. As Meg Brayshaw writes in her review of the novel, while Leonard and Alice both believe their times are bad, “there is meaning to be made by writing about, and in spite of catastrophe” (2022). Writing, though treated with a light touch in Alice’s self-deprecating mode, is taken seriously as a tool for psychic survival.

Set against its historical precedents, the queasiness of the current moment is articulated with specificity and precision, its attendant challenges to writing laid bare. Alice understands all too well how fires, floods and pandemics are symptoms of a heating and degraded world, and how the event through which she is living – COVID – will shape her personal life via the vulnerability of her friend Hen in aged care. For Alice, in yet another Melbourne lockdown:

... understanding didn’t seem to make any difference, for she was overwhelmed, couldn’t look every which way all at once and anyway it seemed that the genie was out of the bottle, the cat was out of the bag, the tipping point had tipped, and now here she was, here everyone was, living in the territory of the unprecedented, the territory of pivoting, the territory of grief and loss. (p. 183)

“Unprecedented”, “pivoting”, “grief and loss” carry the affective charge of bewilderment of the lockdown years. Alice tries to adjust her writing about these times to express their qualities, rewriting “all the bits of non-fiction writing she’d done that were intended to be a commentary on the current moment as the current moment turned to mercury, skidded and pooled all over the place” (pp. 184–5). Alice does not know how to process the changing rules and known modes of expression. To return to Berlant, she might be seen as trying to find her way through “a genre of social time and practice in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos” (2011, p. 6).

The most fundamental change Alice and her creator grapple with through their writing is the depletion of the natural world. In Cunningham’s essay “The Stories We Tell”, she writes of how her characters “keep unwriting themselves” (2020, p. 299). For example, her author character will try to write a scene about Bloomsbury members on a Sussex summer evening. What would they hear? Cunningham asks her character.

The “author” ignores me and googles “Cicadas, Britain. She learns that the New Forest cicada is endangered in Britain, possibly extinct. She googles Crickets and learns they are precipitously declining. So too the turtle dove, the hedgehog, some toads and moths, beetles and squirrels ... The “author” stops writing, closes her laptop and goes for a walk. (2020, p. 299)

Sympathy for the non-human world is a prevalent feature of *This Devastating Fever*. Alice and Leonard have strong and often very moving individual relationships with particular animals, but this is set against the broader backdrop of depletion. Alice visits Sri Lanka and sees the flamingos of Leonard’s time, but there are few, where there were once many. “Where are the flamingos?” Imaginary Leonard asked. “There always used to be so many of them.” In these encounters, the reader is reminded that the world is not how it was. The past is almost as difficult to access as the future.

One of the ways Cunningham invites us to “stay with the trouble” is through a comic tone which takes the form of playfulness and irony. Maxwell Boykoff and Beth Osnes, considering strategies of “climate change communications” and writing of the seemingly unlikely coupling of humour and potentially overwhelming subject matter, write that “Comedy ... brings to the fore multiple truths and ways of knowing, in its deployed delight in the multiple meanings of single ideas, statements or even words ... [it] draws attention to that which is incongruous, hypocritical, false or pretentious” (p. 154). Alice, in her dealings with Leonard and Virginia, continually encounters them not as untouchable literary greats but as flawed and funny human beings, with axes to grind and irritating habits. Alice often employs a lightness in dealing with her anxieties; for example, by creating a “sex list” of the Bloomsbury set to hold her critical agent at bay. She and her partner Edith share a kind of gallows humour; during a cyclone-induced power cut, they say to each other: “What a time to be alive!” (p. 260). These strategies offer a means of connection, of breaking the tension and weariness and opening up the space for criticism of power. Laughter in dark times, novelist Charlotte Wood wrote in *The Guardian* is “a psychic expression of disbelief – a refusal to accept that what is happening can actually be happening” (2018), rooted in the desire for a better world than this one. The humour of *Scary Monsters* is tonally different to this novel, taking aim at the ways in which moral bankruptcy is given a language and narrative that imposes itself on our everyday lives and choices. Alice’s navigation of grief through a sense of her own ridiculousness feels more like Beckett’s complex and timely post-World War II lament: “I can’t go on. I’ll go on” (2010, 1958, p. 135).

Conclusion

The novels discussed here appeared at a strange moment in recent history. They capture its air of dissonance and catastrophe with a commitment to formal and tonal play that resists the luxury of apocalyptic thinking or despair. In these works’ sympathy for the natural world and compassion for other people, and their opposition to the rampant individualism that has brought us to this pass, they place value in common bonds and in art. They arise from but resist the “dominant social imaginaries” Celermajer sees as engendering “disengagement, apathy,

fantastical thinking, hopelessness and inaction”. What we need, Celermajer writes, are “imaginaries that are both alive to the realities of the challenge and that challenge the current realities” (2021). Both books, in their formal energies, historical grounding and wit, help us to sit with and think through fundamental, unwelcome change with a measure of courage and humour; to offer lively, seriously playful responses that help us to maintain an important critical engagement with the world as it is and as it might be.

Notes

[1] For political context see “Climate change takes centre stage in Australia’s election”.

[2] Examples include *Clade* and *Ghost Species* (as well as novels for young adults) by James Bradley, *The Island Will Sink* by Briohny Doyle, *The World Without Us* by Mireille Juchau, *Storyland* by Catherine McKinnon, *Dyschronia* by Jennifer Mills, *Wolfe Island* by Lucy Treloar, *A Wrong Turn at the Office of Unmade Lists* by Jane Rawson, *Inland Sea* by Madeleine Watts and many more.

[3] Terms such as “kin” as per Donna Haraway (*Staying with the Trouble*) and “enmeshment”, as per Timothy Morton (*The Ecological Thought*), are broadly helpful in thinking about a social imaginary redirected towards interconnectedness.

[4] There is an argument that because contemporary reality is shaped by climate change, all art is now climate art. For example, the playwright David Finnigan, in his YouTube clip “The end of climate art” argues, via McKenzie Wark, that climate change is intrinsic to our understanding of our era, and cannot be regarded as a topic or issue.

[5] In 2013, Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott led his party back into government by attacking the Gillard-era carbon pricing scheme, which had begun to reduce emissions. In 2017, Scott Morrison, then Treasurer and, by the following year Prime Minister, took a lump of coal into Parliament, saying, “don’t be scared” (Murphy, 2017).

[6] The novel’s title, *Clade*, refers to “a group of biological taxa (such as species) that includes all descendants of one common ancestor” (Merriam Webster) and this is reflected in the presence of the early protagonist Adam and his family members through time.

[7] See for example Sophie Cunningham’s “Staying with the trouble”, an essay about walking, history and the fate of horseshoe crabs in *City of Trees*.

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