Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

Other worlds: Multirealist writing as a strategy for representing climate crisis

Jack Kirne

To cite this article: Kirne, J. (2021). Other worlds: Multirealist writing as a strategy for representing climate crisis. *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses*, 25(1): 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.23467>

Deakin University

Jack Kirne

Other worlds: Multirealist writing as a strategy for representing climate crisis

Abstract:

This article advocates for the utility of multirealism for writing about the climate crisis. Seeking to contribute to scholarly debates that have considered realist literary fiction's capacity to represent climate crisis (Clark, 2015; Ghosh, 2016; Lockwood, 2018; Johns-Putra, 2018), I advocate for a multirealist literary mode. This mode seeks to destabilise the ontological foundations of realism by assembling narratives that draw into focus the other possible worlds that coexist alongside western modernity without resorting to speculative or spectacular digressions that otherwise exceed the bounds of literary realism. In doing so, I advocate for the utility of practice as an imaginative space to radically reimagine the world and our engagements with it without needing to defer to a possible future. My understanding of how the multirealist text represents the ontological crisis wrought by climate catastrophe is informed by my practice-led research as well as the work of other writers and literary scholarship. Specifically, I conduct my discussion here with reference to a range of ecocritical works, before turning my attention to Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2018), as well as my short story, "A Still Thing Shaken" (2019).

Biographical note:

Jack Kirne is a writer and academic. His creative work has appeared in various publications including *Necessary Fiction*, *Subbed In*, *Meanjin* and the anthologies *Growing up Queer in Australia* and *New Australian Fiction (Kill Your Darlings)*. His critical work has appeared in *JASAL*, *The International Journal of Practice-Based Humanities* and the *A to Z Encyclopaedia of Shadow Places Concepts*. Jack teaches at Deakin University, and is a visiting fellow at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies for 2021. To read his work, please visit his [website](#).

Keywords: cli-fi, multirealism, Olga Tokarczuk, creative writing, climate change

Introduction

In this article I advocate for what I call “multirealism” – a literary mode which seeks to draw us into the other possible worlds that coexist alongside western modernity as a method for writing about climate crisis. As I will demonstrate, typically, multirealist narratives function by making visible the ontological boundaries of realist fiction, without shattering or exceeding them. I understand realism here as a shared worldview between writer and reader. In other words, an agreement between reader and writer over what is real, and what is speculative or supernatural. As I will go on to discuss, this poses particular challenges for novels about climate crisis, precisely because it calls the category of the real into contest. Multirealist texts capitalise upon this contested territory of the real to draw into focus other worlds that have already arrived.

Over the last decade, there has been considerable debate about the efficacy of literary realism as a tool for representing the climate crisis. While I will go on to detail these arguments, it is important to note that the problem I am exploring largely hinges on the form of the novel. Emily Potter has argued the novel is a product of modernity, stating that it, “most commonly, reproduces chronology, while the narrative’s containment by an opening and a conclusion reinforces linear temporality and episodic, containable time” (2019, p. 8). Simply put, the novel as a form works to sustain an illusion of time as regular, predictable, and gradual in which events unfold in a logical and coherent fashion. While less dependent on the episodic structure of the novel, the short story relies on a narrative that is temporally contained and reliant on a cogent chronology. This is especially true of realism, which seeks to represent everyday life’s regularity by backgrounding spectacular or speculative elements.

The multiple effects of the climate crisis explode these logics of representation. They are, by nature, both immediate and delayed. The time lag between carbon dioxide emissions and warming is the most obvious example. The temporal dimensions of catastrophe in the present are infused with the past and future. A coalmine contaminating groundwater in the present will displace (and possibly result in the extinction) of many humans and nonhumans in both the short and long term, perhaps in unpredictable ways. In addition, to situate climate crisis as merely emergent is to deny that for many, climate crisis (or at least something sufficiently similar) has already occurred. As Kyle Whyte has argued:

The [climate] hardships many non-Indigenous people dread most ... are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration. (2018, p. 226)

With this in mind, it remains critical to interrogate what is being obscured in discourses of “the first climate refugees” or “the first species to go extinct due to climate change.” Whyte’s claim insists that climate crisis has a history in which communities have lived, resisted and created. Put simply, time in climate crisis is not chronological or containable. Future, present, and past are all colliding into each other, destabilising the ontological foundations of western modernity.

Of course, this ontological rupture has not stopped writers from writing about climate crisis. A few years ago, it may have been possible to claim that literary novelists had not taken up the task of writing about climate crisis as Ghosh famously did (2016), but this is no longer the case. In Australia

and abroad, many celebrated novelists have tackled issues of environmental catastrophe in recent years, including Alexis Wright (2013), Jane Rawson (2013), Ellen Van Neervan (2014), James Bradley (2015), Mirelle Juchau (2015), Jennifer Mills (2018), Jenni Offill (2020), Ben Lerner (2014), Megan Hunter (2017), Richard Powers (2018), Lauren Groff (2018), Margaret Atwood (2004) to name just a few. Climate crisis has also remained a consistent interest of my practice (Kirne, 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2020). While a thorough exploration of these writers' works would exceed the scope of this essay, I point toward this abundance of literary works as evidence of not only the wealth of climate fictions, but also of the diversity of approaches.

Multirealism represents one such approach. My understanding of how the multirealist text represents the ontological crisis wrought by climate uncertainty is informed by my practice-led research as well as the work of other writers and literary scholarship. Specifically, I conduct my discussion here with reference to a range of ecocritical works, before turning my attention to Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2018), as well as my short story, "A Still Thing Shaken" (Kirne, 2018).

Realism and climate fictions

My interest in realist climate fiction partly emerges from a long-standing scepticism I have held against the argument that realist literary fiction is ill-equipped to represent climate catastrophe (Clark, 2015; Ghosh, 2016). This claim was most famously made by writer and critic Amitav Ghosh, who laments the lack of serious literary fiction seeking to address climate change in a time of escalating crisis (2016, p. 11). Ghosh is not suggesting that literary texts about climate do not exist. Rather, he proposes that their prevalence matches neither the scope of the crisis nor the wider public attention (Ghosh, 2016, p. 7).

Ghosh attributes the great derangement to the anti-catastrophic worldview from which the modern novel emerged. He argues that the novel and the now debunked gradualist view of geology – the view that the earth changed slowly, and not through spectacular, explosive geological events – developed concurrently and that, throughout the 18th century, gradualism became the predominant means through which the natural world was understood (Ghosh, 2016, p. 20). Under gradualism, catastrophe was ejected from a modern worldview and deemed "primitive" (2016, p. 20). Ghosh contends that the modern novel shares this non-catastrophic worldview. Rather than revelling in the spectacular or the unlikely (as in the case of fables), the realist novel seeks to conceal these elements by relegating them to the background while moving the everyday into the foreground via what Franco Moretti calls "fillers" (2016, p. 17). These fillers, or "detailed descriptions of everyday life", function to realise the realist novel's "mimetic ambition" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 19) by "banishing of the improbable and [inserting] ... the everyday" (2016, p. 17). Thus, Ghosh asserts, the novel emerged as a distinct literary form through its ambitions to represent the world as the gradualist enlightenment understood it – as rational, predictable, and gradual.

A common critique of Ghosh's work is that his argument is premised upon a relatively narrow description of what the literary is (Wark, 2017; Lockwood, 2019). Ghosh defines the literary novel as realist and thus excludes supernatural and speculative narratives or genres. Ultimately, these critiques circle into Ghosh's call to expand the literary category of the real (2016, pp. 83–84); the line of

division rests on how this might be achieved. Alex Lockwood, reflecting on Ghosh's argument, summarises this line of thinking:

Is Curtis's work of speculative fiction about rising sea levels NOT realist? Is Royle's work of playful prose that laments extinction NOT realist? Lobb's autobiographical mediation? The Chernobyl disaster and the threat of nuclear waste? These books are expressly realist, not despite of but *because* of the nonhuman presences surrounding us; they cannot any longer be labelled *only* as sci-fi or genre fiction. (2019, p. 9)

Lockwood's gesture strikes me as productive, as it is demonstrative of how climate crisis (and perhaps crisis more generally) questions the ontological foundations of realism. Representations of the spectacular, anti-gradualist nature of climate change might render realist and speculative fiction as indistinguishable from one another. However; as Lockwood's argument suggests, part of the difficulty is achieving an agreement between reader and writer as to what constitutes the real.

In swapping work with writing friends, I have experienced the complex manner in which readers may encode representations of the contemporary as speculative. The most explicit instance of this emerged from a reader who generously volunteered to read an unpublished novel manuscript. The text included a mostly factual compilation of mass animal deaths that had occurred over the last five years as a background to what was an ostensibly conventional love story. Although I took few liberties in representing these ecological disasters, my reader suggested that I revise my manuscript to make it clear that the text was happening in the future, rather than the present. In another example, many readers have described my short story "Escape Out the Back Passage" (Kirne, 2021) – which takes place in a remote community stricken by drought – as "apocalyptic", despite much of its detailing being taken from reporting which detailed the catastrophic fallout small towns have experienced in the shadow of industrial farming's exploitation of aquifers (see Cagle, 2020; Plumer, 2013; Shannon, 2018).

While these two instances could be read as merely anecdotal, or, less generously, as indicative of how insulated my readers were from the unfolding climate and ecological crisis, I believe that there is something more interesting in evidence here. Namely, I think these reader responses suggest an inherent belief that catastrophe exists beyond the boundaries of realist depictions of western modernity. In simpler terms, I believe the work was read as speculative, or spectacular, because it exceeded what passes as realism for these readers in contemporary literature.

The difficulty of representing climate crisis as a contemporary problem has also been addressed by Timothy Clark (2015) and Adam Trexler (2015). Both of these scholars have independently argued that the realist novel, and, in Clark's case, the novel as a form, have struggled to represent climate crisis due to the form's anthropocentric narcissism. Trexler contends that the view that the novel is committed to an anthropocentric narcissism is a by-product of the literary canon, noting the canonical literary text's prioritisation of the single genius author and their everyday human concerns (2015, p. 13). Trexler's book-length study of anthropocene fiction moves its critical attention beyond the canon, to discover a wealth of climate change novels, both literary and popular, that he deems worthy of attention (2015, p. 13). What defines these texts, Trexler argues, is that:

The narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of genre: literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire. (2015, p. 14)

Again, what strikes me about Trexler's observation is that the objects of his analysis defy a pure realism. They rupture the ontological limits of the genre in their attempt to encapsulate a more-than-human entity. This, in turn, suggests that these texts defy the contract upon which realism depends, suggesting that, as a genre, it is ill-equipped and perhaps unable to encounter climate crisis.

Clark, who takes a far more pessimistic view than Trexler, has argued that the realist form's ongoing commitment to creating "intelligible and coherent world[s], centred on individual agency" (p. 165), stands stubbornly at odds with ecological collapse, which is violent, unpredictable, and ambivalent to human agency. For Clark, narrative fiction, short of a complete reinvention of narratological techniques, is forever doomed to fall into the trap of anthropocentric narcissism. Adeline Johns-Putra has responded to this claim via an advocacy for postmodern genres such as magical realism and metafiction. Johns-Putra suggests:

The opportunity to critique (in Waugh's terms, to expose and, in D'haen's terms, to "de-center") the norms and expectations around realism, and, moreover, to align this with an exposé and de-centering of what, after Plumwood, one might view as the hegemonic centrism of human exceptionalism. (2018, p. 32)

Put simply, Johns-Putra (2018) looks toward magical realism and metafiction for their capacity to draw attention to the socially constructed basis of reality. Johns-Putra advances that such gestures in eco-fiction then function to make visible the "fallacy of the human voice" to de-centre anthros and all its trappings (p. 40). This de-centring passes agency to alternative ontologies. This invites not only sceptical engagements with the limits of realism, but also enables alternative strategies, such as those offered by Indigenous realism (Wright in Potter, 2016) and Indigenous (science) fiction (Whyte, 2018) to which I will briefly return.

Underlying Clark and Johns-Putra's argument is an argument for the utility and/or ethical responsibility of literature as a critical tool to shape discourse. As Emily Potter puts it, to "generate or feed imaginaries" that "give shape to the material ways of relating to and inhabiting place and its constituent parts" (2019, p. 4). While Johns-Putra's work tends toward emphasising how literary strategy might intervene on specific political formulations, such as posterity (2017) or colonial legacies (2018) by linking them to ecological crisis, Clark advocates for a complete reimagining of literary representation in order to explode established categories, such as the human or nature. Any attempt to synthesise these ideas would exceed this essay's scope, and very well might be impossible.

Multirealism

In my discussion so far, I have pointed toward a strand of scholarly inquiry that collectively demonstrates that realist depictions of climate change events are difficult due to limits in perceiving climate crisis as realist, and, in some other formulations such as Clark's, due to fiction itself. As outlined above, Johns-Putra contends this crisis of representation is not unique to eco-fiction.

Postmodern techniques such as magical realism and metafiction were either invented or adopted to do decolonising or postcolonial work (Johns-Putra, 2017, p. 31) as a way of deconstructing the colonial belief that we live in a monoreality.

It is possible that a world, the only one many of us have ever known, is no longer tenable. The global economy is willing a mass extinction into motion by mining the Earth's strata for the fossilised life of past extinctions and using it to power another (Brannen, 2018). Capitalism promises to eat everything, even itself. It is possible to imagine it storming the future, consolidating its power amid climate catastrophe by using crisis as justification for an escalation of what Naomi Klein calls the *shock doctrine*, the exploitation of crisis and public shock by governments to force through otherwise untenable pro-free market measures, deregulation, or new draconian laws (2008, pp. 7–9). And even if capitalism does miraculously fall along with the American Empire, it is essential to remember that what replaces the present will not necessarily be kinder than what exists now.

Reflecting on the utility of political depression, human geographer Natalie Osborne writes: "It might be over, but this is not the end" (2019, p. 151). In other words, the Earth is an increasingly precarious place, but it will go on. "Whole ways of living and dying have passed and are passing from this Earth," Osborne writes, and continues:

We have lost futures, and the basics of a good life are still denied to most ... Perhaps release may come from considering that we are not in the midst of a desperate, heated, chaotic battle to save The World. In fact, we lost that battle, lost that future, lost that world. (2019, p. 146)

For Osborne, this is not a wholly depressing realisation. Following Haraway (2016), Stengers (2015), and Tsing (2015), she considers what worlds might be found in the ruins of what already exists, "growing in the fissures of white colonial heteropatriarchal capitalism" (Osborne, 2019, p. 147). Osborne argues these alternatives, practiced by Indigenous people, queers, Marxists and many more, offer more than an alternative lifestyle. Rather, she insists that they offer up another way of knowing the world, thus working to reject the primary violence of modernity, which seeks to dismiss those old forms of knowledge beside its own as superstitious, primitive, or unrealistic. In doing so, Osborne seeks to break from monorealism by embracing the possibly of multirealism. She looks to Indigenous scholarship and activism for one example (p. 147) as to how this might be achieved. As Osborne rightfully demonstrates with reference to Claire G. Coleman, Erica Violet Lee and Nayuka Gorrie, First Nations Australian Peoples have experienced invasion that more or less brought about an apocalypse, yet First Nations People remain (p. 147). Osborne continues:

The generative, creative, evolving survival-and-beyond of First Nations Peoples in settler-colonial cities and countries tells us that while we might lose a world, other worlds are already here. The monorealism that dominates Western thought makes *an* apocalypse *the* apocalypse. Multirealism makes apocalypses possible, and while that is depressing in its own way, plurality means possibilities. (2019, p. 148)

The stories we tell matter. They foreclose particular realities and open others. Moreover, they reproduce ways of knowing our world. Through careful attention to what exists in our present, Osborne advocates for a politics that invites those of us limited by western notions of monorealism to learn "to attend to other worlds already with us" (2019, p. 147). She invites writers to embrace

multirealism. But how do we acclimatise to these other realities, to represent worlds different to The World constructed by the colonial powers?

Although this may seem obvious, it is not through the process of non-Indigenous people taking up Indigenous ontologies as their own in their everyday life or to make art. This would serve as but a further colonising gesture, and would likely give rise to crude caricatures. Moreover, I suspect such approaches would risk reproducing many settler-colonial anxieties surrounding sovereignty. I would also like to stress that to read Indigenous texts as multirealist would elide other genre distinctions such as Indigenous realism (Wright, 2019) and Indigenous (science) fiction (Whyte, 2018).

The task of multirealist fiction is to make visible the multiple worlds already with us. The first task of multirealist texts is to make visible the ontological limits of realism and, in turn, present alternatives to the reader while not breaking the contract between reader and writer over what is and is not possible in the realist text. In the context of novels about climate change, this ontological limit is often tested through a gradual defamiliarisation. At least initially, these novels push ecological concern into the background, as per Ghosh's claim. However, in these works, the spectacular penetrates and sometimes explodes into the narrative, occasionally overturning the plot. This establishes a final act in which characters find themselves teetering between multiple worlds, or trapped in an undesirable reality.

To demonstrate how realist novels have pursued this mode of writing, I will now turn my attention to two examples. First, however, it is worth noting that there is nothing particularly unusual about the explosion of an unlikely or world-changing event into a text. For instance, in a three-act structure the inciting incident that will lead to the novel's first plot point is often activated by the crashing of an external force into the protagonist's world, upending their life. Apart from signalling the end of act one and setting a point of no return for the protagonist, this moment poses the narrative question to be answered by the story's end (Trottier 2014, pp. 5–7). While the two novels I will go on to discuss do not strictly follow three-act structures, the texts' ecological events do work as inciting incidents. Multirealist narratives also ultimately subvert the teleology of traditional narrative and three-act structure in two ways. Firstly, they refuse, complicate, or make facile the dramatic question posed by the inciting incident. More importantly, they often move into a digressive mode in the second act, subverting the movements of graduation that will align in a moment of revelation at the narrative's climax. The most humorous example I found of this was executed in DeLillo's *White Noise*. At the novel's climax, seeking freedom from his fear of death, amplified by his encounter with an airborne toxic event, the protagonist, Jack Gladney, confronts the antagonist, Willie Mink, intending to murder him. However, as Jack approaches the moment of conquest, the scene language and coherent reality crumbles. For instance, approaching the hotel room where Willie is hiding, Jack notes an aluminium-plated awning over the office door that reads "NU MISH BOOT ZUP KO" (DeLillo, 1984, p. 350). In a surreal turn, Jack ends up taking Willie to hospital, where the nuns all speak German and do not believe in God (pp. 356–358). For the nuns, Jack, and indeed the narrative itself, there is no moment of revelation or transcendence. Reflecting on the text in the 1990s, Deitering writes that, with the conclusion, Jack is "poised between worlds, looking back home from an exile" caused by his culture's toxic impacts (1996, p. 202). Denied the moment of revelation, Jack is cast into a multi-toxic reality in which there are only further graduations of catastrophe, the source and meaning of which are impossible to process.

Of course, I am not suggesting that DeLillo's text is about climate change. Rather, I wish to suggest that ecological crisis can and has been used by writers to draw a multirealism into focus. A more sustained account of what I am trying to identify as multirealism can be read into Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2018). The novel evidences much of what I have discussed so far. As many critics have reflected (Perry, 2018; Ashan, 2019; Weber, 2019), the text defies easy categorisation. While it presents ostensibly as a murder mystery, it is also a manifesto for vegan politics, a dark feminist comedy, a work of portraiture, and a meditation on the role of astrology, the poetry of William Blake, and fate.

Briefly summarised, Tokarczuk's novel is narrated by Janina Duszejiko, an eccentric woman living out her life in a remote Polish village besieged with the lingering threat of development. Over the narrative's course, a series of ecological accidents befall prominent men of the town, all of whom have abused the environment somehow. Animal murderers all, they come to their ends through what the text plays as fates of irony. Janina's neighbour, a poacher who she calls Bigfoot, chokes on a bone. The police commandant is found in a ditch by his car surrounded by deer prints (marking the inciting incident, where the text becomes a whodunit). Innerd, a fox farmer and brothel owner, is found entrapped in a snare and the president of a mushroom pickers' association, a womaniser, is found suffocated by beetles. Finally, after delivering a sermon that praises hunters, calling their work "the vocation of caring for the gift from God" (Tokarczuk, 2018, pp. 239–240), the local priest is incinerated when the presbytery burns down – a turn of events that Janina implies is caused by the nests built by the magpies in the awnings (2018, p. 242).

While the novel is written in a realist style, avoiding fanciful or speculative elements, it continually threatens to break this through Janina's frequent discussions of astrology, and, more importantly, the lingering prospect that animals are responsible for the murders. In doing so, the novel frequently poses the possibility of another world, one where animals have agency, and astrology is both a science and a way of life. Throughout the text, Janina insists to both the police and her friends that the deaths are acts of nonhuman revenge. She insists to her friend Dizzy, "it's the animals taking revenge on people" (p. 84). She attributes this revenge to her belief that animals have been denied their natural place in the world as equal citizens, and cites medieval instances when animals were prosecuted in the legal system as evidence to contrast their contemporary disenfranchisement. This, Janina stresses, is an attempt to denaturalise the devaluation of nonhuman life as an ahistorical natural order (p. 84). While most mock Janina for her views, a few take her side, including the dentist and a "gentleman" who attributes the first three murders to discontent sown by climate change. He reflects:

I don't think this is to do with a single killer animal, but animals in general. Perhaps thanks to climatic changes they've become aggressive, even deers and hares. And now they're taking vengeance for everything. (p. 180)

While the prospect of environmental revenge is absurd and exceeds the boundaries of realism, it nevertheless works to become the text's animating question – are the animals the killers? This question works for two key reasons. The first is that it preys on a deeply ingrained narrative of divine justice. As the geographer Mike Hulme has noted, deities have expressed their displeasure via acts of environmental response – the Noah myth is a telling example (2017, p. 40). The second and more relevant point is that Janina's belief in ecological revenge enables Tokarczuk to interrogate the ontological foundations of her society. For instance, about halfway through the novel, Janina waves

over a passing forester to protest against the cutting down of trees that house *Cucujus Haematodes*, an endangered beetle that she has recently learnt of from a visiting entomologist. The forester, who Janina names Wolf Eye, dismisses her outright, then states:

There's nothing natural about nature any more ... it's too late. The natural processes have gone wrong, and now we must keep it all in control to make sure there's no catastrophe. (p. 194)

Wolf Eye's statement is contradictory and telling. He claims that nature has ceased to be, and therefore it is the responsibility of humans to take stewardship of the environment. This is the justification he lays out for not complying with environmental law to save the *Cucujus* beetle. However, as Janina draws out, this control is not apolitical, but anthropocentric and capitalist. Under further interrogation from Janina, Wolf Eye concedes that the *Cucujus* beetle does not represent any looming catastrophe, before admitting, "we need timber for stairs and floors, furniture and paper" (p. 195). The anthropocentric narcissism of Wolf Eye's belief that humans must control nature is nailed home when Janina goes on to lament the capture of several foxes which have recently escaped from a nearby fox farm. He states:

They weren't suited to a life of liberty ... they would have perished. They didn't know how to hunt, their digestive systems were weak and altered, their muscles were weak. What use would their beautiful fur be to them at liberty? (p. 196)

Care, in this formulation, is just another word for "enslavement".

Of course, the staging of a dialectic is hardly novel. This scene is notable because it animates not only an ontological tension, but the narrative question: what if the enslavement of animals has motivated the recent killings? The dialectic is effective not because it stages a sustained philosophical question, but because it invites the reader to consider what is possible in this ostensibly realist text. The reader is forced to ask themselves if it is possible, in the world of the novel, if nonhumans have the agency for revenge, and if Wolf Eye's beliefs may be understood as the animus driving them to such violence. In doing so, Tokarczuk interrogates the anthropocentric narcissism of her world by drawing the reader into another possible world without breaking the realist mode.

The debate over what constitutes truth, and thus a legitimate means of knowing the world in the novel, is further teased out via Janina's obsession with astrology. She attributes the murders to events she divines from the stars – in the case of the commandant, for instance, she notes that Saturn, being an animal sign, "portends a threat to life caused by a wild or aggressive animal" (p. 127). In one sequence, she summarises her efforts to convince her friend, Dizzy, of the legitimacy of the practice, pointing to a statistical link between the horoscopes of sportsmen and the position of Mars at their times of birth against non-sportsmen. Finding Dizzy dismissive, she then turns to demonstrate her case through historical evidence, with reference to a string of predictions regarding Hitler's fate that had come to fruition. Dizzy notes that these predictions are "incredible" (p. 124), before immediately being overtaken again by incredulity.

As with the scene with Wolf Eye, here Tokarczuk draws attention to how understanding the world through profit or through "rationality" limits the ability to know it in other ways. Janina is seen as

mad for her obsession and yet, as the prediction regarding the commandant's fate suggests, perhaps there is weight to her case. The upshot of this is a tension of two worlds. Both the hyper-rationalist familiar reality presented by Dizzy and Wolf Eye and the "superstitious" ecologically minded worldview propagated by Janina are held open as equally legitimate realities in the novel.

This question is troubled by the novel's conclusion, in which it is revealed that Janina has murdered the men for their complicity in the shooting of her dogs. An easy reading might suggest that this ending reduces Janina to an extraordinary other, a modern-day witch with fanciful ideals. However, such easy closure is denied by the text. Over the novel's course, Janina manages to assemble a small crew of eccentric friends – Oddball, Dizzy, Boros (the entomologist) – all of whom assist her escape to the Czech Republic. Janina retreats into a life of deeper solitude spent trying to figure out the meaning of her life in the stars. At the novel's finale, she writes again to Dizzy in an attempt to make clear the purpose of astrology. She tells the story of a monk who:

Foresaw his own death in his horoscope. He was to die from the blow of a stone that would fall on his head. From then on he always wore a metal cap beneath his monk's hood. Until one Good Friday, he took it off along with the hood, more for fear of drawing attention to himself in the church than for love of God. Just then a tiny pebble fell on his bare head, giving him a superficial scratch. But the monk was sure the prediction had come true, so he put all his affairs in order, and a month later he died. (p. 268)

Janina's conclusion suggests the importance of living by the conviction of one's ethics, even when said ethics go against a dominant norm. Such actions may be read as irrational, but as the discussed scene regarding Wolf Eye evidences, the norm does not necessarily hold a rational centre. More importantly for my argument, Janina's final letter insists upon the complexity of her ontology. There are no easy answers. Did the monk die because of the stone, as he predicted, or for another reason entirely? Did Janina murder the commandant because she lived with a rare kinship for animals, and saw herself as an animal, or instead because the violence he conducted toward animals drew Janina's revenge? This irresolvable question destabilises any coherent realism in the text. What counts for a representation of "the real" remains in flux.

Making the impossible pivotal

Throughout this essay, I have demonstrated how a multirealist approach may provide a useful frame for thinking about how to write climate fiction. Given the proliferation of climate texts in recent years, such an approach should not be read as prescriptive of a correct, or even common, strategy for writing, but instead as a potentially productive way of thinking through how a multirealist narrative might help to rethink the ontological challenges that climate crisis presents to western modernity. To demonstrate this, I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of my practice with reference to my short story, "A Still Thing Shaken".

"A Still Thing Shaken" is drawn from a series of creative experiments that I conducted from 2017 to 2019, culminating in three published short stories. Across all three works I pursued a similar narrative strategy (2019; 2019a; 2021). In each, a lonely protagonist's life is overturned by an affair that is either brought about or influenced by an environmental event. The design of this narrative was

inspired by the structure of *White Noise*, in which a realist family drama is made farcical following what the novel calls “The Airborne Toxic Event”. It was also designed without the idea of a multirealist narrative in mind. Rather, the intended effect was to capitalise on the trust gathered from the familiar realist premise of the love story to then risk a more dramatic environmental event in an effort to represent a coming into awareness.

The first story I wrote followed this formula neatly. In *Cass-O-Wary* (2019a), a woman goes on a holiday to far north Queensland to escape her cheating husband. While there, she runs into an old lover who is staying in the same resort. When a hurricane strikes, the pair reconnect in the basement where they shelter, which in turn triggers a near-sexual encounter. Although this story found success in publication, I was ultimately dissatisfied with it as a story about climate change. While I had wanted the hurricane to open the characters and story to new possibilities, ultimately the event had no relevance to narrative beyond its service to the plot, and as a consequence, felt artificial. In this way, the story was illustrative of the anthropocentric narcissism I discussed earlier in this essay.

Only after reading Osborne’s article and then Tokarczuk’s novel did I realise that the failures I perceived in *Cass-O-Wary* were ontological. The hurricane in the story was intended to function as a harbinger of climate crisis which, in turn, diminished its transformative potential. Because the hurricane sought to represent an apocalypse to come, it could not deliver the world-ending revelations that climate crisis forces upon western modernity without resorting to an apocalyptic or didactic passage which would break from the aesthetics of literary realist fiction. Furthermore, because the hurricane was symbolic of what climate crisis might do to transform our worlds, it ultimately worked to defer the climate crisis, which I was trying to draw into the contemporary, into the waiting room of history. In doing so, I reinscribed the very linearity that climate change explodes.

From this failure, I concluded that a successful narrative about climate crisis would only work if the moment of revelation emerged from the story’s narrative questions. The representation of the environment in the text would have to shatter, alter, or challenge the way either the reader or character understood the world. In Tokarczuk’s novel, it is the former. The cause of the murders challenges the reader, but not Janina. In “A Still Thing Shaken” I took the opposite approach. The story is set in an unnamed southern New South Wales town plagued by a catastrophic drought. Dust storms are frequent and farmers have started to take money from the government to cull their stock. Cumulatively these details function to create a mood of an unfolding apocalypse. The drought represents not only a lived experience of climate crisis, but also the end of a way of life, a fact openly acknowledged by many side characters throughout the story. This context is played off against the arc of the narrator, who lives at the back of one of these dying farms. At the request of his neighbour, he plays host to a disgraced Olympic swimmer, who has come to the remote town to avoid the press. As an outsider, the swimmer finds many of the narrator’s water-saving quirks variously irritating and confusing. For instance, a recurring detail throughout the story is that the narrator strikes his water tank each day to judge the water level. While the swimmer finds this amusing, the narrator views the lowering water as prophetic of an inevitable catastrophe. This tension threatens to complicate their relationship, but it’s simultaneously tempered by an unspoken desire for the swimmer which is, eventually, however briefly, reciprocated. The resulting effect is a narrative in which apocalypse and queer reproduction become charged with one another, and in which different ways of seeing the world, and marking time, become the animus for the story. To put it another way, I felt that in drawing together a figure of watery abundance (the swimmer) into a context of scarcity I was able to

make visible the horror and banality of climate crisis within the confines of an ostensibly realist plot through an attention to a world beyond the metropole that is already here.

Such an approach is unlikely to resolve the representational challenges posed by critics of climate fiction who have lamented fiction's anthropocentric narcissism. As my examples suggest, although multirealist approaches may be shot through with encounters with nonhuman and more-than-human forces, their narrative is almost always contained by human consciousness. Multirealist drama will likely be largely, although not entirely, driven by the human, rational subject. With this said, multirealism may begin the difficult undertaking of grieving for our world and making visible those worlds that have already appeared.

The ontological reckoning forced upon us by the climate crisis presents both challenges and new possibilities for creative writing. Representing climate crisis in a realist mode may not be a question of representing sea level rise, melting sea ice, or deforestation, but instead a question of remaking how characters know the world. As Tokarczuk's novel demonstrates, making the question of reality itself the subject on which the narrative turns enables realist fiction to speculate. In other words, in making the supposed impossibility of climate change the animating narrative question, it becomes possible to interrogate the pre-defined limits of realism and, in turn, imagine new worlds.

References

- Ashan, K. (2019, August 16). 'Drive your plow' is a philosophical lament, disguised as a whodunit [Radio broadcast]. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/16/751323423/drive-your-plow-is-philosophical-lament-disguised-as-a-whodunit>
- Atwood, M. (2004). *Oryx and Crake*. Anchor Books.
- Bradley, J. (2015). *Clade*, Hamish Hamilton.
- Brannen, P. (2018). *The ends of the world: Volcanic apocalypses, lethal oceans, and our quest to understand Earth's past mass extinctions*, Bloomsbury.
- Cagle, S. (2020, February 27). 'Without water we can't grow anything': Can small farms survive California's landmark water law? The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/27/california-groundwater-sigma-law-farmers>
- Clark, T. (2015). *Ecocriticism on the edge: the anthropocene as a threshold concept*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Climate Vulnerability Monitor. (2012). *A guide to the cold calculus of a hot planet*. <https://daraint.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/EXECUTIVE-AND-TECHNICAL-SUMMARY.pdf>

- Deitering, C. (1996). The postnatural novel: Toxic consciousness in fiction of the 1980s. In C. Glotfelty & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*, 196–203. University of Georgia Press.
- DeLillo, D. (1984). *White Noise*. Picador. (Original work published 2011)
- Ghosh, A. (2016). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press.
- Groff, L. (2018). *Florida*. Riverhead Books.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Hulme, M. (2017). *Weathered: Cultures of climate*. Sage Publications.
- Hunter, M. (2017). *The end we start from*. Grove Press.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2018). *Summary for policymakers of IPCC special report on global warming of 1.5C approved by governments*.
<https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments>
- Johns-Putra, A. (2018). The rest is silence: Postmodern and postcolonial possibilities in climate change fiction. *Studies in the Novel*, 50(1), (pp. 26–42). [10.1353/sdn.2018.0002](https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2018.0002)
- Johns-Putra, A. (2017). Borrowing the world: Climate change fiction and the problem of posterity. *Metaphora* 2, (pp. 1–16). <https://metaphora.univie.ac.at/volume2-johns-putra.pdf>
- Juchau, M. (2017). *The world without us*. Bloomsbury.
- Klein, N (2008). *The shock doctrine*. Penguin.
- Kirne, J. (2021). Escape out the back passage. In Fifield, M. & K. Theil (Eds.), *Fire and water: Stories from the anthropocene*. Black Lawrence Press.
- Kirne, J. (2019a). A still thing shaken. In Starford, R. (Ed.). *New Australian fiction: 2019*. Kill Your Darlings.
- Kirne, J. (2019b). *Cass-O-Wary*. Roanoke Review. <http://www.roanokereview.org/prose2019/jack-kirne>
- Kirne, J. (2018). *A gaia man survival guide*. Exposition Review.
<http://expositionreview.com/issues/vol-iii-orbit/a-gaia-man-survival-guide/>
- Lerner, B. (2014). *10:04*. Granta.

- Lockwood, A. (2019). Creaturely writing at the end of worlds. *Proceedings of Bodies of Knowledge Conference*. St John University, York.
- Mills, J. (2018). *Dyschronia*. Picador.
- Nelson, M. (2014, August 24). *Slipping the surly bonds of earth: on Ben Lerner's latest*. *LA Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/95063>
- Offill, J. (2020). *Weather*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Osborne, N. (2019). For still possible cities: A politics of failure for the politically depressed. *Australian Geographer*, 50(2), (pp. 145–54). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2018.1530717>
- Perry, S. (2018, September 21). *Drive your plow over the bones of the dead by Olga Tokarczuk – the entire cosmic catastrophe*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/21/drive-your-plow-over-the-bones-of-the-dead-review>
- Plumer, B. (2013, September 13). *How long before the Great Plains runs out of water?* *The Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/09/12/how-long-before-the-midwest-runs-out-of-water/>
- Potter, E. (2019). *Writing belonging at the millennium: Notes from the field on settler-colonial place*. Intellect.
- Potter, E. (2016). Postcolonial Australia, Indigenous realism and Alexis Wright's the swan book. *Teaching climate change in the humanities*. S. Siperstein, S. Hall & S. LeMenager (Eds.). Routledge.
- Powers, R. (2019). *The overstory*. Penguin.
- Rawson, J. (2013). *Wrong turn at the office of unmade lists*. Transit Lounge.
- Shannon, N. G. (2018, July 19). *The water wars of Arizona*. *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/magazine/the-water-wars-of-arizona.html>
- Stengers, I. (2015). *In catastrophic times: Resisting the coming barbarism*. Open Humanities Press.
- Tokarczuk, O. (2018). *Drive your plow over the bones of the dead*. A. Lloyd-Jones (trans.). Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Trexler, A. (2015). *Anthropocene fictions: The novel in a time of climate change*. University of Virginia Press.

- Trottier, D. (2014). *The screenwriter's bible: A complete guide to writing, formatting, and selling your script*. (6th ed.). Silman-James Press.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- Van Neerven, E. (2014). *Heat and light*. University of Queensland Press.
- Wark, M. (2017, August 16). *On the obsolescence of the bourgeois novel in the anthropocene*. Verso. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3356-on-the-obsolescence-of-the-bourgeois-novel-in-the-anthropocene>
- Weber, H. (2019). Olga Tokarczuk: Drive your plow over the bones of the dead. *World Literature Today*, 93, 1. <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2019/winter/drive-your-plow-over-bones-dead-olga-tokarczuk>
- Whyte, K. (2018). Indigenous science (fiction) for the anthropocene: Ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate crisis. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1, pp. 224–242.
- Wright, A. (2013). *The swan book*, Giramondo Publishing.
- Wright, A. (2019). *A journey in writing place*. Meanjin. <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/a-journey-in-writing-place/>