

**TEXT**

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>*Swinburne University of Technology***Julian Novitz*****Story cycles and climate disaster: Finding alternative structures for literary realist narratives in the Anthropocene*****Abstract:**

Because of its looping, non-linear structure, the short story cycle is ideally suited to capture the everyday experience of the Anthropocene, particularly as it manifests through encounters with climate disaster. The dualistic nature of the short story cycle demands that its narratives be at once self-sufficient and interrelated. Its simultaneously fragmented and unified structure has the potential to address the complex interconnections and enmeshments of human and environmental elements in the Anthropocene in ways that work to integrate the consideration of climate disasters into everyday life. *A Constant Hum* (2019) by Alice Bishop, *Florida* (2018) by Lauren Groff and *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022) by Sequoia Nagamatsu are all story cycles that centre, in some respects, on climate disasters. This article compares and contrasts how these authors approach disaster as a unifying theme or focus in their respective short story cycles, exploring their use of the non-linear form to address the ways in which disaster works to reshape landscape and identity, and express the mesh of human/non-human interaction that typifies life in the Anthropocene.

Biographical note:

Dr Julian Novitz is a senior lecturer in writing at Swinburne University of Technology. He is the author of two novels and a collection of short stories, and his creative and non-fiction work has appeared in a wide range of journals and anthologies.

Keywords:

Short story cycles, climate change, realism, Anthropocene

Introduction

Discussions of prose fiction depictions of climate change have tended to focus on the form of the novel, in both literary and science/speculative fiction genres. This overlooks the short story cycle as a mode for addressing the increasingly complex reality of life in the Anthropocene (the current period of history defined by the significant and unprecedented impact that human activity has had on the climate). The non-linear, fragmented and looping structure of the story cycle has the potential to offer a more varied, multiscale consideration of human behaviour and relationships in a world that is increasingly defined by a destabilising environmental crisis.

Amitav Ghosh's extensively discussed critique of contemporary literary realism in his essay collection *The Great Derangement* (2016) largely focuses on the conventional human-centric focus of the linear, chronological modern novel and its modes of depicting "plausible" narrative drama. An atmosphere of constant catastrophism feels untrue to the register of reality that is typically expressed through the conventions of this literary tradition, and, according to Ghosh (2016), this means that it is now ironically out of kilter with the actual reality of the climate crisis that we now live within (pp. 16–26).

At the time of its publication, Ghosh's argument encapsulated growing concerns about the failure of literary authors to address the climate crisis. Many eco-critics had already noted that authors of science and speculative fiction often provide more substantial engagements with the prospect of climate catastrophe (Trexler & Johns-Putra, 2011, pp. 185–186). Caren Irr (2017) describes the way literary realism has frequently "come under fire" (p. 11) for its normalising descriptions of the dominant social conditions of production and consumption that are contributing to the climate disaster. Furthermore, the structures of the literary realist novel were seen as often disregarding or excluding deep considerations of the natural world through their focus on the individual psychology and ethics of human protagonists (David, 2016, p. 113). The typical emphasis that literary realism places on questions of individual agency and character development frames human characters as the drivers of narrative, either making consequential decisions within a stable, regulated environment, or responding to the dramatic challenge presented by disaster and upheaval (Klases, 2021, p. 1111). Ecocriticism traditionally attempts to address this imbalance, refocusing human relationships with the material environment in ways that allow non-human matter to take on narrativity (Caracciolo, 2021, p. 17).

In the years since the publication of *The Great Derangement*, there have been more substantial and numerous attempts to address the concerns raised by Ghosh and others, through both scholarly criticism and creative practice. Hennessy, Cothren and Matthews (2022) and Traub (2016) note the importance of formal experimentation in recent literary depictions of the climate crisis, where disruptive stylistic devices and narrative forms are used to eschew the traditional human-centric focus and linear incremental developments of the modern novel. Klases (2021) makes the case that formally innovative novels like Ben Learner's *10:04* (2014), which combines poetry and prose, may offer a way of decentring the human in literary fiction and framing weather and climate as a more active and primary focus. He notes the ways in

which this movement between modes of literary expression and their associated perspectives resists the discrete, singular focus of linear realist narratives and their need to focus on a relatable and complete human experience. More recent examples include Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), which explores a lattice of narratives that converge around issues relating to deforestation, providing the reader with a sense of the overlapping relationships between environmental, economic and cultural factors. Published in 2022, Hanya Yanagihara's *To Paradise* applies this fragmented approach to place, following three narratives set in different time periods but in the same physical location, subtly illustrating how past and present activity may result in future disaster.

To date, these discussions have largely overlooked the affordances of the short story cycle and its potential to provide a literary response to the challenges of the climate crisis. Story cycles can be broadly understood as collections of short fiction where the individual stories are linked through recurring characters, settings, events, subjects or themes. According to Susan Garland Mann (1988), the stories of the cycle must be simultaneously independent and interdependent (p. 15). Each story, while narratively self-contained, provides a differing lens through which the perspectives, themes, subjects and characters of the preceding and subsequent stories can be re-examined (Kelley, 1995, p. 306). Helena Kadmos (2015) argues that the links between the self-contained stories – both explicit and implied – construct the story cycle's identity and allow for a multifaceted exploration of themes and experiences, rather than a progression to towards a singular, unified meaning or affect. These structural elements mean that story cycles can capture experiences that may be overlooked in the typically linear, character-focused structure of the novel. Michelle Pacht (2009) has noted that the short story cycle is uniquely suited for the exploration of unpopular and disquieting ideas through its capacity to integrate disparate narrative threads while still emphasising the discontinuities between them (p. 103). Following this, Rebekah Clarkson (2015) argues that short story cycles have the potential to deliver complex and uncomfortable depictions of place – through patterning, juxtaposition and contrast – in ways that upset the traditional hierarchy between character and setting in literary fiction. These qualities mean that the story cycle form is ideally suited to depicting experience of life in the Anthropocene.

It should be acknowledged that the term “Anthropocene” itself is controversial, given that it implies a collective responsibility for environmental changes that have largely resulted from a Western economic model (Malin, 2021, pp. 13–16), and the continuing debate as to whether it designates a definable geological epoch, or operates more as a metaphor (Hafner, 2022, pp. 150–151). However, I employ it here because the term can be understood as not just indicative of the impact of humans on the environment, but also of the ways in which human life is becoming increasingly entangled with environmental factors (Morton, 2010). Accepting that we live in the Anthropocene may potentially demand that we abandon the linear and hierarchical thinking that has defined our relationship with the locations that we inhabit (Caracciolo, 2021). The non-linear form of the story cycle and its capacity to disrupt the assumed primacy of human characters in relation to place seems ideally suited to capture this shift in thinking.

Three relatively recent story cycles provide us with the opportunity to examine and explore the possibilities of the form by considering how they depict complex interdependencies between human life and shifting, increasingly unpredictable natural environments. Tellingly, all three also use the recurrent consideration of natural disasters to provide multifaceted perspectives on the conditions of life within the Anthropocene. Alice Bishop's *A Constant Hum* (2019) is unified by a specific focus on the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009. Of the three cycles considered, it is the only one to deal with a historically identifiable climate disaster, but it is also notable for its general reluctance to depict the bushfires themselves. In *A Constant Hum*, the stories cycle around the disaster as void or absence that cannot be put into words or directly spoken of. Lauren Groff's *Florida* (2018) is unified by a focus on place. Most of the stories are set within the titular state and the few that are not centre on characters with deep and significant Floridian histories and connections. While *Florida* does not focus on a singular, specific climate disaster in the way that *A Constant Hum* does, destructive storms and floods feature in many of the stories in the cycle. The final cycle considered in this article is Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022). Like the other cycles, *How High We Go in the Dark* is unified by a recurrent focus on a disaster, albeit one that is not usually associated with climate. The stories explore the trajectory and consequences of a devastating global pandemic, beginning in a roughly contemporaneous setting and advancing into the distant future. However, *How High We Go in the Dark* merits consideration because it repeatedly links its pandemic to climate change. The entanglement of viral and climate disasters in this cycle offers insight into the increasingly complex interconnections between human and environmental spheres.

The remainder of this article will compare the approaches of these works in three critical areas. The first area of consideration will be the use of climate disaster as a unifying focus within the cycle. The second will be how the structures of these cycles work to challenge or critique assumptions of human primacy in relation to environments and settings in literary realist narratives. The article will conclude by contrasting the ways in which these cycles explore the deep enmeshment of previously separable human and environmental elements in the Anthropocene.

Addressing climate change through disaster

As noted, all three authors use a recurrent focus on different types of climate disaster as a way of providing a sense of unity across the stories in their cycles. This is, in some respects, typical of climate fiction in a variety of forms and mediums, as a focus on disaster is a powerful way of making the impact and threat of climate change feel tangible to readers. The disaster is typically framed as the inciting incident of science and speculative fiction treatments, which explore the possible consequences of ignored or unaddressed climate disasters, and the single, climatic, "plausible" disaster is a feature of attempts to address climate change in conventional literary realist forms. While these approaches have their merits, the function of disaster in these kinds of narratives is usually clear. The disaster operates as a shocking and destabilising event, disrupting "normal" modes of human life and practice. However, positioning climate disaster as a unifying focus in a story cycle can address the disaster as an event that resists singular

interpretations and stable meanings. This form of engagement is reminiscent of Maurice Blanchot's fragmentary insights on disaster as both a material and psychological phenomenon in *The Writing of the Disaster* (1995). Blanchot explores the challenges of capturing the disaster in writing when disaster tends to obliterate meaning rather than build or create it. In a similar way, the form of the story cycle allows for multiple overlapping and occasionally contradictory perspectives on disaster and its ramifications. This foregrounds the complexity of human and environmental interconnections in the Anthropocene, which both give rise to disasters and are created by them.

While the Black Saturday bushfires provide the story cycle with its unifying focus, Bishop largely avoids direct depictions of this disaster in *A Constant Hum*. Many of the stories focus on their immediate and distant aftermath, exploring experiences of bereavement and loss, economic stress and dislocation. This structural avoidance of a direct depiction of the disaster is in keeping with Wolfgang Iser's (1978) argument about the function of narrative blanks, where key events or developments have occurred but are not described. This absence challenges the reader to actively make connections, filling in the narrative blanks through their own interpretations and conclusions. In *A Constant Hum*, the decision to focus on seemingly peripheral after-effects of the fires creates a meaningful gap which draws the reader's attention as they progress through the collection. The disruptive loss caused by Black Saturday – of nature, of homes, of family, of communities, of security and selfhood – operates as the unifying theme of the cycle, and this is communicated not only through the individual subjects of the stories, but also through the structural absence of the fires themselves. In this regard, the collection captures Blanchot's (1995) conceptualisation of the disaster as “non-experience”, in that: “We feel there cannot be any experience of the disaster even if we were to understand disaster as the ultimate experience. This is one of its features: it impoverishes all experience, withdraws from experience all authenticity” (p. 51).

The lack of a direct depiction of the fires in *A Constant Hum* speaks to this loss of authenticity in the wake of disaster. Each of the stories either explicitly or obliquely references a trauma that is not directly described, creating a cumulative sense of Black Saturday as an event that in some ways defies memory and conventional narrative representation. This presents a contrast with approaches to climate disaster in linear fiction, where it is often presented as a challenge to the protagonists of the narrative in a way that provides expected dramatic tension and cathartic resolution. As Ghosh (2016) notes, this tendency to prioritise human agency and development fails to address the complexity of the Anthropocene. The cyclic structure of *A Constant Hum*, where the stories revolve around an absence that cannot be satisfactorily addressed or communicated, avoids this kind of reduction or simplification. No single story makes a claim to the authentic totality of the disaster through a direct representation. The subjects of the individual stories are overwhelmed by, and enthralled to, the unseen “non-experience” of the disaster that has preceded them.

While Bishop largely avoids the direct depiction of climate disaster, storms and floods repeatedly appear throughout many of the stories in Groff's cycle *Florida*. Adam Trexler (2015) notes that storms and flooding are one of the more common literary means of

representing climate change, as they provide a powerful and dramatic means of describing its impacts in a concrete and tangible location (pp. 2–4). However, rather than framing the storm as a singular, exceptional event, the non-linear structure of the story cycle allows Groff to signal how common these climate disasters have become in the Floridian landscape. When storms emerge as critical elements in the third and fourth stories in the cycle, they are framed as dramatically violent and disruptive. In “Dogs Go Wolf” two young girls are abandoned on an island by their nominal carers and forced to weather a cyclone. In “The Midnight Zone” a mother suffers a traumatic head injury and is trapped in a rural cabin for a period of days with her two young sons while a storm rages outside. Both stories explore how the storm operates as an isolating phenomenon, suddenly cutting characters off from familiar worlds and sources of support. The focus on storms reaches its most dramatic crescendo in the next story “Eyewall”, in which the narrator describes her house being literally ripped apart by a storm over the course of a single, harrowing night. Throughout this, the narrator is visited by ghosts of her husband, her college boyfriend and her father. The imagery of the story contrasts the quiet intimacy of the protagonist’s hallucinations or hauntings, and the violent exposure caused by the disaster, which batters down the walls of her home and spills her possessions into the world. This movement in “Eyewall” is reminiscent of another paradox of the disaster observed by Blanchot (1995): “There is no solitude if it does not disrupt solitude the better to expose the solitary to the multitude outside” (p. 6). The disaster of the storm and flood may force or entrap characters into solitude, but it also challenges notions of privacy and self-containment, altering the relationship between the protagonist and their natural surroundings.

Storms and flooding persist throughout the stories that follow “Eyewall”. In “Flower Hunters” and “Snake Stories” storms dramatically punctuate turning points in the narratives – the discovery of a sink hole that imperils the family home of the protagonist in the former, and a destabilising encounter with a mysterious young woman who has been the victim of a violent assault in the latter – but do not otherwise feature significantly in their plots. In “Above and Below” storms play a background role, as changing weather conditions prompt the itinerant movements of its homeless protagonist. Even stories that are not set in Florida (such as “For the Love of God, For the Love of God” and “Salvador”) have violent storms emerge without warning, as if to remind their Floridian protagonists that there is no escaping the increasingly unpredictable encroachments of climate into previously safe and stable spaces.

The diversity and often wildly differing scales of climate consideration in Groff’s story cycle – from the catastrophic to the mundane – offers a different approach to the idea of climate disaster than that found in Bishop’s *A Constant Hum*. The interchangeable violence and severity of the storms and the differing approaches to their role in the stories – where the storms may serve as an incidental background to human drama in some and play a more pivotal role in others – works to emphasise the familiarity of such extreme weather events in the Anthropocene. Trexler (2015) notes that one of the challenges for contemporary literary realist climate fiction is the need to frame seemingly dramatic climate events like storms and floods not as an “unrepeatable singularity” in the lives of their characters but as regularly recurring events (p. 80). *Florida* offers a mode of doing so by using the looping, non-linear structure of

the story cycle to explore the ways climate and environment can impact on human lives at different levels and scales, chiefly through the ever-present threat of storm and flood.

As already noted, the disaster that unifies the stories in Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* is not so immediately recognisable as a climate disaster as the bushfires that sit at the centre of Bishop's cycle, or the storms that recur throughout Groff's. Nagamatsu's stories follow the course of a devastating and highly infectious global disease that causes violent transformations in the internal organs of its victims, leading to a prolonged coma and then death in many cases. The stories all touch upon the history of the pandemic and its consequences, from its discovery and rapid spread around the world, to its legacy in the more distant future. Nagamatsu's work is more aligned with the speculative bent common to climate fiction than Bishop and Groff's. His stories explore the varied responses to the spread of the virus, from the different practices it creates for the care of the dying, to the psychological consequences of loss, to changes in funerary practices and the disposal of the dead. Through their various lenses, the stories also examine cultural and technological changes that emerge because of the virus.

Written and published in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, *How High We Go in the Dark* has been identified as an important part of the new wave of "pandemic fiction" (Feigel, 2021). However, it is notable for the ways in which it uses the varied narratives in its story cycle structure to consider how pandemics, like COVID-19 and Nagamatsu's fictional virus, can be meaningfully connected to environmental changes. A virus like COVID-19 does not just emerge from the ether but can be closely connected to the ways in which human settlements have increasingly encroached upon wildlife habitats, and these previously distinct and separate areas of life are now more interconnected in ways that inevitably lead to the transmission of viruses between animal and human populations (Armstrong, Capon & McFarlane, 2020). In a similar way, *How High We Go in the Dark* emphasises the close interrelation between the viral disaster and the ongoing climate disaster. The opening story "30,000 Years Beneath a Eulogy", which explores the initial outbreak of the virus, locates its origin in a thawing ice shelf in Siberia. The changes brought about by the Anthropocene result in the reintroduction of dormant biological matter into human spaces with disastrous consequences. While the following stories about the spread of the virus do not foreground the connection between the pandemic and the Anthropocene so overtly, an awareness of climate change as an equally significant disaster also persists throughout the cycle. As Nagamatsu examines how aspects of society and culture change in the decades following the outbreak, he also draws the reader's attention to the ongoing transformation of urban and natural environments via references to rising oceans and the increased prevalence of sea walls in cities. As the stories progress, adapting to the climate crisis becomes as important as adapting to the presence of the virus.

How We Go in the Dark is also worth examining alongside *A Constant Hum* and *Florida* due to the distinct optimism that permeates the cycle, despite its individual stories often dealing with tragic losses. Rather than adopting the more conventional dystopian framework for understanding human responses to destabilisation, Nagamatsu is more interested in considering how such changes may ultimately have beneficial outcomes. While the subjects of many of the stories are bleak – such as the development of a euthanasia theme park to provide a perfect last

day for terminally ill children in “City of Laughter”, or a new funerary practice where elaborate ice sculptures are created from the liquified remains of the deceased in “Before You Melt into the Sea” – the cumulative effect of reading the stories in the cycle is to see a world that is gradually improving, rather than disintegrating into chaos. Through the different insights the stories offer into emerging practices, customs and technologies, we see human culture becoming more collectively supportive in the wake of extreme loss, more invested in the preservation of memory, more sensitive and compassionate in the face of illness and bereavement, and more attuned to the ways in which it is situated within a natural environment. In this regard, *How High We Go in the Dark* uses the structure and scope offered by the form of the story cycle to explore the ways disaster may be transformative, rather than simply destructive.

To summarise, all three texts are notable for their use of the structure of the story cycle to provide multifaceted and various perspectives on the nature and potential meanings and ramifications of climate disaster. *A Constant Hum* addresses the loss of a sense of authenticity that follows in the wake of disaster by using the story cycle form to avoid directly representing the disaster or attributing a singular meaning to it. *Florida* uses its recurrent depictions of storms and floods to break down the assumption that disasters should be treated as singular, exceptional events. *How High We Go in the Dark* uses its cyclic structure to draw attention to connections between different kinds of disaster and to reveal their potential for transformation. The following sections will examine in more detail how these cycles use their focus on disaster to comment specifically on features of life in the Anthropocene.

Human characters, natural environments and agency in the Anthropocene

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh notes the irony of literary realist fiction being so relentlessly focused on the human in an age where human activity is drastically and visibly changing nature. While the non-human natural world and environment can be afforded primacy in non-fiction and science fiction, literary realist narratives still largely frame them as part of a static and secondary “setting” in contrast to the agency and empowerment of human subjects. This is again attributable to the linear, character-focused structures of most literary realist narratives which fail to address or express the uncanniness of climate change. Ghosh (2016) argues that the assumed hierarchy between active human characters and a passive setting in literary realist fiction needs to be contested to address the ways in which the natural world increasingly challenges or impinges upon human agency in the Anthropocene (pp. 61–66).

Marco Caracciolo (2021) attributes this deficiency to the human-centric cause-and-effect thinking that permeates Western narrative structures. Traditional linear narratives are our primary means of capturing temporal experience by creating a clear path between an initial state and a current outcome. He argues that our view of time – particularly in Western cultures – favours a sequential, irreversible model, and this is reflected in the conventions of literary realist storytelling, which typically explore the success or failure of goal-oriented movements by characters. These structures are unable to capture the non-linear “mesh” of arrangements that define the Anthropocene, in which human and non-human factors act upon each other in

complex and unpredictable ways that occasionally defy human-centric notions of causation and narrative logic (Caracciolo, 2021, pp. 56–58).

In contrast to the sequential thinking of Western cultures, notions of cyclicity still structure the temporal experience of many non-Western cultures, and these might offer a better understanding of the experience of the Anthropocene. By their nature, cyclic structures work to decentre human agency and the sequential notions of irreversible progress through which nature and natural forces are increasingly marginalised and separated from our sense of self and society. Caracciolo (2021) proposes the “loop” as a figure of non-linear narrative engagement. Rather than charting advancement towards individual success or failure, the loop narrative disrupts notions of sequential progress through re-examinations of earlier events that create increasingly complex and multifaceted connections between seemingly disparate phenomena (pp. 60–62).

The form of the story cycle offers a possible model for the loop-like narrative structures that Caracciolo calls for, as evidenced by the texts under consideration. Madison Smartt Bell (1997) argues that the modular design of non-linear narratives can put a focus on the kinds of relationships between characters, themes, motifs and events that are not generated through the emphasis on plausible sequences of cause-and-effect found in linear storytelling (pp. 213–216). Clarkson (2015) notes that the term “story cycle” itself “implies a circular patterning or framing of stories” (p. 8) and this is certainly present in Bishop, Groff and Nagamatsu’s cyclic explorations of climate disaster. While Nagamatsu’s *How High We Go in the Dark* follows a more overtly chronological structure than the other story cycles, the arrangement of its narratives still works to contest the agency and assumed primacy of human characters. While its central crisis develops incrementally across the stories, we repeatedly encounter largely passive protagonists who are either responding to or simply describing the upheavals and innovations that have occurred because of the viral pandemic and the subtly connected impact of climate change. The final story in the cycle, “The Scope of Possibility”, returns to the prehistoric origins of the virus discovered in the opening, blurring the boundaries of past, present and future in a way that captures the “catachronistic” temporality of climate fiction, where the effects of unnoticed or unaddressed events from the past permeate the present and future (Aravamudan, 2013). The loop-like structure of Nagamatsu’s story cycle – where the inciting incident of the meta-narrative emerges in a final story that is, in part, set in the distant past – frames individual human agency and progression as a less central consideration when addressing the scope of climate change.

By contrast, Bishop’s stories revolve around the largely undescribed Black Saturday bushfires in a more radically atemporal manner, moving backwards and forwards in time between the immediate and distant aftermath of the event. The elliptical structure of *A Constant Hum* works to decentre and arrest the progress of the human characters who have been affected by the disaster. As readers we repeatedly encounter characters who are dealing with both the material and psychological consequences of loss, transience and sudden transformation. Bishop’s protagonists are often not heavily individualised, and we are usually presented with a glimpse or snapshot of their circumstances, rather than a conventional narrative progression towards a

meaningful change or resolution. However, the same themes re-emerge at different times and in different contexts: bereavement and loss in “Just a Spark” and “Before the Winds Changed”; psychological trauma in “Taking Back” and “Soft News”; transience and relocation in “City Girls”, “Sticks”, “Valley Haze” and “Comfort Inn”; financial and legal repercussions in “Bunkers” and “Can’t Complain”; community judgements and tensions in “Local Hero” and “Community”. When coupled with the muted, quiet language used in many of the stories this creates a sense of recurrence and undramatic familiarity. The cumulative effect of the stories is that the disruptions and upheavals caused by the disaster are normalised, as is the loss of agency and control experienced by almost all the protagonists. As Blanchot (1995) writes: “The disaster does not put me into question but annuls the question. ‘I’ too disappeared into the disaster, which never appears” (p. 28). It is the largely unspoken yet traumatic memory of the fires which gives the cycle its centre, with the fragmentary experiences of the human actors who revolve around it being framed as more peripheral and interchangeable.

In Groff’s story cycle, the consistent focus on Florida as a place works to disrupt the hierarchy between active human characters and the static setting that typically manifests in literary realist fiction. The diverse narratives about Florida – both as a physical location and as an atmosphere, history or state of mind – explore how place and environment are both shaped by human settlement and intervention, but also exert material and psychological influences on human characters. This is expressed in the opening story “Ghosts and Empties” through the protagonist’s recurrent fixation on the possibility of disaster, even though she is situated in the seemingly safe and static location of her suburban neighbourhood:

During the day, when my sons are at school, I can’t stop reading about the disasters of the world, the glaciers dying like living creatures, the great Pacific trash gyre, the hundreds of unrecorded deaths of species, millennia snuffed out as if they were not precious. I read and savagely mourn, as if reading could somehow sate this hunger for grief, instead of what it does, which is feed it. (Groff, 2018, p. 7)

The threat of catastrophe feels intimately present to the narrator as she explores the streets of her suburb at night, noting shifts in the climate of her lived environment that work to undermine her sense of agency and control. The storms and floods that feature in many of the following stories similarly challenge the assumed primacy of human actors, but this also occurs through more subtle interactions between human characters and natural environments in the cycle.

This is perhaps best exemplified in “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners”. The protagonist, Jude, lives in a house on the borders of a swamp where the landscape is shifting and frequently perilous. As Jude enters maturity and takes possession of the property, he attempts to tame and regulate it. As a mathematician, the embodiment of human rationality, Jude is presented as being in opposition to the chaos of his surroundings and his menacing, irascible father, a snake-hunter who is thoroughly at home in the swamplands. Jude’s narrative follows a *Bildungsroman*-like course, where he gradually moves from extreme uncertainty to a position of stability and self-knowledge. What is problematic about this familiar trajectory in the short story is that it seems to come at expense of the natural world around him. Gradually over time

he “parcels” up the land around his family home and sells it to a nearby university. As readers, we are trained to view this movement as a positive one. However, towards the end of the story, he finds himself trapped on a lake near his home, the pretence of his agency as a primary human actor suddenly stripped away. In this moment, he considers the legacy of damage that has been caused by his own process of growth and development:

He thought of this lake. He thought of how his father would see Jude’s life. Such a delicate ecosystem destroyed by Jude’s careful parcelling of love, of land. Greed, the university’s gobble. Those scaled creatures, killed... Jude’s promise was unfulfilled, the choices made not passionate ones. Jude had been safe.

And yet still, here he was... Isolated. Sunbattered. Old. (Groff, 2018, p. 42)

Jude is saved by chance, his boat on the lake floating back to shore. However, the seemingly heroic trajectory of his life has been shaken by his sudden brush with death and the way in which it has reframed his relationship with the natural world that he has fought throughout the story to control. He has been made painfully aware of the destructiveness of his actions and his lingering vulnerability to the “hungry dark” (Groff, 2018, p.43) that still surrounds his seemingly safe and ordered life.

“Yport”, the final story in *Florida*, reinforces these themes through its loop-like circularity, returning to the protagonist of “Ghosts and Empties”. She has moved to the small coastal town of Yport in France but is still afflicted by the same sense of disquiet. She finds that the climate of Florida seems to follow her to the continent – “that Paris has become somehow Floridian” (Groff, 2018, pp. 218–219) – and she is repeatedly unsettled by the seemingly inexplicable behaviour of the seagulls that flock around Yport. Her obsession with the possibility of disaster has now passed to her youngest son who constantly speculates on the apocalyptic scenarios, particularly floods and tsunamis. Despite the change she has made in location, she is still uneasily aware of her family’s vulnerability to environmental shifts. The lack of essential change for the protagonist between the first and final story in *Florida*’s cycle emphasises the insufficiency of individual agency and empowerment in the face of climate dread.

All three story cycles utilise their looping structures to challenge assumptions of human primacy in their narratives. In *How High We Go in the Dark*, the passivity of the protagonists in the individual stories creates a cumulative sense of humanity being directed by the experience of disaster rather than heroically responding to it. The radically atemporal structure of *A Constant Hum* is used to present disaster as an experience that is never fully resolved, disrupting the expectations of progress and development. Finally, the loop-like structure of *Florida* reveals the futility of attempts by human characters to control or “master” their environments.

Human and non-human enmeshment in the Anthropocene

Bishop, Groff and Nagamatsu’s works not only use their cyclic focus on disaster as a way of contesting assumptions of human primacy in relation to the natural world, but also as an impetus to explore complex interconnections between human life and the natural world around

it. In doing so, they arguably demonstrate the potential of the story cycle to address the enmeshment of human and non-human actors within the Anthropocene. Many critics agree that a distinctive feature of the Anthropocene is that it links humanity and human action to climatological, biological and geological areas that were previously considered as separate and distinct (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000; Morton, 2010). Rather than viewing climate change simply as a matter of the environment acting on human structures and arrangements – as in “plausible”, singular, disaster-focused environmental narratives – or humanity acting on the environment – which again privileges human agency, albeit through the consideration of tragic hubris – the Anthropocene presents creative opportunities to explore complex interconnectedness and convergence. Timothy Morton (2010) deploys the “metaphor of the mesh” in critiquing the capacity of conventional narratives to adequately address the Anthropocene (p. 28). For Morton, the mesh offers an alternative to linear and hierarchical ways of thinking about the relationship between human and non-human processes, and the complex entanglements of environmental and cultural factors that define the Anthropocene condition pose a challenge to our traditional structures of narrative logic and sense-making. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh (2016) argues that linear realist novels are often incapable of addressing these relationships with sufficient complexity. Their tendency to prioritise the development of human characters and relationships, and to frame natural environments as largely static settings, can be read as a continuation of what Bruno Latour identifies as one of the principal projects of modernity: the partitioning of culture and nature (Latour, 1993, as cited in Ghosh, 2016, p. 68). The non-linear and non-hierarchical structures of the story cycle may arguably be better suited to narrating the mesh of human and non-human connections in the Anthropocene.

In *A Constant Hum*, this enmeshment is subtly expressed through the way its cyclic focus on the Black Saturday bushfires results in scenarios where the boundaries of nature and culture are deliberately blurred. The story “Porch Light”, for example, opens with its protagonist confusing birdsong with the noise of her dishwasher, following a housewarming in her rebuilt home sometime after the fires. This sets the tone for the rest of the story, where the newness, bareness and acutely felt vulnerability of the protagonist’s house mirrors the empty landscape that surrounds it and the slow, budding regrowth of foliage. Elsewhere in the story cycle, the damage that the fires inflict on animals, both domestic and wild, is repeatedly emphasised alongside depictions of human suffering, and similar language is used to describe both the destruction of human habitats and the unsettled areas of bushland. In this sense, the central disaster is used to create linkages and draw parallels between the human and the non-human, giving them equivalent weight within the cyclic structure.

Furthermore, the cycle’s description of the spiralling and peripheral impacts of the bushfires – psychological trauma, financial stress and demographic transformation – bring these human elements into a consideration of the natural environment of rural Victoria, rather than separating them as distinct and disconnected factors. Tellingly, the titular story “A Constant Hum” takes this confusion around the boundaries of the human and the natural world as its subject. This is one of the few stories set in the days before the events of the fires themselves, and it describes a rural family’s confusion about the source of a faint humming sound that emerges in their house during the brutal heat of the February summer. The hum that afflicts the

house may be emitting from a faulty appliance or nearby powerlines, or something in the surrounding landscape, but the family never definitively solves the mystery of its source. As the hum heard by the family seems like an ominous prelude to the destructive fires, the uncertainty over whether its origins are natural or technological is significant. This aspect of the story speaks to the confusion of human and environmental spheres in the Anthropocene, where the divisions imposed through modernity are increasingly eroding. The origin of the fires as a manifestation of climate disaster is not uncomplicatedly environmental or human, but emerges from the complex, often contradictory relationships between the two. In *A Constant Hum*, we repeatedly see the ways in which the boundaries between the human characters and the natural environment are blurred. The repeated confusion and comparison of human and environmental phenomena speaks directly to the paradox of the Anthropocene, where our attempts to divide “civilised” spaces and lives from nature have resulted in destructive human intrusions upon it, and now, through forms of climate disaster, increasingly challenging natural disruptions of human spaces that had been thought of as safe and separate.

The stories in Groff’s *Florida* also touch upon the enmeshment of the human and non-human aspects and spaces. In the opening story “Ghosts and Empties”, a creeping awareness of this enmeshment is the source of the narrator’s anxiety. In the increasingly hot, sweaty summer nights that she spends walking the familiar streets around her home, she notes how the drone of air conditioning units will gradually start to drown out the night birds and frogs. The story subtly alludes to how the weather is moving towards extremes, heavy winters followed by oppressive summers, and the ways in which human actions are causing noticeable changes, even in the seemingly settled and static environment. Baby swans in a nearby pond have died and the smell of the blooming trees is drowned out by smoke from a controlled burn outside of the city. These changes to the natural environment are also implied to influence the lives of the human residents. Old buildings collapse, old communities disperse, the homeless become more visibly ingrained in the fabric of the neighbourhood. An air of menacing decay and erosion seems to be present in both the natural and the human elements, but the narrator does not or cannot reduce them to simple cause-and-effect relationships. However, her observation of the enmeshment of the human and the environmental aspects of her surroundings leaves her anxiously aware of the unpredictability and the destructive volatility that may result from these entanglements.

In the later story, “Eyewall”, we see the other side of this enmeshment, where the storm works to challenge the culturally imposed barriers between the human and the natural/environmental. The narrator emerges from her shelter the morning after to find the storm has not been wholly destructive – “The house, in the end, had held.” (Groff, 2018, p. 99). It has also reoriented (if only momentarily) the divisions between the self and the wider world – “My life was scattered across three counties.” (p. 99). The narrator finds herself sharing the ruins of her house with an abundance of wildlife at the story’s close: “On my way downstairs, I passed a congregation of exhausted armadillos on the landing. Birds had filled the Florida room, cardinals and whip-poor-wills and owls. Gently the insects fled from my step.” (pp. 99–100). The narrator ends the story musing, “Houses contain us; who can say what we contain?” (p. 100). The storm pushed her into a deep interiority, as represented by the ghostly visitations she experiences throughout

the night, but it has also opened aspects of her private life to the environment that surrounds her. The contrasting extremes of solitude and exposure that the disaster of the storm forces upon the narrator of “Eyewall” once again emphasises the complex enmeshment of human and environmental factors in the Anthropocene. The barriers and boundaries that are used to partition the private self from the natural world are revealed as artificial and are easily eroded.

This enmeshment is also addressed in *Florida* through the rapid shifts in scale and focus allowed by the story cycle form. For example, in the final story “Yport” there is a gradual build-up of portentous disquiet that seems to signal that another destructively violent storm is about to strike. This is intimated through the narrator’s uneasy awareness of the weather and her inability to contact her husband back home in Florida, as well as her son’s growing obsession with disaster and the preponderance of storms and floods in the earlier stories. However, when the narrator is finally able to access her email in the final pages, the strongly foreshadowed disaster turns out to be a personal one – a close friend has committed suicide. This rapid shift between collective and individual concerns, the environmental and the human, offers an example of the multiscale narration called for by David Herman. Herman (2018) argues that effective climate fiction should use its focus on human scale phenomena not as an end in itself, but to allegorically point towards climate processes that are not on a human scale (p. 82). In “Yport”, the sudden substitution of a human tragedy for the environmental catastrophe that the reader might be primed to expect at this point in the story cycle works to articulate the confusion of human and natural worlds. In keeping with Herman’s concept of multiscale narration, the human scale event is allegorically mapped to the environmental scale. Though not the same, the foreshadowing and subtle menace of the story renders them both briefly equivalent, operating as an emotional expression of the mesh of human and environmental relationships that defines the Anthropocene.

While *A Constant Hum* and *Florida* largely explore the uneasiness or uncanniness of the human/non-human enmeshment that is revealed by climate disaster, the speculative engagements in *How High We Go in the Dark* are more optimistic. In addressing the devastating losses caused by the interconnected viral and climate catastrophes, Nagamatsu’s stories also examine how these events may give rise more progressive understandings and relationships. This movement is perhaps most overt and powerful in the story “Pig Son”, where a pig that is being used in a medical laboratory to grow replacement organs for victims of the virus begins to take on human characteristics. The pig can articulate its desires, ambitions and emotions, and forms a close bond with the narrator and other lab workers. The empathy between them builds to the point where the narrator cannot accept the instrumental use of the pig, but the pig elects to fulfill its function out of compassion, having learned of the loss of the narrator’s son to the virus. The blurring of the boundaries between the human and animal works to dispute the assumed primacy of the human over the natural world, with the pig ultimately modelling humane behaviour for the human characters. This is paralleled by what can be read as a reciprocal movement later in the story cycle. “A Gallery, a Century, Cry a Millennium” is set in the distant future and focuses on a spaceship that is travelling the stars, seeking a new home. Upon an encounter with a hostile species on a promising planet, the crew of the ship elect not pursue the process of violent conflict and colonisation that is common in science fiction

narratives but elect to leave the creatures in peace. “This is their planet,” the captain of the ship states, deciding to seek out a world where human life will fit within an existing ecosystem, rather than demanding that it should be changed to fit their needs (Nagamatsu, 2022, p. 200). The viral and climate crises that caused their exodus have also given rise to an awareness of how the violent partitioning of human and natural spaces will only lead to further crises, and the chronological end point of the story cycle sees humanity seeking a more harmoniously situated existence. In the disparate narratives that comprise *How High We Go in the Dark*, Nagamatsu uses the structure of the story cycle to positively explore human/non-human enmeshment and to speculate on how our responses to a disaster that foregrounds this enmeshment might produce meaningful change.

All three cycles use their non-linear structure to confuse and contest boundaries and divisions between human and environmental factors. Their multifaceted approach to climate disaster – through repeated re-examination and re-contextualisation – presents it as a phenomenon that arises from an increasingly complex enmeshment of the two, rather than as a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Furthermore, through patterning, parallels and juxtapositions between the stories in their cycles, Bishop, Groff and Nagamatsu all explore ways in which the experience of disaster itself may work to erode the hierarchical and often artificial boundaries that are typically imposed between the “human” and the “natural” worlds.

Conclusion

The experience of climate change reveals the limitations of the linear, incrementalist, human-centric modes of thought that often underpin literary realist fiction. Returning once again to *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh (2016) argues that as the climate crisis can be understood as a crisis of culture – in terms of our collective failure to arrest the destructive patterns of production, distribution and consumption that have come to define modern living – it must also be understood as “a crisis of imagination” (p. 9). We are failing to conceive of the magnitude and immediacy of the threat we are facing, and to seriously explore the alternative ways of living and forms of political and economic organisation that might help mitigate it. According to Ghosh, literary fiction itself plays a role in this crisis by failing to find narrative structures, modes of representation and language capable of compellingly addressing the realities of living in an age of climate change.

In *The Storyworld Accord* (2018), Erin James calls for an “econarratology” that foregrounds the relationship between stories and the environmental imagination. Such a movement, almost paradoxically, demands the consideration of planetary rhythms and cycles beyond the everyday experiences, temporal understandings and patterns of cause-and-effect that often provide our meter for literary realism. Climate fiction therefore demands engagement with alternative literary structures to explore the reality of the Anthropocene.

Through their multifaceted explorations of disaster, their contestation of assumed human primacy in narrative and their considerations of human/non-human enmeshment in the Anthropocene, the works of Bishop, Groff and Nagamatsu demonstrate that the story cycle can

provide such an alternative. As Pacht (2009) argues, the story cycle's non-linear, non-hierarchical structure makes it ideal for the exploration of uncomfortable and unpopular experiences and observations and it therefore provides a highly suitable way of narrativising and normalising the shifting conditions of life in the Anthropocene. The story cycles of Groff, Bishop and Nagamatsu model diverse approaches to the theme of climate change through their focuses on disaster and the upheavals and transformations that may accompany it. The existing affordances of the story cycle as a form should therefore be considered alongside the recent trend towards experimental and genre-bending fictions in discussions of literary attempts to address and represent our current environmental crisis.

References

- Aravamudan, S. (2013). The catachronism of climate change. *Diacritics*, 41(3), 6–30.
- Armstrong, F., Capon, A., & McFarlane, R. (2020, 31 March). Coronavirus is a wake-up call: our war with the environment is leading to pandemics. *The Conversation*.
<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-is-a-wake-up-call-our-war-with-the-environment-is-leading-to-pandemics-135023>
- Bell, M. S. (1997). *Narrative design: A writer's guide to structure* (1st ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Bishop, A. (2019). *A constant hum*. Text Publishing.
- Blanchot, M. (1995). *The writing of the disaster* (A. Smock, Trans.). University of Nebraska Press. (Original work published 1995)
- Caracciolo, M. (2021). *Narrating the mesh: Form and story in the Anthropocene*. University of Virginia Press.
- Clarkson, R. (2015). *The short story cycle and the representation of a named place* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Adelaide].
<https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/101813/12/04whole.pdf>
- Crutzen, P. J., & Stoermer, E. F. (2000). The “Anthropocene”. *Global Change Newsletter*, 4, 7–8.
- David, S. (2016). *Eco-fiction: Bringing climate change into the imagination* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter].
<https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/24331/DavidS.pdf>
- Feigel, L. (2021, 27 November). Inside story: The first pandemic novels have arrived, but are we ready for them? *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/27/inside-story-the-first-pandemic-novels-have-arrived-but-are-we-ready-for-them>
- Ghosh, V. (2016). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press.

- Groff, L. (2018). *Florida*. Penguin Random House.
- Hafner, R. (2022). The Anthropocene: Thought styles, controversies and their expansions. A review. *DIE ERDE* 153 (3), 149-161. <https://doi.org/10.12854/erde-2022-619>
- Hennessey, R., Cothren, A., & Matthews, A. (2022). Creating new climate stories: Posthuman collaborative hope and optimism. *TEXT*, 26(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.35289>.
- Herman, D. (2018). *Narratology beyond the human: Storytelling and animal life*. Oxford University Press.
- Irr, C. (2017, 27 February). Climate fiction in English. *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.4>
- Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- James, E. (2015). *The storyworld accord: Econarratology and postcolonial narratives*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Kadmos, H. (2015). *Riding waves: Representing women's relational autonomy in the short story cycle* [Doctoral dissertation, Murdoch University]. Murdoch University Research Repository. <https://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/27336/>
- Kelley, M. (1995). Gender and genre: The case of the novel-in-stories. In J. Brown (Ed.), *American women short story writers: A collection of critical essays* (pp. 295–310). Routledge.
- Klaces, C. (2021). Ben Learner's *10:04* and climate change. *Textual Practice*, 35(7), 1109–1123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1731583>
- Malin, S. A. (2021). Examining the Anthropocene: A contested term in capitalist times. In S. Ryder, K. Powlen, M. Laituri, S. A. Malin, J. Sbicca & D. Stevis (Eds.), *Environmental justice in the Anthropocene: From (un)just presents to just futures* (pp. 10–18). Taylor & Francis.
- Mann, S. G. (1988). *The short story cycle: A genre companion and reference guide*. Greenwood Press.
- Morton, T. (2010). *The ecological thought*. Harvard University Press.
- Nagamatsu, S. (2022). *How high we go in the dark*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Pacht, M. (2009). *The subversive storyteller: The short story cycle and the politics of identity in America*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Powers, R. (201). *The overstory*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Traub, C. (2016). Non-anthropocentric narrative strategies in recent experimental US fiction. *Literature Compass*, 13(9), 515–529. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12337>

Trexler, A. & Johns-Putra, A. (2011). Climate change in literature and literary criticism. *Wires Climate Change*, 2(2), 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.105>

Trexler, A. (2015). *Anthropocene fictions: The novel in a time of climate change*. University of Virginia Press.

Yanagihara, H. (2022). *To paradise*. Doubleday.