



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

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

Flinders University and University of Melbourne

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Author experiences of researching, writing and marketing climate fiction

Abstract:

There is a growing body of literature that studies the emotional impact of engaging regularly with climate change in a professional capacity, with a particular focus on climate scientists and activists. However, the experience of climate fiction writers is yet to be investigated, despite the many years such writers must spend deeply focusing on the issue. This project fills this gap by interviewing 16 Australian and New Zealand writers of climate fiction, focusing on how the different stages of the publishing cycle – research, writing and marketing – affected their wellbeing. While there was a diversity of experiences, we have identified a number of trends. Despite some confronting moments, the research and writing phases represented a positive experience, with writers gaining a sense of control and purpose in the face of the immense climate change problem. For many writers, though, the post-publication phase produced more difficult emotions, including feelings of guilt over inaction in the face of the crisis, frustration at reader responses, and the pressure of being construed as climate change experts in interviews and at festival events.

Biographical note:

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Keywords: Climate fiction, climate anxiety, creative writing, wellbeing, cli-fi

Introduction

It has been established that mere awareness of climate change can be detrimental to mental health and wellbeing. Terms such as “climate anxiety” (Clayton, 2020), “climate change anxiety” (Schwartz et al., 2022), “eco-anxiety” (Coffey et al., 2021) and “solastalgia” (Albrecht, 2005) are used to describe the negative emotional states created by thinking and worrying about climate change and other environmental destruction. Alongside surveys of climate change anxiety in the general public (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023), qualitative research has also explored the emotional impact that close engagement with climate change can have on groups such as climate scientists and climate activists (Head & Harada, 2017; Hoggett & Randall, 2018; Nairn, 2019). One cohort that has not yet been studied this way is writers of climate fiction, or “cli-fi”: a genre of fiction depicting climate change and other impacts of the Anthropocene. This study fills this gap by interviewing 16 Australian and New Zealand authors of full-length cli-fi works, focusing on how the different stages of the publishing cycle – research, writing and marketing – affected their wellbeing.

It is important to note that research into climate change anxiety has been criticised in the past for focusing on the feelings of privileged populations and consequently ignoring those for whom climate change has already had a direct and substantial impact (Ray, 2021). The embedded privileges of the Australian literary context, which have been elucidated in a number of recent studies (Bowen & Driscoll, 2022; Kon-yu & Booth, 2022), mean our study cannot cover the full spectrum of climate change experience. The study’s ability to provide intersectional analysis that includes the wide spectrum of lived experience with climate change is therefore limited.

Indeed, many writers interviewed here were careful not to equate the challenges facing the fiction writer with those directly affected by climate change or those working at the coalface of climate change research and action. Nonetheless, writing a full-length work of cli-fi can involve years of deep focus on a frightening subject that is likely to directly affect authors and their families in the future, if it has not done so already. Furthermore, while it is common for climate scientists to attempt to suppress their emotions by ignoring the wider implications of their research into climate change (Head & Harada, 2017; Hoggett & Randall, 2018), the act of creating cli-fi narratives naturally requires writers to imagine how climate change has or will impact living beings. A novel is an emotional journey as much as an intellectual one, necessitating the writer’s emotional engagement with negative and often distressing facts. Additionally, while climate activists frequently put their bodies at risk in a manner rarely asked of the fiction writer, these activists also report receiving a positive sense of community and agency, something that is more difficult to achieve for writers who predominantly work alone and whose real-world impact is difficult to ascertain. Thus, there is something uniquely challenging about the experience of writing cli-fi, and understanding this experience and its emotional impact will complement other qualitative studies in this space.

While there was a diversity of experiences across the 16 interviewees, we were able to identify a number of trends that suggest each stage of the publishing cycle affects author wellbeing differently. Firstly, while we hypothesised that the research stage and the knowledge it brings would be the most emotionally difficult, writers reported it having a neutral impact on their wellbeing, mostly because climate change was an issue they were already deeply concerned and informed about. Secondly, many writers described the writing phase as being positive for their wellbeing, as it gave them a sense of control and usefulness in the face of the immense climate change problem and allowed them to confront their fears about the future. Finally, many writers described how the marketing phase resulted in difficult emotions, including feelings of guilt over inaction in the face of the crisis, frustration at reader responses, and the pressure of being construed as climate change experts in interviews and at festival events. Those who *did* report positive experiences during this phase attributed this to a sense of connection and collaboration with either communities of readers or fellow writers, as well as a feeling that their writerly skills were being properly utilised in the public sphere.

On the back of these findings, we offer a number of recommendations on how the creative writing field can best situate itself to assist those eager to engage creatively in the climate emergency, but who are perhaps worried about the mental health cost. These include harnessing the wellbeing benefits of the writing process to help alleviate climate change anxiety, rethinking the role of the author in public climate change discussions, and fostering opportunities for meaningful collaboration in reading and writing communities.

Methodology

We conducted a literature review of Australian and New Zealand fiction about climate change published between 2013 and 2022. The database in Austlit's (n.d.) "Climate Change in Australian Narrative" project formed the backbone of this literature review, with a few more titles added by the researchers as they encountered climate fiction in their own reading. To narrow the sample set down, we did not include young adult novels or children's fiction, as we felt their audience and purpose to be different from adult climate fiction [1], and we only included books that received at least one review in a major publication, such as *Australian Book Review* or *Sydney Morning Herald*. We focused on mainstream/literary fiction that sought to challenge and advance conversation, rather than entertainment fiction (such as romance or crime fiction, for example). A total of 26 authors were identified, with 16 agreeing to be interviewed. A list of the authors and their climate fiction works is provided at the end of the article.

Specific demographic information was not sought from authors as part of the study, and therefore the findings here are limited by the inability to provide intersectional analysis. Such intersectional analysis is crucial to understanding the full picture of climate change's impact, as Sarah Jacquette Ray – author of *A Field Guide to Climate Change Anxiety* – writes that "Climate change and its effects ... are not universally or uniformly felt: the people and communities suffering most are disproportionately Black, Indigenous and people of color [*sic*]" (2021). Therefore, we suggest that further research into a wider range of writers, both in

Australia and worldwide, is required to understand just how cli-fi authors' experiences are mediated by their intersections with race, class, gender and geographic location.

Each thirty-minute semi-structured interview focused on how an author's understanding of and anxiety about climate change was affected by the writing cycle, but room was made for authors to discuss any other issues related to writing about climate change. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and authors were given full editing rights over the transcripts prior to their inclusion in the dataset. Prior to the interviews, authors were notified that they would be identified in research outputs. This decision was made so that connections between the authors' experiences and their creative works could be analysed openly in outputs. Thematic analysis was used to break data into themes, which we will now unpack in this article.

Researching “the full scale of it”

While the interviewed authors were, unsurprisingly, aware of and concerned about climate change prior to beginning their writing projects, some described how their research process led to a deeper understanding of aspects of the issue. There is an emotional impact to knowing and understanding the process and effects of climate change, including grief for what is already lost and what is being lost, as well as anticipatory grief, guilt and responsibility, anger, despair, and fear. We found that writers of climate fiction are often drawn to the genre because they already know some facts and have some understanding of the catastrophe – yet to write is also to consciously engage with the feelings that knowledge of the climate crisis engenders.

Rohan Wilson says that prior to beginning his research into climate change, he had “the same general knowledge that most people had” but “didn't really quite understand the dramatic effects that were coming along the way”. This changed during the course of his research, leading to a new perspective on the severity of the issue: “Reading all of the research and realising that one thing leads to another, whole ecosystems collapse and then countries disappear ... When you realise the full scale of it, it does change the way you think about the world ... It's pretty confronting”. James Bradley says his research process “changed [his] relationship to the whole subject” as it enabled him to imagine what day-to-day life might look like in fifty years' time “in a more granular way, in a more closely imagined way. Trying to actually give shape to what that science might mean”. This is not simply an intellectual working through of facts, but a leap of imagination that conjures the details of a future that is emotionally confronting, extrapolating a lived experience that is personal and imminent. Catherine McKinnon similarly believes that her “research and writing process helped [her] understand and think about climate change in a much deeper way than [she] would have otherwise”, but she is uncertain about the exact emotional effect of this new knowledge: “Does the accumulation of knowledge mean that you worry less or more?”

Indeed, for some writers, moments throughout their research had a surprisingly positive emotional effect, deepening their appreciation for both the environment around them and the work being done to protect the environment. Joshua Lobb says his research focus on birds illuminated an entire world he had previously ignored:

There are all sorts of birds, and I never listened out for them, I had my headphones on or whatever. Now that's a part of my ritual is to listen ... I've gotten to be much more attuned to those worlds around me and my impact or effect on them.

During his research, Lobb also had a positive experience on Cabbage Tree Island, where he was witness to the committed work of an ecologist there: "The work that I saw him do, and the generosity that he engaged with the space was so enlivening, and heartening. I thought, 'Oh, okay, there are people who are doing these things, that's their job'". Lucy Treloar also had a positive experience during a research trip to Chesapeake Bay, a region in the north-east of the United States of America that is dealing with flooding as a result of higher sea levels. She says the trip opened her eyes to the resilience of a community currently affected by climate change:

We tend to think that people might be sitting around thinking, "Oh, we're all doomed". And what I couldn't get over both times I visited there was how chipper they all were ... They just get in the machinery, jack their houses up and move them further away from the sea, or abandon them and move to the mainland. They are incredibly resilient, and so I just thought: reframe the discussion.

Kate Mildenhall was similarly impressed by the resilience of environmental journalists who continue reporting on climate change issues despite facing harassment or worse from powerful actors. She deliberately used her novel to introduce other readers to this new knowledge:

The idea of green journalism and the threat on green journalists, that was something that I read heaps about and I was interested in. It hadn't been on my radar, and I thought if it was not on my radar, and I've read a lot in this area, then that is something that I would like people to pay attention to.

As these writers' experiences show, researching climate change can involve positive discoveries. However, perhaps inevitably, given the severity of the issue, there will also be moments in which writers encounter new knowledge that disturbs or even temporarily debilitates them. For Meg Mundell, her research involved becoming "more aware of the ocean and what we're doing to it", and she was particularly affected upon encountering images of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch: "I did watch some footage of that. When I saw the garbage in the ocean and how big it was, it was very upsetting ... I remember that being disturbing". Lobb's research into human and bird interrelations gave him a deeper understanding of factory farming, knowledge he describes as "particularly debilitating for [him]". He explains further: "The impact that has on the individual lives but also on the planet was quite shocking to me ... I really found that a hard time when I was researching that. It made me quite stuck for a while". For Wilson, the most difficult part of the process was zooming out and thinking through what his central premise – the flooding of the Maldives – would mean for the rest of the world:

You think, okay, so if a country like the Maldives is underwater what else is underwater? Because that sort of two-metre level rise is apocalyptic. Like Manhattan is underwater. Miami is gone. Bangladesh is gone ... Every decision you make ripples outwards and affects everything else. It was quite anxiety-inducing.

Bradley, who has written about climate change across multiple novels, short stories and non-fiction pieces, agrees that “there’s no question it can be a very emotionally demanding space to work in”. He says: “There’s real grief, and pain, and a lot of what you end up understanding is deeply confronting ... There are definitely times when it’s left me in a pretty abraded state”.

However, while acknowledging that new knowledge could affect their emotional states, the writers rejected the premise that their overall anxiety about climate change increased as a result of researching the issue. For many, it simply stayed the same – climate change was something they frequently thought and worried about before *and* after writing their books. This shows that writing climate fiction may be as much an act of choosing to consciously process the information, to find an understanding that allows for working through the intense emotions the climate crisis provokes. In any case, it is notable that writers did not feel their research into climate change elevated their awareness or concern about the issue above that of the general public. For example, despite the research that allowed her to integrate real Australian climate change events into her contemporary novel, Madeleine Watts does not see herself as any more or less connected to the issue than others:

I don’t think that I necessarily have a different relationship to hearing about climate change than anybody else. You feel it, you hear it, you listen, and you look at maps and you spend an hour with content about it. And you have that dawning sense of absolute terror and helplessness. And then you go on with your day.

Watts therefore cautions against comparing climate fiction writers to others who interact with the issue on a daily basis: “I would feel like a huge fraud and imposter if I felt like I was even suggesting that just because I think about climate change that I’m more affected than I believe climate scientists and even climate journalists are”. Lobb admits to often feeling paralysed in the face of climate change but does not ascribe this to being a writer focusing on the topic: “I don’t think the project caused that. I think that’s the nature of being when we are and where we are ... I think that negative impact was already there before I started doing this particular work”. Clare Moleta says she was already anxious about climate change, as “writing the book came out of a massive, long-term preoccupation with all that stuff”. And while she does recall this anxiety being “a bit more concentrated” while writing her novel, she also says the manifestations of this anxiety were familiar to her: “I had waking patches in the night over that time, where I’d be very intensely imagining something and grieving it ... But to be fair, I do that anyway”.

Although authors’ anxiety about climate change did not, on the whole, increase as a result of the research stage, many did report a growing sense of anger. In some cases, this anger was described as negative for authors’ wellbeings. For example, Bradley says that “when you write about things like coal mining, you end up really angry. It’s really hard. That’s one of my issues, is controlling anger”. Wilson says this anger can escalate to a point where it begins to “fracture your relationships”. He describes how his new understanding of climate change put stress on a close relationship, as the other person would not accept the reality of the issue:

You start to fall out with them in a really deep and important way. Like if they cannot see what's in front of their eyes, you start to question what sort of person are you? Who is that ignorant? Who is that sheltered that they can't accept what's going on? It just puts stress on the relationships that you have around you ... It's pretty difficult.

However, anger is not always negative, and the experiences of other authors show how anger can in fact be an energising, and even useful, emotion. As Rebecca Traister (2018) observes in her book *Good and Mad*, “political anger – which can stem from personal fury and be felt individually, but which is distinct from personalised and punitive anger – can be ... far more expansive and optimistic in its goals” (p. xxiii). As opposed to the paralysis of solastalgia, anger can be a propulsive emotion that “injects energy, intensity, and urgency into battles that must be intense and urgent if they are to be won” (Traister, 2018, p. xxviii). For example, Mildenhall describes how her research transformed personal guilt over climate change into anger that has allowed her to home in on those most responsible for continuing inaction:

I think what [research] did do is made me focus my climate guilt and shame and anger from being personal responsibility towards being angry at government and big corporates, becoming more angry at that perpetuating myth that if you recycle all your plastics, you buy an electric car, you'll save the world. And I think that what I've done is got increasingly angry about that. And partly that came through doing that research.

Alice Robinson describes how her research resulted in a similar shift from guilt over personal responsibility to a desire to target the bigger actors and actions that need to change: “I've stopped believing now in personal, private action, like getting a water tank or solar panel. I think that's all crap. It's useful. Let's keep doing it. But it's not going to save us. I think now we need policy”. Exemplifying Traister's definition of anger as an energising force, this shift resulted in Robinson becoming involved in the political arena. Working with writers such as Katherine Collette, she organised a campaign in which writers publicly endorsed the Greens, a course of action that Robinson describes positively as “tangible” and something she's “really proud that [they] did”.

Writing as “something to do”

With anxiety about climate change predating these writers' climate fiction projects, many pointed to the writing process as helping, not exacerbating, this anxiety. For some writers, using their talents to craft fiction about climate change gave them a sense of purpose. It channelled anger and anxiety, putting to work their knowledge in an act of synthesis but also of expression. Jennifer Mills rejects the premise, which she believes is often attributed to activists, that “if you worry too much about the problem that you've invested your life in, then you cause yourself to become anxious and to spiral into some kind of terrible depression”. Instead, Mills argues that the opposite is true: “If you're taking action ... then you have an outlet. The times in my life where I've experienced really poor mental health have been times when I felt like there was nothing I could do”. Mills argues that, for her, writing climate fiction provided such an outlet:

Having a book to write gives you something to do. And so, even if it's not terribly useful, it still gives you an illusion or a sense of your own agency ... [It] makes you feel like you have some power over the events that are happening around you. Whereas if you're just absorbing the news, if you have the obsession, but you don't have the creative outlet, you're just absorbing things with nowhere to put them.

Miles Allinson agrees that writing fiction provides an outlet from “the general sense of uselessness we get from reading news”. Allinson says that climate fiction was a way of transforming his anxiety about the issue into something useful: “I think that writing ... made me feel somewhat useful [as] writing about my own fear put that fear to use, in a way that was, if not comforting, then at least energising”. In this context, the sense of “use” is less about transmitting the facts of the climate crisis and perhaps more about putting to work the intense emotions generated by knowing those facts. Alice Bishop's short story collection *A Constant Hum* explores the lives of those affected by the 2009 Black Saturday fires. As a member of this affected community, Bishop says writing fiction about the event gave her a strong sense of purpose: “Because it was a national story, and because it was my parents' story, and because it was my brother's story, and because it was my neighbours who weren't coming back, it was a sense of carrying something bigger than myself”. Prior to writing her debut novel, Moleta spent years in climate activism but “largely felt that it hadn't worked”, leaving her with a “large-scale sense of helplessness and ineffectiveness”. She says the writing process helped combat these feelings of paralysis:

For that period of time – the eight months when I wrote the first draft, and then a couple of years after that – getting to funnel all my anxiety or grief or anger into making something I had some control over was great. It was consuming and it felt productive.

In discussing the sense of purpose she felt during the writing process, Moleta also touches on another common theme expressed by writers: writing fiction about climate change gave them some semblance of control over the issue, or at least over their thinking and emotional responses to the issue. Writing is an act of shaping and curating – a process of focus. The choice of focus for each project allows for a meditative narrowing of vision and a depth of processing. Mundell admits to being “a lot worse at coping with the reality of the situation than I am coping with its fictional representation”, as “when you're making something, you have control”. She compares this control over a fictional creation to “the reality of the situation”, in which we each “have a little bit of influence, and it's so small that it just actually creates more anxiety”. Bradley agrees that because “it's so under your control”, he has “always found writing fiction weirdly consoling”. Bradley compares this to the process of writing non-fiction, “where you're right up against the reality of what's taking place”. Mireille Juchau describes how this sense of control when writing on a difficult topic “helps to manage anxiety”: “Whether it's climate change, or something else, when I'm preoccupied, writing helps put some order into the chaos”. Watts agrees: “There's something about being able to write about it ... You're sitting there and you've got your own little mastery over it”.

Aside from this element of control, writers working in speculative genres described how imagining the lives of people in the future, even if they are bleak, gave them a sense of hope.

Bradley's *Clade* traces a family through multiple generations into a climate-changed future, and Bradley says this "process of imagining demands you to think about what happens next ... To imagine the complexity of the lived experience of what lies ahead, and to insist that life will go on and history will keep happening". Bradley therefore believes that this process can help combat "that totalizing [*sic*] tendency to just decide, 'everything's fucked and we're all doomed'", because when plotting out a novel, "There's always tomorrow. The sun will come up again. And what are we going to do then?" This process widens the vision, bringing the writer out of their own experience into a future that must (and will) be lived. Although Jane Abbott's *Watershed* describes an even more dystopian climate-changed future than that of *Clade*, she says the very fact that she could imagine her characters' lives "was cathartic", as it helped "cement the idea that, okay, this is one of the worst scenarios that might happen. Yet there are still survivors". Jane Rawson says trying to imagine a future climate-changed Melbourne, as she did in her first novel (*A Wrong Turn at the Office of Unmade Lists*), was a response to the shock she suffered when first comprehending the severity of climate change:

It's so shocking, that first introduction to the seriousness of it. So, part of wanting to write fiction about it was slightly to defuse that feeling. To do something with those ideas and thoughts that were nagging at me. To materialise a future that was happening in my imagination and then to chuck myself or someone like me into it and see what their life is like, make it a little bit more manageable in my imagination.

This is not to say that writing about climate change is emotionally easy. In fact, as Wilson describes, writing scenes of loss can require emotional labour from a writer:

There were a lot of scenes in that novel that as I was writing them, I was crying. That happened many, many times ... I don't know what it was. I think it's that idea of just losing the people you love ... And it never kind of wore off. You'd think after you'd read a scene like that 20 times it would wear off but it never did.

However, Wilson actually believes these emotions buttress his wellbeing in the case of future loss:

When I'm upset by it, and when I'm going through those difficult emotions, it's sort of safe, it feels like I'm vicariously going through it. It's like a rehearsal of emotion. We get to see how other people have dealt with situations, so that when they happen to us in our lives, we know how to react.

Mildenhall says that she was once wary of how imagining an anxiety-inducing future might affect the present: "When I've talked to therapists, they say, 'Stop living that future because even imagining it, your body's reacting to it and imagining that it's here'". However, she says her thinking has "flipped" on this, largely as a result of reading Jane McGonigal's *Imaginable* (2022), and she now sees writing future-focused fiction as a method of preparing herself for difficulties to come:

We have to imagine ten years in the future and we have to imagine fifty years in the future. And if we do that, we are forearmed and we also begin to make small changes immediately, we don't even know we're making them, just to move towards or away from that future.

Alongside preparing oneself for the future, Allinson argues for the therapeutic aspect of imagining and writing one's worst fears:

Sometimes when you turn towards something and start to live it, with all its difficulties and mystery, then something changes ... It's actually not as hard as you sometimes think it will be. It's sometimes more terrifying to close your eyes, I have found.

Although her work is focused on the present, not the future, Bishop describes how writing allowed her to undergo the difficult process of reconnecting with the post-Black Saturday landscape:

Writing has helped me feel connected to the place that was suddenly unfamiliar after the fires. It was a way of helping me to come home again – to love the new details of the burnt landscape that at first I found alienating and sad.

Post-publication: “Am I not doing enough?”

Some authors described how the sense of purpose and usefulness they felt during the writing process evaporated once their books were published, with doubts over the value of their work emerging in the face of a huge issue like climate change. Here we see the movement from the writing process being central – an act of agency – to the moment the work becomes an art object – a thing in the world – beyond the author's control. After publishing her novel, Moleta describes encountering “a whole other layer of ethical questions about what you've actually done, and whether in some ways you were just trying to make yourself feel better”. Robinson describes similar misgivings about the value of her work and climate fiction in general: “You're trapped in this weird space where it's almost like you're profiting off this terrible thing ... You're always wrestling with: ‘Am I not doing enough?’” Even Bradley, who has written about climate change for over a decade, says he still has doubts about the role of the writer in the climate change movement:

I still go round and round about this question, but the position I've ended up with is that I'm probably a pretty crap activist, but I'm a reasonably good writer. I can probably achieve more as a writer than I could as an activist. But at the same time, I look at those poor kids going into jail for stopping coal trains [2], and wonder whether that's just me letting myself off the hook.

Writers also admitted to frustrations over reader responses to their work. Moleta recalls coming across a Goodreads review that described her book as “enjoyable disaster porn”. While on one hand, Moleta was able to laugh at that description – “I said to my agent, ‘Should we put that on the cover?’” – she admits it “also absolutely gutted me” as it fed into her doubts about the disposability of climate fiction:

It was everything I didn't want to do ... Here's all this hard, painful stuff I can turn into an exciting plot and people can read it on the sofa with a glass of wine and then dispose of it and never think about it again. The idea even one person would read it that way, I was still worrying about it a week later.

In direct contrast, Abbott found that her readers were turned off by *Watershed's* bleakness and violence: "Nobody wants to read the direst predictions ... I thought I was doing the right thing by saying, 'This is how I see humanity coping with this situation'. But ... I think I kind of shot myself in the foot". For Wilson, his frustration has come from readers' focus on the love story at the centre of his novel, *Daughter of Bad Times*, at the expense of its exploration of climate change:

There's only certain things readers are particularly interested in, to the exclusion of all else most of the time. This is kind of the never-ending problem of writing ... You're always stuck with this kind of dynamic of having to make sure that what's going on drama-wise or emotion-wise in the story matters enough to a reader to actually get them to read closely enough to take in the rest of what you're trying to tell them as well. It's just so difficult to find that balance.

Upon the publication of Treloar's second novel *Wolfe Island*, she became frustrated by a different problem: the tendency of readers to view her novel as an instrumental tool and to "interpret climate fiction as if it is a sort of sermonette". As a result, Treloar found her work of "literary fiction that acknowledges climate change but is not very interested in it" instead perceived as "a utilitarian text" that uses the resilience of those in Chesapeake Bay as an allegory: "I've read what people think the book's message is: we must all come together and care for each other. I'm allergic to that sort of messaging in a book". Bradley agrees that "something weird goes on with fiction in this space, where it gets instrumentalised", especially in comparison to fiction on other topics: "If someone writes about an unhappy marriage, it's not meant to do something about unhappy marriages. But if we write about climate, that book is somehow supposed to do something about climate". Like Treloar, Bradley dislikes this additional expectation of climate change fiction: "I'm a bit uncomfortable with that, and often push back against it a bit". Juchau expressed similar discomfort when recalling an event she attended in which scientists gave presentations on climate change to writers. She says the initiative, organised by a film and screen body, was "designed for writers to create screen drama from the dire scientific facts we were being presented with". This expectation, says Juchau, "conveyed the feeling that our work should carry a message, or elicit particular responses from the viewer about tackling climate change". She describes this expectation as "quite confronting" and at odds with how she values literature and art:

I'm entirely sympathetic to the desperation and despair of the scientists, and I feel it too, but I don't think the goal of a work of art is to deliver messages or be didactic about really complex, layered, difficult subjects ... That kind of instrumentalisation of creative work is anathema to me.

Becoming an "expert"

The post-publication publicity cycle of interviews and writers' festivals can feed a public perception that climate change writers are experts with solutions to the issue – an expectation that some writers described as a burden. After the publicity cycle for her second work of climate fiction *The Glad Shout*, Robinson recalls that she “felt really fatigued”: “I thought, ‘I can’t keep talking about this’. I kept being asked ... ‘What can writing do for climate change?’ And I just felt like I wanted to say, ‘Nothing ... I don’t have an answer. I’ve just written this book’”. Juchau agrees that public events can lead to climate fiction authors being pushed to provide answers to the crisis: “Unless you have the lucky fortune of getting a really good interlocutor, you’ll just get the most topical questions about your work ... Ultimately, those climate-change focused questions lead to you being asked to solve the problem”. Watts recalls a similar pressure, in this case, the expectation that she offer hope about the future of climate change: “People want hope. They want you to deliver hope. Because in that moment, you’re the one who’s being interviewed. It was a very, very frustrating part of the interview process”. When asked to predict the future of climate change in such a way, Mills says she sometimes has to remind audiences of her profession: “You have to remind people that you are just a novelist. That what I do all day is I play with my imaginary friends. I’m not out there solving climate change. I’m not a scientist”.

This is not to say that writers have no expertise or experiences worth being shared with the community, just that many felt their skills in relation to the climate crisis lay outside of scientific knowledge or prognosis. In particular, a common theme among writers was their preference to talk about the technical challenges of writing about climate change. Bradley says that “as a writer, it’s always a bit frustrating to do endless panels ... talking about issues ... When in fact, I really love to talk to people about the process of finding a fictional language to talk about climate change”. However, this opportunity to discuss process alone is so rarely afforded to climate fiction writers that Rawson recalls being shocked on one occasion when it arrived:

I was once on a panel that was just about my book as a book, where I got to talk about character development and plotting and that sort of stuff. And it was like, “Wow, this is what you guys all get to talk about all the time? This is so much fun”.

Writers' expertise can extend beyond craft, however, into what Mills describes as “cultural narratives”, helping people to imagine how we can “shift around our relationship with nature and our relationships with each other”. The potential for climate fiction writers to contribute in this space is underlined by Moleta’s invitation to join the Anthropocene Judgements Project, which she describes as an “ambitious, interdisciplinary attempt to adapt existing common law to meet the challenges of the future”. Initially, Moleta was surprised by the invitation, as she had “no legal or scientific expertise at all”, but was told that what the project needed was “the perspective of speculative fiction writers who’ve spent a lot of time imagining the future”. She says it was rewarding to collaborate in a manner in which her specific skills as a writer were valued: “The idea that my book might be useful to these people, and the skills I do have can contribute to something that might actually make a concrete difference to the future, that feels really worthwhile”.

Indeed, this sensation of collaborating and sharing with the wider community, as opposed to being separated out as an expert, was the source of positive author experiences during the publicity stage of the writing cycle. Writers described moments of uplifting connection with audiences that gave them renewed energy for writing in this space. Upon beginning the publicity cycle for *A Constant Hum*, Bishop recalls being wary of how those who were affected by the Black Saturday fires would respond to her work. However, she describes the process of hearing audience stories as “one of the best experiences of my life. And it gave me so much hope, because people shared their stories ... People were very open to it”. McKinnon also enjoyed the personal stories and reflections that audiences shared during events promoting her novel *Storyland*: “They were interested in discussing the environmental changes that had occurred in the Illawarra. I enjoyed talking about that with readers”. Mills says she feels energised by the potential to use such publicity events to engage with the community and emphasise working together for a more positive future:

I actually enjoy that part of it a lot ... The more people you can speak to or engage with on that stuff, the more people might feel empowered to go and make some change in their community. So, I’m very motivated in that way. I want to make the world a better place. Otherwise, what’s the point?

Bradley says he uses such events as an opportunity for advocacy, and in particular, for “attempting to communicate with audiences about the political structures that underpin the fossil fuel industry’s grip on political life and solutions to that”. However, Bradley also often finds himself advocating for the possibilities of climate fiction itself:

I felt like I was doing an advocacy role for fiction that was trying to grapple with this stuff, because you’re trying to make a space for books about this kind of thing in an industry that was pretty resistant to it.

Aside from connection with the audience, writers also described how the community of other published climate fiction writers has helped them through the writing and publishing process. Robinson says regularly being put together with the same climate fiction writers on panels at festivals has helped her build positive relationships: “You’re put together, so you start to form a little cohort. And I’ve made friends with lots of them. I feel a real camaraderie”. Rawson says her doubts about writing about climate change, or writing in general, are assuaged by the writing community she has built along the way: “Totally worth it to have people who you can talk to about writing, which is such a weird thing to do with your life. And to talk about all this environmental stuff”. Bishop agrees that “community is really important”, as a writer needs “to have people reminding you all the time of why we do it”. Sometimes, the encouragement from a writing community can help ease any anxiety around the issue of climate change. McKinnon is a member of a University of Wollongong collaborative writing group that recently published an experimental work of climate writing, *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder*, and she says that “being part of a group discussing climate change helped me and others deal with any anxiety or pressure”. At a basic level, Bradley says interacting with other climate change writers can be useful simply to confirm that such anxiety is warranted in the

first place: “I’ve found that sense of being able to sit in a room with people and not feel like you’re a crazy person is reassuring. It’s really, really helpful”.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, the lack of demographic data on the writers studied here and the subsequent inability to produce intersectional analysis means that this study’s findings are limited to the specific experiences of our dataset. Future studies should seek to embed intersectional analysis in their study design by both collecting demographic data and purposefully targeting a range of demographics to better represent the spectrum of lived experience with climate change.

Even withing the narrow spectrum of Australian-based writers, each writer had unique experiences with how they responded to the challenge of writing cli-fi. Nonetheless, there are some common trends that emerged when looking at the data from afar. In terms of wellbeing, writers do not differentiate the anxiety they feel from what is felt by other members of the public, although the research required to write a work of climate fiction does include moments of close attention to difficult material. If anything, the writing process provides a positive outlet that gives authors a sense of purpose and control, even if it is temporary. Furthermore, the act of imagining a future world helped writers push past feelings of helplessness or despair, as the very mechanics of plots demanded that they think through how people would regroup and respond to climate situations. There was an imaginative *act* – and this action in some ways countered anxiety and despair, at least in the moment of writing.

What little data there is on the effect of climate fiction suggests these positive feelings do not naturally flow into readers, or in a worse case, could be producing negative emotions that cause readers to feel disempowered in the face of the climate change issue (Schneider-Mayerson, 2018). Furthermore, as writers such as Treloar note here, it should not be expected that every artistic work about climate change is a tool designed to teach or mobilise audiences. Our findings here suggest a different path forward, one in which members of the public – including but not limited to published or aspiring-to-publish writers – engage in creative writing about climate change as a way of pushing past paralysing feelings of despair and helplessness. The mental health and wellbeing benefits of creative writing have been established, including studies exploring how writing can reduce anxiety in those affected by natural disasters (Brémault-Phillips et al., 2020; Gillam, 2018; Robertson et al., 2020). However, much of the research in this area focuses on expressive writing or other similar therapeutic-focused techniques that produce quickly written and usually insular work not intended for an audience, which is different from the experiences of the writers interviewed here. In discussing their findings from one of the few studies to focus on the wellbeing effect of writing fictional narratives, Catherine Deveney and Patrick Lawson (2022, p. 294) argue that “it is in the craft of writing, the combination of technique and emotional catharsis, that some of the therapeutic benefits of writing can be found” (p. 294). We believe there are significant research opportunities in modifying such an approach to focus on anxiety around climate change, but more study is needed before any large conclusions can be reached.

Another trend uncovered here is that writers often felt like they were put in an unqualified position in the post-publication marketing cycle, where they were separated out as experts who could deliver both climate change knowledge and optimism to audiences. Instead, we suggest that the role of the author in public discussions has the potential to break down individual silos of worry, to connect across the reader/author divide, and to refuse the certainty of expertise and replace it with the possibilities of collective imaginaries and storytelling.

Finally, writers reported the benefit of connecting with like-minded communities to discuss climate change, whether that be fellow writers or discussions with the public about their own experiences. We believe more could be done in the Australian creative writing community to foster opportunities for meaningful collaboration. Our broader project (Hennessy et al., 2022) is concerned with and curious about the writing process as opposed to the writing product, and we believe there is untapped potential in using collaborative writing to work through climate change anxiety. The findings of this project, and the common experiences among climate fiction writers that it has unearthed, only further underline this potential.

Notes

[1] The premise of writing for younger people often intersects with societal expectations of providing educative experiences, which frequently embeds hope as a given rather than an aesthetic choice. For this reason, we felt including this large area of writing was outside our research focus.

[2] Bradley is referring here to climate activist group Blockade Australia, who had a member jailed in 2021 for climbing on top of a coal train in the Hunter Region: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-23/12-month-jail-sentence-for-newcastle-coal-protester/100642414>

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the interviewees/authors who donated their time and expertise. This study would have been impossible without them. This project was funded by a grant from the Assemblage Centre for the Creative Arts, Flinders University.

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