



# Literature and Climate

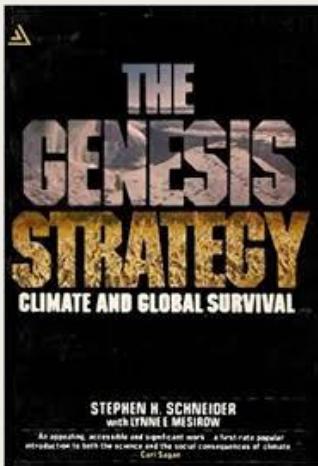
A Short History and Reconsideration of Climate Fiction

Adeline Johns-Putra,  
Queen's University, Canada

# Literature and the environment

- Nature poetry
  - Origins of English and other European forms of nature poetry: Virgil (70-19 BC), Theocritus (300-260 BC)
  - Origins of nature poetry in Asia: *shan-shui* 山水 or landscape poetry (China) or Sanskrit seasons poetry such as *Ritusamhara* ऋतुसंहार; ऋतु (India) – both around 500 AD
- Narratives about climate
  - Old Testament: story of the deluge
  - *Epic of Gilgamesh*
- Literature after climate change
  - Nature poetry → ecopoetry (contains “a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe”, J. Scott Bryson, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*)
  - Theatre → climate theatre (e.g. Richard Bean’s *The Heretic*, Simon Stephens’s *Wastwater*, Monica Buffini et al’s *Greenland*, all in 2011)
  - Fiction → climate fiction

# Climate change awareness: beginnings



**Friends of  
the Earth**

**GREENPEACE**



Joseph Fourier



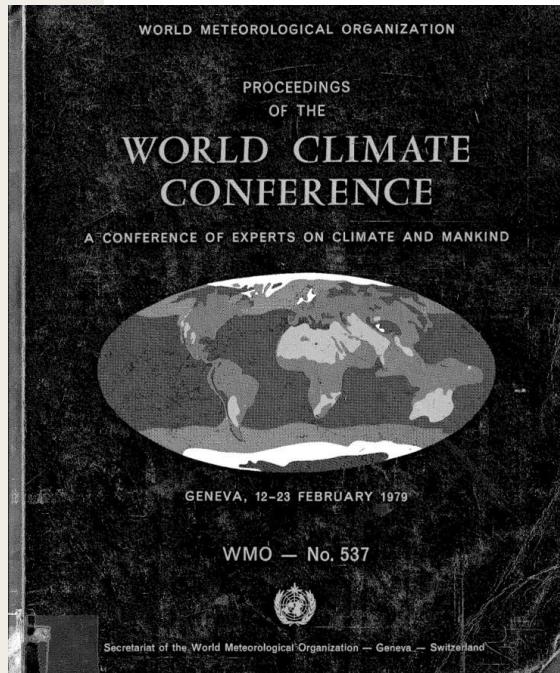
John Tyndall



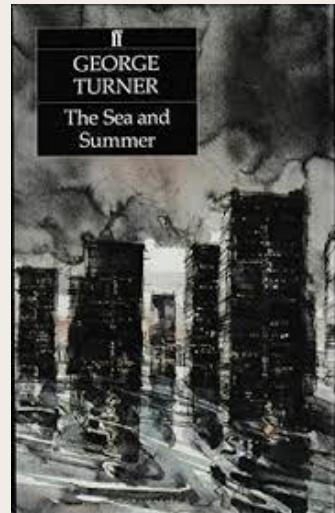
Svante Arrhenius



Eunice Newton Foote



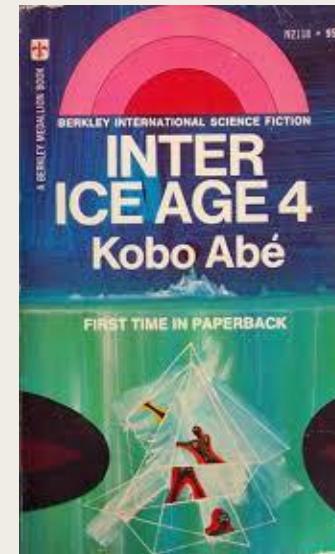
# Climate fiction: beginnings



*The Sea and  
Summer* (1987)



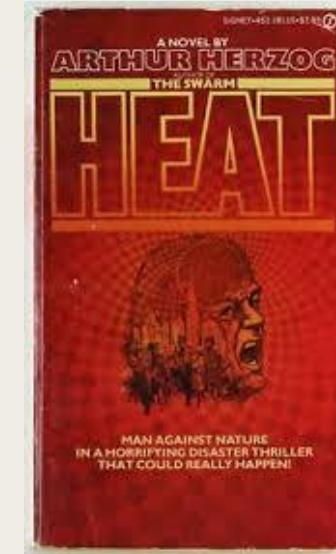
*The  
Drowned  
World* (1962)



第四間冰期  
(1958-59)



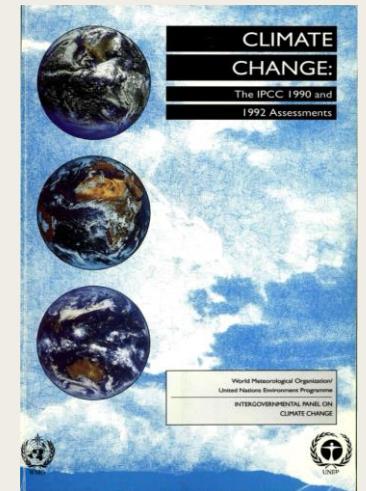
*The Lathe of  
Heaven*  
(1971)



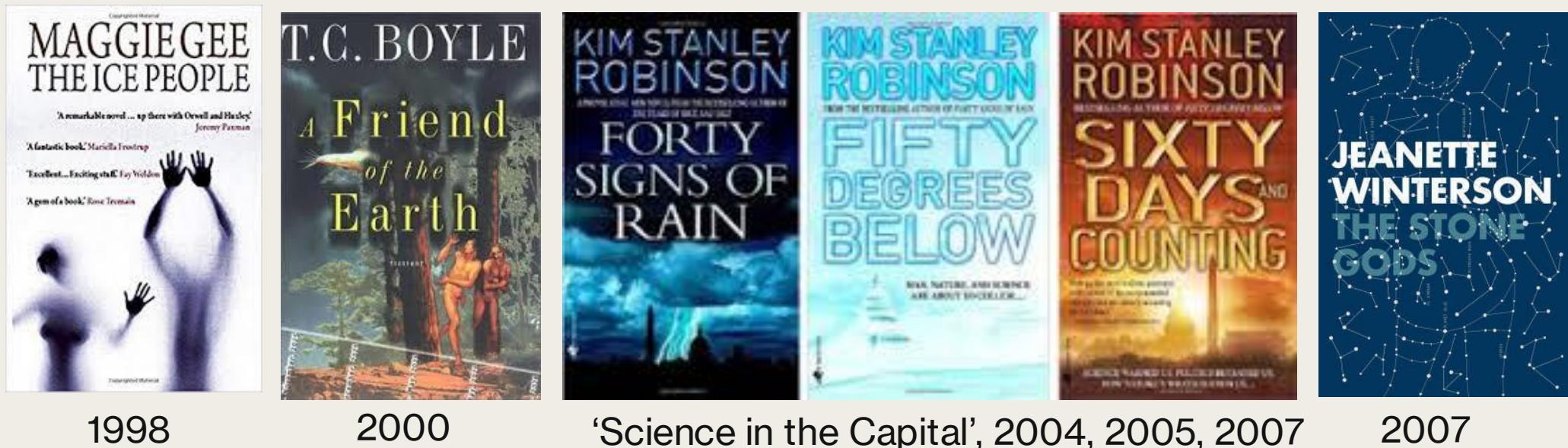
*Heat* (1977)

# Climate change awareness: the 1980s- 2000s

- UNEP and WMO set up a climate advisory group in **1985**
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) created in **1988**
- James Hansen speaks at the US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in **1988**
- IPCC makes first report in **1990**
- UN Framework Convention on Climate Change introduced at Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in **1992**
- Kyoto Protocol agreed in **1997**
- The Al Gore film *An Inconvenient Truth* released in **2006**



# Climate fiction: 2000- 2010s



“cli-fi” – term attributed to Dan Bloom

*Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* by Adam Trexler (2015)

# Climate fiction: the challenges of representing climate crisis

## 1. Scale: the planet

- climate change affects every human on a vast global scale

## 2. Scale: all species

- climate change affects every living thing, beyond the human species

## 3. Scale: the distant future

- climate impacts operate on a vast temporal scale

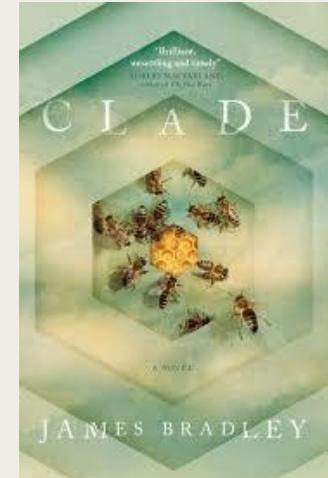
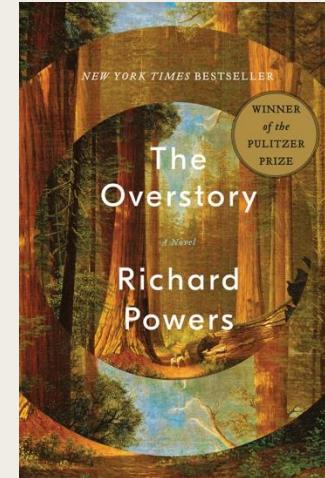
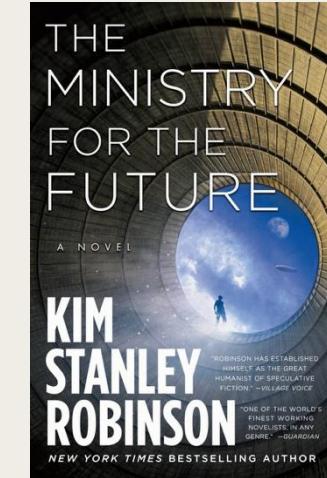
## 4. Science and understanding climate

- climate change is knowable through science, using our reason rather than our emotions

# Climate fiction: strategies for representing climate crisis

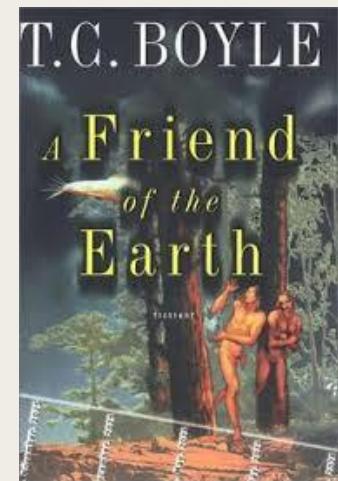
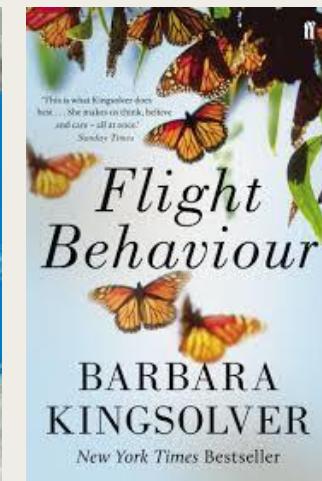
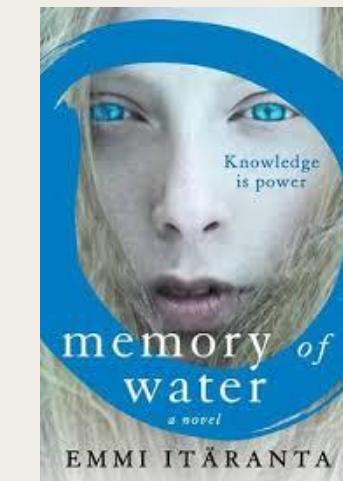
## • Scale and planet:

- montages, ensembles of characters from around the world



## • Scale and species:

- intricate relationships between humans and nonhumans over time



## • Scale and the distant future:

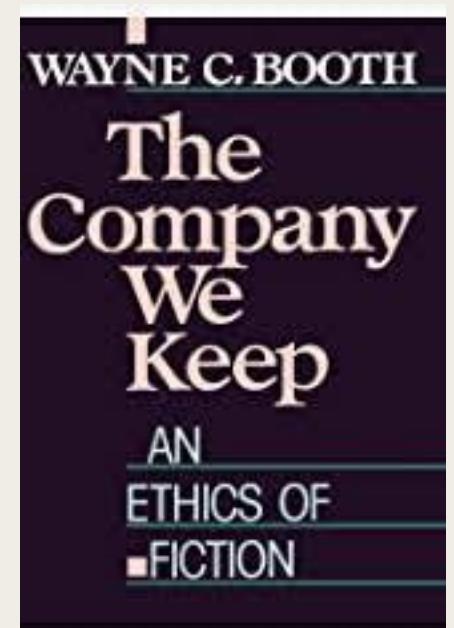
- futuristic stories of future worlds that are climate changed
- present-day stories about intergenerational relationships

## • Science and understanding climate:

- scientist characters who explain the science and its consequences

# The effect of fiction

- aesthetic effect: the readers' enjoyment as they read
- efferent effect: what readers carry away with them
- The reader's identification with characters: **empathy**
- The appeal of the world that characters inhabit: **immersion**
- The interest in what happens to and in them: **investment**



# Climate fiction and climate change: the 2020s

Derek Woods:

- “the metagenre of climate fiction”
- metagenres are “atmospheres of wordings and activities, ... that surround a genre and indicate how readers and writers should appropriately take it up”

Tech

## Can climate fiction inspire a response to help save the planet?

‘Cli-fi’ has quickly become a recognised genre as more of us imagine possible futures as a way of considering how we are going to get ourselves out of this mess, writes **Chris Pak**

Thursday 14 October 2021 00:01 BST • 0 Comments

**A** Popular Latest Newsletters **The Atlantic**

CULTURE

### Climate Fiction: Can Books Save the Planet?

A new literary genre that focuses on the consequences of environmental issues is striking a chord with younger generations—and engaging them in thinking about the Earth's sustainability.

By J.K. Ullrich

**FINANCIAL TIMES**

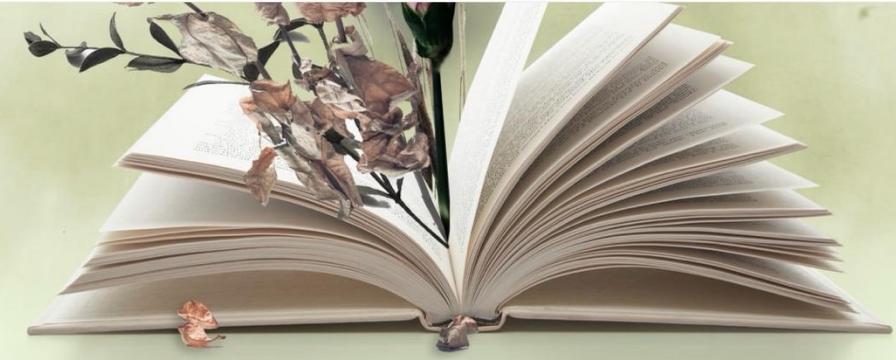
US COMPANIES TECH MARKETS CLIMATE OPINION LEX WORK & CAREERS LIFE & ARTS HTSI

Financial Times Life & Arts Global literary circles warm to climate fiction



**Esquire** ENTERTAINMENT STYLE LIFESTYLE SHOPPING NEWS & POLITICS

Discover Entertainment Everything Everywhere All in One Novel Can Dune Save the World? We Need Speculative Fiction Now More Than Ever Lauren Groff's Florida Is Not Your



Sarah Kim

Entertainment > Books

### Climate Fiction Won't Save Us

As the world burns, readers increasingly look to climate fiction for hope, predictions, and actionable solutions. But can the genre really be a manual for useful change?

By Jeff VanderMeer PUBLISHED: APR 19, 2023

# Climate fiction and climate change: the 2020s



# The risks posed by the demands of the “meta-genre”

- undermines the power of fiction to produce empathy, the immersion of world-building, and the narrative interest that comes with creating investment from the reader
  - Ian McEwan: worried about “hectoring” his readers
  - Maggie Gee: worried about being “message-y”
- suggests a too-easy correlation between reading a text and creating action
  - Empirical ecocriticism (Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Alexa Weik von Mossner): no empirical evidence as yet to support this

# Teaching climate fiction as inspiration, not instruction

- Fiction is not a silver bullet
- Hopeful novels that also build investable, believable worlds
- Novels that bring climate crisis into conversation with other issues that matter
- Novels that make students think about broader issues, e.g.
  - why environmental destruction happens and how we can think differently about it
  - how other species contribute to the planet
  - the power of young people and the need to develop resilience

