



The future of the ecological crisis in young people's climate fiction

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This article summarizes the ecocritical debate around the idea of the ecological crisis as a “crisis of the imagination”, emphasizing how certain literary forms struggle to adequately represent its scale and complexity. While genres like science fiction and works from peripheral traditions offer useful alternatives, much remains to be understood about how such narratives actively shape social imaginaries. The article also provides a brief introduction to the project “Addressing Climate Anxiety Using Flash Fiction in the Classroom”, which involves young people in writing climate fiction. The resulting stories often reflect dystopian tropes and a nostalgic view on the present, proving how challenging it still is to imagine real alternatives to our fossil-fueled reality.

The ecological crisis as a crisis of the imagination

How is contemporary fiction depicting the ecological crisis? And what is the impact of these fictional narratives on their readers and on society at large? In one of the most widely discussed works on the relationship between fiction and the ecological crisis, Amitav Ghosh accused modern literature of being unprepared for such a complex task. According to the Indian novelist and essayist, the problem does not arise from a lack of information on the crisis itself, its historical roots, and its scientific processes. The real challenge, Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement*, “derives from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth” (2016, 7). In other words, during the same decades when the Western world began feeding its political-economic obsession with industrial capitalism and fossil fuels, it also inaugurated its cultural obsession with the ordinary lives of individuals and their inner developments. The literary forms that have taken shape from these new narrative interests – such as the modern novel – are therefore incapable of representing global phenomena such as the ecological crisis, which requires a completely different set of narrative tools. As Ghosh would say, spectacular events, more-than-human perspectives, and very large scales of time and space are not the “territory” of modern literature. Given this absence of adequate models, society as a whole lacks the necessary shared imaginaries to represent the ecological crisis and deal with it effectively. “At exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament,” Ghosh concludes, “humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics, and literature alike” (2016, 80).

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This understanding of the ecological crisis as a crisis of the imagination has been widely discussed in ecocritical debates over the last few years. Some science fiction scholars, such as Ursula K. Heise, have rightly pointed out that modern literatures – and certain genres, in particular – are actually replete with texts that overcome the narrative constraints that Ghosh identifies (see Heise, 2018 and 2019). Others, such as postcolonial ecocritic Elizabeth DeLoughrey, have suggested broadening the gaze beyond the limited Western canon, pointing to the abundance of forms, traditions, and experiences that have emerged from marginalized and indigenous communities (see DeLoughrey 2019). Still others, such as film and pop-culture scholar Mark Bould, have argued that a text need not feature extreme climate events to address the ecological crisis, inviting us to “discover what happens if we stop assuming a text is not about climate change” (2021, 11).

Thanks to these and other interventions following the publication of *The Great Derangement*, ecocritics have contributed to flagging a very large and diverse corpus of fictional narratives and discussing the complexity of the ecological crisis and its uneven impact on communities and ecosystems. At the same time, there has been a real proliferation of imaginative texts that address the crisis more or less directly, to the point of normalizing the use of a new genre category, so-called climate fiction (or cli-fi).¹ However, much remains to be done to understand the impact of these narratives on social imaginaries and the ways in which they shape individual and collective actions that exacerbate the ecological crisis as well as those that could mitigate its most severe impacts.

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In an effort to address this gap, some scholars have proposed integrating literary analysis with social science methodologies, a field now referred to as “empirical ecocriticism.” Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik Von Mossner, W. P. Malecki, and Frank Hakemulder describe it as “a tool that humanists can use to predict which texts are more likely to have desired psychological and political effects” (2023, 11). In other words, instead of focusing on the “inevitable limitations of storytelling” or “how one can or should read texts”, these scholars propose to focus on the ways in which fictional texts “are being read right now – not whether a text is ‘environmental’ or not, but how it affects actual readers” (2023, 11). Thanks to various methodologies – from interviews and questionnaires to theater projects – this approach has been used, for example, to discuss

1 “Cli-fi may be best thought of as a distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change, exploring the phenomenon not just in terms of setting, but with regard to psychological and social issues, combining fictional plots with meteorological facts, speculation on the future, and reflection on the human-nature relationship” (Johns-Putra and Goodbody, 2019, 2).

whether novels, short stories, and films can influence people's attitudes towards nonhuman animals and their beliefs about the ecological crisis.

Similar efforts have also been undertaken in other academic contexts. Sociologists Miranda Iossifidis and Lisa Garforth, for instance, have examined the dynamics of online reading groups to “empirically explore how non-professional readers are engaging with speculative climate fiction” (2022, 249). Through their shared enjoyment and discussion of cli-fi texts, such as Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*, Iossifidis and Garforth argue, readers can collectively learn to live with the ecological crisis. Very recently, sociologist Lara Monticelli and literary scholar Mikkel Krause Frantzen have attempted to bridge the gap between social sciences and the humanities by treating literary texts – and Kim Stanley Robinson’s cli-fi bestseller *The Ministry for the Future* in particular – “as a kind of laboratory in which experiments with speculative, imaginary and . . . sociological utopian alternatives take place” (2024, 4).

High school students’ climate fiction

Building on these interdisciplinary experiences that aim at exploring the social impact of climate fiction and bridging the gap between academia and the rest of society, Bryan Yazell and I are currently conducting the research project “Addressing Climate Anxiety Using Flash Fiction in the Classroom” at the University of Southern Denmark.² Since climate fiction is often tasked with envisioning more or less desirable futures, we are using this genre to gain access to young people’s ideas and expectations about personal and social life in a climate-changed world. Unlike some of the projects mentioned above, our main goal is not so much to measure the impact of a specific cli-fi text on its readers but rather to examine which fictional narratives a particular social group draws upon when imagining a future shaped by the ecological crisis. In other words, we turn the project participants into active producers of climate fiction stories to be able to analyze, first-hand, the narratives that form their imaginaries.

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The focus on young people is particularly significant in this context: They are obviously the ones who will inhabit this future the longest, while at the same time bearing a psychological burden related to the most threatening future scenarios (see Hickman et al., 2021). Moreover, following the success of climate strikes and the growing popularity of young leaders, such as Greta Thunberg, the younger generations are often portrayed as the most engaged in fighting for the climate and demanding more systemic and radical change. It is therefore particularly important to understand whether this engagement and the underlying visions for the future are shared beyond youth activist groups.

2 The project is supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark, grant ID: 10.46540/3097-00135B. For updated information on the project, see <https://www.sdu.dk/da/om-sdu/institutter-centre/iks/forskning/forskningsprojekter/climate-anxiety>. It also operates within the framework of the SDU Climate Cluster’s interdisciplinary center for mobilizing Post-Anthropocentric Climate Action. For an overview of PACA’s academic and public activities, see https://www.sdu.dk/en/om-sdu/institutter-centre/i_virksomhedsledelse/forskning/forskningsenheder/paca.

For this reason, the project is based on cooperation with high school students from the Danish region of Funen, where our university is located.³ In order to collect and examine the students' ideas about the future and the ecological crisis, we engage them in writing workshops and group discussions taking place both on campus at SDU and in their English classes. The students are first invited to participate in a flash fiction workshop, where they have a couple of minutes to write down the basic elements of their stories (protagonist, setting, and future climate conditions). Afterwards, they may share these flash fictions with their classmates and rework them into longer stories (see Yazell and Wolf, 2023). In order to avoid influencing their writing too much, we only remind the students that their flash fiction stories have to be set 40 years into the future, focus on a single main character, and provide both a positive and a negative climate experience. Everything else is for them to figure out, as freely and creatively as possible.

So far, almost 250 stories have been collected over two years (2022 and 2023), and additional workshops took place during the fall 2024 semester.⁴ Despite the extent of the corpus, many of the envisioned climate futures follow a few distinct narrative patterns. In the remainder of this article, I will briefly examine two of the most common ones, namely their prevalent dystopian tone and their positive perspective on the present.

Dystopian imaginaries

It is not surprising to note that most of the stories paint a grim picture of the future through well-known science fictional and dystopian tropes, symbols, and characters. For example, in many of the stories, the protagonist resides “in societies where, under climate-induced duress, life is constrained by strict rules and threats to wellbeing” and characterized by “draconian surveillance measures, ruthless social class structures, and suppression of free speech” (Yazell and Wolf, 2023, 567). Although students claim not to be frequent consumers of these kinds of narratives, their climate future visions reflect the influence of these narratives in multiple ways. For example, most of the stories (21%) take place in the United States, which is where dystopian blockbusters and bestsellers often depict extreme climate disasters to happen.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Amy Chambers, and Lisa Garforth have explained this tendency by pointing to the special role that science fiction plays in today's social imagination by furnishing “contemporary culture and media with a distinctive ‘thesaurus’ of images, symbols, and narratives, a stock of tropes for making sense of technological change and the future” (2020, 247). For this reason, “one does not have to be a fan or a close and critical reader of literary science fiction to access the science-fictional imaginary. It is always-already part of our cultural equipment and sensibility” (2020, 247).

The students' dystopian climate fictions may also be influenced by a more general move towards apocalyptic tones in public and official narratives. On the one hand, daily news offers a rich repertoire of increasingly alarming stories focusing on so-called “natural” disasters and escalating international violence occurring closer and closer to Denmark, for example the recent extreme climate events affecting Mediterranean countries, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the sabotage

3 The following high schools have participated in the project so far: Middelfart Gymnasium, Nyborg Gymnasium, Odense Katedralskole, Svendborg Gymnasium, Mulernes Legatskole, and Sct. Knuds Gymnasium.

4 The collaboration with the schools and the writing workshops is coordinated by the SDU Citizen Science Knowledge Center (Mette Fentz Hastrup, Thomas Kaarsted, Line Laursen Corydon) and the researchers participating in the Climate Future Fiction project (Bryan Yazell, Patricia Wolf, Karl Attard); see <https://www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/forskningsformidling/citizenscience/climate-future-fiction>.

of energy infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, to name just a few. Furthermore, in response to this widespread feeling of insecurity, the Danish government is also inserting dystopian elements into its official narratives and communications. In September 2024, for example, following public statements from the Minister of Defense, all Danish residents received an email from the Danish Emergency Management Agency on how to prepare for a crisis, with a list of items every household should buy and advice on how to store bottled water and canned food. The previous year, the same governmental agency began testing a national alert system to reach the mobile phones of all Danish residents, an operation that was repeated in 2024 on an even larger scale.

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On top of this, even if Denmark has so far been sheltered from the worst effects of the ecological crisis, some of the students may have first-hand experience with recent emergencies. Many of the stories, especially the ones written in 2022, imagine new pandemics and depict futures where people are forced to shelter indoors and wear face masks. As for the extreme climate events that will affect future people and ecosystems, most of the texts revolve around floods and storms (30%) and drought and wildfires (20%). This is perhaps no coincidence, since Denmark has been hit by some very powerful storms since 2022, and in the summer of 2023, the country endured the worst drought in 30 years.

A positive view on the present

Despite the students’ likely familiarity with the various ways in which the ecological crisis is already affecting their lives, most of the stories depict the crisis as a single, extreme weather event that will happen at a certain point in the future.⁵ In an untitled story (2023), for instance, the main character was sleeping when the ozone layer collapsed, and so she “*missed the moment* when things started to go downhill for humankind and all the living vessels on this planet as well” (emphasis added). One of the most obvious consequences of misrepresenting the ecological crisis as a single future event that suddenly changes everything is that it allows the author to depict the narrative past – that is, our present – in very positive terms, as a perfect time of freedom and endless possibilities. In *Ever ending story?* (2022), for instance, an old man remembers today’s Denmark as “the best country you could ever imagine”, since at that time, “we had all we needed”. In the story *The discussion of perspectives* (2023), the protagonist has to admit that “the world is not the same. I wish our future kid could grow up *in the same picture-perfect world we lived in, in our past*” (emphasis added). And finally, in an untitled story (2023), the main character explains that his parents “used to tell stories of how the world was at that time. How *beautiful and full of opportunities life was*” (emphasis added).

This very positive, nostalgic take on the present of course reflects the students’ extremely privileged position, as well as their attachment to the “easy”, “modern” life that the capitalistic exploitation of fossil fuels has so far enabled for Denmark and the rest of the Global North. Broadening the scope of Ghosh’s remarks, I would argue that not only our fictional narratives but a whole set of practices, freedoms, and pleasures that shape everyday life in the wealthy cores of the capital-

5 17% of the stories even place the blame on the general concept of “climate change”, without mentioning any specific event.

ist system are intimately connected with the collapse of planetary ecosystems. In this sense, the students' stories illustrate how hard it is for young Danes – and all of us, really – to imagine radical alternatives to our fossil-fueled present. At the same time, they also illustrate that the classroom can be a highly generative space for engaging with young people's imagination. This is why, in addition to social movements demanding just economic and political transitions, there is a growing need to work with fictional narratives to reshape our dreams and aspirations as a way of fostering practices and lifestyles that will not continue to hasten the end of the world.

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8. maj 2025, Aarhus

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2. september 2025, København

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19. september 2025, Aarhus

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29. september 2025, København & 3. oktober, Aarhus

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