



Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) and the Anthropocene: Literature in the Age of Climate Emergency

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n3.20>

Abstract:

How can stories help ordinary people understand a problem as giant as global climate change? This research paper looks deeply at the underlying meanings inside modern climate fiction ('Cli-Fi') books and films to discover answers. We argue that looking at Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* alongside Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* reveals a major split in how we envision the future. Robinson contends that we need to address the planet's issues through the implementation of large-scale government initiatives, international regulations, and extensive technological projects. Conversely, Butler posits that ordinary individuals must collaborate from the grassroots level within small local communities to endure, as large institutions are likely to falter under pressure. Using clear ideas from researchers like Paul Crutzen, Timothy Morton, and Rob Nixon, we examine how storytelling makes the slow, invisible dangers of environmental damage visible to readers. We also look at two popular movies, *Snowpiercer* and *Wall-E*, to show how films use visual images and emotion to have a quick impact, whereas books give us more room to analyse complex laws and economic ideas. Ultimately, these stories are not just warnings about the future; they give us practical ideas on how to organise our society so we can survive a changing planet.

Keywords: Cli-fi, Anthropocene, Environmental Humanities, Climate Crisis, Slow Violence, Narrative Ethics, Climate Literacy.

1 Introduction: Why Climate Change is Challenging for Stories to Tell

When scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer said that humans have started a new geological time period called the 'Anthropocene,' they meant something very simple: human actions are now changing the entire planet more than natural processes do (Crutzen and Stoermer 17). This creates a huge problem for creative writers. For a very long time, books have been about individual human lives, small towns, and short timelines. A typical story tracks a few characters over a few months or years. However, climate change lasts for thousands of years and affects the entire globe at once. How do you write an interesting story about something so massive without losing the reader's attention? This is why climate fiction, or 'Cli-Fi,' is so important today. These stories take giant scientific numbers and turn them into personal human adventures, helping us understand the moral choices we have to make to protect our shared home.

To look deeper into these stories, we can use two helpful concepts: Timothy Morton's idea of 'hyperobjects' and Rob Nixon's idea of 'slow violence'. Morton uses the word 'hyperobject' to describe things that are too big for a single human mind to fully see or touch, like global warming or plastic pollution (Morton 1). You cannot stand in one place and point your finger at climate change because it is everywhere at the same time. This makes people feel completely helpless and paralysed. This feeling becomes worse because of what Rob Nixon calls slow violence (Nixon 2). Unlike an explosion, a flood, or a sudden war, environmental damage happens very slowly over many decades. It is an invisible kind of harm that does not make the daily news cycle because it lacks dramatic pictures. The big question for any writer today is, how do you take this slow, giant problem and turn it into an exciting plot with clear answers?

This paper shows that different writers provide completely different answers to this question. By comparing Kim Stanley Robinson's book *The Ministry for the Future* with Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, we find a major split in how we imagine survival. Robinson trusts big systems. He argues that we can only fix the planet by using international laws, big central banks, and huge global engineering projects. Butler completely disagrees with this view. She shows that big governments often cause or ignore environmental harm to protect rich people. Instead, she argues that survival must start from the bottom up, with small groups of neighbours helping each other, sharing tools, and learning to grow their own food. By also looking at two movies, Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* and Andrew Stanton's *Wall-E*, we will show how movies use visual action to make us feel the danger immediately, while books give us the quiet time to think about big laws and long-term plans.

2. Fixing the System: Big Government and Tech in Robinson's Ministry

Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* is a large story designed to show how big organisations can save the world from climate change. Robinson does not write a typical fiction book with a simple plot. He fills his chapters with a mix of character dialogues, fake official meeting notes, economic reports, and short history essays. He does this on purpose because he thinks individual human drama is too small to capture the true size of the Earth's problems. In this book, the real hero is not a single person but the international system itself. Robinson wants to show that if we change how our global laws and financial markets work, big governments can become the most powerful tools we have to save the environment.

The book starts with a terrifying scene: a deadly heatwave in Uttar Pradesh, India. Robinson does not use vague words; he uses exact numbers to show how hot it really was: 'It was twenty past six, and the temperature was already thirty-eight degrees and the humidity sixty per

cent.” The combination meant the wet-bulb temperature was around thirty-two degrees’ (Robinson 1). This ‘wet-bulb’ number is a scientific limit. It means the air is so hot and wet that the human body cannot sweat to cool down, causing people to die quickly. He writes that ‘the heat was a bodily weight, a hammer strike against the senses’ (Robinson 3). This scary scene is placed at the very beginning of the book for a clear reason. It is meant to wake up the world and show that climate change is a real danger happening right now, which justifies the massive government projects that happen later in the story. It shows that human survival has real physical limits.

After this local tragedy, the story moves to Switzerland, where a global committee called *the Ministry for the Future* tries to fix the world's economy. The main character, Mary Murphy, does not spend her time protesting in the streets or changing her personal habits. Instead, she goes straight to the leaders of the world's biggest central banks and convinces them to create a new type of money called the ‘carbon coin’ (Robinson 124). Robinson's big idea here is that if you want to stop pollution, you have to make saving the planet profitable for businesses. The book spends a lot of time explaining how global banks and international laws can be used to force companies to stop burning fossil fuels, turning an environmental problem into a giant financial project run by experts.

Robinson also shows great faith in big technology and engineering. When ice sheets start melting rapidly in Antarctica, the Ministry does not wait for everyone to agree on a plan. They immediately send a massive fleet of government ships to pump water out from under the glaciers, freezing it back onto the top to stop the sea levels from rising (Robinson 312). This fits perfectly with Paul Crutzen's idea that humans must accept their role as the active managers of the planet (Crutzen 23). Robinson argues that we cannot just leave nature alone anymore; we have to use technology and government power to actively run the Earth's sys-

tems. The book tells us that while individual lives are important, the survival of our species depends on big laws, massive technology, and global cooperation from the top down.

3. Working Together: Small Communities and Mutual Aid in Butler's Parable

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* takes us into a completely different world. She shows us a future where big governments are not saviours but broken systems that actually caused the crisis by protecting rich corporations instead of ordinary people. Writing in the 1990s, long before the term 'Cli-Fi' was popular, Butler imagined a dangerous world where climate change destroys the economy and makes poverty and crime much worse. In her book, the government has abandoned its citizens, leaving small towns to be destroyed by fires and thieves. For Butler, you cannot trust central banks to save the world because those banks only care about money, not human lives. When the environment breaks down, the state protects itself and leaves regular people behind.

This critical view is shown through the practical choices of her young hero, Lauren Olamina. Lauren does not wait for a government check or an international law to protect her town. Instead, she focuses entirely on real, physical tools for survival, packing a special emergency 'go bag'. Lauren writes down exactly what she puts inside it: 'I have been updating my emergency pack... money, a change of clothes, a blanket, matches, a knife, a small bottle of bleach, and some seeds' (Butler 15). Notice that she puts 'seeds' right alongside a knife and bleach. This is a very important detail. It shows that to survive a broken world, you must be ready to defend yourself, but you must also be ready to build a new agricultural future by growing your own food. In Butler's world, safety does not come from a massive tech project in Antarctica; it comes from hard physical work and planting crops in the soil with your own hands. It shows that survival requires a direct connection to the Earth.

This focus on practical survival is the foundation of Earthseed, a new philosophy that Lauren creates to help people deal with a changing world. While big institutions try to pretend that things will stay the same, Earthseed teaches that change is the only constant rule in the universe. Lauren writes, ‘All that you touch / You change. / All that you change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is change. / God / Is change’ (Butler 24). This simple idea is a powerful survival tool. By saying that God is change, Lauren tells her followers that no one is coming to save them from the sky or from a government office. People must save themselves. Survival depends on small groups of people moving together, sharing their food, and building tight community networks based on mutual aid. When Lauren forms a small village called Acorn, she shows that true safety comes from local trust and working together to grow food from the ground up.

Butler’s story focuses completely on the small, daily choices needed to stay alive when everything else breaks down. She shows that when the environment breaks down, big systems often turn into unfair corporate towns, like the village of Olivar mentioned in the text (Butler 118). Because of this, she argues that small, independent, and flexible communities are the best way to handle climate change. While Robinson’s book looks at global finance statistics, Butler’s book tracks a group of poor refugees walking down a highway, trying to protect each other from danger. *The Parable of the Sower* delivers a clear message: if we want to survive on a changing planet, we cannot rely on the big systems that broke it. We have to learn to build new communities from the ground up by helping our neighbours.

4. Books versus Movies: How Different Media Show Climate Damage

To fully understand climate stories, we also need to look at movies to see how a change in medium changes how we think about the environment. Books have plenty of space; they can

spend pages explaining complex banking laws or internal thoughts. Movies, however, must tell their stories quickly, usually in less than two hours. They have to take Rob Nixon's 'slow violence'—which happens over many decades out of sight—and turn it into visual images that hit the audience with immediate emotional force. This time limit forces directors to use simple visual symbols, shifting the story from an intellectual lecture into a thrilling, emotional experience that anyone can feel.

We can see this clearly in Bong Joon-ho's film *Snowpiercer*, where the giant problem of an engineered ice age is shrunk down into a single, fast-moving train (Snowpiercer). Instead of showing us global committees like Robinson does, the director uses the train as a visual metaphor for class division in a broken world. The train is a mini-version of our current society under severe environmental stress: the ultra-rich live in luxury in the front cars, wasting food and water, while the poor are locked in the crowded, dark rear cars. The slow violence of the frozen world outside—caused by a failed chemical project meant to cool the planet—is constantly contrasted with the immediate, bloody fights inside the train. The director uses long camera shots as the poor characters fight their way forward, showing how climate disasters make social unfairness worse. The movie ends with the complete destruction of the train, delivering a radical message that matches Butler's view: you cannot fix a corrupt system from the inside. Sometimes you have to break the entire machine to start over in the real world.

Andrew Stanton's movie *WALL-E* uses animation to show the massive problem of consumer waste and trash accumulation from a different angle (WALL-E). The entire first part of the movie shows environmental slow violence without a single line of dialogue. We see a quiet, abandoned Earth covered in giant towers made entirely of garbage under a thick, dirty sky. The director uses immersive sound design, rusty colours, and wide camera shots to show the deep sadness of a dead planet. The giant problem is made clear through the simple, repetitive

actions of WALL-E, a tiny robot whose daily job highlights centuries of human neglect. However, when the movie moves to the luxury spaceship called the Axiom, it turns into a sharp satire of modern life. Humans have become floating consumers who sit on automatic chairs, screens locked in front of their eyes, completely taken care of by a giant corporation. The movie uses this funny but sad image to show that the real danger of climate change is how technology can make us blind to reality, letting the planet get ruined while we stay entertained. The happy ending, where humans return to Earth, matches Butler's focus on physical work: the characters must leave their screens, step onto the dirt, and manually care for a single green plant to bring the world back to life.

5. Conclusion: Bringing the Two Sides Together

Ultimately, modern climate books and movies do not just show us our fears about the environment; they act as active guides, mapping out the different choices we can make to handle a changing world. The big difference between Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* shows the main debate we face today. Robinson proves that global laws, financial reforms, and massive technology projects are absolutely necessary, showing that giant global problems require giant government resources. Butler, on the other hand, warns us that big institutions are often corrupt and unreliable, showing that real human resilience lives in small groups, mutual aid, and direct local action.

When we look at these books alongside movies like *Snowpiercer* and *WALL-E*, we understand how different media shape our thinking. Books give us the quiet space to analyse global systems and long-term plans across decades, while movies use powerful visuals and sound to shock us out of our comfort zones and make us feel the pain of a dying planet. We should not view big government tech and small local communities as a simple choice between one or the

other. Instead, we need both working together. We need large-scale laws to control the global climate, and we need tight, local community relationships to take care of each other during daily crises. In our current climate emergency, these stories are more than just entertainment; they are the essential, practical instruction manuals for the world we must build together. They show us how to survive.

5.1 Avenues for Future Research

This research, however, foregrounds the ways in which prominent climate stories foreground the tension between top-down systems and local efforts, leaving numerous key avenues open for future academic work.

First, since this study focuses mainly on Western novels and films, it would be important to explore stories from the Global South in the next step. Non-Western climate fiction can allow us to consider how those communities that bear the brunt of environmental devastation articulate survival and political intervention on their own terms.

Second, future studies could shift from literary analysis to real-world audience studies. Empirical assessments to evaluate if readers and viewers do truly change their political beliefs or daily environmental practices after engaging with these works would be invaluable. For example, researchers could follow up on whether a data-heavy book results in different real-world activities than a highly emotive, visually startling picture.

Finally, if real-world technology such as geoengineering and artificial intelligence continues to evolve fast, so, no doubt, will modern fiction. Future studies should carefully observe the adaptation of new novels and films in order to analyse these new instruments so that the academic discussion is updated with real changes in science.

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