

Can Cli-Fi Novels be Considered a Beneficial Tool in Urging People into Action Against Climate Change?

This article aims to answer the question: Can Cli-fi novels be considered a beneficial tool in urging people into action against climate change? It will reflect on two pieces from the Cli-fi genre: *Implanted* by Lauren C. Tefteau and *The Myth of Rain* by Seanan McGuire.

The article will discuss, using examples from the text, how the two authors combine both emotive language and vivid imagery in their literature to actively encourage readers to want to make a change and to warn them of the impending dangers of climate change and global warming.

It will discuss the dangers and benefit of dystopian cli-fi novels and the importance of including both dramatization and fact to incite change.

Additionally, it will include quotes and statistics drawn from other academic sources to

further back up the claim that Cli-fi novels can indeed be considered a beneficial tool in urging people into action.

It will also focus on the need to continue creating and sharing work from this genre in a bid to strengthen both; people's understanding of climate change and their willingness to act accordingly.

In order to answer the question: Can cli-fi novels be considered a beneficial tool in urging people into action against climate change?

One must first define what is meant by the term "Cli-fi." A relatively new term coined by journalist Dan Bloom, Cli-fi or climate fiction, is 'a genre of fiction that deals with the impact of climate change and global warming.' Although, a relatively lucid definition by nature, the

understandable tendency of authors of this genre, to lean towards dystopian themes, has led to arguments that, by adopting these largely science-fiction type story lines, cli-fi authors are in danger of combining the genres, thus painting climate fiction as a futuristic Hollywood monster not dissimilar to Doctor Who's The Daleks.

But Climate change is so much more than that, isn't it? If years of watching Sir David Attenborough gracing the small screen has taught us anything it should be that if we do not take "dramatic action within the next decade, we could face irreversible damage to the natural world and the collapse of our societies."¹ We are all aware of the looming disaster and yet there remains a vast majority, reluctant to make a change, still stood, complaining about the corporate world's poor attempt at showing solidarity with our Earth - the infamous paper straw substitute.

Of course, even in these dismal times, the Attenboroughs and Thunbergs of the world are vocal in their valiant efforts to raise awareness and

Land in Literature, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023 invite others to join the cause. Therefore, is it not better for Cli-fi authors to continue to pen literature regardless of its critics? Surely any exposure, considered realistic or not, surpasses none at all? Besides, who is to say that all Cli-fi work descends into science fiction? Certainly, *The Myth of Rain*, despite being set in the future is a very realistic imagining into the state of our world, backed up by scientific evidence.

The Myth of Rain begins by discussing our current time. The narrator reminisces on the 'early teens'² of the 21st century and the harrowing warnings mankind were given to change their ways. Factually accurate language is used throughout, and the quoted passage below could easily be taken from a genuine documentary or article on climate change:

"Even as people were starting to focus on eating local and recycling, they ignored the fact that the lakes were drying, and the hills were burning and the whole great stretch of green that we had all depended

¹ Lisa Joyner, *Sir David Attenborough will present Climate Change — The Facts on the BBC this spring* (2019) <<https://www.countryliving.com/uk/news/a26926582/david-attenborough-climate-change-the-facts-bbc/>> [accessed 27 November 2022].

² Seanan McGuire, 'The Myth of Rain', in *Loosed upon the world*, ed. by John Joseph Adams (New York City: Saga Press, 2015), pp. 45-58 (p. 45).

upon for so long was becoming a fairy tale.”³

The opening content of the story clearly echoes our own tangible experience and in doing so forces the reader to view the ending as an undoubtedly plausible fate for the Earth if we continue on the same path, with no intervention.

McGuire's use of ‘we’ and ‘our’ throughout the story is a vital tool. Collective phrases such as “We’d listened to the lies too long”⁴ and “we had failed”⁵ aim to draw the reader into the narrator's albeit doomed, trusted inner circle. We too are environmentalists fighting against “industry and fossil fuel and men who spoke in voices that dripped money.”⁶ This inclusive technique is one often deployed in shorter climate change stories and builds momentum that lasts long after the pages of the book have been closed.

These decidedly less fanciful cli-fi stories are invaluable. The short sharp facts and realistic occurrences make for powerful reading and push for results.

fiction that needs to be considered when answering the opening question. For all its critics, some of the more adventurous Cli-fi has garnered its fair share of advocates. In his 2019 essay *Cli-Fi – Genre of the Twenty-First Century? Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Climate Fiction and Film* – Axel Goodbody asserts that:

‘Climate fiction has the potential to prompt reflection on the risks associated with climate change and the choices we are called on to make.’⁷ But is it living up to that potential? Critics would argue that fantasy novels such as *Implanted*, (a book featured on grist.org’s definitive climate fiction reading list,) are no more than young-adult science fiction stories, however Goodbody goes on to shrewdly observe:

“If climate fiction is to draw it to the attention of a wider public, it must therefore resort to techniques of concretization and dramatization.

Literature and film commonly seek to enhance awareness of climate change by

⁷ Axel Goodbody, ‘Cli-Fi – Genre of the Twenty-First Century? Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Climate Fiction and Film’, in *Green Matters*, ed. By Maria Loschnigg and Melanie Braunecker (Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2020), pp. 131-153 (p. 134).

⁴ McGuire, p. 47.

⁵ McGuire, p. 53.

⁶ McGuire, p. 48.

making experiences, attitudes and actions real, and they do so through stories and images involving threats to people's centres of felt value."⁸

Echoing this same sentiment, in *Saving the World One Word at a Time: Writing Cli-Fi*, Ellen Szabo writes "The best Cli-fi, seamlessly intertwines literary fabrication and science; it's a literary collaboration between the disciplines of science and the humanities."⁹

Although *Implanted* undeniably meanders into somewhat of an Orwellian teenage love story, upon reading it, thanks to passages such as:

"After too many years of storm-leveled towns, receding coastlines, drought, flood, pollution, and devastating fighting over food and resources as governments tried to provide for their people, domed cities became our only option to escape the ravages of a world that had finally turned against us after so many years of abuse."¹⁰

Coupled with instances of change evoking language, it is entirely impossible to disregard the

Land in Literature, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023 underlying themes of climate change and global warming that run throughout the novel.

There is an obvious contrast between the above passage describing factual repercussions of climate change and the main plot of the novel. Where parts of the story discuss "the harm done to the climate by global warming, warfare and pollution",¹¹ the story's other focus is on its protagonist Emery. Imprisoned in a domed city for their own well-being by the government, Emery and the rest of mankind now communicate virtually through implants. Emery, who is a young vigilante type, is blackmailed into becoming a courier for a corrupt organization who utilize her rare blood type to carry secret codes.

Without a doubt, everything about the latter, screams science-fiction and adventure. Even whilst reading this, it is impossible not to imagine the action-packed novel eventually finding its way from paper to film. This naturally leads us to a second question: do the exciting storylines so often included in cli-fi novels, alongside the facts, hinder or help their cause?

⁸ Axel Goodbody, p. 134.

⁹ Ellen Szabo, *Saving the World One Word at a Time: Writing Cli-fi* (New York: Yellow Island Press, 2015), p. 6.

¹⁰ Lauren C Tefteau, *Implanted* (Nottingham: Angry Robot, 2018), p.6.

¹¹ Lauren C Tefteau, p. 45.

each individual's responsibility to reflect and alter accordingly. If an individual can be helped along in this reflection by a piece of literature, then yes, that literature *must* be labelled as a beneficial tool. What we cannot do is allow internal bias towards "less academic" writing to become a stumbling block that causes such debate that we neglect to deal with the principal issue at hand.

"All we could do was save what little we could put our hands on and remember the things we had to leave behind. We owed the world we had destroyed that, at least. We owed it so much more. Maybe someday, our children would see owls in the world again."¹²

If, as Goodbody and Szabo suggest, in order to draw wider attention, cli-fi needs not only to state facts but also to include drama, then surely so labelled "science-fiction" books such as this, are in fact, fulfilling their role effectively. It has been proven that there is great power in the written word to incite change. By drawing the reader in with relatable human emotion and bringing them to the edge of their seats with cliff-hangers and thrilling exploits, Tefteau manages to mould a memorable narrative that offers a grave insight into the effects of climate change and global warming. Regardless of how the author gets there, there is no argument that she does. After reading *Implanted* and similar books in this "science/climate fiction" genre, it cannot be debated that they *too* are a helpful tool.

There is room enough in society for both the sensible, factual books filled with hard hitting truths *and* futuristic, exciting books that fill our heads with ideas and notions as to how the world might look if we continue down the same path. Some of us are drawn to logic and reason, others, to adventure. This does not mean that both groups cannot reach the same conclusion. Climate change

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¹² McGuire, p. 58.

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