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ARTICLE

Mashing It Up: Creative Writing Pedagogy and the Affective Possibilities of Genre Meeting Climate Fiction

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Abstract
This article explores how pedagogy focused on affective possibilities of narrative genres can suggest new directions for climate fiction, potentially challenging the dystopian dominance in the climate crisis imaginary. We analyse a corpus of work produced by first year creative writing students. The students were given the task of "mashing" climate fiction with another genre (romance, horror, crime or any other genre of their choice) and asked to reflect on how this changed the emotional affect and tone of their narrative. Many students were still drawn to dystopian visions, reflecting how climate fiction has become entangled with this particular mode of storytelling, but the focus on reader affect resulted in the students adding layers of hope and agency. Many made use of the possibilities offered by genre: the whimsical allegory of fantasy, the critical thinking of realism, the active fear of horror and the comic potential of satire. By giving students the freedom to embed climate change into their preferred genre, and by asking them to consider the affective consequences of their choices, we offer challenges to the dominance of dystopian climate fiction, suggesting a different path to narratively engage with the climate crisis without descending into hopelessness.

Keywords: Climate change; creativity; narrative; pedagogy; writing

Introduction

There is growing recognition of climate fiction's ability to affect readers' relationship with real-world issues of climate change (Castles, 2024; Kirne, 2021; Lovell, Thomas, & Wickham, 2019; Wain & Jones, 2018). Genres have varying emotional ranges and much of this scholarship has focussed on which genres or narrative types might be "best" for climate fiction (Hennessy et al., 2023; Hyoung Song, 2022; Novitz, 2023; Trexler, 2015; Wark, 2017), a focus which reveals the charged moral tone of the debate. Climate fiction has often been felt to have educative or morally instructive value, offering warnings and cautionary tales, emerging from an era when climate change denial was still prominent. But is it a genre of its own? Or a topic or theme? Is it form or content? Some climate fiction is literary, such as Margaret Atwood's work, some is speculative, such as Kim Stanley Robinson's, but on the whole, it has stood apart from popular genres like romance, crime, or horror. The search for a "secondary" genre within which to embed stories of climate change is potentially built on the doubt that climate fiction, sometimes called "cli-fi," can truly be considered a coherent genre in its own right (Evans, 2017; Goodbody, 2019; Johns-Putra, 2016). The fact that most commercially popular genres have not embraced climate issues may suggest a wariness to treat a topic of such gravity in the sandpit of entertainment fiction. As climate fiction "lacks the plot formulas and stylistic conventions that define genres such as

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science fiction and the western," Axel Goodbody comes to the conclusion that "Cli-fi is not a genre in the scholarly sense" (2019, p. 136). Adeline Johns-Putra comes to a similar conclusion, deciding that "it is probably more accurate to identify climate change as a topic found in many genres" (2016, p. 267), rather than a consistent genre of its own.

This haziness over climate fiction's status as a coherent genre might come as a surprise to the lay reader, given perceptions of climate fiction as a genre of dystopian, future-looking disaster have hardened over the past few decades. In a survey of climate fiction, Johns-Putra finds that "overwhelmingly, climate change appears in novels as part of a futuristic dystopian and/or postapocalyptic setting" (2016, p. 169). There is concern that a restriction to dystopian narratives could have a negative effect on reader's ability to engage with the topic of climate change, with Matthew Schneider-Mayerson fearing that "the psychological tendency to avoid stories that deliver negative emotions means that well-intentioned authors who vividly depict the catastrophic consequences of climate change may actually be hindering their goal of heightening environmental consciousness" (2018, p. 490). This has led to calls for more positive visions of the future, described by Emily Coren and Debra L. Safer as "solutions stories that give us agency, courage, and hope" (2020, p. 445).

The role that different genres can play in diversifying the affect of climate change stories remains under-researched, particularly in terms of considering creative practice. Our previous research project tried to partially fill this gap by questioning professional creative writers on their motivations and creative choices when writing climate fiction (Cothren, Matthews & Hennessy 2023). Here, we turn our attention to emerging writers, exploring the pedagogy and results of a first year creative writing module focused on climate fiction and genre at Flinders University in South Australia. Building on considerations of the negative affect of dystopian climate fiction on perceptions of the ability to make change (Hennessy et al., 2022), our methodology positions the analysing of creative output as a means to gain insight into how emerging writers are feeling about the climate crisis and to consider what role story-making plays in challenging the temperature of our collective imagination. We consider creative practice as a rich field in which to measure both personal and political engagements.

Background to the project

A group of first year creative-writing students at Flinders University, South Australia, were invited to participate in this study. These students were enrolled in the subject "Ideas: Imitation and Originality," a course originally designed by Associate Professor Amy Matthews. This course explores a different genre each week, discussing how to take the core ideas and inherent affects embedded in each genre and make them fresh. The creative and reflective works analysed in this article were a graded assignment for students in this subject. The student's second assignment asked them to write a 2000-word work of climate fiction, either a short story or a chapter of a novel, that combined elements of at least one other genre. Alongside the fictional component, students were also required to submit a 500-word exegetical reflection explaining why they selected this second genre. In particular, students were asked to reflect on what they wanted readers to feel or think about climate change as a result of their fiction, and how different genres could help them create this desired effect.

Six weeks prior to the submission due date, students were guided through a lecture on generating climate fiction story ideas, delivered by Dr Alex Cothren. The session began by defining climate fiction as a genre only in the sense that its topic is climate change. This was a deliberately broad interpretation, as Adam Trexler describes how climate fiction can focus on both the extreme weather events associated with global warming, such as "droughts, tropical cyclones, heat waves, crop failures, forest diebacks and fires … flooding, drought, and water shortages" (2015, p. 2), as well as examining the cultural aspects of the society that have led to this issue: "the

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climate change novel can explore the aesthetics of wilderness, gastronomy, domesticity, species, urban life, fast cars, and international life" (2015, pp. 14–15).

Having introduced students to this broad palette of possibilities for their story, we set an initial idea generation exercise. Students were asked to close their eyes for a moment and think of the first image that came to their mind when thinking of climate change. They were then given five minutes to describe this image in writing. With this initial image in hand, students were asked to consider how the concept of time could fix stories about climate to a certain genre. For example, early 1960s and 1970s climate fiction novels by J.G. Ballard, Octavia Butler and George Turner speculated about the possible future when global warming had not yet occurred and were, therefore, inherently tied to science fiction. But as the effects of climate change have moved from speculation to reality, writers can now write climate fiction in the realist genre. For example, Alice Bishop's *A Constant Hum* is a set of connected short stories about the 2019 Black Saturday bushfires that devastated her rural Australian community. Bishop has described how experiencing the effects of climate change firsthand has changed how she thinks about the topic: "reading cli-fi is a different experience for me now. It's hard for me to see speculative fiction in the way I might have growing up, as some future terror we may escape" (Bishop in Cothren et al., 2023). We also discussed how fantasy texts such as Merlinda Bobis' *Locust Girl* can examine climate change allegorically without pinning their fiction to a specific timeline (2016). This led into the second writing exercise, in which students were asked to add to their earlier image via a description that would help readers understand the time period in which it was occurring. They were also asked to experiment with moving this time period and seeing what it did to the image and subsequent narrative opportunities.

The final section of the lecture focused on the effect that climate fiction can have on readers. Given the pressing nature of the climate crisis, Laura Wright discusses how "in addition to evaluation of cli-fi in terms of its artistic literary merits, analyses of the genre also tend to engage with, and even utilise, these works as potential pedagogical tools in the fight against what constitutes perhaps the grandest societal challenge of our time" (2019). Students were guided through different author approaches to using cli-fi as a tool. For example, we examined Jane Abbott's hope that her dystopian novel, *Watershed*, would act as a warning against inaction, "saying if we don't address this issue now, this is what might happen" (Abbott in Cothren et al., 2023). Students were then offered the counter argument, described by Schneider-Mayerson above, that negative stories may only serve to push readers away from the topic of climate change altogether. They were introduced to a selection of positive climate fiction stories hosted by the literary magazine, *Grist,* whose annual writing contest "celebrates stories that invite us to imagine the future we want" (Grist Magazine, 1999-2025). As a final writing task, students were asked to write a few sentences on the affect they wanted to have on their readers, from scaring them to giving them hope. Upon finishing this final exercise, the students were then asked to draw on their understanding of genres built up during the semester and to consider what second genre (that is, besides cli-fi) might be best suited to the image, time and affect they had begun to develop for their story.

While many students may have moved on from this initial story sketch once they started to work on their assignment, this lecture nonetheless helped to get students thinking about how the choice of genre can impact readers and their relationship with the climate crisis. As the analysis of the corpus of student work will show, there was variety in the final choices made by students, showcasing the adaptability of the climate fiction genre and drawing attention to the ways in which genre conventions might usefully overlap with stories of the climate crisis.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for the project was granted by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics, Integrity and Compliance Office. Students were recruited by verbal invitation in class followed by an email reminder. They were told the project aims of understanding how emerging writers might

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use genre to tackle the issue of climate change in fiction. They were told that their stories and exegetical reflections would both be included in the dataset if they chose to participate, but that their names or any other identifying information would not be included in the article. Here, we refer to the students by a number corresponding to their names in an excel spreadsheet accessible only by the authors. Those who chose to participate returned a consent form to the investigators.

Results

Twenty-five stories were made available by the students, across two years of teaching the subject. The stories were analysed and coded by Dr Rachel Hennessy. Here we examine the common genres the students' chose to work in, and how this affected their depiction of climate change. We finish with some concluding thoughts on the continuing challenge of dislodging climate narratives from dystopia and consider how this pedagogy can prepare emerging writers for thinking about the responsibilities and opportunities of climate fiction.

Genres

Dystopia/science fiction

The most common genre chosen was dystopian/science fiction. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given science fiction itself might be considered to have birthed the genre of cli-fi, and that the majority of popular published fiction about climate remains focused on depictions of horrifying climate-changed futures. Most recently, one of Australia's most popular fiction writers, Tim Winton, has contributed to this plethora of dystopian visions, with his novel *Juice* (2024) set in a dry, desolate Western Australia where the population lives in underground bunkers during the summer months. In our lecture, we raised the question of whether these dystopian stories still act as a warning, given the climate crisis is widely accepted now and a lived reality, yet there were many students who still felt there was a strong purpose for sounding the warning, believing — as Hughes and Wheeler describe — that "apocalyptic visions have the power to transfix their audience with horror, to command attention and shock people out of a position of comfortable apathy, in a way that strict adherence to the data cannot" (2013, p. 2).

Students wrote of ruined worlds — with flooding being the most common cause of the Earth's demise — with those who survived the disasters living in vastly altered societies. Students sought to use these stories as a wake-up call that might jolt readers into action. Writer #1 said they chose dystopian fiction because by "threatening the readers with a society dealing with the aftershock of climate change" they believed they could "provoke thoughts of current society which can still fight against it." In a story focused on a character who discovers that the present state of the world has been caused by past generation's actions, the character's questions serve to echo contemporary questions of responsibility: "It feels awful knowing what I know now, it feels awful knowing how preventable this all could have been — how do the people who made these decisions live with themselves when I hardly can?" (Writer #1). In Writer #17's story, people live in apartment buildings, gradually moving up and up as the waters rise, with corrupt and morally void leaders determining who gets to live or die. While Writer #17 claims their story "keeps a positive, hopeful tone for the characters in the story," a world of poisoned rain and monthly, government-sanctioned death is hard to reconcile with this intention. Similarly, Story #11 presents "a poisoned wasteland of broken junk," whilst Story #19 has society living in weather-controlled domes where the affluent are able to segregate themselves from those less lucky. This focus on dystopia remains driven by an idea that imagining the worst will make us work towards something better. Writer #18 writes that the "sci-fi genre allows for a thought experiment — a 'what if' — of taking the climate crisis to its every end." By depicting this end, Writer #18 draws on the belief that in cli-fi, "the fear for man's future is used to motivate change in readers" (Cole, 2021, p. 6). For these

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students, representation of a hopeless future is still seen as a catalyst for present action. Whilst the climate activist Zahra Biabani claims that "climate doomism — a fatalistic view of our future centred on the belief that the earth is too far gone — is now so pervasive that it rivals climate change denialism" (2023, p.12-13), apocalyptic fictions are clearly still seen as a viable strategy for consciousness raising.

Although Ingo Cornils claims that "anglophone Cli-Fi is often criticized for being so dystopian that it no longer offers its readers any hope" (2024, p. 22), many students did attempt to infuse their dystopian texts with elements of hope by either showing their characters continuing to fight even in the worst circumstances or demonstrating that climate disaster was, at least, being tackled by collective action. Writer #8 describes their understanding that a purely fear-based narrative will be ineffective in motivating readers:

> when I have engaged with individuals of all ages and backgrounds about their understanding of climate change ... I [have] perceived a general disinterest in climate change based on a fundamental level of fear.

They believe their positive, solutions-focused science fiction will "[allow] for a more responsive view where there is confidence in humanity eventually overcoming problems." As Andrew Milner and J.R. Burgmann write, this modicum of hope at a story's finale might "allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings ... maintain the utopian impulse within the work" (2020, p. 76).

To achieve more positive future-focused stories, students often pinned their stories to subgenres of science fiction such as Hopepunk and Solar-Punk. Of the latter, Writer #24 asserts that Solar-Punk allows them to "write a piece of fiction that simultaneously highlights the level of environmental ruin our species is heading towards while also providing hope that humanity can still turn things around ... I chose to focus on hope as a motif as it is a core aspect of the Solar-Punk genre." In their story, the Earth has destroyed itself but knowledge has been sent out into space in the hope that other species will learn from our mistakes. In Story #11, a child protagonist is the key holder of hope for the future, showing her parents that the wastelands previously dismissed as toxic have potential for growth and renewal: "They don't sound angry-tired, or sad-scared. They sound love-hopeful about the future here." The writer points to Hopepunk as their genre, a kind of writing described by Alexandra Rowland (in Romano, 2018) as the "opposite of Grimdark." Here "hope and strength comes from our bonds with each other, from the actions we take as a community, holding hands in the dark" (Rowland in Buhlert, 2018) and the imagined future still has acts of kindness and solidarity.

Presenting another "catastrophic and doom-laden" story, as Mikaela Loach writes in *It's Not That Radical: Climate Action to Transform Our World*, centres fear as a primary motivator, when, in fact, fear "doesn't lead to actions rooted in justice, but instead, ones rooted in panic" (2023, p. 7). By utilising science fiction tropes, these student stories continue to focus on climate change as a future problem, rather than something affecting the world now. Yet the recognition that pure fear might be a less useful tool in motivating action shows through in many of these dystopian imaginings being tempered with positive possibilities, whether with a belief that humanity will pull back from the edge or a belief in a less grim outcome for the collective.

Fantasy/high fantasy

Many students chose to write in the fantasy genre, tackling climate change through indirect allegory. Despite its popularity, the fantasy genre is not often thought of as a natural container for climate fiction narratives. Rebecca Evans writes that "the critical response to cli-fi has thus far generically flattened the term, emphasising its association with the realistic literary strategies commonly associated with scientific knowledge while excluding other genres" (2017, p. 95).

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Fantasy, by definition, explores other worlds, while climate fiction has been seen as a genre wrestling with *this* world's most pressing challenge. But fantasy also has a long tradition of providing allegorical reflections, however slanted, of contemporary society, its adventures in magical, strange lands never as disconnected as they may first appear. Students choosing to mix fantasy and climate fiction wrote of how it allowed them to foreground entertainment and explore climate change in a less confrontational manner than realist or extrapolative science fiction stories. Writer #9 hoped that their choice of fantasy would help "alleviate the tensions and emotions a genre like cli-fi can bring to the reader and the writer," leaving them "feeling hopeful and entertained." This focus on entertainment does not mean a complete disconnection from the issue of climate change. To craft their magical world inhabited by whale-like creatures, Writer #9 researched whales and carbon storage, and they describe how this research might draw readers' attention to the very real need to protect whales: "if a reader were to focus on the cli-fi aspect of my story I would hope the narratology leaves a reader wanting to know more, to investigate, and be driven to act."

This combination of entertaining surface and deeper allegory was replicated across many student stories in the fantasy genre. Writer #23 says the goal of their story about a magical love affair gone awry was simply to "create a fun story that readers could get immersed in and enjoy reading." Yet, their exegetical reflection also points to the depth of their allegorical construction, with each main character in the story representing a different aspect of the climate crisis, such as the powerful Princess Amber who represents "global warming, since by the end of the story she was emanating a significant amount of heat." What at first appears to be a high fantasy story disconnected from our world transforms into a clear allegory once the reader recognises the coded elements.

Another common element of the fantasy stories was their ability to take the slow creep of climate change and use magic and other fantasy tropes to represent it as a more accelerated disaster. Each fantasy story opens by describing a pristine world in which the environment and those living within it are in harmony. Writer #9 opens the story with a peaceful description of an underwater world with "vibrant colours, life active and swarming, and plentiful food . . . abundant and harmonious." Writer #2's story opens with similarly peaceful images of a human civilisation ensconced in a magical forest, "their homes woven between the roots, illuminated by the glow of the crystallite fruit and the wisps that danced between its boughs." Writer #4's planned epic fantasy novel is about a war between four kingdoms representing different natural elements, and the opening chapter describes how they once "coexisted in harmony, each balancing the other in the intricate game of life."

In reality, the Anthropocene has taken hold over decades, but in fantasy the disaster arrives suddenly and spectacularly, using the genre's unmooring from real timelines to heighten the contrast between "utopian" pre-climate change eras to our current state of decline. In Writer #9's story, the sudden arrival of human-like creatures represents the slow degradation of colonialism and capitalism: "there is a new being on the borderlands of Talia. They walk upright with naked skin. They bring loud noise makers that destroy and come in big clunking boxes on the water with grey puffing clouds exuding from them." The war between the kingdoms in Writer #4's story is described in the language of sudden natural disasters, with "fire waltzing around the landscape causing destruction as it drags everything and anything into its dangerous choreography." Writer #23's fantasy-romance story ends with the main character, Princess Amber, self-destructing, and the exegesis explains how this sudden disaster helps symbolise the impact of a climate crisis: "climate change is an issue impacting much of the world right now . . . My story sends the message that this is becoming an issue and can be explosive if not monitored." And yet by sending this message through fantasy, in which problems are simplified into allegory, the confronting nature of climate changes feels temporarily manageable.

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Realism

In contrast to science fiction texts that looked toward the future or fantasy works that deal with climate change in a timeless way, a small section of the cohort chose to write realistic stories depicting how climate change is currently affecting our lives. Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra describe how literary realism texts have the "ability to render the abstract and intangible phenomenon of climate change visible, and relate it to readers' lives" (2019, p. 229). Story #7 features a protagonist for whom climate change has resulted in a failed relationship, as the couple disagreed on whether it was ethical to have children:

> . . . not that he didn't love her enough to have her baby, kind enough to blame the climate crisis. If there had been water flowing, if the world wasn't dying going unnoticed of all it could do, would he have felt differently?

Writer #7 describes how this smaller story "feels closer to the reality we live in, rather than speculative storytelling." In contrast to big-picture genres like fantasy, realism focuses on smaller moments, showing how each contains intersections of the personal and the political. This connection between everyday emotions and climate change speaks to the core consideration of why fiction writers might engage with the issue in the first place and the story evocatively shows the way in which eco-anxiety intersects with personal circumstance. Story #12 occurs in the aftermath of a natural disaster but deliberately avoids narratives of breakdown and conflict that are common in dystopian fiction. Instead, the story focuses on small moments in the aftermath of the disaster, as members of a rural community work together. Writer #12 writes that this more realistic depiction of climate disaster can infuse readers with belief in humanity:

> while it does not shy away from the terrifying uncertainty of being in a natural disaster, the story also has a sense of hopefulness to it; a sense I believe comes from its focus on being present, in the moment, with people that you care about.

As Scott Jukes et al., point out, there is a need for "little shifts in attention" and this story's emphasis on community-building, rather than community disintegration, asks for a narrative move away from conflict, violence and survivalism and towards imagined "relationship building and collaboration . . . where we may foster specific yet unique capacities to act within situated worlds" (2024, p. 817).

Story #15 focuses on the story of a young girl on holiday with her dysfunctional parents. The child is badly sunburnt but her mother is more concerned with ensuring her husband's possible violence is kept in check. Here, the references to the environment are solidly grounded in realistic connections to images of pollution and consumer waste: "Vivienne tied up the garbage bag and hoped it wouldn't leak. She was sure the plastic material would rip from the weight. She could feel the bottles rubbing together and creating a smooth friction." Writer #15 writes that the aim of the story was "to present an allegorical depiction of the social discourse surrounding climate change . . . Synthesising a connection between cli-fi and the genre of social realist fiction." Here the collective is forgotten and the small moments of interaction with elements of the environment — the burning sun, the rotting garbage, the smell of petrol — bring the individual into full view, set strongly against the societal tensions brought about by patriarchal and capitalist systems.

Unlike dystopian or fantasy writing, these realist works are grounded in the possible. Interestingly, though, the students who made this choice did not necessarily do so with an intention of making their stories more positive: two out of three show present situations which are reeking with contemporary despair, and only one decided to use realism with the intention of showing humanity's "better" side, deliberately eschewing any extremity to ensure the work was not read as speculative. As Jack Kirne writes, this question of what constitutes the real has

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narrative implications because "catastrophe exists beyond the boundaries of realist depictions of western modernity" (2021, p. 5). Kirne posits that their own work was "read as speculative, or spectacular, because it exceeded what passes as realism for these readers in contemporary literature" (2021, p. 5). The boundaries of what is believable are being redrawn in the Anthropocene, with the word "unprecedented" having lost meaning, and thus the genre of realism has become more permeable.

Horror

Three students chose to combine climate fiction with horror, a genre defined by the negative emotions — most notably fear, shock and disgust — it seeks to evoke in readers. Horror is also what Xavier Aldana Reyes calls "a phobic cultural form," with the genres' tropes constantly refreshed to meet new "historically contingent anxieties" (2016). This exploration of contemporary anxieties is often said to have a cathartic effect, allowing horror readers to safely confront their fears by "fantasis[ing] about their dangers from the vantage point of fiction" (Reyes, 2016). However, the student exegesis reflections suggested that they instead hoped to leave their readers lingering in discomfort long after their stories had finished. Writer #21 describes their story's goal as "leav[ing] the audience with a mix of hopelessness and [to] push readers to imagine a future where nature attacks humanity and prompt them to consider changes before climate change is irreversible." Similarly, Writer #14 sees their role as creating the negative emotions audiences should *already* be feeling about climate change: "It is my belief that an issue as significant as climate change is something people should feel confronted by." A desire to confront the reader also drove Writer #5's story, in which they aimed to use the sudden appearance of mysterious oil-like substance to symbolise the "tangible threat" climate change plays in all of our lives: "It doesn't matter what you're doing in your day to day, when an existential threat could randomly take away everything you love."

While these three stories were connected by their confronting effect on readers, there was variety in who suffered *within* the stories, and whether readers were meant to empathise or not with these victims. Writer #21's story sees a group of unnamed men attacked and killed by a variety of strange creatures, including a monstrous personification of Mother Nature, while out walking in a Scottish moorland. The story immediately casts these men as brutes deserving of the violence perpetrated upon them, describing how "the serenity of the moorland was disrupted when [they] trampled through the grass and brush . . . contest[ing] who could kill as many red grouse or rabbits to pass the time." The language describing their slaughter has a joyous fecundity, mixing gore with a celebration of the resilience of nature: "hazel glove fungus sprung from his distended stomach and unfurled amongst the rotting entrails, and the lethal spores danced at the crucifixion site. Sprigs of dainty, dusty pink tendrils flourished in his wake." One surviving man encounters Mother Nature, and he is initially saved from starvation through the apples and blueberries she grows for him. But underlining this man's-and perhaps mankind's-inability to adapt and harmonise with nature, he tells mother nature "he couldn't live off only fruit and needed more to sustain him. Like the red grouse or rabbits his companions had killed." Angered by this greed — "it never mattered how much she provided for them. It would never be enough" — Mother Nature murders him by infesting his body with fungi. The man's death is not a tragedy but rather a necessary step to save the environment he once trampled through, with the story ending by telling us how the moor "begins to heal as his body decays in a macabre display."

Writer #5's story also depicts humans suffering at the hands of mutated nature, but here the roles of villain and victim are swapped. In this fantasy-horror hybrid, the human characters are a First Nations-like community that lives harmoniously with nature, suspended in the trees on woven platforms, and subsisting on the fish they catch from the ocean. When the eco-horror reaches these characters, it is not their regular environment striking out but a new substance described as oil-like and bringing to mind the petroleum spills that have devastated coastal

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regions. The deadened language used to describe this substance's effect is the exact opposite of the erupting colour in Writer #21's story:

> . . . .it sucked the very colour out of everything it touched; coral turned white, algae black. Fish darted beneath in frantic dance. Those foolish or unlucky enough to touch the oil sunk grey to the seafloor. Miles across the water it spread, seagrass meadows and reefs lost beneath the lustre.

In Writer #5's own words, this oil is the "villain of my story," and as it spreads over the environment in the story's dark conclusion, we see not healing but destruction, with the story's final image of "a single grey leaf float[ing] on its surface." Clearly, readers are meant to fear, not celebrate, the harm caused to the humans and their home in this story. Yet it is interesting to consider where a Western reader, particularly those living in colonised nations, sits in relation to this story. Alongside empathy the community there might be a strong sense of guilt, with the wave of oil a metaphor for the apocalypse that colonisation has already brought to many peoples across the world.

Writer #14's story also aims for a more complex mixture of emotions than pure fear and readers may struggle to figure out exactly who it is they should be empathising with. The story begins with the protagonist waking up in a square cell reminiscent of Vincenzo Natali's cult horror film, *Cube*. Along with three other characters, they discover a button that gives them the chance to play a deadly game of puzzles, one which will reward them with escape if they succeed but kill them all if they fail. The catch is that if they choose not to play at all, they will survive but the burden of the game will pass onto another collection of captives elsewhere, and with less time to solve the puzzles. The manner in which the group clashes over the correct reaction to this dilemma will feel familiar to anyone who has watched arguments about the topic play out in the media. Writer #14 describes taking inspiration from the *Saw* franchise, as "fighting against climate change can often feel like the succeed in your task or die scenario these movies portray," while pointing out that unlike those films, in which death comes quickly to an unsuccessful player, with the climate crisis "we won't be the ones to suffer the consequences, our children will." This is driven home by the story's conclusion, when the lights dim and the characters are able to see into a second cell sitting beyond their own, in which a group of children lie asleep on the floor, "peacefully unaware of what's coming." We never know what the captives choose to do, but the real horror of this story comes when the reader confronts the choices they would make or, more to the point, are making right now.

Satire

Finally, some students turned to satire to introduce elements of humour into climate fiction. As Jonathan Greenberg writes, satire seeks to "intervene in the world's business" (2018, p. 7) by attacking real-world targets, be they specific individuals like US president, Donald Trump, or larger, abstract groups, like those responsible for climate change. However, satires are not straight polemics, but playful works of art "blend[ing] attack with entertainment" (Greenberg, 2018, p. 7). Humour, in particular, is a constant feature of satire, and there is a growing body of scholarship on the usefulness of humour in combating the paralysing despair of climate change (Branch, 2014; Skiveren, 2024; Zekavat & Scheel, 2023). A number of the student stories appeared to buy into this philosophy that "focusing on humour makes it possible to propose an alternative to the prevalent dystopian and alarming messages to change environmental behaviour" (Zekavat & Scheel, 2023, p. 3). For example, Writer #25 explains that their use of comedy was to "create awareness about social, political, and cultural issues." The story in question could have been a dark, dystopian tale, as its subject matter is the extinction of humankind. However, Writer #25 frames this destruction as a workplace comedy, focusing on the interpersonal relationship between the two aliens who

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discover the dying planet as part of their surveying job. Because these visions of apocalypse are slanted through the squabbles of the two aliens — who bicker over how to help and fret over the bureaucratic punishments that await them if they are caught — this commentary is never as heavy as it might otherwise be. Even the final image of Earth exploding is comedic, as it is the result of the aliens forgetting to leave the humans an instruction manual for the climate crisis averting technology they dropped off. And as silly as this ending is, it still works as satirical criticism for what Writer #25 describes as "human's intentional and unintentional misuse of technology to the detriment of the Earth," successfully linking slapstick humour with deeper commentary.

While Writer #25's humour is broadly aimed at the human foibles, Writer #13's satirical story has a much more specific target; their politician protagonist's name, Morris Abbottson, is an amalgam of recent Liberal Party Prime Ministers Scott Morrison and Tony Abbott, both who were antagonistic towards efforts to reduce carbon emissions. Writer #13 describes their:

> anger around the politicians who continually deny that the planet is dying beneath our feet" and explains that turning to satire helped them channel this fury: I ... had a little repressed anger to get out and I figured that satire would help to release those feelings.

Scholars often point to this "release valve" function of satire, in which emotions that might otherwise bubble into violence or other antisocial actions are shown to be under control through the use of humour and irony (Phiddian, 2020). Writer #13 uses irony to resist criticising her protagonist directly, instead embedding the reader into Morris Abbottson's mind as he goes about his day cutting ribbons on new coal plants, completely oblivious to the fact that the climate crisis has reached his nation. There are references to real scandals, such as Scott Morrison's holiday in Hawaii during the 2019–2020 Black Summer Bushfires, as well as direct quotes from the targeted politicians snuck into the fictional dialogue. This use of referentiality gives readers what Greenberg describes as "a charge of pleasure in guessing who is really being targeted" (2018, p. 22). Overall, Writer #13's approach makes use of satire's playfulness, in which the text becomes a game or puzzle the reader must solve; this may lead to a more engaging experience for readers than a didactic story.

Another core feature of satire is parody, in which a creative work "imitates another work in a humorous or playful way" (Greenberg, 2018, p. 33). Writer #6's story parodies the fairytale and in doing so obliquely satirises climate change. The story is written as a village newspaper article describing the disappearance of Runpunzel, a play on the classic fairytale character Rapunzel, and the efforts of her husband, Sir Chancelot, to track her down. What at first appears to be a typical "hunt for his Damsel In Distress" turns dark as Writer #6 hints that escaping domestic abuse is the cause for Runpunzel's disappearance: "she always wears longs sleeves, even in summer, and sunglasses, even on overcast days." As they explain in their exegesis, Writer #6 sought to link domestic abuse to the abuse of our planet via a magical twist that sees the weather change according to Runpunzel's mood:

> the sky wept when she was sad, storms brewed when she was mad, and droughts ravished the land in her despair.

The story ends on a positive note suggesting that Runpunzel is happy wherever she is — "in the past twenty days that coincide with Runpunzel's disappearance, Fableton has seen nothing but clear skies" — as well as a humourous jab at climate deniers and domestic abusers alike, as the confused villagers puzzle over how this beautiful weather is "an utter contradiction of a defenceless and frightened Dame separated from her Knight." These layers of irony and parody make for a deceptively complex story, one whose meaning may not easily be interpreted by readers, but which achieves Writer #6's desire to "provoke audiences" through indirect humour and critique.

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Alongside its parody of the fairytale genre, Writer #6's story also parodies newspaper coverage of climate change. This is a common approach in which parodying a medium allows one to "satirise the ideas, values, or attitudes embodied in them" (Greenberg, 2018, p. 33). Writer #16's satirical horror story parodies the medium of business meeting minutes to comment on how corporate language hides the horror of ecological denigration. The document describes a community consultation meeting between a representative of a mining company and youth activists, and the opening sections accurately parody the vague platitudes of corporate blather, with phrases like "spirit of cooperation" and "respect we all share." Elements of horror begin to intrude, as it is revealed that the activists are in fact werewolves angered by the destruction of their environment. Whereas werewolves are typically a villain in horror stories, Writer #16 says "horror in the satirical mode ... presents the opportunity to make a hero of the monster, justifiably attacking the victim turned target." Despite being unsettled when he realises he is surrounded by werewolves, the spokesperson is reassured when he sees there is no full moon outside, and retreats to his position of power: "business protocol is not to acquiesce to threats." However, climate change has destabilised the status quo, with werewolves now able to transform at any stage of the moon and Writer #16 describes how their violent takeover of the meeting satirises "hysterical perceptions of young girls' recent effective political organising against climate change." In a final humourous twist, the meeting minutes return to their earlier "unfeeling" language, but in this case it is the spokesperson's demise that is obscured: "Please reimburse YN2 cost of cleaning and biological waste removal: $245.00." This is satire as catharsis, allowing readers to laugh in recognition at the parody of corporate language and then revel in its destruction.

Conclusion

Whilst much published climate fiction gives us a sense of the narrative moment as experienced by writers of older generations — that is, those who have access to the machinations of the publishing industry — the work of university students gives us a small insight into the ways in which the next wave of writers is imagining the climate crisis. Taking the ideas out of the university context would provide an opportunity for a different range of responses and further research into how affective responses intersect with real-world climate activism needs to be undertaken. If stories are part of the way in which we process the possibilities for our present, and our futures, the stories encountered in this experiment speak to an ongoing tendency to imagine the worst. Despite being presented with material that questioned the usefulness of dystopian visions, the majority of student writers still chose to write in this genre, perhaps reflecting both the ongoing dominance of doomsday scenarios in popular climate fiction, and a belief that there is still value to be gained in presenting a hideous future, as a warning away from where we might be going. Representing climate change clearly presents a challenge to the creative writer who wants to push against these imagining of hopelessly denuded futures, and educational pedagogies will need to continue to chart new solutions to this challenge, while also allowing for creative freedom. Even for those students who selected other genres to intersect with representations of climate change — fantasy, realism, horror, or satire — there was not necessarily a turning away from despair or negativity. But embracing the conventions of a different mode of storytelling, such as working with allegory in fantasy or utilising the comic potential of satire, allowed for a greater range of imagined reader responses. From bewilderment to laughter, from contemplation to critical analysis through to anger, these stories showed the ways in which climate fiction might hold a wider range of emotions, giving student writers the narrative space to imagine alternatives to hopeless futures and, perhaps, counteract unproductive despair.

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