St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow
open, inclusive, welcoming

TRANSCRIPT
'Climate Fiction and the Everything Change: How Science Fiction Engages Climate Change'
by Dr Jaime Wright

As part of CLIMATETALK: A series of events leading up to COP26
St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, Glasgow, October 2020

Climate Fiction and the Everything Change: How Science Fiction Engages Climate Change (slide 1)

Hello, everyone, and welcome to this talk, entitled 'Climate Fiction and the Everything Change: How Science Fiction Engages Climate Change'.

I would like to thank St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow for hosting this series of talks in the run up to COP26 despite its postponement and for inviting me to speak as part of this CLIMATETALK series. I would also like to thank Oliver Brewer-Lennon for his work in organising these events. Finally, I would like to thank all of you for taking the time to listen to these podcasts and for your interest in and any work you are involved with addressing the ecological and climate crisis we are facing.

Outline (slide 2)

A brief outline of my talk today: first, I will briefly introduce myself and my research, so that you know who you are listening to; we will consider what science fiction is; then more specifically, we will look at how science fiction engages climate change; and we will end on some glimpses of hope in the midst of this climate crisis.

Introduction (slide 3)

My name is Dr Jaime Wright, and I graduated this year with a doctorate from Edinburgh University. My research is interdisciplinary and looks at the intersection of science, religion, and literature. Whilst at Edinburgh University, I was based within their divinity school, so I would say the disciplines I am most comfortable with are theology and religious studies. I am also currently training for ordained ministry within the Scottish Episcopal Church. Given this background, it's actually a bit rare for me to be speaking about just one discipline—that being climate fiction today—and you will notice that I couldn't help but bring bits of religion into this talk today.

What is Science Fiction? (slide 4)

So what is science fiction?

Defining science fiction is notoriously difficult. Readers tend not to care; it's the critics who debate. And yet—despite all this talk about defining the genre—there is still much disagreement and confusion. For example, there is the famous and humorous definition by Damon Knight: 'It means what we point to when we say it' (Knight 1952, 122). Then there is the also famous and more serious definition by Darko Suvin: science fiction is 'the literature of cognitive estrangement' (Suvin 1972, 372).

There is also a wide variety of types of science fiction. For example, in his book *Worlds Apart*, Carl Malmgren presents five different types of science fiction: (1) the alien or monster encounter, in which the human encounters a being that is extremely different or other; (2) the utopia or dystopia, in which the human encounters an alternate society; (3) the gadget science fiction, which focusses on inventions, discoveries, and technology; (4) the alternate world science fiction, in which the human experiences a different environment, whether that be Earth after a catastrophe or an alien landscape; and (5) various types of what Malmgren calls 'science fantasy' that present alterations of some sort of natural law, leading

to themes of altered epistemology or ontology (Malmgren 1991, 18). This is only one way of classifying various types of science fictions; there are others. But this describes some of the diversity within science fiction.

Given the difficult in defining and classifying science fictions, I often prefer to use the term ‘speculative fiction’, which some critics take to be an umbrella term for a variety of genres, including fantasy, science fiction, horror, utopia, and dystopia.

Even if you don’t think science fiction is your particular cup of tea, it is extremely important to pay attention to it. Science-and-religion scholar Michael Burdett, in a book on Christian eschatology and technology finds that he must look to science fiction, giving the following explanation: The sheer pervasiveness and consumption of science fiction today is grounds for asserting that our technological imagination is influenced more by science fiction media than political or social engagements with technology and the future’ (Burdett 2015, 47). This is something to keep in mind for our topic today, especially with the technology of our society and the future-orientedness of climate change.

What is Science Fiction? (slide 5)

As I said at the start of this talk, I am normally addressing how science fiction engages the religious, so I want to quickly highlight a resource if you are looking for a straightforward and brief introduction to that intersection: I would suggest the Cascade Companion book *Theology and Science Fiction* by James McGrath (2016). But that is the subject for a different talk …

Climate Fiction and the Everything Change (slide 6)

Instead, we are here today to consider how science fiction engages climate change.

Climate Fiction (slide 7)

If you can see the presentation slides, you will be able to see just a small handful of climate fiction books and films: from Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* to Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*; from *The Day After Tomorrow* to *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

[Books and films visible on slide: *Parable of the Sower, Mad Max: Fury Road, Interstellar, Geostorm, The Year of the Flood, The Day After Tomorrow, Waterworld, Forty Signs of Raid, Wall-e, Kingsmen: The Secret Service.*]

Climate Change Fiction (slide 8)

The term ‘cli-fi’ was coined by Dan Bloom, and the phrase gained traction in 2013 to encompass a wide variety of dystopian visions of near-future climate change (Trexler 2015, 8; Streeby 2018, 4). The often dystopian mode of climate fiction is unsurprising, according to Shelley Streeby, author of *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018), ‘because imagining the future of climate change at this moment is frightening. For year’s scientists have issued warnings about what will happen if we fail to act soon’, which we haven’t done, and now, those changes (‘more dramatic and destructive storms, the loss of biodiversity, species extinction, and sea level rise’ to name just a few) ‘are no longer on the horizon but are happening now’ (4).

The genre has exploded since 2013; however, the themes of climate fiction occurred much earlier. For example, terraforming, the purposeful transformation of a planet’s climate to make it more hospitable to humans, appeared in science fiction as early as 1951 with Arthur C. Clarke’s *The Sands of Mars* (Trexler 2015, 8), and J. G. Ballard’s four disaster novels of the 1960s imagined drought, floods, and other climate changes often caused by industrial pollution and human activity (Streeby 2018, 22). When he was writing about novels engaging climate change in *Anthropocene Fictions* in 2015, Adam Trexler noted that at that time ‘nearly all … [climate] fiction addressed the historical tension between the existence of catastrophic global warming and the failed obligation to act. Under such conditions, fiction offered a medium to explain, predict, implore and lament’ (9). Given such content, climate fiction is perhaps better understood as existing under the wider umbrella of ‘speculative fiction’ as explained earlier (Streeby 2018, 4).

A working definition for climate fiction for this talk will be this: Speculative fiction that incorporates a changing or changed climate into its storyworld.

Climate Fictions: Benefits of Climate Fiction Reading and Writing (slide 9)

I think there are at least four benefits of climate fiction writing and reading.

First, it allows for expression of the complexity of climate change. According to Antonia Mehnert, who writes about American climate fiction: 'The importance of literature for the discussions of climate change lies precisely in its potential to offer imaginaries for the unfamiliar realm of the future' (something we will return to as a later benefit). Climate fiction 'thereby not only reframes scientific data in a way that provides insight into the intimate aspects of human struggles in altered environments, exposes potential conflicts and is able to create affect, but [it also] shapes the very idea of climate change' (2016, 8). She also claims that 'an important contribution [of literature] to our understanding of climate change' is admitting 'to the validity of a multitude of narratives that constitute the meaning' of climate change, itself (Mehnert 2016, 9). We don't just experience climate change as complex scientific models and predictions, but also as complex embodied social and cultural beings.

Second, climate fiction allows one to experience climate change in a way otherwise not possible or simply not occurring for one reason or another. Over the last couple of months, as wildfires raged in California, I found myself simultaneously reading Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, in which the protagonist is forced to outrun a raging wildfire in the near-future setting of a hot and dry California. Butler's novel enabled me to experience the raging wildfires in a way that was not possible by simply reading news reports from my home in Scotland. Adam Trexler (2015) writes in his book of the climate fiction novel's 'capacity to interrogate the emotional, aesthetic, and living experience of the Anthropocene' (6).

A third benefit of climate fiction is allowing us to envision possible future scenarios. In 2000, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report on emissions scenarios in order to provide plausible narratives on how the future might unfold based on demographic, social, economic, and technological developments (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2000). This is what climate fictions do, as well, although pitched at a popular culture level. Such stories explore possible future realities in order to serve as a means of reflection about current human behaviour. Which leads us into the fourth benefit.

Climate fiction allows us to make decisions (and act) here and now about what we think is happening and what we would like to do about it. This is the fourth benefit of climate fiction. Science fiction writers often comment reflectively on the future setting of their stories. For example, believing that science fiction is not actually about the future, but rather it is about the present, such that science fiction enables us to reflect on present realities and engage with them. In the case of climate fiction, Antonia Mehnert (2016) writes that 'climate change fictions play an important role in shaping not only our understanding of this unprecedented crisis, but also in guiding our responses to and actions against it' (16).

Climate Fiction and the Everything Change (slide 10)

I've also mentioned 'the Everything Change' in the title of this talk. This comes from an interview with author Margaret Atwood. When asked about the focus on climate change in her *MaddAddam* trilogy, Atwood replied, 'I don't even call it climate change, I call it "the everything change." It's a change in everything' (Crum 2014). This sounds very similar to the wording of the 2018 IPCC special report, which warns that successfully limiting the increase in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels will 'require rapid and systemic changes on unprecedented scales' (de Coninck et al. In Press). Such changes on a worldwide scale are still to be seen. I am reminded of a statement made by the literary critic Fredric Jameson in 1994: 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism' (xii).

And here is where climate fictions aptly step in. As Adam Trexler (2015) explains: 'More sophisticated [climate change] novels incorporate both economics and ecology, describing climate change as a longer transformation of the terms of human life.' … 'The best … [climate fictions] are not solely "character-driven." Nor do they reduce climate change to a unitary phenomenon, such as the "Great Storm." Instead, they explore how things like ocean currents, … [animals], viruses, floods, vehicles, and capital relentlessly shape human experience' (25–26).

Hope in the Midst of Climate Crisis (slide 11)

But is there hope in the midst of this climate crisis? Although many climate fictions are dystopian, many also have hints of utopia; hints for a different future scenario than the ones we dread.

Hope in the Midst of Climate Crisis: 'Beyond Humanity's End' by Celia Deane-Drummond (2010) (slide 12)

We need to be realistic: some climate change is already inevitable. Certain changes that are already occurring will have unstoppable knock-on effects. But that does not mean we should give up hope or stop seeking to mitigate the climate crisis.

In her chapter in a book on climate ethics, theologian Celia Deane-Drummond contrasts different frameworks for climate change narratives. She discourages us from engaging narratives that either depict humanity using technology to dominate the natural world or depict the simple overturning of anthropocentrism and the dethroning of humanity in a way that often depicts humans as only a liability or negative influence upon the Earth because both of these frameworks envision climate collapse as inevitable and lead to either human in-action or human defensive adaptation. Deane-Drummond would rather see climate change narratives that do three things: (1) portray the importance of human agency, (2) encourage collective and communitarian action that is inclusive of the non-human realm, and (3) empower action in the present realm. Because these frameworks enable us to make those rapid and systemic changes on unprecedented scales that are required of us; they enable us to make 'the everything change' in the way we live on this planet, rather than having 'the everything change' be enforced upon us by climate or biosphere collapse.

In some climate fictions, the necessary hope to enable such change is rooted in religious belief and ritual. In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents*, the protagonist believes that only a religion is capable of motivating people to live in partnership with one another, work out a sustainable partnership with their environment, and prepare for and embark upon interstellar travel to establish life on new planets ([1998] 2019, 343–44). Reflecting on the eco-religion she depicts in *The Year of the Flood*, Margaret Atwood claims that 'unless environmentalism becomes a religion it's not going to work' (Wagner 2009). But with these comments, we are returning to science fiction engaging the religious, again—the topic of another talk!

Resources (slide 13)

So to summarise what we have covered in this talk: (1) we've considered what science fiction is, (2) we've looked at how science fiction engages climate change, (3) and we've glimpsed at signs of hope in the midst of climate change as offered by some climate fictions.

On this final slide, I've listed some of the resources mentioned during this talk, as well as some further useful ones.

[Resources listed on slide: *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction* (1991); 'Beyond Humanity's End: An Exploration of a Dramatic Versus Narrative Rhetoric and its Ethical Implications' in *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination* (2010); 'Ecological Hope in Crisis?' *Anvil* 30 (2014); *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015); *Loosed Upon the World: The Saga Anthology of Climate Fiction* (2015); *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* (2016); *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism* (2018)]

I realise we didn't look in-depth at any particular climate fictions during this talk, but I hope that you will go away from this talk excited about reading or watching some climate fictions and with resources with which to engage and analyse them as you continue to engage with the climate crises in which we find ourselves.

Thank you.

Works Cited

Burdett, Michael. 2015. *Eschatology and the Technological Future*. Routledge Studies in Religion. Oxford: Routledge.

Coninck, H. de, A. Revi, M. Babiker, P. Bertoldi, M. Buckeridge, A. Cartwright, W. Dong, et al. In Press. 'Strengthening and Implementing the Global Response'. In *Global Warming of 1.5°C: An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C Above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty*, edited by V. Masson-Delmotte, P. Zhai, H. O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, et al., 313–443.

Crum, Maddie. 2014. 'A Conversation with Margaret Atwood About Climate Change, Social Media and World of Warcraft'. *The Huffington Post*, 11 December 2014, UK edition, sec. Books. http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/6141840.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2000. *Emissions Scenarios*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jameson, Fredric. 1994. *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Knight, Damon. 1952. 'Book Reviews: The Dissecting Table'. *Science Fiction Adventures* 1 (1): 122–25.

Malmgren, Carl D. 1991. *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

McGrath, James F. 2016. *Theology and Science Fiction*. Cascade Companions Series. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.

Mehnert, Antonia. 2016. *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Octavia, E. Butler. 1998. *Parable of the Talents*. London: Headline.

Streeby, Shelley. 2018. *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Suvin, Darko. 1972. 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre'. *College English* 34 (3): 372–82. http://www.jstor.org/stable/375141.

Trexler, Adam. 2015. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Wagner, Erica. 2009. 'The Conversation: Margaret Atwood'. *The Times*, 15 August 2009, sec. The Review.