

professor: Dr. Timothy S. Miller

The Hottest Books: Climate Change in Fiction

"I think the world is big, and we broke it."
--Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife* (2015)

Course Description:

In his 2016 book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh laments that authors of literary fiction have done so little thinking and writing about the greatest existential threat facing the human species and the biosphere of the planet we inhabit: "[C]onsidering what climate change actually portends for the future of the earth, it should surely follow that this would be the principal preoccupation of writers the world over -- and this, I think, is very far from being the case" (8). In recent years, however, the term "cli-fi" or "climate fiction" has been proposed as a label for an emerging category of fiction concerned with exploring climate change and its consequences, but the science fiction genre has a long relationship with environmentalism and ecological thought, from Frank Herbert's concerns about peak oil and ecosystem health in his 1965 novel *Dune* to more recent visions of climate apocalypse and environmental collapse. This course will introduce you to some of the classic works of ecological science fiction as well as a number of 21st-century texts that address climate change in light of the most current scientific understandings of the phenomenon and its stakes. Several of the authors on our syllabus would likely not identify themselves as writers of science fiction -- including, for example, T. C. Boyle, Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, and Richard Powers -- indicating the increasing convergence of genre fiction and the highbrow literary mainstream in the wake of this all-important environmental issue. We will also discuss how Indigenous writers and people of color have found science fiction or climate fiction a particularly urgent tool for examining the intersections of race, class, gender, and technology, and also the differential impact that climate change will -- and has already -- had on different kinds of communities and populations. We're all in this together, but, as we will see, some of us are deeper underwater.



Required Texts:

- (1) *The Word for World Is Forest*, by Ursula K. Le Guin. ISBN: 978-0765324641.
- (2) *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, by Shelley Streeby. ISBN: 978-0520294455.

- (3) *Parable of the Sower*, by Octavia E. Butler. ISBN: 978-0446675505.
 (4) *A Friend of the Earth*, by T. C. Boyle. ISBN: 978-0141002057.
 (5) *The Overstory*, by Richard Powers. ISBN: 978-0393356687.
 (6) *The Stone Gods*, by Jeanette Winterson. ISBN: 978-0156035729.
 (7) *Annihilation*, by Jeff VanderMeer. ISBN: 978-0374104092.



'Follow the leaders,' Berlin, Germany, April 2011. Isaac Cordal

Course Calendar:

The many short readings marked with a single asterisk (*) are accessible online via the hyperlink provided; a text marked with two asterisks (**) should instead appear on our course page.

Week 1: Science, Fiction, and Climate Change

T --

->Introduction and syllabus: we will discuss the history and definition(s) of science fiction

R --

-Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), Chapters 1-4

-Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018), Introduction (1-33)

Week 2: Resisting Climate Change

T --

- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), Chapters 5-8
- Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018), Chapter One (34-68)

R --

- Butler, *Parable of the Sower* I (1993)
- Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018), Chapter Two (69-100)

Week 3: Race, Class, and Climate

T --

- Butler, *Parable of the Sower* II (1993)
- *N. K. Jemisin's blog post "Don't Put My Book in the African American Section" (2010): <http://nkjemisin.com/2010/05/dont-put-my-book-in-the-african-american-section/>

R --

- Butler, *Parable of the Sower* III (1993)
- *Butler, "'Devil Girl From Mars': Why I Write Science Fiction" (1998): <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/butler.html>

Week 4: Imagining Futures

T --

- Butler, *Parable of the Sower* IV (1993)
- *Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon" (1970): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtBy_ppG4hY
- *Gil Scott-Hero, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (1970, 1971): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGaoXAwI9kw>

R --

- **adrienne maree brown, "The River" (2015) **[Course Page]**
- **Dani McClain, "Homing Instinct" (2015) **[Course Page]**
- Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018), Chapter Three 101-126)

Week 5: Green Misanthropy and Green Pessimism

T --

- T. C. Boyle, *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) I

R --

- T. C. Boyle, *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) II

Week 6: What Kind of Story Is Climate Change?

Film Screening #1: *The Last Winter*, dir. Larry Fessenden (2006), time and location TBA

T --

-T. C. Boyle, *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) III

*Dan Bloom, "To Fight Climate Change, We Need Better Movies" (2015):

<https://medium.com/the-outtake/to-fight-climate-change-we-need-better-movies-4bac3c173958>

R --

*James Tiptree, Jr., "The Screwfly Solution" (1977):

<http://davidlavery.net/Courses/3840/stories/screwfly.html>

->In-class discussion of *The Last Winter*, dir. Larry Fessenden (2006)

Week 7: The Overstory

T --

-Richard Powers, *The Overstory* I

R --

-Richard Powers, *The Overstory* II

Week 8: Plant Stories

T --

-Richard Powers, *The Overstory* III

*Margaret Atwood, "It's Not Climate Change: It's Everything Change" (2015):

<https://medium.com/matter/it-s-not-climate-change-it-s-everything-change-8fd9aa671804>

R --

-Richard Powers, *The Overstory* IV

Week 9: The Lives of Plants

T --

-Richard Powers, *The Overstory* V

R --

*Paolo Bacigalupi, "The Tamarisk Hunter" (2006): <http://windupstories.com/books/pump-six-and-other-stories/the-tamarisk-hunter/>

*Ursula K. Le Guin, "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" (1971):

<https://archive.org/details/rog-UrsulaKLeGuinVasterThanEmpiresandMoreSlow>

Week 10: Looking Backward, Looking Forward

T --

-Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods* (2007) I

R --

-Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods* (2007) II

Week 11: Weird Fiction and the Ecological Uncanny

T --

-Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* I

R -- 11/13

-Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* II

*Browse some images of the contemporary sculpture of Patricia Piccinini:

<http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/56/82>

*Donna Haraway, "Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations: Taking Care of Unexpected Country" (2007): <http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/writing/30/242/20>

Week 12: "Living with the Trouble"

Film Screening #2: *Annihilation*, dir. Alex Garland (2018), time and location TBA

T --

**Donna Haraway, excerpts from *Living with the Trouble* (2016) [Course Page]

->In-class discussion of *Annihilation*, dir. Alex Garland (2018)

R --

*Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl" (1956, trans. 1967): <http://southerncrossreview.org/73/axolotl.html>

*Nnedi Okorafor, "Spider the Artist" (2008):

<http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/spider-the-artist/>

*Nnedi Okorafor's blog post "Lovecraft's racism & The World Fantasy Award statuette, with comments from China Miéville" (2011): <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2011/12/lovecrafts-racism-world-fantasy-award.html>

Week 13: Going Primitive?

T --

-Junot Díaz, "Monstro" (2012): <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/monstro>

-Junot Díaz on the 2010 Haiti earthquake, "Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal" (2011):

<https://bostonreview.net/junot-diaz-apocalypse-haiti-earthquake>

R --

*Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Former Age" (1380s?): scroll down or search to find this short poem here: <https://machias.edu/faculty/necastro/chaucer/translation/short/short.html>

*John Moore, "Comin' Home: Defining Anarcho-Primitivism" (1995):
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/john-moore-comin-home-defining-anarcho-primitivism.html>

*Mark R. Seely, "The Revolutionary Posture of Anarcho-Primitivism" (2012):
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mark-r-seely-the-revolutionary-posture-of-anarcho-primitivism>

**Kim Stanley Robinson, Introduction to *Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias* (1994) [Course Page]

Week 14: Where Do We Go from Here?

T --

*Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973):
<http://harelbarzilai.org/words/omelas.txt>

R --

->We will have a retrospective discussion of the course, and everyone is also encouraged to take a few minutes to share findings from their final projects, time permitting

Some Selected Further Reading in Ecological/Climate/Disaster Fiction:

- J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Burning World* (1964)
- Frank Herbert, *Dune* (1965)
- Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (1985)
- Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991)
- Kim Stanley Robinson, *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), *New York 2140* (2017), and others
- Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* (2009)
- Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl* (2009) and *The Water Knife* (2015)
- Liz Jensen, *The Rapture* (2009)
- Ian McEwan, *Solar* (2010)
- Bill McKibben, ed., *I'm With the Bears: Short Stories from a Damaged Planet* (2011)
- Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (2011)
- Tobias S. Buckell, *Arctic Rising* (2012)
- Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior* (2012)
- Nathaniel Rich, *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013)
- Emmi Itäranta, *Memory of Water* (2013, trans. 2014)
- John Joseph Adams, *Loosed upon the World: The Saga Anthology of Climate Fiction* (2015)

Films:

- Silent Running*, dir. Douglas Trumbull (1972)
- Beasts of the Southern Wild*, dir. Benh Zeitlin (2012)
- Snowpiercer*, dir. Bong Joon-ho (2013)

Nonfiction:

- Mark Maslin, *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction* (2014)
- Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015)
- Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016)
- Antonia Mehnert, *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* (2016)
- Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, "Climate Change Fiction," *American Literature in Transition, 2000-2010*, ed. Rachel Greenwald Smith (2017):
https://www.academia.edu/35907548/Climate_Change_Fiction