

NARRATING CRISIS:  
NARRATIVES AND STORYTELLING IN TWO FLOOD NOVELS

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Today, I want to explore how in particular flood narratives utilize storytelling to challenge the ways we come to terms with environmental crisis. Hereby, the narratives also frequently undermine the role that ecocritics and environmental humanities scholars believe stories play in a time of environmental crisis.

The paper combines my current research, particularly the monograph I'm currently finishing [**SLIDE**], as well as on my new project on flood narratives.

Floods are a particularly powerful image for climate crisis – and they are ever more frequent: [**SLIDE**] in the UK, [**SLIDE**] in France, [**SLIDE**] in Asia, [**SLIDE**] and in the US. The cultural resonance of floods particularly lies in the way in which flood narratives draw on two things at the same time: old narratives that have become part of our cultural memory, and new narratives that present floods as a cause of environmental crisis.

Flood narratives are told in many cultures. The floods that were common in Mesopotamia, for example, are believed to have inspired the epic of Atrahasis, in which a flood is the gods' way of dealing with overpopulation. Travellers travelling along the great caravan routes of Western Asia will have heard these Mesopotamian myths. Their retellings of the stories may explain the surfacing of similar stories in classical antiquity and the Old Testament. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance, the flood is Jove's punishment for a mankind corrupted by crime. Similarly, in Genesis, man's wickedness leads God to flood the earth, saving only one man and his family: Noah. While the names of those saved differ, all of these ancient flood narratives have in common that only the

very special survive. Atrahasis, who survives the Mesopotamian flood, is the last human to be made immortal by the gods. In Ovid, Deucalion and Pyrrha are emphasized as being very good, and of divine origin. In the Bible, Noah is also very good – and very old. Interestingly, this kind of exceptionalism resurfaces in climate fiction, including flood narratives. In novels such as Sam Taylor's *The Island at the End of the World* and Clare Morall's *When the Floods Came*, only those that are somehow different – exceptional – survive.

When it comes to imagining the effects of climate change, or making sense of contemporary floods, such traditional stories form a familiar framework. Adam Trexler observes that in terms of climate change issues, floods are a relatively easy way to depict the larger issue of environmental crisis. They're much easier to imagine than, for instance, rising CO2 levels. Another reason for the cultural appeal of floods is that so many areas around the world are susceptible to it. Trexler writes that twenty-three percent of the world's population lives within 100 kilometres of the coast and less than 100 metres above sea levels. What's more, sixty percent of the world's largest cities are near the coast (83).

Inland and coastal flooding are high on the list of ways in which the UK will experience the effects of climate change (CCC FAQ). [SLIDE] As this infographic of the British Committee for Climate Change shows, a temperature increase of up to 2 degrees will put 40% more homes at risk of flooding. A temperature increase of up to 4 degrees will put 93% more homes at risk ("Projections of future flood risk" vii). Even the adaptations currently underway will not, the Committee argues, be enough to offset the predicted increase in flood risk ("Projections of future flood risk" viii).

It's hardly surprising, then, that so many twenty-first-century British novels imagine a very *wet* future for Britain. As I said, I'm starting on a larger project on British flood narratives soon. Examples of some of the texts I'll include are [SLIDE] Sam Taylor's *The Island at the End of the World*, [SLIDE] Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army*, [SLIDE] Maggie Gee's *The Flood*, [SLIDE] Clare Morall's *When the Floods Came* and [SLIDE] Antonia Honeywell's *The Ship*. Today I'll focus on the first of these novels: *The Island at the End of the World* and *The Carhullan Army*, although many of the arguments I'll be making are applicable to the other novels as well.

[SLIDE] *The Carhullan Army* is set in the near future, when an unnamed British woman – only called "Sister" – makes her way to Carhullan, a former farm. She tries to escape the city and her old life. In her world, political as well as environmental changes have taken place. Readers learn that a collapse of some sort happened, that there are food shortages and wars, that the countryside is largely abandoned and forced population control is the norm. The weather looks much like that predicted for our future. The climate has become wetter, settlements are flooded and rivers have permanently broken through flood defences.

[SLIDE] Something even more dramatic seems to have taken place in *The Island at the End of the World*. In this novel the entire world, save for one island, has been flooded. The protagonist relates how seven years before the novel starts, a "Great Flood" has taken place. In a direct echo of Noah's flood, he has built an ark for himself and his children – his wife supposedly having died. Much like *The Carhullan Army*, Taylor's novel is set in the near future. Although no

specific date is given, the father refers to Hurricane Katrina occurring when he was five years old, suggesting that the novel is set in the 2030s or early 2040s.

There's a lot to be said about the floods in these novels. Initially I had intended to talk more about scale, for example. Scale is an interesting issue in debates on environmental crisis, also in the humanities, because many ecocritical and environmental humanities scholars argue that narratives and the critics who interpret them should take a "global" perspective. Environmental crisis, they rightly argue, is a global crisis, in which different issues and regions affect each other. Yet what is fascinating about flood narratives is that the characters' world they depict has become so small because of the flood.

However, since my time is limited, I want to focus on the thing I find most interesting: the role of storytelling and stories in these novels. Narratives have two important functions in the novels. Firstly, they help characters make sense of the world around them. Secondly, the loss of narratives points to a loss of knowledge and even civilization that the novel as a form associates with the end of the world.

Ecocritical scholars have long put faith in, as Timothy Clark calls it, the cultural imaginary. Richard Kerridge, for instance, [SLIDE] argues that "[t]he inability of political cultures to address environmentalism is in part a failure of narrative" ("Introduction" 4). Similarly, Greg Garrard [SLIDE] suggested a few years ago that "global environmental crisis is also a crisis of representation" ("Ian McEwan's Next Novel" 709). To me, these suggestions are interesting – seductive almost, as they appeal to things I like to believe as a literary scholar. At the same time, I find them problematic. Arguments such as these suggest that narratives are stable, reliable, almost perfectly transparent lenses through which

to see the world. Kerridge's and Garrard's arguments resurface in more recent Environmental Humanities work. There, scholars call for new narratives, with the aim to discover [SLIDE] "which concepts and narratives from the environmentalist inventory will move environmentally oriented thought into the future, and which ones shackle environmentalism to outdated templates" (Heise and Carruth 3).

[SLIDE] The role that narratives play in how we interpret the world is explicitly addressed in *The Island at the End of the World*. The father in Taylor's novel allows his children to read only three books, depending on their age: a book of fairy tales, the Bible and a collection of Shakespeare's works. These works literally shape how they perceive and interpret the world. Alice, the oldest daughter, for instance, has had doubts about the sea surrounding their island actually being a sea for a while. Her doubts are founded in Shakespeare's works: "in Shakespeare the sea's always moving. There are waves and tides and tempests and ... in Shakespeare the sea has a special smell, it makes a special sound" (142). The body of water surrounding their island, on the other hand, is calm and still, without the briny, salty smell of the sea.

Her strictly religious father, conversely, interprets everything in terms of the Bible. Towards the end of the novel, Alice begins a relationship with Will, a cousin who suddenly shows up on the island. Her father sees this as disobedience – on the scale of the disobedience of Adam and Eve towards God in the Bible. Yet by practising a kind of Biblical exegesis and framing everything in terms of the Bible, the father also projects the failure of the paradiscal, Biblical narrative unto his own life, and that of his children. The Biblical paradise didn't last, and perceiving his own world in those terms projects the failure of that

earlier paradise on the one he tries to create on the island. While we may, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, "normally envisage the future with the help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past" (197) doing so is not without risk. In the novel, the position of narratives as reliable entities is even further destabilized in Taylor's novel when Will's arrival demonstrates that the entire world didn't flood. While this is the story that he had been telling his children, it turns out that he flooded a large plot of land when his children were little, in the belief that this would save them from a wicked world.

In *The Island at the End of the World*, then, narratives and storytelling play a role in both the establishment and destabilization of a potentially environmental flood narrative. It could even be argued that the destabilization of the flood narrative in this novel foregrounds the extent to which even climate discourse relies on narrativity in order to bring across a message of environmental crisis. Narratives, the novel suggests, might always be corrupted. In other flood novels, such as *The Carhullan Army* but also Gee's *The Flood* and Morall's *When the Floods Came*, another dimension of narratives is foregrounded. In these novels, as in *The Island at the End of the World*, books are mentioned – especially in terms of having become scarce or discredited. In *The Carhullan Army* and in many other climate fictions, the loss of narratives suggests a loss of knowledge. Narratives, the novel suggests, are not merely ways of coming to terms with the world, they are also receptacles of knowledge and even guardians of a civilization under threat of environmental crisis. Narratives may not only offer ways of imagining climate crisis, but by drawing attention to their own form, may also emphasize the limits of narrativity, and the extent to which environmental crisis is tied in with epistemological problems. Narratives

consequently become a symbol, even a synecdoche, for civilization, and their loss as another sign that with environmental destruction, human civilization also crumbles. In doing so, novels such as *The Carhullan Army* employ the most definitive end they can depict – the end of the very narratives, sometimes even language, they are made of – as a powerful representation of the end of humanity.

**[SLIDE]** *The Carhullan Army* is structured as a series of records, some complete, some partly destroyed, in which Sister records her life at Carhullan and, in sparse detail, the attack on Rith, a nearby town. The further the reader progresses in the novel, the less material becomes available. What exactly happened in Rith and how Sister has come to be – as we can assume – questioned about her activities remains unknown. She herself provides the reason for that: all official records were destroyed by the women of the Carhullan army (loc. 2747). At the same time, Sister's story, fragmented as it is, is presented as significant. It is important, Carhullan's leader tells her, to "tell them about us. Tell them everything about us, Sister. Make them understand what we did and who we were. Make them see" (loc. 2738). The records and the story she tells are consequently a way in which she both reveals and obscures: with the destruction of all records, the census has been wiped as well and the woman who identifies herself as "Sister" tells her supposed interrogator: "You will not find out who I am. I have no status. No one does" (loc. 2747).

The trouble of recording narratives and knowledge is even further complicated when the medium most commonly used – the written word – is lost. This is a fairly common technique used in post-apocalyptic novels. It is used, for instance, in the final section of David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*, in which a kind of language entropy or erosion takes place. Something similar happens in

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, in which, Joshua Masters suggests, the end of language is employed as a means of imagining the end of the world (114). To the extent that records and narratives still exist, *The Carhullan Army* does not utilize this technique. The library at Carhullan is full of books, and Sister reads widely, including works by T.E. Lawrence and Buckminster Fuller. In *The Island at the End of the World*, however, the idiosyncratic language of the two youngest children, Daisy and Finn, is an example of such language erosion. When Finn relates his love of fairytales, and his dislike of the Bible, which his father now makes him read, he does so in a language reminiscent of that in *Cloud Atlas*

**[SLIDE]:**

I miss the Tales I loved ther onceponatimes an ther dangerous ventures an ther happy everafters. I liked magining my self a Prince fighting ogres an witches but the Bibles not like that I cant magine my self Cain or Noah or Abram an no body fighting God ever wins (9)

Language erosion – the literal falling apart of the narrative's medium – strengthens the idea that the end of the world is near. Without language, these narratives suggest, we have little left to interpret the world with. Entropy is consequently employed as a metafictional device that illustrates the confusion of environmental crisis, and the future that awaits.

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Flood narratives are an interesting subcategory of climate fiction. Perhaps more than many other types of novels dealing with environmental crisis, flood narratives themselves are always already thick with stories. The place of flood

stories in many traditions makes any contemporary mention of flooding trigger a host of cultural memories. In other words, these events are immediately and inherently narrated. While this makes them instantly recognizable and imaginable – perhaps, for large areas of the world, more so than droughts – this narrativity is also problematic. It may obscure, for instance, the extent to which stories can be manipulated. The inherent narrativity of these stories may also leave out nuances that are important to the understanding of, for example, climate crisis. The reliance on narratives may even suggest that stories are relatively uncomplicated ways of seeing the world, almost like transparent windows.

As such, novels such as *The Island at the End of the World* and *The Carhullan Army* intervene in contemporary debates in ecocriticism and environmental humanities. This conversation between postmillennial British fiction and literary and cultural studies is an element that, I believe, deserves to receive more attention – even if it makes us feel uncomfortable to challenge the importance of the very narratives we spend so much of our time reading, studying and enjoying.

**[PAPER + SOURCES ARE ON WEBSITE]**

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