

**The ethics of the Anthropocene:  
Characterization and narrative perspective in postmillennial British flood  
novels**

Today I will be talking about twenty-first-century flood novels – particularly novels in which floods are a consequence of climate change. I became interested in flood novels when I was completing my monograph [SLIDE] – *Climate Crisis and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century British Novel*. In that book I explore climate crisis as it is represented in postmillennial British novels, focusing especially on depictions of environmental collapse; pastoral nature; urban nature; and the Arctic. I realized that a growing number of British novel depict flooding in relation to climate crisis. While not necessarily a new theme in literature, I became interested in what the effects are of using floods to depict climate crisis. Floods are especially useful for making the large issue of climate crisis more immediate. And, of course, for Britain and many other areas of the world, flooding is a prime effect of climate crisis. As a narrative device, floods are also interesting: flooding creates a constricted space as characters are often unable to venture far from home. This constricted space magnifies issues related to climate crisis: inequality, for instance, and the struggle for limited resources. Flood novels, then, provide apt environment in which to imagine and think through climate crisis. Today I'll focus on one aspect: how these novels touch on the ethical dimensions of climate crisis. I'll argue in particular that characterization and narrative perspective foreground ethical issues of survival and privilege.

Predictably, as always tends to happen, I decided on a slightly different selection of novels than I had in mind when I wrote the abstract. I'll leave out Ali Shaw's *The Trees*, which depicts a waterless flood but is really interesting, and

focus instead on **[SLIDE]** Clare Morrall's *When the Floods Came* (2015), Antonia Honeywell's *The Ship* (2016), and Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From*, published earlier this year. These novels are part of a larger tradition of flood novels, including Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007) and Sam Taylor's *The Island at the End of the World* (2009), stretching back through Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) and Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885) to origin stories in the Bible, the epic of Gilgamesh and Greek and Roman mythology. In all three novels, floods have devastated Britain, or at least part of it. *The Ship* and *When the Floods Came* are set roughly fifty to eighty years after their publication dates – towards the late twenty-first century. The temporal setting of *The End We Start From* is much more vague, but there's nothing in the novel that suggests that it's set far into the future. *The Ship* and *When the Floods Came* centre on two families. In *The Ship*, the main character is Lalage, a teenager whose father has filled a ship with five hundred people from all over the world in an attempt to save them from an increasingly violent and unstable world. *When the Floods Came* is about Roza, a young woman in her early twenties who lives with her parents and siblings in an abandoned flat outside of Birmingham.

Both works draw explicitly on familiar climate crisis discourse. In *The Ship* floods have devastated low-lying deltas such as Bangladesh and the Netherlands. The Netherlands, we always knew it was coming, has also been lost to the sea in *When the Floods Came*. Roza mentions that water temperatures in Iceland are still rising, "after fifty years of warming" (81), and that environmental measures implemented by the government in the past didn't stop the floods (7). While neither character explicitly uses the phrase "climate crisis",

the events that they mention have become so much a part of climate crisis discourse that the reader will make this connection herself.

*The End We Start From* stands out here. It provides very few details about anything, including the cause of the floods. The reader doesn't even find out the name of the narrator, a young woman with a new-born son, nor of any of the other characters. She's in London, just gave birth, when the flooding becomes much more severe than suspected. The fact that it was expected suggests the possibility of climate crisis, rather than a freak accident – as is the case in another flood novel, Maggie Gee's *The Flood*. Since *The End We Start From* provides so little information beyond the narrator's thoughts, I'll focus on *When the Floods Came* and *The Ship* in my discussion about characterization and narrative perspective. I'll come back *The End We Start From* in a moment – the novel's experimental nature makes it particularly suited to my discussion of narratives and narrativity.

Climate crisis, as we know, rarely stands alone: in fiction as much as in reality it coincides with and causes a host of other political, social and economic crises. In *When the Floods Came* Britain relies on the US and China for food and education. The environmental laws that were passed when Roza's mother was young led to the collapse of the tourist economy, and once the government responded poorly to the outbreak of Hoffman's disease, much of the population died. Without an adequately functioning government, large portions of the country are left to their own devices, bearing the brunt of the floods. In *The Ship* a "collapse" happens when "[b]anks crashed, the power failed, flood defences gave away" (2). The position of the characters amidst this political instability shows just how privileged the perspective is that the novels depict. In the middle

of national, if not global, crises, Roza and Lalage survive, even thrive. Lalage grows up "in a proper flat, with foods and clothes and locks on the door, and because we had these things, it seemed to me that they were available, and anyone who lived without them was making a choice" (6). The reader is consequently provided with the perspective of the survivors, the lucky few who, due to the narrative perspective, seem the norm. Such exceptionalism is a recurring trope in flood stories. In the Mesopotamian epic of Atrahasis a flood is the gods' way of dealing with overpopulation, much like in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 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. All of these ancient flood stories 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, and in the Bible, Noah is also very good.

Of course, you could say that the survival of one or a group of characters is a narrative inevitability: without a survivor, there is no one to tell the story. Yet in the case of these climate crisis flood novels, the exceptionalism that flood stories display becomes more than a narratological necessity – it becomes an ethical problem. Not only is the reader likely to identify with a privileged perspective, she is also likely to underestimate the consequences of climate crisis, at least for herself.

One of the most salient examples of survival and exceptionalism is given in *When the Floods Came*. At the beginning of the novel, Roza lives an extremely sheltered life, with little to no contact to what remains of the British population.

That she and her family survived at all is because of their immunity to Hoffman's disease. Towards the end of the novel, Roza and her family are suggested to be even more exceptional when they are literally saved from the flood. After a stranger attempts to kill her and her family – and succeeds in murdering her fiancé – Roza and her family are airlifted out of the floods by a Chinese helicopter. Apparently, Roza and her brother Boris were so much appreciated by the Chinese company they worked for, that the Chinese sent a rescue mission halfway across the world when they believed them to be in trouble. A new life awaits the family in Brighton. This event reinforces a belief that Lalage expresses in *The Ship*: she and the others aboard are "the good people who had escaped from the bad people" (125).

Exceptionalism and privilege aren't just expressed through characterization, but also on the narrative level. Through their first-person perspectives, *The Ship* and *When the Floods Came* reinforce an emphasis on survival that is available only for the lucky few. The role of narrative perspective in depicting climate crisis is increasingly gaining attention. In an essay on narrative in the Anthropocene, Erin James points to the "species perspective" put forth by Dipesh Chakrabarty as allowing for collective narration. She also points to the work done on nonhuman narration, for instance by Lars Bernaerts and others, who suggest this form of narration allows readers to empathize with nonhuman storytellers while at the same time reflecting on their own humanness (Bernaerts et al.).<sup>1</sup>

James' discussion on narrative perspective may be extended in another direction as well. While the climate crisis flood novels that I am concerned with

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<sup>1</sup> See also Herman, "Storyworld/Umwelt" for a discussion of nonhuman narration.

provide neither a species or collective perspective, nor nonhuman narration, they foreground narrative perspective through the emphasis that the first person places on privilege and survival. All three novels are narrated by a first-person narrator, participating in and reporting on events. As such, the narrators are the sole centres of focalization: the reader only gets to see the textual world through the eyes of Lalage and Roza. For the reader an alternative perspective on (the consequences of) climate crisis is not available within the novel. First-person narration in these novels emphasizes the possibility of survival.

Rather than confronting readers with the devastating and deadly consequences of climate crisis, the reader is provided with a way out. Such an escape out of crisis is often provided by contemporary (post-)apocalyptic stories. Karen Renner suggests that such stories, as in the television series *The Walking Dead*, **[SLIDE]** "do far more than simply affirm our suspicions that our current world is corrupt and encourage us to delight in its destruction. Today's apocalyptic tales appeal to a yearning for experiences that will reveal the undiscovered heroic potential in the most average of us all and establish a new community in which the truly worthy are rewarded" (206-7). In *The Ship* and *When the Floods Came*, the protagonists are saved because they are worthy. At the same time, sheer survival becomes a mark of worth.

**[SLIDE]** As I said earlier, survival is a narrative necessity in climate crisis stories. So much so, indeed, that the fate of Western civilization is often explicitly tied in with the survival of stories and knowledge. What I find interesting is that in many climate crisis novels, including flood novels, there is both an emphasis on the importance of stories, and at the same time, extensive loss of stories. To

put it differently, these novels are invested in the story of survival, because it entails their survival, yet at the same time can't prevent that story from cracking.

Both Lalage in *The Ship* and Roza in *When the Floods Came* are enchanted when they come across (digital) libraries. In their worlds, books have become scarce, equating the destruction of much of Western civilization as we know it with the destruction of the analogous written word. Books and stories, the novels suggest, are important: they provide a connection to the past that Lalage's father is keen to sever in *The Ship*, and consolation to Roza who insists on taking her copy of *Birds of the British Isles* with her when she travels – as a way of "touching the past" (117). The loss of written narratives becomes a symbol, even a synecdoche, for Western civilization. This also happens in other flood novels: Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* is literally incomplete: the documents that make up the novel are part of a larger collection of texts that is no longer available, pointing to the collapse of civilization. A twist on the instability of narratives is provided by Sam Taylor's *The Island at the End of the World* in which a flood story is presented that is suddenly undermined by the main character's lies.

Some climate crisis novels go even a step further than the novels I've discussed so far: they do not only depict the loss of narratives, they embody it. In novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, in which a kind of language entropy takes places, "the exhaustion of narrative is the corollary to the death of the planet" (217), as Peter Boxall puts it.<sup>2</sup> Something similar happens in *The End We Start From*. The unknown narrator has to flee with her partner and new-born son. They seek shelter with their in-

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, this argument neglects that in while in both novels mentioned by Boxall written narratives and written knowledge are lost, oral narratives survive. Relating the loss of narratives to the loss of civilization, as Boxall and many novels do, presents a very Western perspective that is problematic.

laws, but in the anarchy that follows the flood, her in-laws are murdered, and her husband lost. It is a highly fragmented novel, consisting of short bursts of text interspersed with asterisks and loosely grouped into chapters. None of the characters have names, only initials, and very little information is offered about the temporal setting of the story, or about the socio-political context. The fragmented nature of the novel symbolizes the epistemological uncertainty that characterizes climate crisis: despite the models and predictions, despite the resolutions and conventions, the form and consequences of climate crisis are essentially unknown. The fragmented story told in *The End We Start From*, then, is not about a flood, but literally embodies the destruction of the familiar world in the most powerful way any text can: by having the text itself fall apart.

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Flood novels present particularly apt spaces in which to imagine and think through climate crisis. Not only do the floods depicted in them correspond to realities and future predictions for many parts of the world, they are also instantly recognizable and relatively easy to picture. Moreover, since they take place in a necessarily constricted environment, they provide a useful environment for thinking through changing human relationships. How these relationships are played out in novels, and the picture this presents of climate crisis, is shaped by narrative elements such as characterization and narrative perspective. As I discussed, characterization and first-person narrative perspective create the idea that the reader too, like the characters, will survive climate crisis. At the same time, contemporary novels, and climate crisis fiction

in particular, challenge our ideas about narrative stability. It seems that many of our discussions about needing new narratives, or genres other than realism, or media other than the novel to depict climate crisis are founded on this idea that narratives are relatively straightforward. Narratives, it seems, may capture something, in more or less adequate ways. But narratives, of course, aren't stable. They may deliberately or not deceive, and in extreme cases, fall apart. Climate crisis fictions such as the flood novels I talked about today shed light on these discussions. They open up a discussion between postmillennial British fiction and literary and cultural studies that is productive and important, 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.

[SOURCES AND PAPER AVAILABLE ON MY WEBSITE]

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