

**Disruptive narratives:
The Carhullan Army as climate crisis flood fiction**

On her hike to Carhullan, Sister describes the river Eden: **[SLIDE]** “it had broken its banks in the rains, spilling into the ditches and gardens on either side. I could hear the lower branches creaking as the trees along its sides were stripped of leaves” (loc 100). Floods recur in this novel as part of the general collapse of the environmental, socio-political and cultural world. **[SLIDE]** Today I’ll read *The Carhullan Army* as an example of what I call “flood fictions”: contemporary novels that use floods as literal consequences of climate crisis, but also as symbolic images for life in the Anthropocene - unpredictable, overwhelming and quite literally engulfing.

I define flood fictions as novels that, firstly, depict climate crisis through floods. These are major disrupting events, leading to and coinciding with the large-scale collapse of societal, political and economic structures. Secondly, flood fictions internalise the effect of climate crisis on cultures and societies through narrative fragmentation and language erosion. Such breaking apart of narrative and language reflects the novels’ concern with the role that narratives and knowledge play in the Anthropocene.

This project is still very much in progress. I’ve been working on flood fictions since finishing my monograph, which was published at the end of last year. **[SLIDE]** In *Climate Crisis and the 21st-Century British Novel* I also discuss *The Carhullan Army*, and today’s paper, and the larger flood fiction project, has developed from that.

Floods are a recurring feature of the climate crisis imagination, both symbolically and literally. **[SLIDE]** Leonardo DiCaprio’s 2016 documentary *Before the Flood* uses the image of the flood as a kind of environmental tipping point after which broad-scale climate crisis can no longer be prevented. **[SLIDE]** Similarly, the 2017 film *Downsizing* ends with a waterless, but no less dangerous flood. When the methane levels in the atmosphere reach dangerous heights, a group of idealistic environmentalists descends

into a cave under the earth's surface, in an attempt to wait out the next great extinction - of humans. The cave, the film's protagonist realizes, functions as a kind of Noah's Ark.

[SLIDE] A deadly virus is similarly called a 'waterless flood' in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, **[SLIDE]** just as the deadly flu that kills off most of humankind in *Station Eleven*. **[SLIDE]** Floods are shown in many disaster films, from *Waterworld* (1995) to **[SLIDE]** *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and **[SLIDE]** the 2007 British film *Flood*.

[SLIDE] Sensationalist though these films may be, flooding is a very real consequence of climate crisis. Global warming is linked to increased flooding in most European countries and in other areas around the world (Alfieri et al.). In Britain, changing environmental and climatological circumstances will make floods twenty times more likely by 2080, affecting at least twice as many people than are currently at risk from flooding. Even though it is notoriously difficult to relate individual events to climate change, attribution studies are being done that show direct links between anthropogenic climate change and extreme weather events such as droughts, hurricanes and floods (Schaller et. al). Events such as the 2013/2014 floods in England and Wales coincided with increased cultural awareness of climate crisis. While the term Anthropocene is by no means new, and scientists have pointed to the mid-twentieth century as its beginning, our self-consciousness that we are living in the Anthropocene can be dated quite precisely to the beginning of the twenty-first century (Dillon 8).

The Carhullan Army is one of a growing set of British flood fictions. Other examples include **[SLIDE]** Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004), **[SLIDE]** *The Ship* (2015) by Antonia Honeywell, **[SLIDE]** *When the Floods Came* (2016) by Clare Morrall, **[SLIDE]** *The End We Start From* (2017) by Megan Hunter and **[SLIDE]** Natasha Carthew's *All Rivers Run Free* (2018). Today I will focus on how *The Carhullan Army* presents floods as a disruptive force of climate crisis and socio-political collapse. At the same time, as I'll discuss

towards the end of my paper, in flood fictions the very narratives that novels are made up of are disrupted, hereby illustrating the effect of climate crisis on culture and civilization.

[SLIDE] *The Carhullan Army* depicts both literal flooding as well as the symbolic meaning of flooding as a watershed moment, represented in the novel through political, economic and societal collapse. The novel is set in the near future, though no date is provided. Britain has undergone a "civil reorganisation", led by a new militarised government - the Authority. As the main character, Sister, relates, the weather has changed as well: the rain has become different, more "erratic, violent" (loc. 38); summers have become more humid, allowing sub-tropical plants to grow in the British countryside (loc. 1263). Indeed, the political changes are explicitly related to environmental changes: **[SLIDE]** "Each year after the Civil Reorganisation summer's humidity had lasted longer, pushing the colder seasons into a smaller section of the calendar, surrounding us constantly with the smog of rape and tar-sand burning off, and all of us packed tightly together like fish in a smoking shed" (Hall 2007: loc. 28). The weather being one of the main indicators of climate, changing weather patterns are a stock feature of flood fictions. In Clare Morrall's *When the Floods Came*, for instance, stronger winds herald the beginning of the floods that cover large parts of Britain (36).

[SLIDE] The words "climate change" appear only once, in fleeting, in *The Carhullan Army*. They're part of a list of memories that the women at Carhullan share: "a spate of poisonings in London. House prices had started to drop as the insurance companies refused policies. The Red Paper on climate change had been published" (loc. 1638). Yet the references to the changing climate, tied in with one of the main predicted effects of climate change in Britain - flood - makes the link between the two plausible enough. Literal flooding is referred to again and again. **[SLIDE]** The river Eden swells and floods - an echo of the floods at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Whole sections

of the landscape have been pulled away by floods (loc. 89), leading Sister to notice the “familiar smell” of flooded homes (loc. 102). The smell of flood has become intensely familiar: no longer a once in a lifetime event, or even once in a hundred years. Extensive flooding is a key feature of other flood fictions as well: the perpetual rain in Gee’s *The Flood* means that the city it is set in is flooded most of the time. In *When the Floods Came* and *The Ship*, floods have extended across the world, submerging, for instance, the Netherlands. In all of these novels, the collapse of societies, economic and political systems ties in with, and is worsened by, environmental changes. In the former novel, anti-pollution laws led to the collapse of the tourism industry, which ruined the British economy. Britain has become dependent on the Americans and the Chinese - much like in Hall’s novel, where food is imported from the US. The quasi-military government in *The Carhullan Army* is echoed in Honeywell’s *The Ship*, in which economic and political collapse leads to the rise of a military government and flooding as flood defences are no longer adequately maintained (2). Likewise, the massive flood in *The End We Start From* leads to civil war, violence, riots and killing.

[SLIDE] Flood fictions, then, use the flood as the primary means of representing climate crisis. How to represent life in the Anthropocene has long been an issue of debate in ecocritical and environmental humanities circles. Critics suggest that we need to think on wholly different scales, both temporally and spatially. Different genres and media in particular are suggested as being somehow more adequate to this representational challenge, from Google Earth, to Timothy Clark’s scale readings, Timothy Morton’s hyperobjects and ice core research. Yet when it comes to understanding scale, there’s much to be said for focusing on the medium-scale that narratives such as novels function on. After all, humans don’t live on the large-scale, but rather on the medium-scale of decades and years, and the small-scale of months, weeks and days. As the cognitive

narratologist David Herman argues, human minds are best at grasping “person-level experiences” (2002: 81).

It is in the light of these debates that I approach flood fictions. I use them to explore the tension between an event generally seen as un-narratable on the one hand, and the constraints and opportunities of narrative fiction on the other. Novels present a particularly productive space in which to imagine and think through the causes and consequences of climate crisis, and especially what it means to live through it. As Andrew Tate puts it in his discussion of contemporary apocalypse, “[t]he end of the world is, oddly, a rich beginning for narrative” (22). Twenty-first-century British flood fictions consequently function as imaginative tools that shed light on a flooded future. They do so through spatial and temporal techniques, from stretching backwards and forwards in time, to creating constricted spaces that stand for larger issues of global climate change inequality.

Flood fictions frequently leave their temporal setting deliberately vague. This creates difficulties for the reader, who is unable to adequately determine when exactly in the future the novel takes place. It creates an eerie sense of familiarity and proximity to crisis that makes the effect of flood fictions particularly powerful. There are relatively few temporal cues in *The Carhullan Army*. The date of the narrative is not given, nor does Sister tend to mention the dates of the events that she relates. An exception to this is a reference to World War II - her great-grandfather had been at Osterley, the site of the training school of the Home Guard. Later, she mentions walking through a village with her father. Now abandoned, during that walk, Sister - who is 31 years old - had noted that the village had survived the troubles at the turn of the century. These two hints suggest that

the novel is set around the 2030s or 2040s.¹ In this sense, collapse and escalating climate change happened quite closely to the publication date of the novel, 2007.

Flood fictions, like other dystopias, are often concerned with the past as much as with the future. Future collapse often entails a return to the past, while flood fictions themselves rely on older narratives and stories to imagine what climate crisis floods will look like. The world that Sister describes in *The Carhullan Army* is in many ways a developmental step back. New strains of illnesses have emerged that are hard to cure, and modern society has collapsed. The women at Carhullan, on the other hand, look to the past more deliberately - while the people in the cities tend to mourn what is lost, the women look at the past to see what is to be gained from it. As Jackie, their leader, says, "It's not hard to learn from the past and apply it to the present" (loc. 1336). Flood fictions consequently establish a timeline of climate crisis, stretching back into the past and forward into the future. Part of this timescale is the occurrence of earlier floods and climate changes, and the stories that are old about them. Flood narratives are part of many creation myths around the world. As such, the image of the flood is rooted in older conceptions of flood: not only what the flood looks like but also what causes it, and the role that humans play. **[SLIDE]** *The End We Start From* makes this connection to older stories quite explicit when the narrator considers naming her baby Noah, a popular name at the time. The narrator's story is moreover interspersed with passages in italics reminiscent of creation myths, such as **[SLIDE]** "In the ancient times the ocean rose until it covered everything in sight. It covered the trees and the beasts and even the

¹This calculation depends on when the great-grandfather was born and the length of a generation. If Sister's great-grandfather was twenty years old in the middle of World War II, 1943, and he had a child at age thirty, Sister's grandfather was born in 1953. If he too had a child at age thirty, Sister's father was born in 1983, and she - provided she was born when her father was thirty years old - born in 2013. An alternative would be to pick the longer period for a generation, of thirty-five years. Starting with the premise that great-grandfather was twenty in 1943, Sister's grandfather would have been born in 1958, her father in 1993, and she in 2028. In *The Carhullan Army*, Sister seems to be a young woman of childbearing age, who has work experience and has been with her boyfriend for several years. If she is thirty years old, the temporal setting of the novel would be 2043 at the earliest (if generations are twenty years long) and the latest 2058 (if a generation is thirty-five years long).

mountains, and ice drifted over their tops” (17). Yet framing climate crisis in terms of older flood stories is potentially problematic. In creation myths, the few who survive are generally very good and devout, and therefore worthy. But in contemporary flood fictions - and in the real world - survival is more often an accident of being in the right place at the right time. The sense of exceptionalism that pervades these flood fictions hence perpetuates the deep inequality at the heart of global climate change.

[SLIDE] Flood fictions do not only address the temporal scale of climate crisis, they also grapple with its spatial scale. They do so, perhaps counter-intuitively, by depicting radically constricted spaces. Sister, in *The Carhullan Army*, describes a country which is mainly urbanised, with people in the countryside left to fend for themselves. Like other urbanites, Sister lives in an apartment shared with others. Forcing people to live in shared housing and making them work useless jobs in plants that produce obsolete products is a form of population control, a kind of censorship of everyday life. It fits in with the birth control that Sister is subjected to - a bodily constriction. At the same time, flooding means that large parts of the countryside have become inaccessible, have been pulled away by floods (loc. 89). Likewise, in *When the Floods Came*, *The Ship* and *The End We Start From* characters rarely leave their familiar surroundings because floods and civil war have made it impossible and dangerous to do so.

So far I have been mainly concerned with flooding as literal disruption caused by climate crisis and collapse. I've focused mainly on the temporal and spatial representation of climate change through floods. Yet flooding is also a powerful symbol of climate crisis disruption, and the flood is a powerful visual icon of the Anthropocene. *The Carhullan Army* presents a series of images and scenes that illustrate the destruction caused by floods and political upheaval. Passing through a village on her way to Carhullan, Sister notices the abandoned houses: **[SLIDE]** “The cottages next to the bridge were window-

deep in the current. There was a strong odour of wet mortar, fabric and silt. It was the familiar smell of flooded homes; the riverbed slurring up house walls, rotting curtains and carpets.(loc 102). This scene depicts what I call future ruins, landscapes and objects in dystopias that are part of our present, but are ruined in the future. They are ruins not only literally, but also symbolically - they are the ruins of our contemporary society.

In depicting future ruins, *The Carhullan Army* taps into the same kind of visual language that disaster films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* and mock documentaries like *Life After People* tap into. While these American productions tend to be particularly concerned with the fate of the Statue of Liberty **[SLIDE]**, a different symbol recurs in British flood fictions. Sister recalls that “the Thames flood barrier had been overwhelmed and tidal water had filled” the houses of Parliament (loc 1465). **[SLIDE]** In the 2007 British film *Flood*, a radical change in weather patterns leads to the breaching of the Thames Flood Barrier. This image recurs in Honeywell’s *The Ship* **[SLIDE]**, when Lalage takes a walk with her mother along “the new banks of the Thames ... to see Big Ben and the London Eye pouring mournfully out of the water” (4). Of course, this kind of iconography is not new - Richard Jefferies flooded London completely in his 1885 novel *After London*. Flood fictions take much of their power and impact from depiction the submersion of familiar places and iconic structures such as these. Moreover, imagining the flooding of the political centre holds great symbolic power.

Flood fictions also engage with climate crisis metafictionally. They emphasise narratives, storytelling and the fate of books, much like others climate fictions. In flood novels the loss of books to water and the drowning of narratives presents a striking image of the fate of cultures and civilisations in the Anthropocene. Paper is particularly vulnerable to the elements, as the protagonist in Hall’s short story “Later, His Ghost” relates, trying to piece together the full text of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* from the scraps he can find in the

wind-ridden wasteland that has become the future. In Jeff Vandermeer's *Borne*, the humidity has turned most books into pulp. In the flooded future, books have become precious and rare.

[SLIDE] Sister relates reading a number of books from Carhullan's library. Jackie leaves a copy of Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* for her, and on her own she later discovers books by Fuller and Douhet (Hall 2007: loc. 2209). Through these works, the novel establishes a kind of doubling of time, a pointing backwards to our present, as well as forwards - for us - to Sister's present and her future. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is an account of World War I. As such, it serves both as a reminder of the wars of the past and refers to the introduction of global warfare. Richard Buckminster Fuller's use of the concept Spaceship Earth prefigures our - the novels' initial readers - future, while at the same time shedding light on the textual world's past. The scenario that Fuller sketches, namely that earth has finite resources, much like a spaceship, has become all too true in *The Carhullan Army*. Resources, notably fuel, have run out, leading to even more political and social instability. 'Douhet', another of the authors Sister encounters, references Giulio Douhet, the early twentieth-century Italian general best known for his belief that during war a quick victory can be won by an early air attack on the enemy's vital centres. In doing so, the civilian population should also be targeted. The mention of his name around three-quarters into the novel foreshadows the events taking place towards the end. While it is unlikely that the Carhullan army has the means to attack the town from the air, mention of the Authority headquarters, clinic, refinery and railway station, as well as civilian casualties, suggests that Douhet may have inspired the women. For the reader, the books at Carhullan consequently come to serve as connections between her own time and that of Sister: both as future ruins, as well as frightening foreshadowing of the societal and environmental collapse that awaits.

Stories and storytelling, then, have several functions in these flood fictions. Books and other narratives function as future ruins, connecting not only the future as depicted in the works to the initial readers' present, but also creating and drawing on a shared visual iconography that crosses media and genres. Books and stories provide a way of making sense of the world - for instance for Sister when she reads her way through Carhullan's library. The loss of books and narratives consequently comes to stand for the loss of knowledge, culture and civilization at large, with the breaking up of narrative as the literal depiction. To put it differently, flood fictions do not only show disruption, they are also disrupted narratives themselves as flooding destroys physical and material stories, seeps into narrative and erodes language.

The Carhullan Army is structured as a series of records, some complete, some partly destroyed, in which Sister talks about her life at Carhullan and, in sparse detail, the attack on Rith. The further the reader progresses in the novel, the less material becomes available. Sister's story, fragmented as it is, is presented as significant. It is important, Jackie tells her, to tell them about the women at Carhullan (Hall 2007: 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 and the woman who identifies herself as 'Sister' tells her supposed interrogator that no one will find out who she is (Hall 2007: loc. 2747). The loss of narratives in novels such as *The Carhullan Army* also turns into a legitimisation for the novel as genre. Without novels and narratives, they suggest, civilization and culture as we know it will be lost.

The most powerful device that novels have to depict this loss and fragmentation is literal narrative fragmentation, both on the level of the narrative itself as well as on the level of language. In *The Carhullan Army* the collection of records that the novel is essentially made up of is one such example of fragmentation. Hunter's *The End We Start From* is similarly fragmented, as the lay-out of the pages shows. **[SLIDE]** It also utilises

what I call language erosion, in which language itself is inadequate and falls apart.

Typical for dystopian fictions such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, language erosion is a particularly powerful metafictional depiction of flooding, and the literal and symbolic washing away of civilization.

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[SLIDE] Yet this is not an argument against the novel, or a defense of those critics who have suggested that the novel is unsuited to depicting climate crisis. Quite the contrary. I hope to have shown that floods are a very productive space in which to think through climate crisis, both literally and symbolically. Flood fictions use this space to tackle some of the representational challenges of the Anthropocene. By depicting disruption and being disrupted, these novels explore the limits as well as the power of narrative - and in particular the potential that the novel as a genre holds in a time of climate crisis.

[SLIDE] book + full text of paper and sources on my website

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