



# Cli-Fi: What is it and Why is

By Christine Havens

“For years, authors have been writing climate change fiction, or ‘cli-fi,’ a genre of literature that imagines the past, present, and future effects of climate change.” So wrote Amy Brady, of the *Chicago Review of Books*, for her then-new column, “Burning Worlds,” an exploration of all things cli-fi. Her piece also introduced Dan Bloom, a literature professor who coined the term in 2007 after having read the 2006 report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Though as a proper genre, cli-fi is just over 10 years old, books fitting the definition have been around since at least the 1960s. Science fiction authors and staples of mainstream and literary fiction have created a varied and blended spectrum of books. Frank Herbert’s sci-fi classic, *Dune* (1965), is a primary example, as is Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and J. G. Ballard’s *The Drought* (1965). What unites them is a desire to help humanity ‘see’ possible futures lived out on a burning, drowning, or dying planet,” says Brady.

My curiosity about the genre was piqued by a customer browsing in the environment and sustainability section at BookPeople in Austin, Texas, where I’m a bookseller. She asked me if we had a separate section for cli-fi. My face surely betrayed my befuddlement as

she explained, “cli-fi — climate change fiction.” We didn’t have one, but that soon changed after I read Brady’s piece. I’ve curated it for the last three years. My public conversations with customers about this genre have stayed mostly in the secular realm, with the same goal as Dan Bloom, Amy Brady, and others — to raise awareness and increase readership of this genre. However, perhaps now is the time to bring climate fiction into creation care discussions among religious people.

Two sections of the Episcopal Church’s Creation Care webpage offer good reasons to use climate fiction to facilitate theological and spiritual conversations on the subject: *Loving Formation* and *Liberating Advocacy*. As a person who is passionate about the intersection of literature and theology, I have found that fiction can be a liberating advocate in unique ways, serving as an excellent tool for loving formation. In the ten years that I have been a member of this church, the small groups I have facilitated were all grounded in using literature as a means of spiritual exploration.

To start such exploration in the world of cli-fi, two titles are especially helpful, *Flight Behavior*, by Barbara Kingsolver (HarperCollins, 2012) and *New York 2140*, by Kim Stanley Robinson, (Orbit, 2017). They have pride of place on my bookstore display and constantly must

be restocked.

*Flight Behavior* provides a compassionate way into the cli-fi genre. Barbara Kingsolver writes bestselling literary fiction and nonfiction as well as poetry. Her works incorporate her passion for the environment into strong narratives involving family relationships; she deftly weaves faith and scripture in as well. The PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction that grew from her efforts speaks to her view of what fiction can accomplish.

*Flight Behavior* is set in a rural, impoverished area of Appalachia, an environment that Kingsolver knows intimately. The protagonist, Dellarobia Turnbow, a young wife and mother, feels trapped and yearns for a life beyond raising sheep and abiding her unimaginative husband, Cub. On a cloudy day in November, she walks up into the higher reaches of the valley, heading for a tryst, only to encounter an unnerving sight: What she mistakes for trees on fire when the sun breaks through the clouds turns out to be monarch butterflies sheltering in the valley, an inexplicable occurrence.

Della wonders at the miracle of these creatures, not realizing that they are far afield from their normal overwintering home in Mexico. She thinks of them at first in terms of Moses and the burning bush — a sign from God. Instead of following through with her affair,



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she turns around and returns home, intending to keep the butterflies a secret. However, the region has been receiving abnormal amounts of rain all year, causing crops to fail and families to face financial peril. The trees in that part of the valley are valuable timber and soon the secret is revealed.

Once the world at large becomes aware of the butterflies, the “miracle” comes under scrutiny from many sources, including Dr. Ovid Byron, an entomologist. He risks ridicule and outright belligerence when he brings the bad news that the monarchs and the life-altering rain are both due to climate change.

Kingsolver’s well-researched premise, poetic style, and sharp insight into human nature make *Flight Behavior* an excellent introduction to climate fiction. While not as overwhelmingly apocalyptic or dystopian as some other cli-fi novels, the reader is still faced with revelation. At the end of the book, Della is in much the same position as Noah, watching her world begin to drown. Despite her faith, she is uncertain what the future will hold.

Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* presents readers with a more certain, though no less dire, vision of the future. Robinson’s body of work is one great act of advocacy, envisioning different climate change scenarios and plausible road maps for thriving ad-

aptation. He writes literary sci-fi and most of his nearly 20 novels have been bestsellers. In 2017 he gave the opening talk at the Trinity Institute’s global conference on water justice, and is considered by many to be the quintessential climate fiction author.

This book takes place in New York City in the year 2140. Climate change has caused two catastrophic rises in sea level, a total of 50 feet. Robinson’s tale, which is told from the point-of-view of several denizens of a now Venice-style metropolis, is a radical one, with roots as much in Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* as in Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. The engaging, and often quirky, characters include Mutt and Jeff, whose opening discussion of capitalism’s relationship to climate change prompts them to report some major financial improprieties to the SEC, which sets the rest of the narrative into motion.

There’s also Amelia, a young woman who rescues polar bears from the Arctic in an airship; and a citizen, who serves as a sort of Greek chorus. In 2140, the super-rich have not changed — power and money still dictate government policies to their advantage. The other main characters, such as Vlade, Franklin, and Charlotte, find themselves joining forces as a result of Mutt and Jeff’s unintended consequences in order to permanently change the status quo.

*New York 2140* is a work chronicling and championing the best of human resilience. It is an apocalyptic novel, rather than a post-apocalyptic one unveiling the present through future eyes. Despite its length (600-plus pages), Robinson’s narrative isn’t bogged down with dense prose. He writes very clearly, with engaging characters and a fast pace, and encourages people to advocate for the climate and social justice.

Climate fiction is on the edge of becoming an important part of the conversations happening around creation care. The Rt. Rev. Cathleen Bascom’s just-published debut novel, *Of Green Stuff Woven* (2020) is a fine example, though I might term it eco-theo fiction (see my review in the April 19 issue of *TLC*). I hope you will pick up *Flight Behavior* or *New York 2140* and that they will help form you in loving ways, drawing you into deeper conversation about climate change, which is not fiction. I would be happy to recommend more titles for you, whether via private conversation, or, I hope, via a reading list on the Episcopal Church’s Creation Care webpage.

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