



Weathering the Change

CliFi Settles in for the Duration

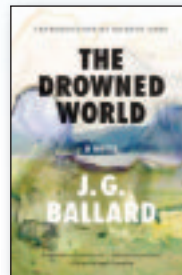
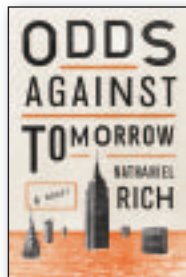
When Dan Bloom popularized the word “CliFi,” he thought that it was a great way to categorize the multiple offerings of fiction that dealt with climate change and to bring attention to the fact that our world climate is constantly shifting. He did it mostly because, he says, it was an easy way to alert novelists and short story writers that they could focus on climate issues the same way that SciFi made it more palpable to write about science. He also believed that the term made it easier for readers, buyers, and publishers to find novels on these topics. It could, Bloom said, include novels and short stories being written from a variety of points of view, pro or con, and even those of skeptics and denialists. Though writers and readers throughout the blogosphere and Internet caught on to the term, most major media outlets didn’t really notice.

Then, Nathaniel Rich wrote **Odds against Tomorrow**, a tale about a disaster prediction expert who forecasts the flooding of New York City by a Category 3 hurricane. As Rich put it in his essay penned for the *New York Times*, “On October 30 last year, after staying up late to edit the final proofs of my novel, I woke to discover it had already been adapted to television by CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and every other channel that had interrupted its programming to show images of a flooded New York City” (Rich, 2013). But at the time of Hurricane Sandy and the publishing of his book, Rich had never heard of the designation “CliFi.” As Rich’s book became more popular, folks at NPR, the *Guardian*, and other venues picked up the CliFi moniker. Needless to say, CliFi has now entered our lexicon of genre description, science fiction or not, all thanks to Dan Bloom.

So what exactly is CliFi? Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, in her essay for *Dissent*, stated that CliFi is basically when a writer uses fiction to bring climate change to life, or when a writer uses climate change to bring their fiction to life (Tuhus-Dubrow, 2013). Most science fiction buffs will tell you that CliFi has basically been around since J.G. Ballard opened the



DAN BLOOM



door with his novels, **The Drowned World** (1962), **The Burning World/The Drought** (1963), and **Hello, America** (1984). Others, like Dan Bloom, say that it can be a subgenre of science fiction. Novels such as Stephen Baxter’s books, **The Flood and Ark**, or Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* series (despite the fact that she claims it is not science fiction, but speculative fiction) bear that out. Atwood’s new book, **MaddAdam**, now completes her so-called “speculative fiction” trilogy.

Then, there are novels, like Barbara Kingsolver’s **Flight Behavior**, that deal with the change in migration habits and habitats of

monarch butterflies as a result of flooding due to climate change, that simply tell the story of what happens to the species as our climate changes. There are other novels that just mention climate change, not as part of the plotline, but dropped in casually as part of the book’s setting, like in Jennifer Egan’s **A Visit from the Goon Squad**. Still other novels treat climate change as an apex event that causes the destruction of our world or population.

Books like Clara Hume’s **Back to the Garden** or S.D. Crockett’s **After the Snow** treat climate change as the actual apocalyptic event, revolving their stories around those who are left behind to cope with the aftereffects. In both books, characters who are safely ensconced in remote venues then venture into the world decimated by climate. In Hume’s **Back to the Garden**, a group of survivors leave the safety of their mountaintop home to find family members in the south. During their journey, they find polluted ocean waters, unpredictable heat, slender resources, and standard apocalyptic fare, like road gangs and marauders.

In the telling of a modern Ice Age, Crockett’s book takes



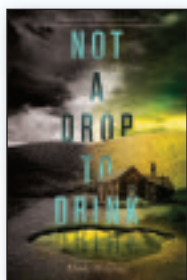
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MARY WOODBURY AKA CLARA HUME

fifteen-year-old Willo off his mountaintop in search of his family, who was taken by a brutal government. Unlike in the other books, cold weather dictates rather than a shift to a hotter climate. Crockett's setting also reminds me of Adam Roberts' book, **The Snow**, where snow covers London and the world, three miles thick, killing six billion people.



Climate change, however, is not always about the end of the world. Mindy McGinnis's book, **Not a Drop to Drink**, doesn't fit so neatly into the apocalyptic format. McGinnis' book is based on the idea of a limited and coveted supply of potable water on the planet, something that is a very real possibility, according to the United Nations at the

October 2013 Open the Water Summit (RT, 2013). Her characters are living in a world where water is scarce, and protecting resources can mean life or death. McGinnis is thrilled to have the designation of CliFi to depend on when classifying her book. "My novel is based on a slow waning of resources, and the reaction of humans is what drives the plot," McGinnis said. Acknowledging that her book doesn't fit into a strict dystopian definition or even the post-apocalyptic genre, McGinnis likes the CliFi classification. "I'd love to have my title touted as CliFi. It captures more thoroughly the concept of the book," she said.



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MINDY MCGINNIS

Whether they are writing under a CliFi umbrella or not, most authors simply want to help change minds or make a difference with their fiction. Nathaniel Rich points out those often-great novels help us "make sense of our own response to all these ominous transformations." Climate change through fiction— especially, Rich says, "catastrophic transformation of our planet"—is an important, yet greatly underexploited subject in fiction. Fiction should, says Rich, reflect the most pressing questions of our time. "Novels can ask the difficult, thorny questions: What are we supposed to make about all of this scary information? Do we ignore the bad news completely, tune it out? Do we live in denial? Do we become environmental activists?" said Rich. "Or do we just worry about improving our own lot and not worry about anyone else? I tried to explore these questions (and others) as deeply as possible in **Odds against Tomorrow**."

McGinnis, who drew inspiration from the documentary *Blue Gold: World Water Wars*, believes that books like hers can make an impact. "When I tell people that the idea [for my book] came from watching the documentary, they get very quiet. It's a terrifying thought, and it makes people sit up and listen. If action springs from that, even better," McGinnis said.

Whether they inspire or not, if these books are not found or not read, what good is the CliFi label or the books? Mary Woodbury,

aka Clara Hume, writes the blog **CliFi Books**, where she archives and categorizes a multitude of climate fiction books that come from her readers or from her own reading. In writing **Back to the Garden** and her blog, Mary felt that most authors who write about climate change basically just want their readers to be moved enough to start caring more. "Whether or not any of these books have truly moved others to care is not something I can tell yet," said Woodbury. "I have read articles that say nobody is writing about climate change fictionally, yet, the books are there. That tells me that people just don't know the books are there or do not care (yet)."

So whether or not the moniker is well known, climate fiction exists. As our own weather gets colder, hotter, or stormier, we can look to fiction to present us with a variety of conclusions from which to pick. While those conclusions may contain a mass of contradictions, says Rich, that's because these questions do not have clear answers. "My hope is that readers can use the novels to reach their own conclusions," said Rich. ■

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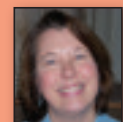


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