How to Write About Climate Change

Issue 3 of The Lit, titled **How the Light Gets In**, explored climate change writing. It included a podcast interview from acclaimed novelist Ben Smith, with Liz Jensen, author of climate novel *The Rapture*, and Gregory Norminton, author of *The Devil's Highway*. Here's an outline of their tips and thoughts on using **literature as a form of activism**.

What does a climate novel entail?

Climate change novels are becoming more common and popular and as a result terms to categorise them have arisen, notably **cli-fi**. However, as discussed by Liz and Gregory, these terms can be somewhat **"limiting and damaging"**. This particular term, cli-fi, suggests it is a subset of science fiction, sci-fi, which not only limits the amount of readers interested, it also insinuates a speculative story, as opposed to our **reality**.

Placing your novel in the sci-fi or cli-fi genre can limit your readership to those who hold a prior interest in climate change – and preaching to the converted is of limited value. Therefore, if you treat climate change as an inescapable aspect of contemporary life by using it as **context rather than content**, you are more likely to attract a readership that would otherwise be reluctant to pick up a book blatantly concerning global warming.

A climate change novel can be a **collaboration of genres** from historical to thriller to naturalist – there is not a set of criteria in which it must fit. As said by Liz, "write whatever you feel you need to write and let other people worry about where it fits".

Why use fiction to convey this message?

If you can write effectively and capture people's imagination, then why not use this gift to aid the fight to control climate change? While the novel is not the most dominant form of narrative, and writers aren't the most influential people outside of the sphere of literature, they can still do their part as activists in their own circles. Gregory Norminton asserts that we must do our duty and **"bear witness"** to something that no longer belongs to the realm of speculation; something that is now our present reality.

Jensen analyses how artists possess both the tools and the capacity to connect with the **emotional side** of climate change, a type of activism that takes on an entirely different form to the facts and statistics we are confronted with (and arguably saturated with) daily. Writing allows us to reach beyond the surface and touch people's hearts, forcing them to listen to the truth and take responsibility for the world we are destroying. To incite a transformation, you need to access the minds of the people. In Jensen's words: **"go where it hurts"**.

Exercise – In what ways does global warming penetrate the mundane?

To seamlessly incorporate climate change into your novel, take the most overt examples of climate change and translate them into day-to-day experiences.

Large scale events	Day-to-day experiences
Increased rainfall	Decreased crops; flooding; landslides
Pollution	City smog; stars only visible in the countryside
Wildfires	Orange skies; destroyed areas of land; species extinction
Increasing temperatures	Wildfires; melting sea ice; rising sea levels; heatwaves

To access a broad spectrum of readers, you must ensure your novel is accessible.

To inform the uninformed, to reach the yet unreachable, you will need to consider how to appeal to these fringes.

Adapted from an original article for The Lit Platform by Natalya Sharp and Sacha Mann 2021.