

Unpacking Uncertain Futures: A Critical Reading of Select Australian Children's Fiction

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Abstract

Ellen Van Nerveen's essay titled "The country is like a body" points out that the term "climate change" neither evokes clear mental images of the threat that humanity may encounter in either immediate or distant futures nor furthers our understanding regarding the impact it has on our everyday lives, interactions or about the people who have intricate connections with nature like our indigenous populations. Changing temperatures and rising sea levels, the two most overused images circulated to uncritically engage with the dangers posed by "global warming," have played an important role in limiting our imagination on the issue. Apart from taking immediate measures to combat and using terms like "climate emergency" in the age of post-truth to convey the sense of the mess we are actually in, it is also equally important to educate, inform and make children aware of various facets of dangers that are unimaginatively harped on in popular discourses. There is an immediate and desperate need to broaden the canvas of children's imagination regarding the "uncertain futures" so that they are sensitised to the implications of "climate emergency". The paper would discuss how Children's Fiction from Australia in recent times draws young readers' attention towards dystopian landscapes created by the absence of non-human entities like bees or rivers that are extremely crucial for our existence but are ignored due to our anthropocentric understanding of the world we inhabit. My paper would particularly focus on Alison Croggon's *The*

River and the Book (2015) and Bren MacDibble's *How to Bee* (2018) and discuss how these texts draw young readers attention towards details that are otherwise rarely acknowledged in popular climate change narratives.

Keywords: Australian Children's Fiction, Post-truth, Cli-fi, Uncertain Futures, Extractivism

How much is she worth?
 You went an put a number on her
 How much does she deserve?
 You went and put a number and now there's

Smoke already in our lungs
 And the season's just begun
 There is smoke already in our lunge
 It's just begun

Why do we wait til it's too late?
 How can you say that it's a lie today?
 She's in pain and you went away
 Letting it lay
 Meanwhile we are all ablaze

We are all ablaze

...

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—*Ablaze* by Tartie

The song *Ablaze* released on Feb 2nd, 2020 by Australian songwriter and performer Tartie, addresses the state of climate emergency we are in, and, is an earnest attempt to draw the attention of the world, especially our leaders towards the unprecedented bushfires that ravaged the island continent in 2019. In the past few years, bushfires/wildfires, floods,

droughts, rising sea levels, heat waves, torrential rains, cyclones, extreme weather conditions, etc., have emerged as a recurring menace around the globe and perhaps it would be foolish to use redundant adjectives like ‘unprecedented’ to describe these scenarios because climate catastrophes have become a part and parcel of our everyday lives. It is not a matter of mere coincidence that in December 2019, Australia witnessed the worst drought as well as the hottest day ever with fifty degree centigrade recorded temperatures and that very year uncontrollable bushfires ravaged the country. But in the age of post-truth; climate skeptics and denialists on the basis of manufactured studies, selective and biased evidence have vehemently disagreed that these phenomena are the resultant effects of climate change. But at the same time irrefutable scientific evidence linking recurring environmental disasters to climate change make it is impossible to overlook the fact that, bushfires, largely a controllable natural phenomenon, like most ecological disasters of the present are becoming fiercer with every passing year because of reckless human behavior, raising temperatures and intensified climatic conditions. If in the age of post-truth “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford English Dictionary) then we cannot prepare ourselves for the uncertain future that awaits us. If we, the masses, do not open our eyes and acknowledge that we are indeed dealing with a state of climate emergency then we are doomed as a species. Ellen Van Nerveen’s essay titled “The country is like a body” that addresses the issue of climate change rightly argues that the term “climate change” neither evokes clear mental images of the threat that humanity may encounter in either immediate or distant futures, nor carries any hint or furthers our understanding regarding the impact it would have on our everyday lives, interactions or the people who have intricate connections with nature like our indigenous people. Changing temperatures and rising sea levels are two most overused images circulated to uncritically engage with the dangers posed by “global warming” that have played an important role in limiting our imagination on the issue. Lack of understanding as well as uncritical engagement with the current state of affairs regarding climate change often confuses ordinary people and at times also inadvertently desensitizes them. The best example perhaps is the intentional conflation of difference between weather and climate by right wing politicians like Donald Trump who are the mouthpieces of climate denial. Climatologists working on post-truth and climate change like Michael Mann have pointed out,

by particularly referring to powerful networks like Fox in USA that media outlets have contributed to climate change denialism rather than acting towards bringing a positive change. In recent times, the misguided euphoria of climate change reversal propagated by select media outlets during the first phase of lockdown imposed by countries because of Corona virus across the globe is yet again another example of how incomplete information misleads people who are craving for “good news” and are looking for excuses to continue with their usual lifestyle choices without “guilt” or “interruptions” resting in self imposed ignorance that “nature has the power to heal itself”. The examples cited above are bitter reminders of the cardinal unnegotiable truth of our times i.e., we are in a state of climate emergency. But more often than, this ‘truth’ is being constantly undermined in popular discourses because in the present scenario the barrier between knowledge and information has completely collapsed thanks to the ever expanding reach of “mediascapes” and “disinformation”.

Therefore, my paper would argue that if the age of post-truth thrives on the politics of emotion then rather than fighting back with the sword of rationality that holds little or no power; cli-fi, especially written for children and young adults can possibly play a crucial role in challenging the mirage created by propaganda and untruths by opening the mind of young adults to crises our world is battling and may encounter in future. Apart from taking immediate measures to combat and using terms like “climate emergency” to convey the sense of the mess we are actually in, it is also equally important to educate, inform and make children, the future citizens of our world: aware about various facets of “dangers” or “change” we keep unimaginatively talking about. There is an immediate and desperate need to broaden the canvas of children’s imagination regarding the “uncertain futures” so that they understand what they may have to deal with in future if “climate emergency” is left unaddressed in the present. Shaping personal belief and acquainting children with discourses related to environmental degradation by “catching them when they are young” and cultivating emotions to fight climate emergency can be one of the ways to escape the catch 22 situation created by the warring rationalities. After all, “fiction enables us not merely imagine things but to do so collectively”. (Harari, 2014, p. 388) and as Christopher Schaberg in “The Work of Literature in the Age of Post-Truth” points out that literature, an “interpretation” of the world, helps us to go through structures of

feelings that otherwise one may not have encountered in real lives. Through a critical reading of Alison Croggon's *The River and the Book* (2015) and Bren MacDibble's *How to Bee* (2018) my paper would elaborate how the select writers draw young readers attention towards intricate nuances of our world that is ridden by inequalities and suffering the burnt of ecological crises as well as the changes we might have to live through, that otherwise do not feature in popular climate emergency narratives. By encouraging young readers to engage with works that can shape their ideological position regarding climate emergency and helping them see the tragic outcomes as well as enabling a nuanced understanding; we, adults may redeem ourselves from the reluctant position of climate quietists as we strengthen children's understanding of climate emergency through fictional narratives and shape them as climate warriors. Before I start with a detailed analysis of the text I would once again hark back to the song cited in the opening lines. Tartie's song is an important citation because it not only points a finger at our extractivist tendencies i.e, looking at earth from the lens of anthropocentrism and our reckless indulgence in the 'modern' habit of putting a number on everything/calculating the planet's worth based on how we can control and extract its bounties but also reminds us how cruelly we are subjecting our priceless nurturer to a terrible fate by objectifying her. The song tolls a warning bell that cautions us about our uncertain futures: a time when our lungs would be filled by smoke and we would be unable to breathe freely if we while away our debating if climate change is real. It also questions our reluctance in addressing the situation of climate emergency, while we perhaps still have time on our side but particularly raises question on the Australian Prime Minister's ill timed family vacation to Hawaii when the country was facing devastation because of bushfires. Tartie, basically is questioning our misplaced priorities of our leaders as she highlights a particular person's absence as the disaster unfolded in Australia. Most countries at present are doing little to reduce carbon emission and greenhouse gases even after signing the Paris Climate Change Agreement in 2015. Sadly, till date, no country has taken adequate steps in meeting the standards of emissions nor has the approach to mitigate climate related disasters has witnessed major transformation in recent years. Pouring out money as aid and coming up with band aid solutions while the disaster is unfolding or it is over has is the popular remedy of our present times.

Bruno Latour in *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime* rightly points out that terms like ‘ecological crisis’ or ‘environmental crisis’ do not signify the material reality we are living in as the word ‘crisis’ carries an underlying meaning that “this too shall pass” whereas terms like “environment” and “ecology” that humans will remain unaffected. He suggests the phrase “a profound mutation in our relation to the world” to describe the situation we in. Both the novels in discussion precisely lay bare some facets of this “mutation in our relation to the world”. Croggon’s narrative is an isomorphic, fantastical retelling of a narrative from our times where an extractivist authoritarian regime is working hand in gloves with a corporate to produce profitable goods while it disenfranchises people enmasse. Environmental degradation in the story is the resultant effect of grand developmental projects that yield profits for select few but are the mainly responsible for the dispossession of common folks. The effects of the steady depletion of the life giving river’s water levels on self sustaining communities living on its bank, lays bare the brutal operations of state power and short-sightedness of policymakers. Sim, the narrator, in the opening pages of the narrative recalls the times when the river flowed in its most glorious avatar and natures bounties satiated the needs of her people kept them happy:

When I was a child I never went hungry. Each year we harvested a crop of barley, and my father grew cabbages, radishes, turnips, peas, beets and beans, and we had a small orchard of apple and walnut trees, with a mulberry tree to sweeten our table and mountain pepper to spice our dishes. There was meat and milk and, of course fish. (Croggon, 2015, p.14)

The river that is both the god and the road for the people who live on the plains of Pembar; in the good old days swelled and spilled its black silt in the summers that fertilized the harvest. But no one, actually, can put a finger on the date when the river started failing because the process was gradual. There were signs of course, but again, no one could read them. Gradually, with the shrinking levels of water the people became poorer but they adjusted to the new conditions hoping that the river would go back to its old form one day. But this misplaced hope dwindled as the river shrank with every passing day and a family of three strangers who lived in a community upriver arrived in a distressed state one fine day. The man Kular Minuar who

arrives with his son Inhiral Minaur and dead wife Ilino Av'hardar narrates the tale of his dispossession to Sim's family that sheltered him. He tells them that under the cruel rule of King Tarik, a big company occupied the empty spaces of the Upper Pembar Plains and decided to grow the profitable crop cotton because it was easy to access river from there. The company got white-skinned outsiders as workers who were managed by people wearing clean, grey uniforms and carrying whips and guns. As most of the river water was directed towards the cotton fields the water levels depleted but the real disaster hit the community when mysterious disease struck the community and crops and animals started dying. The villagers eventually understood that these happenings were occurring because the water drained by the company into the river was poisoned as it carried the remnants of the pesticide used to treat the cotton crop. This discovery led to a series of face offs between the people/farmers and the company's soldiers and eventually these encounters turned bloody. In one such encounter Kular's wife was shot and they tried to escape the Tarnish soldiers and a place that denied them access to water. To quote Kular, "If we have no water, we cannot live...They don't care if we starve. They don't care if they poison the water. And they are killing the River. Soon it will die, and so will we." (Croggon, 2015, p. 53) The fate of Kular's community in Croggon's narrative is not very different from that of many agrarian communities of the developing world that are forced to embrace the monoculture of the "dirty crop" cotton under the industrial agriculture model as pointed out by Vandana Shiva and other environmental activists. The case of Aral Sea in Central Asia is one such example that perfectly fits the scenario depicted in the narrative. Such systems of industrial agriculture wreck havoc on multiple levels: they cause environmental devastation, create monocultures and lead to forced labour to name a few. The structures of violence that mar the lives of ordinary farmers in developing countries may vary from the depiction of the fictional tale but are no less damaging in real life because if access to water is interrupted then a community's social, societal, economic, health, livelihood and food security is directly threatened. In both cases, that is fictional and real, the damage is inflicted by 'outsider' neocapitalist forces that are technologically advanced and hence set the rules of the game. Vandana Shiva in the essay titled *The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* points out that after the trade liberalization of agriculture in India in 1991 under World Bank/ International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment plan

cotton cultivation displaced food crops and “increased by 1.7 million hectares”. Not only corporate hybrid seeds replaced local varieties but because this new variety was vulnerable to pests and required more pesticides that ordinary farmer could not afford the government that was under pressure to cultivate cash crops allowed private corporations to acquire hundreds of acres of land. Shiva’s argument that the industrial agriculture failed to produce more food and destroyed sources of food...stolen food from other species to bring larger quantities of specific commodities to the market, using huge quantities of fossil fuels and water and toxic chemicals in the process” (Shiva, 2014, p. 69)

that will lead to the extinction of humankind is elaborated in an easy to understand manner in Croggon’s novel. MacDribble’s fictional world on the other hand appears to optimistic where children thrive in the pre-lapsarian setting of the ideal farm life that is seemingly untouched by the trappings of the capitalism but the actuality is far from true. The foreman, the benign patriarch of the farm leads a cushiony life when compared with the rest of the inhabitants of the farm. The children study and toil hard through out the day to earn their daily bread. They on one hand cannot be categorized as forced labour but on the other hand they do not have the right over the fruit they work so hard to grow because,

All the good fruit goes to the Urbs in the city, but they wont take fruit with marks on it...Apples cost loads, so none of the farm kids ever had a whole apple to ourselves (MacDibble, 2017, pp. 36-37)

The best yield is packaged and sent to the Urbs for consumption while the unwanted, damaged goods are distributed amongst the children of the farm. The food choices of the children who live on the farm are dictated by the foreman or the manager of the farm who in turn works for a big corporate.

Croggon’s and MacDibble’s protagonists Sim and Peony are new age females: clear headed, rational, determined girls belonging to the proletariat class whose concerns are remarkably different from the teenagers of our world. Sim leaves the comforts of her community life to embark on a journey to the city, to find and bring back the Book, the ‘history’, the oracle and soul of her community that is stolen away by a sly visitor, Jane Watson, whereas Peony, who aspires to be a bee in a fruit farm located in the suburbs is kidnapped by her own mother so that she can work for money in the city as a maid.

Peony lives in a farm community set in the future where bees are on the brink of extinction and swift-footed children are employed by the foreman to pollinate the flowers of fruit trees like apple and apricot. Her Gramps moved to the farm with P's mother Rosie when she was little, before the famine. Tired of living on the streets and hungry Gramps moved to the farm that promised him food and shelter along with many others like them. Peony's mother now lives and works in the city and occasionally visits her father and two children namely Magnolia or Mags and Peony or P. Gramps, Magnolia and Peony love their life in the farm and have no complains. They lead a contended life, living in a small shed made from boxes and with their payment in the form of food supplies. Peony innocent remarks in the opening chapters of *How to Bee* that the "bees went away coz they looked liked pests" as she confesses her desire to be the Bee to the readers. She says: "Before the famine, farmers didn't have enough farm kids to catch the pests so they sprayed poison on the pests, but the poison didn't know which was bees and which was pests" (MacDibble, 2017, p. 22). This confession hints at the nefarious effects of agrochemicals used to safeguard crops in order to maximize their yield. Like P points out, chemicals do not have the ability to differentiate between harmful pests and insects that crucial for agriculture and more often than not cause more harm than benefits. Peony's family of MacDibble's *How to Bee* (2018) and Kular's family of Croggon's *The River and the Book* (2015) are environmental refugees; displaced from their original homes because of irreparable ecological changes caused by the anthropocentric desire to control and reign in the forces of nature. The crises of both the fictional world as well as of the real world hint at the fact that neither do we possess the ability to command or control forces of nature nor do we have capability to foresee the damage we are causing as we tread the sinister road of ungirdled development.

Peony the younger sister, aspires to be the Bee because her promotion from the post of the pest would mean that they would paid little more than what they were earning and she could take better care of disabled Magnolia and the ageing Grandpa. But her mother's aspirations are at loggerheads with the rest of the family. Rosie wants to make some cold hard cash because she doesn't want to live in the shed forever, she wants a home in the city and save some money for hard times. But P like Sim sees herself as an integral part of the world she inhabits not merely as an individual like Rosie or Jane Watson of, *The River*

and the Book for whom self assertion and personal need satisfaction are of utmost importance. Unlike the mature women of the narratives in discussion the young protagonists battle the challenges of the world in transition by adhering to the core values of group orientation, duty consciousness, forgiveness, friendship, sympathy and justice. Sim, an Effenda, or a Keeper of the Book, embarks on a quest to retrieve the stolen cultural repository of the indigenous knowledge systems because without the Book her community's links with the past and future would forever be severed. Without the Book, Sim feels that she has no job or place in the village. Afterall, what can be the role of the Keeper of the Book if the Book itself is lost? Similarly, despite P's intense desire to escape the City and the land of the Urbs, she does not go back to the farm till Esmeralda overcomes the fear of the outside world, burglars and bad people. She stays back for her friend like Sim who stays back for the Book, undermining hardships and overcoming the road blocks that come in her way in the city.

Both the girls strive hard to keep the promises they make and the processes they undergo in the course of their journeys help them to develop into mature individuals who overcome set expectations, prejudices and petty misconceptions they construed as sheltered children. In the course of Sim's search for Jane Watson she learns to forgive her bitter enemy's i.e., Jane Watson's betrayal of trust and the act of theft committed by the latter. Watson's character based on the stereotype of a learned yet conceited left-wing activist, a self-proclaimed messiah of the oppressed people who refuses to operate beyond the boundaries of her logic is irredeemable. She is incapable of understanding the dreadful wrong committed by stealing the priceless possession of Sim's community i.e., the Book. But Sim on the other hand, the simpleton, poor peasant girl is able to understand and forgive Watson's ill thought move. Sim's knowledge and understanding that she derives from her experience is far more superior and powerful than that of Watson's who is seemingly well known, erudite and educated but whose vision is restricted by the blinders of egotism. Peony too in the final section of the novel is heartbroken by her mom's ultimate act of abandonment but her recalcitrance pays. She does not nurse any grudges against her mother and is happy that she is back to the place that she truly belongs to. She realizes that her expectations of a happy family life do not match with that of her mother. Rosie strives hard yet fails to fit into the definition of the happy family constructed by society but her chosen

man is self-centered, violent and demanding who takes away her money and wants to control her. The relationship is doomed from the start but Rosie refuses to see the truth till the end. It is only when she is about to die that she asks her boyfriend to handover their new born child to her family in the farm. Sim and Peony play the role of mother and in their respective social set ups both inside and outside their homes. They take care of their surroundings, siblings, friends as well as pets and are the keepers of the traditions and practices of their respective communities. While the centre of all Peony's decisions are the bees, the farm and her sister Mags, Sim's primary priority is the Book when she lives in the village and Mely, the cat when she lives in the city. The girls emerge as able nurturers and protectors towards the end of the narratives because they value their surroundings and respect people for who they are. Peony and Esmeralda belong to polar opposite worlds but it does not take Peony long to understand that Esmeralda, the spoilt child is not very different from her sister Mags and has to battle personal demons everyday. The class barrier is overcome by genuine empathy and kindness that Esmeralda and Peony have for each other. The worlds the young heroines of the texts in reference inhabit are not free from greed or the desire for excesses but their careful and well thought out choices ensure the well being of their families and communities. Reason and good thought guide the meticulous actions of the protagonists who may not be able to reverse the changes caused by ecological changes but definitely take a step in the right direction. They constantly challenge the discourses of a world that is becoming increasingly corrupt and ruthless; operating under the capitalistic logic of accumulation, competition, mindless consumerism, that frames the "other" as the "enemy" and present an alternative mode of 'being' and 'becoming'. The narratives thus beautifully highlight how the "climate question is at the heart of all geopolitical issues and that it is directly tied to questions of injustice and inequality." (Latour 2018 15) and the need for a planetarity approach to solve the crisis at hand.

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