



# Climate Fiction for Inclusive Pedagogy in Politics

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## Abstract

Research indicates that climate fiction can help readers grasp the fragility of human societies and vulnerable ecosystems, while also de-mystifying the abstractions of climatology and generating alternative climate imaginaries and futures (e.g. Schneider-Mayerson 2018; Death 2022; Hulme 2021). But how can climate fiction enrich students' pedagogical experiences in an inclusive manner? This paper presents three distinct perspectives: that of the lecturer, and one each from two Politics students who read and discussed a climate fiction short story. These three perspectives suggest that climate fiction can break down complex, multifaceted issues, enable critical thinking and facilitate inclusive curriculum design by amplifying under-recognised forms of knowledge and experience. The paper concludes by reflecting on how to best embed climate fiction into environmental politics teaching.



## Introduction

There is no settled definition of 'climate fiction'. Rather, it is in the reading: while making no explicit reference to climate change, McCarthy's (2006) *The Road* is often listed among the greatest 'climate novels' (e.g. Armitstead et al 2017). However, our purpose here is not to interpret texts, but to reflect on the opportunities presented by climate fiction for inclusive pedagogy.

Existing literature identifies three pedagogical benefits of climate fiction. First, it can amplify under-heard voices, as well as undervalued knowledge and experience. Carl Death (2022) shows how dominant climate imaginaries sideline non-Western temporalities, while Africa-futurism places colonialism and slavery at the centre of the history of climate change. While our focus is on reading, writing climate fiction can also be a pedagogical strategy. In 2022-2023, researchers collected 250 'flash fiction' stories from Danish high school students. These had to be set in 2060, include a single protagonist and include both positive and negative climate experiences (Nole 2025).

Second, it may help break down complex, multifaceted issues; helping readers grasp the fragility of human societies and vulnerable ecosystems. Geographer Hulme (2021) has argued that climate fiction is just as much a 'futuring' practice as are policy visions, scenario planning or climate models; therefore, eroding the distinction between 'scientific' and 'non-scientific' futuring practices. However, academic and disciplinary conventions may dissuade students from going to fiction for these purposes.

Third, while climate fiction cannot 'convert' climate deniers, it may help to imagine potential alternative futures (e.g. Schneider-Mayerson 2018). Ghosh (2016) argues that the modern novel is incapable of depicting ecological breakdown, though this is contested by other authors (e.g. Heise 2018). For example, Nole found that the Danish students' stories often featured dystopian tropes, such as surveillance states and suppression of free speech, suggesting the difficulty of imagining alternative futures.

## Lecturer perspective

In December 2024, I rounded off the Environmental Politics and Policy module with a seminar discussing a climate fiction short story: Rachel Handley's (2022) 'The Sound'. In this story, the plants appear to be screaming and humanity cannot understand why. I chose a



four-paragraph-long story for accessibility and so that no prior knowledge of a story would be needed. The students enrolled on this module were second-year Politics and IR undergraduates but also from other disciplines (e.g. economics, geography).

I set the following questions to guide student reading:

- What are your personal responses to this story?
- Which environmental politics themes does this story allude to?
- Do you think climate fiction is a helpful alternative way of communicating about the climate crisis?
- What other cli-fi short stories or novels have you read?

In response, many students were moved by the story or found it a helpful alternative way of communicating about climate change, while others did not. However, many parallels were noted between events in the story and the 'real world', and several links articulated with relevant academic topics, such as climate denial and intergenerational justice. Many students remarked on the fact that it was the children who could hear the plants singing, as well as the extent humans would go to silence the noise of the trees and plants. Interestingly, I noted that some students were unsure about offering their 'personal responses' to the story, suggesting they are not used to this kind of activity.

## **Student perspective 1 (Millie Banister)**

Traditionally, in seminars, students discuss ideas presented in lectures and create a deeper understanding of the concepts being taught. There is often a shared agreement between the intention of the lecture and the author of academic reading. However, Handley's *The Sound* addressed complex environmental issues and facilitated an open discussion of interpretation, with all students not only listening to each other's ideas but also engaging with them. Just one text was able to inspire several branches of thought, already stressing the importance of the implementation of CliFi from the outset. This highlights how CliFi holds strength as a tool, as it inspires diverse and original thought, as well as connection to the present dangers of environmental degradation (Shakun et al., 2016).

In deeper reflection, it allowed us as students to gain an in-depth understanding of intersectionality – a key component in environmental politics (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). Our interpretation of something is inherently biased. Therefore, by engaging with texts that question a person's position and inadvertently reminding them that interpretation is never



neutral, it breaks down this barrier, allowing for a deeper understanding and inspiration for critical thinking. CliFi as a pedagogical tool does not just teach theoretical frameworks but also teaches the importance to recognise that knowledge is never neutral, and critical thinking is of the upmost importance.

Moreover, by placing readers in a situation that they otherwise would not have experienced, it forges an emotional bond that translates to real-world events. A key example is Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, which translates the African American experience: a group disproportionately impacted by climate change. If this novel was implemented as a pedagogical tool, it would allow for the exploration of theoretical frameworks within environmental politics, intersectionality, and discussion of preconceived notions of climate change: aspects that may not feature in traditional approaches.

CliFi isn't just a genre, nor should it be treated as such. In my view, I would encourage educators to consider applying CliFi in their teachings to best break down the barriers that traditional teachings may pose.

## **Student perspective 2 (Adam Parker-Rich):**

Since the seminar, I was initially hesitant about fiction existing in the academic space. However, on second thoughts, many of the most important and well-known pieces of political literature are fiction. Orwell and Atwood focus on authoritarian dystopias, which have since become highly influential within politics and in popular culture. It became clear to me that fiction can be useful in an academic discipline that is not fully empirical.

Political studies are in part scientific, but also influenced by non-scientific areas such as religion and philosophy. Politics is clearly not all empirical, which in turn creates space for stories to be helpful in explaining environmental issues in a vivid and inclusive way. This view is also forwarded by Hulme (2021) who breaks down the boundary between scientific and non-scientific futuring practices. Furthermore, CliFi has a significantly larger reach and is greatly more accessible than academic writings, which promotes inclusive audiences.

First, there is no doubt that Climate Change is a complex topic. The intricate interplay of natural and human factors alongside its global scope and numerous affected systems make understanding Climate Change difficult. It is debated how accurate CliFi should be and whether literature can depict the extent of the ecological crisis (Ghosh, 2016). However, CliFi allows for complex and under-examined issues to be explored and depicted in an engaging way. For example, Handley's *The Sound* highlighted young people's role in addressing the climate crisis. Overall, whilst it is impossible to depict and address the entire scope of the



environmental crisis, CliFi can describe and explain specific elements of this crisis in an engaging and provocative way.

Whilst CliFi is not an educational panacea, it allows more people to write, read and discuss Climate Change. It reaches a wide audience and creates imaginaries that may not have been considered in purely academic works. CliFi and the broader inclusion of fiction in certain academic disciplines can explain complex systems, introduce a broader range of imaginaries and push students to explore the non-empirical side of these disciplines.

Furthermore, in higher education, CliFi functions as an analytical lens that broadens imaginaries, making climate politics more accessible and inclusive. Overall, the inclusion of CliFi helps to diversify the imaginaries presented to students by presenting narratives that extend beyond those found in academic works. Introducing these broader imaginaries may raise questions over plausibility of their narratives. However, if read without the intent to scientifically critique these texts, CliFi and fiction in general can provide students with a broader and more holistic view of environmental issues. This promotes a more inclusive curriculum that delivers a wide range of perspectives to its students.

## **Conclusion and Reflections**

In conclusion, these three perspectives suggest that climate fiction can break down complex, multifaceted issues, enable critical thinking and facilitate inclusive curriculum design by amplifying under-recognised forms of knowledge and experience.

Practicalities will be an ongoing focus. For example, first, when is the best time to introduce climate fiction: at the beginning or the end of a module? Choosing the end may risk student engagement due to the end of term or assessment deadlines. Second, there is a question of how to ensure inclusion is reflected in the choice of texts, as well as their length and format. Finally, there is further work to be conducted on how to properly integrate climate fiction into a module or a degree, as it may sit at odds with 'employability'-focused agendas or established student expectations.



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