

Climate Fiction and Science Fiction

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One impression from our readings is that the threat of climate change is both a serious matter and the latest academic trend. Thus it's not surprising to see scholars and journalists embracing a seemingly new type of fiction dubbed "climate fiction," or "cli-fi" for short. However, this abbreviation—echoing "sci fi," an abbreviation for science fiction—suggests the fictional treatment of climate change is not really new. In fact, climate change has been treated by science fiction for decades. After all, science fiction projects the inevitability of change into the future. It is natural that climate change would be one example, either through natural disasters or human-made ones or through the long passage of time.

For instance, H. G. Wells depicted environmental change over thousands of years in *The Time Machine* (1895), with much of the former London recaptured by vegetation. Life may go on, but the climate changes due to the inexorable forces of nature. In his short story "The Star" (1897), Earth in the near future is threatened by a celestial object hurtling through the solar system. As it approaches the sun, even though it misses the Earth, such a massive object passing so near the planet causes extreme meteorological disasters as it approaches. In its aftermath, "men perceived that everywhere the days were hotter than of yore, and the sun larger ..."

While later science fiction authors also depicted altered climates caused by calamity, other Victorian writers noted how industrialization was affecting their world. In *Hard Times* (1854), for example, Charles Dickens depicts the smoke-filled sky of his fictional northern Coketown, with its "black canal" and "a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye..." Other Victorians extrapolated the effects of industrial pollution into the future. These include William

Delisle Hay in *The Doom of the Great City* (1880) and Robert Barr in “The Doom of London” (*The Idler*, 1892), both describing a future London poisoned by smog. However, the Victorian belief in progress often led to an optimistic view that, while the 19th century might have lived under the cloud of pollution generated by industrialism, further advances would lead to cleaning up the mess. This view would be continued by many authors into the 20th century.

Indeed, in the utopias and other futuristic projections published in the late Victorian period and into the first half of the 20th century, future cities are routinely depicted as well organized and spotlessly clean. Even in early dystopias like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the “bad places” are bad because of their social and political structures, not because they’ve damaged the planet—a contrast with Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), where we find both.

It is not until the 1950s that science fiction writers consider climate change a realistic possibility for the future, doing so within a specific historical context: the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, both presenting the threat of nuclear war and the altering of the environment through radiation and radioactive waste. Similarly, discussions of the effects of pollution spurred science fiction writers to extrapolate present-day concerns into futuristic depictions of a polluted planet. Key examples include J. G. Ballard, John Brunner, Ernest Callenbach, and Kim Stanley Robinson.

Given the privileging of literary fiction within certain circles and the low opinion some still have of science fiction, it is understandable that some people think climate fiction is a new development. However, if one wishes to get a better picture of how authors have speculated about the possible effects of climate change, one should expand one’s view to take in science fiction and not just “literary” authors who have belatedly joined the discussion.