

How Stories Save the World: The Role of Climate Fiction in Mitigating Climate Change

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Abstract

While the mitigation of climate change is typically framed as a problem globally, the literary genre of climate fiction (cli-fi) plays an indispensable role in shaping the cultural and psychological conditions necessary for collective action. Climate fiction addresses the issue by transforming abstract statistics and distant future projections into tangible, emotionally resonant human experiences. First, cli-fi serves as a "prosthetic imagination," allowing readers to inhabit the lived realities of a warming planet thereby breaking through the psychological barriers of temporal and spatial distance that often paralyse action. By providing concrete sensory details and character-driven plots, these narratives make the "hyperobject" of climate change comprehensible and personally relevant. Thus, the paper is an attempt to examine how climate fiction functions as a repository for future memory and a workshop for social resilience. Unlike purely apocalyptic narratives that can induce fatalistic despair, the most effective works of climate fiction model adaptive strategies, reimagine community structures and explore the ethical dilemmas of mitigation and justice. They offer speculative spaces where readers can confront the emotional weight of loss while simultaneously envisioning pathways toward survivable and even thriving futures. This process of pre-traumatic growth and narrative forecasting is crucial for building the psychological stamina required for long-term civic engagement. Cli-fi shape the perceptual frameworks through which society interprets the world with positive impacts. In a culture saturated with misinformation and short-term thinking, climate fiction provides a counter-narrative that centres long-term responsibility and interconnectedness. To conclude, mitigating climate change requires not only technological innovation but also a transformation of the human imagination. By bridging the divide between knowing and feeling, climate fiction cultivates the moral urgency and collective will needed to translate awareness into action, positioning narrative as an essential, though often overlooked, tool in the global effort to stabilize the planet's climate.

Keywords: Climate Fiction, Narrative Imagination, Climate Mitigation, Environmental Humanities, Climate Change.

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INTRODUCTION

The greatest challenge today is climate change which unfolds on a scale so vast in space and so creeping in time that it defies evolutionary wiring (Deep, 2023; IPCC, 2023). Humans are a species built to react to the immediate not to the slow, statistical creep of atmospheric carbon. The world is bombarded with data in connection with climate change impacts and warming thresholds. The deluge of climate data often results in climate anxiety with a plethora of health implications (Parry *et al.*, 2019; Lawrance *et al.*, 2022; Cosh *et al.*, 2024). In this critical gap between knowledge and motivation, a most unlikely hero has emerged: the story. Specifically, the burgeoning genre of climate fiction, or "cli-fi," has stepped forward not merely to document a changing world, but to shape the emotional and moral landscape required to save it (Andima, 2021). The climate crisis is not solely a problem of scientific

community; it is a profound crisis of culture, of values and of the imagination. The world struggles to act because it struggles to envision a future radically different from the present, or to emotionally connect with a disaster that, for many in the Global North, still feels geographically and temporally distant. This is where the story finds its power. Unlike a scientific report, a novel or a film invites the society to inhabit another consciousness, as it allows one to walk through a drought-stricken landscape in someone else's shoes, to feel the grief of a farmer watching topsoil blow away or the desperate hope of an engineer building a seawall. This act of imaginative empathy transforms a globalized crisis into an intimate, personal experience which makes the invisible, visible; the unthinkable, thinkable. Thus, the paper is an attempt to examine how climate fiction functions as a repository for future memory and a workshop for social resilience.

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Storytelling, imagination and the climate crisis

Climate change is notoriously hard to communicate because it is diffuse, long-term, and often experienced as abstract statistics rather than concrete, lived reality. Despite a strong scientific consensus on the urgency of anthropogenic climate change, public engagement remains weak partly because climate risks feel ambiguous, invisible and uncertain in everyday life (Vujić *et al.*, 2025). This sense of psychological distance makes it difficult for people to connect climate data to their own identities, values and choices, creating an “imagination deficit” regarding possible climate futures. Narratives address this deficit by providing temporal, emotional and moral structures. Studies in environmental psychology and communication suggest that narrative forms can sometimes “speak louder than numbers”, particularly when audiences are asked to imagine behavioural change in relation to environmental risks such as biodiversity loss or greenhouse gas emissions. In this way, stories become a bridge between planetary processes and the intimate scale of everyday life, enabling people to rehearse possible responses before those futures fully arrive.

Storytelling is the technology that allows us to feel the reality of a warming planet (Joosse *et al.*, 2024). It transforms impersonal data into the texture of lived experience, helping one to walk alongside a character fleeing a firestorm or grieving a flooded homeland. This act of imaginative empathy does what no scientific paper can: it makes the distant crisis intimate and the unthinkable future thinkable. By engaging the emotions, stories bypass defences, breaking through the paralysis of anxiety and fostering a deep, personal connection to a shared fate. Moreover, imagination is the faculty through which society envisions a different world. Stories are not merely warnings, but also blueprints for resilience, offering visions of adaptation, justice and renewal. In a time of great uncertainty, the act of telling and listening to stories is itself a form of hope.

Climate fiction (cli-fi)

Cli-fi is broadly defined as fiction in which a changed or changing climate is a central driver of setting, plot or character development rather than a mere background detail (Bartosch and Hoydis, 2025). Cli-fi is rooted in science fiction but draws equally on realism and the supernatural, encompassing dystopian, utopian and more ambiguous narratives that foreground climate impacts (Johns-Putra, 2016). Stories for Earth, for example, characterises climate fiction as a form of speculative fiction that explores the consequences of environmental degradation and climate change, often to build emotional resilience in readers as they confront a rapidly changing world. The term “cli-fi” began circulating widely in the 2010s, popularized by journalist and blogger Dan Bloom, even though authors had been imagining climate-altered worlds for decades. Early antecedents include nineteenth-century and

mid-twentieth-century texts that depicted catastrophic weather, flooded cities or poisoned environments, while contemporary cli-fi has expanded to include literary fiction, young adult novels, graphic narratives and genre-bending hybrids. Institutions such as Monash University now explicitly frame “climate fiction” as an important mode of communicating climate science to non-specialist audiences, emphasizing its capacity to translate technical debates into accessible stories about human and more-than-human futures (Monash University, 2025).

Beyond the print literature, climate storytelling has proliferated across media, including narrative film, television series and even video games. Sebesta’s open educational resource *Telling Stories to Save the World* maps a lineage of “climate fiction film” from works like *Soylent Green* to recent titles such as *Don’t Look Up*, tracing how cinema visualizes both impacts and political failures around climate change. In addition, games and interactive media can function as climate fictions by inviting players to inhabit and experiment with different climate futures, thereby extending the genre’s reach into participatory and ludic forms.

Why climate change needs stories?

Climate risks often feel psychologically distant because they are framed as happening far away, to other people, or in the future and because causal chains between everyday actions and planetary outcomes are complex and indirect. Narrative formats can do this by situating climate processes in concrete locales, families and communities, allowing readers to recognize their own vulnerabilities and responsibilities within the story world (Bosone *et al.*, 2023). Emotional connection is another critical dimension. It should be noted that a lack of emotional connection to one’s future self can impede present-day climate action, whereas empathizing with fictional characters who endure climate impacts may help readers connect with their own potential futures. The power of cli-fi lies in its ability to trigger empathic and emotional responses, which can deepen climate consciousness and foster a perceived need for action if carefully handled. In this sense, climate fiction does not merely “inform” audiences; it invites citizens to feel their way into new ethical relationships with the Earth and with future generations.

Climate change needs stories because stories are the technology of feeling, and this imaginative leap transforms a global crisis into a personal reality, breaking through the numbness of information overload. Furthermore, stories are essential for envisioning solutions. Dystopian narratives serve as vital warnings, but also need stories of resilience, adaptation and renewal (Mackenthun, 2021). It is evident that the narratives map the terrain of possibility, offering blueprints for a different kind of future and reminding us that human agency still matters. In a crisis defined by

uncertainty, stories provide a space to rehearse global responses. Stories are not an escape from reality, but a means of navigating it, forging the emotional and imaginative connections that turn passive concern into active engagement. Without stories, the facts remain silent; with them, the facts find a voice that can move the world.

Narrative transportation and environmental behaviour

The concept of “narrative transportation” helps explain how stories influence attitudes and intentions. Narrative transportation theory posits that when individuals become mentally and emotionally absorbed in a story, they temporarily lower counter-arguing, identify with characters and incorporate story-consistent beliefs into their own worldview (Paymard *et al.*, 2025). Narrative transportation occurs when a person becomes fully immersed in a narrative, their cognitive and emotional faculties deeply engaged with the story world. In this state, critical resistance diminishes. The reader is not being persuaded by arguments or data, but is instead living an experience. When that experience involves characters grappling with environmental loss, making difficult choices in the face of ecological collapse or discovering new ways to live in harmony with the natural world, the reader undergoes a form of vicarious learning

and these emotional experiences can reshape deeply held attitudes and beliefs. This immersive process has direct implications for environmental behaviour (Thomas and Grigsby, 2024).

Narrative transportation in environmental stories directly and indirectly increased intentions to engage in pro-environmental behaviours, with empathy towards nature and environmental attitudes acting as mediators (Green and Appel, 2024). In addition, narratives can out-perform statistics alone in some environmental communication contexts. Bosone *et al.* (2023) showed that presenting air pollution risks in narrative rather than purely statistical form can be more effective in motivating behavioural intentions, especially for individuals at particular stages in the behaviour change process. Narrative-based environmental education for children has likewise been found to improve environmental awareness more effectively than non-narrative approaches, suggesting that stories are powerful entry points across age groups. Together, these findings imply that cli-fi, which typically offers rich character arcs and immersive worlds, is well positioned to capitalize on narrative transportation mechanisms for climate engagement (Yang *et al.*, 2022). Table 1 illustrates key narrative mechanisms in climate fiction.

Table 1: Key narrative mechanisms in climate fiction

Mechanism	How it works in cli-fi	Evidence from research
Narrative transportation	Deep immersion in story world lowers counter-arguing and increases identification	Increases environmental intentions in student samples; boosts risk perception
Empathy with nature/other	Readers care about characters, places and species affected by climate disruption	Empathy mediates narrative effects on environmental intentions and awareness
Reduced psychological distance	Concrete, localized depictions make climate risks feel closer and more relevant	Climate fiction visualizes implications of climate change for readers’ own lives
Emotional arousal	Fear, guilt, hope and solidarity motivate reflection and potential action	Narratives can out-perform statistics in motivating environmental behaviours
Modelling of responses	Characters’ choices illustrate possible mitigation, adaptation, or denial pathways	Typologies of cli-fi map diverse response strategies and their imagined

Film, documentary and climate storytelling

Climate-related films and documentaries demonstrate that visual narrative media can alter climate knowledge, concern and behavioural intentions at least in the short term (Bieniek-Tobasco *et al.*, 2019). The documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth* found that viewers reported higher climate change knowledge, concern, motivation and empowerment after exposure and in some samples their intentions to perform climate-mitigating behaviours also increased (Nolan, 2010). Sakellari (2014) observed that the disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* showed that its vivid visualizations of abrupt climate impacts captured audience interest and increased concern, although not always in ways that aligned perfectly with scientific consensus.

series *Years of Living Dangerously*, finding that higher levels of transportation were associated with stronger efficacy beliefs and risk perceptions among viewers. Importantly, they report that narrative engagement could mitigate partisan differences in climate perceptions, suggesting that stories might bridge some of the ideological divides that hinder climate action. In short, “cli-fi films” reinforces this insight, arguing that narrative cinema can help viewers imagine both the devastating consequences of inaction and the social possibilities of more just and sustainable futures. As climate impacts intensify, many people experience eco-anxiety, grief and feelings of helplessness (Comtesse *et al.*, 2021); climate fiction can function as a coping tool as well as a mobilizing force (Schneider-Mayerson, 2018).

Bieniek-Tobasco *et al.* (2020) focused explicitly on narrative transportation in the television

Climate fiction as public communication of science

Rong's review of climate fiction as a communication tool argues that cli-fi helps readers visualize the implications of climate change for their own lives, thereby reducing psychological distance and making risks more salient (Mingcan, 2023). Because the genre often draws on contemporary climate science while extrapolating plausible futures, it can "translate" complex concepts into human narratives that resonate with non-specialist audiences. Science communication has traditionally relied on a one-way transmission of information: from expert to public, from journal to news article, from report to reader. Yet despite decades of this approach, the gap between scientific consensus and public action remains stubbornly wide. Climate fiction offers an alternative pathway, one that does not abandon scientific accuracy but embeds it within the emotional complexity of human experience.

Climate fiction also reaches audiences that scientific reports never will. Many people will never read an IPCC assessment, but they may pick up a novel that happens to be set in a world transformed by climate change. Through the portal of story, they absorb scientific realities almost incidentally, learning about feedback loops and tipping points not as abstract concepts but as forces shaping the lives of characters they have come to care about. This incidental learning is powerful because it bypasses resistance. Furthermore, climate fiction can explore the psychological, social and ethical dimensions that science alone cannot address. It asks what it feels like to live through collapse, what it means to future generations, and how communities might adapt with justice and compassion. In doing so, it complements scientific data with moral imagination, helping society not only to understand the climate crisis but to grapple with its full human meaning.

Popular and educational accounts emphasize several key communicative functions of cli-fi. First, it raises awareness by dramatizing potential consequences of continued emissions, from intensified storms and heatwaves to climate migration and food insecurity. Second, it personalizes responsibility and agency by following characters who must decide how to respond, thus highlighting the ethical dimensions of climate politics. Third, by showcasing diverse fictional solutions, cli-fi can help readers imagine real-world interventions, including mitigation strategies, adaptation practices, and shifts in social norms (Malpas, 2021).

Utopias, dystopias and the politics of imagination

The formal and tonal choices that writers make like utopian, dystopian or somewhere in between, shape how readers interpret climate futures and their own place within them. Classical dystopias emphasize breakdown, scarcity and authoritarian control, often serving as cautionary tales about the perils of inaction or unjust adaptation; classical utopias, by contrast, present

relatively harmonious societies that have navigated climate challenges successfully. Critical dystopias and utopias occupy the middle ground, using ambivalent or contested futures to invite readers to question existing institutions and imagine more just alternatives without offering simplistic solutions. Milner and Burgmann's climate fiction typology also highlights different "response modes" embedded in narratives, ranging from denial and pessimistic fatalism to active mitigation, positive adaptation and deep ecological critiques of human supremacy (Monash University, 2025). For decades, climate fiction has been dominated by dystopian visions. Drowned cities, scorched landscapes and desperate survivors battling over scraps of a broken world are key takeaways. These narratives warn, shock and demand attention. Yet an overreliance on dystopia carries its own danger. When continually imagining only collapse, the risk of normalising catastrophe and foreclosing the very futures are in peril.

The politics of imagination operates on a simple principle. If climate stories are of failure and despair, the society starves the cultural soil from which hope and innovation might grow. Dystopia can paralyse as easily as it can mobilise, leaving audiences feeling that the cause is already lost. This is where utopian and hopeful fiction enters as a necessary counterbalance. Utopian climate fiction does not mean naive optimism or denial of hardship. Rather, it imagines communities that have navigated the crisis and emerged transformed. It raises questions like what resilience might look like, what justice could mean in a climate-changed world, and how human creativity might rise to meet unprecedented challenge. These stories are not an escape from reality but an exploration of possibility, mapping pathways through the darkness.

Between the extremes of utopia and dystopia lies a rich middle ground of critical imagination. These are stories that refuse easy categories, acknowledging the scale of loss while insisting that human agency still matters. They ask uncomfortable questions about power, inequality and the distribution of sacrifice. In doing so, these reveal that the climate crisis is never solely about carbon; it is about who gets to imagine the future and whose voices shape the world to come. Thus, by expanding the repertoire of futures the society can envision, stories become acts of resistance against despair and blueprints for the long work of transformation.

Risks and limitations of climate fiction

Despite its promise, climate fiction is not a magic solution for climate communication and carries several risks. Overly catastrophic narratives can reinforce fatalism or nihilism, leading audiences to conclude that collapse is inevitable and individual or collective action is futile. If stories focus exclusively on spectacular disasters without showing pathways for

resistance or adaptation, they may increase anxiety without offering constructive outlets, especially for younger audiences (Yang *et al.*, 2022). There is also the danger of misrepresenting climate science or oversimplifying complex socio-ecological dynamics in the service of drama. According to Leiserowitz (2004), films like *The Day After Tomorrow* indicate that while such works can raise concern, their scientific inaccuracies may also distort public understanding of climate processes. Additionally, cli-fi markets can reproduce existing inequities by privileging Anglophone, Global North narratives and marginalising voices from regions and communities most affected by climate change. Addressing these limitations requires conscious efforts to promote scientifically grounded, justice-oriented, and diverse climate storytelling.

Across this emerging field, a converging body of evidence suggests that stories can indeed “save the world” in a specific, limited sense: they can expand imagination, deepen emotional engagement and shift attitudes and intentions in ways that support climate mitigation and adaptation. Climate fiction, as a distinct yet heterogeneous genre, brings climate processes into the foreground of narrative life, helping readers and viewers visualise what is at stake, who is affected and how different choices might shape collective futures. When crafted and used thoughtfully, scientifically grounded, attentive to justice and oriented toward agency rather than paralysis, cli-fi can be a powerful complement to policy reports and scientific models in the broader effort to build liveable, equitable world on a rapidly warming planet.

Conclusion

The world stands at peculiar crossroads in human history due to the plethora of impacts of climate change and global warming. In this scenario, climate fiction operates on multiple fronts, as it transports readers into other lives, making the abstract intimate and the distant personal. It reaches across media, from novels to films to documentaries, engaging audiences where they live and feel. It translates complex science into lived experience, embedding knowledge within the texture of human struggle and hope. It expands the political imagination and challenges dystopian paralysis with visions of resilience and transformation. Each of these functions serves a single essential purpose: to make the climate crisis matter, not as a headline but as a felt reality, not as a future threat but as a present call. It should be noted that stories are not alternatives to these things, but their foundations are crucial. Before the people act, organize and act collectively, they must understand themselves as part of a shared story that extends across generations and species. Stories cultivate this caring, this imagining, this belonging. They are the soil from which movements grow. In the end, climate fiction does not pretend to have all the answers. It does not offer easy comfort or simple solutions. But it offers a space to

grapple, to grieve, to hope and to rehearse the countless small and large choices that will shape the centuries ahead. It reminds us that the future is not yet written, that human agency still flickers and that in the act of telling and listening to stories. The world can be saved, but if it is, it will be saved not only by carbon calculators and solar panels, but by the humble, radical act of one human telling another a story that makes the future worth fighting for. In short, mitigating climate change requires not only technological innovation but also a transformation of the human imagination, where climate fiction cultivates the moral urgency and collective will and acts as a tool in the global effort to stabilize the planet’s climate.

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