

Writing climate change

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In English literature – in Shakespeare, in William Blake, Virginia Woolf, E.J. Scovell and Maureen Duffy – there is an incidental but sharply detailed record of British fauna and flora and the evolution of country into town. Shakespeare's imagery is so vital and various because he lived among such a wealth of animals, birds, plants. He could not have known that the city of his time, where domestic and farm animals still lived closely with humans and where fields and woods were never far away, would be replaced by the bigger, hotter, more sterile city of the twenty-first century. He was not deliberately recording the teeming natural world of his time. But his writing has become part of how we understand it is a very different England that we inhabit today.

I have been writing about threatened nature all my life, probably because I grew up in the country and had parents who had no car, were fanatical walkers and took us camping. Then, as a late adolescent, I moved to the city. When for 18 months of my adult life I kept a diary, I was surprised to find how much of it was spent recording urban nature – the trees coming into leaf in the park, the flowers in the tiny front gardens of my London suburb. At the centre of my work – like the 'unwavering band of light' at the heart of every living being imagined by Kurt Vonnegut's imaginary artist Rabo Karabekian – is my own country childhood.

Where does climate change fit into this? I have been writing about it for over 30 years, since 1985, when I mentioned it in a novel called *Light Years*, a love story set against the seasons, composed of twelve sections for the months and 52 chapters for the weeks. It sounds orderly, but actually the book describes a world of threatened beauty where things are already slipping out of kilter because of human activities. As the year heats up there is acid rain and the air over Europe becomes thick with pollution; August, the hottest month of the year, is unnaturally hot, and leads us on to a section set on a sulphurous, boiling Venus. The red planet is a metaphor for what the earth might become. I'll read a section from it just to show that some of us in Brexit Britain still know we live in Europe.

Dog-days. Still getting hotter.

Every night of the year, the sky over Paris, London, Frankfurt is faintly orange. Thousands of tons of fossilized sunlight are being burned. The air thickens with carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen.

In August, great flashes of lightning split the orange from top to bottom. The little humans pray for rain. When it comes, it is acid rain.

A third of the German forest is dying. The insects have lots of dead wood to bore.

In England, not very much is noticed. Dog-roses wilt in their proper season, horse-chestnut fruit grow tiny horns, thistles turn into plugs of pale fur.

Venus, the closest planet to Earth, was once much more like us. It did have water, once.

A little too close for comfort, now.

The yellow clouds are sulphur. Under that, carbon dioxide. The surface is hot as fire.

My first memory, the substrate on which my subsequent life has been written, is the long white shining beach down which I ran, aged 2, towards the enormous sea. This was in Shell Bay, Dorset, Southern England. For some reason a white multiply-indented piddock shell stopped me in my tracks, amazed. Its twin, picked up weeks ago in Kent, sits on my desk now, a small pale time traveller, my talisman as I finish a new novel about climate change refugees set twenty years in the future.

In the real world, the climate refugees are here already. They are in Dover, in Kingsdown, in Hastings, in Ramsgate. The refugees arrive half-drowned in small boats, fleeing war or the consequences of warming. in the small coastal towns near me in Kent, in the South of England.

Climate change has been central to four of my novels: *Where are the Snows* (1990), *The Ice People* (1998), *The Flood* (2004) and now *The Red Children* (Jan 2022). But I have never thought 'I ought to write about climate change'. Novelists and poets don't usually want to be dutiful, they want to be free. The deep origin

of writing is not in the groomed self that adopts moral positions: it is in the wild self which remembers, the child self, the one which registers love and fear.

My first visceral conviction that climate change was definitely happening came from my garden at the end of the 1980s. Every year my Japanese quince tree bloomed by the frog pond in very early spring, first tiny tight balls of red on black twigs, then perfect, simple round flowers with curved petals and yellow stamens. Some time in the 1990s the quince bloomed too soon, in December of the old year, not in spring. And it did so again. Countless ordinary gardeners like me saw the seasons were changing.

When I was 13 or 14 years old I saw, on a camping holiday, the glacier at Gletsch, in the Swiss Valais. It was a monumental presence, and I could only clamber on the very edge of it, dust and bright turquoise blue in the cracks, leading up to expanses of blinding white. Now, five decades later, the tongue of frozen water has shrunk until it is several kilometres away from the town it once dominated.

My daughter Rosa was born in 1986 – she was an urban tomboy who loved playing in snow and mud. Quite early in her life I realised my daughter as a young adult might not be able to experience without anxiety the diverse world of ice and sun, forests and rivers I had adored as a child. Through her I found the love and fear I needed to write about climate change.

Where Are The Snows (1991) was a novel that linked the capitalist excesses of the 1980s to a global warming which extended into an imagined twenty-first century. We are living those excesses of wealth and consumption, in real life, even more grossly now, only very temporarily muted by Covid-19. My novel *The Flood* (2004), partly inspired by the widespread European floods of 2002 and 2003 and partly by the prelude to the illegal war on Iraq, was another vision of the consequences of global warming and the paralysed inertia of human beings in the face of it. In my fictional world, when there are floods around London's opera-house, it simply lays on a fleet of gondolas so the rich don't lose their

pleasures. The poor, marooned in their tower-blocks, are the ones who really suffer – until the end of the novel, when all the characters, no matter whether they are rich or poor, have to live the consequences..

The Ice People (1998) shows the acute global warming of the first decades of the twenty-first century, what I call in that book the ‘Tropical Time’, going into swift, unexpected reversal as a new ice age looms. This is, alas, unlikely to happen any time soon, despite the fundamental scientific truth that over the longer-term, climate change shifts between hot and cold extremes have always happened, and always will. The idea for the novel came from biologist Geneviève Woillard’s 1979 study of the pollen record, ‘Abrupt end of the last interglacial in north-east France’, which surprised me by showing how very rapidly, over a few decades in the Pleistocene period, temperate trees were replaced by spruce, pine and birch. Could this be true, I thought? Yes, it is true. The old model of slow, steady climate change has been replaced by one of much swifter and less predictable shifts. Democracy in the age of the shrinking welfare state is unlikely to withstand disastrously rapid climate change. I try to keep abreast of scientific knowledge and subscribe to *New Scientist*, the British weekly publication. Art draws on individual memory and emotion, but science has access to longer spans of memory and can investigate geological strata, ice cores and fossil pollens.

I have always been interested in telling the story of my species as well as my own individual one. In my later books I have turned, like many other older artists including Shakespeare, to the slightly more detached view of the world as comedy. This protects me, probably, against artistic wailing and gnashing of teeth. I also feel that perhaps I should cheer and comfort my readers. The climate change novel I have just finished, *The Red Children*, is a fairy-tale about migration, a satire and also a book that suggests we can still find a happy ending – but only if we realise we must be more than human, must recognise the 95% of DNA that we share with other species, and understand that we all need each other, not just for poetry, not just for beauty, not just for mental and physical health and the happiness of our children, but in order for carbon life to survive.

Human beings are art-making creatures because of a broader human characteristic, the urge to transform. Fishing, farming, mining, building, burning, ever since the Neolithic revolution we have been transforming the planet, and now we have megacities, industrial-scale agriculture, the giant footprints of global energy firms, search engines, digital storage – our addictive digital activities are likely to overtake air traffic as a source of global warming over the next five years. Authors, academics, scientists, all of us prisoners of digital searches, are among the worst offenders. Though how innocently, how sweetly we fell in love with knowledge! My novels dramatise the unintended consequences of human activity, and most of my comedy is about people who do not understand what they are doing and never see the bigger picture. Only now climate change is not just in the bigger picture. Now it's right here outside my window, pressing its hot face against the glass, whispering 'Remember me; remember me.' We have transformed the world. Can we transform ourselves?

References

***Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut, 1973**

Geneviève Woillard, 1979, *Nature* 281, 558-562