The gifts of fiction at the time of climate emergency

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Narrative fiction is an underappreciated tool for seeding ideas about transformational change. Although fiction cannot replace action, stories are the oldest human technology for shaping beliefs, emotions and attitudes that inform our responses to real-life situations. Today's audiences often feel trapped in a degenerative, extractive socio-economic system that makes us complicit in the destruction of our planetary home. But it doesn't have to be this way. Stories can also offer tools for imagining a different trajectory, empowering us to turn the emergency into an emergence. This article outlines three gifts of fiction relevant for our times: insight (into the present moment), metaphors (to think with) and agency (to envision ourselves as change-makers).

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In the last pages of Eleanor Catton's ecothriller *Birnam Wood* (2023), billionaire Robert Lamoine assures himself of impunity. Lamoine had just committed the worst ecocidal heist in New Zealand's history: he illegally extracted rare earth minerals from a national park, poisoning its entire ecosystem, and covered the mining operation as a construction project for a doomsday bunker he was allegedly building on a farm bordering the park. Now that the operation has been discovered, Lamoine is wrapping things up:

> *He knew that once the rare-earth elements were in his hands, no government of any country in the world was really going to care how he had gotten them – and that included New Zealand. Sure, there might be a bit of knuckle-rapping, a few warm words [...] but so long as there was a phone in everybody's pocket, so long as there was a screen in front of every face, so long as there were batteries and satellites and cameras and GPS, so long as there was avarice, so long as there was loneliness and envy and ambition and boredom and addiction, he, Lamoine, would be untouchable. [...] He would even be hailed as a liberator: the man who*

> *bravely faced down China and secured technological independence for the West. (p 399)*

As happens in classical tragedies, in the moment of almost ultimate triumph, Lamoine falls. He is shot dead by an old woman whose husband he had murdered. He will never be the richest person alive or anyone's liberator. This ending is no consolation, of course. The irreparable damage Lamoine created will remain New Zealand's burden for centuries to come.

Among many gifts of Catton's multilayered novel is a nuanced representation of the extractive ecocidal logic that accelerates the climate catastrophe. Unless you are a lawyer engaged in a protracted battle against ecocidal lobbies or an activist on the ground, few of us have any chance to grasp the insidiousness of the ecocidal system at the heart of our petronormative civilization. Next to direct experience, stories are the best tool to help us learn about how the ecocidal machine works. Stories can also show how to disrupt the system and what we can do to accelerate a transition to an ecological civilization. This insight is foundational to the environmental humanities and is now being recognized by climate scientists. As Mann (2024) remarks, to tackle the climate crisis we must "find compelling narratives that are engaging and motivating, narratives that convey both *urgency* and *agency*" (p. x).

In this reflection I want to talk about three gifts of fiction at the time of the climate emergency. The first gift is *insight*. The other two are *metaphors* (to think with) and *agency/community* (to envision yourself as a change maker). Most stories, of course, will offer all three and more, but I want to unpack each gift as a separate process using three narratives as examples.

More than anything else, *Birnam Wood* offers insight. The insight is into how extreme wealth has become a key driver of ecocide: one that legitimizes and accelerates human creativity toward planetary destruction. In the name of wealth for the few, the possibilities of liveable futures for human and nonhuman life are being rapidly eroded. This paradox of the modern industrial petro-civilization is not merely inconvenient. It is also resisted by the twin forces of belief in economic growth as a solution and the dominant institutional discourse of "normalized denial" that "help frame an atrocity in process as business as usual" (Zimmerman, 2022).

Despite this resistance, the realization of how extractivist wealth concentration is destroying the planet's life-supporting integrity has been increasingly central to discussions about the climate emergency. The climate catastrophe is a symptom of a larger Earth overshoot created by the extractive logic of capitalism. An exponential acceleration of the climate crisis has by now been correlated with the exponential rise of wealth inequality and the rise of a billionaire class which currently stands at just below 3,000 individuals. This is why, over the past few years, climate justice has emerged as the key framing for addressing this problem. Although entirely fictional, *Birnam Wood* offers a more emotionally engaging insight into the complexities, causes and outcomes of carbon inequality than any policy report. It is likely to reach a much wider audience too.

The second gift of fiction is metaphor. The title of *Birnam Wood* is a good example again, even though Catton uses it only as a name of the eco-rebel collective. Pulled from *Macbeth*, Birnam Wood has larger metaphorical resonance too: it stands for the inconceivable that one is warned will ensue unless one changes one's course. For Macbeth, the inconceivable was Birnam Wood approaching the castle, marking the end of his tyrannical reign. For our times, Birnam Wood would be the climate collapse: a human-caused collapse of the stable Earth system we have been warned about but have taken no real steps to prevent. Except that when it starts cascading down our economic, political and social systems, the price will be paid by all forms of life on Earth, not just humanity.

The search for the best metaphors to live by and think with has been central to environmental and climate advocacy since its earliest days. Rachel Carson's opening fable in *Silent Spring*, for example, builds on the metaphor of pestilence to communicate the multiple and interrelated effects of environmental pollution. Other metaphors have been proposed over time, in activism as well as fiction. The warning ones include extinction, the Great Unraveling, a train heading toward a cliff, or humanity as a virus, a fossil fuels addict, or a species at war with the planet. Positive metaphors have been crafted too. The most successful ones include Greta Thunberg's cathedral thinking, transition to an ecological civilization as a moonshot – seemingly out of reach yet ultimately possible – the Green New Deal, Marshall Plan for the Earth, and our finest hour. Indigenous and ecofeminist thinkers have disseminated even more ecocentric identity notions, such as Water/Earth Protectors, intergenerational and interspecies kinship, and We Are Nature.

Metaphors matter because they provide narrative containers for our values, worldviews, self-images and goals. Metaphors shade into realities and share the same operational space with them. What is believed is what is sought. What is sought is often realized. Each metaphor casts us in specific roles. It brings a set of assumptions about our circumstances and agency – assumptions we can also contest and redefine. Metaphors to think with are another gift that fiction helps us notice.

One of the most inspiring metaphors for the time of the climate emergency is a journey. Any journey consists of multiple beginnings and ends interlaced on a continuum where each end can mean a new beginning. Such is the case in Oliver Jeffers's *Begin Again: How we got here and where we might be going – Our human story, so far* (2023a). *Begin Again* is built entirely on the metaphor of journey and especially on the key question confronting humanity at this juncture: where do we go from here? This future-oriented beginning is couched in a reflection on the three tentative beginnings of the humanity's journey: with fire as a technology, with human hands that enabled all other developments, and with the emergence of life, including the human species, from the world's oceans.

As species on a forever-journey, Jeffers asks, where do we *want* to go? The middle part of the story looks at where we actually are, "on this dry land, where we've always been" (p 20). Our present, the narrative notes, is divisive, exploitative and destructive. Here Jeffers introduces two oft-quoted metaphors:

a competitive, suicidal race to "we don't know where" – illustrated by a group of blindfolded humans running toward a precipice (p 33); and an equally suicidal self-sabotage of "burn[ing] the ship we are sailing on" – illustrated by a half-burned ocean liner (p 43). Sandwiched between these two paths is the alternative vision represented by a glorious sunrise – the metaphor for a new beginning – in which "we find new ways of using the old ways: the heat from the stars, the movement of air and water, using what we find near us to make with the future in mind" (p 40) – all of this "for purpose and love" (p 41). This metaphor soon transitions into an image of spaceship Earth: "Wherever we go, we all go together, so all of us must see we are no longer just passengers on this ship. We are its only crew, we each have a part to play" (p 45).

Having outlined the ecocentric goal, the narrative asks: "how do we get there?" (p 48). Jeffers's tale stresses that the new journey must start with creating "better stories, bigger ones, where we all fit inside the same powerful plot" (p 49) in which "we think beyond our own lifetimes" (p 50). This is how Jeffers leaves the reader at the end of the book: primed, through a set of metaphors, for confronting the climate emergency as a collective journey in which "wild beauty" and hope can be discovered "wherever you look for it" (p 52).

The third gift of fiction is a sense of agency and community. This gift is linked to the work of metaphors, including in *Begin Again*. Jeffers addresses it directly in a video teaser for the book when he talks about humankind as "cooperative species [...] driven by stories". *Begin Again*, he says, was created "using navigation terms" so that it can possibly be "a key you can get inside yourself and turn the steering wheel a bit by creating better stories". These guiding metaphors, in turn, Jeffers envisions as tools of change: "I want people reading this book [...] to feel galvanized that it's possible, that we're not all doomed, and that they have a role in whatever this unwritten future is" (all quotes from Jeffers, 2023b).

To be galvanized and inspired to believe that a different future is possible is perhaps one of the biggest challenges for anyone living today. Although stories cannot replace action, they are the most advanced human technology for inspiring change, empowering ecocentric positions and giving us "an idea of where we fit in the long line of time" (Jeffers, 2023b). This gift of agency and participation in a larger community of life comes to the fore in a number of recent narratives, especially in works of ecocentric, planetarianist fantasy that assert our kinship with all life.

Brian Selznick's graphic novel *Big Tree* (2023) offers the gifts of agency and community through a story of nonhuman characters whose struggles may not be that different from our current predicament. The protagonists are two Sycamore seeds, Louise and Mervin. They live through the Cretaceous/Paleogene extinction event 66 million years ago, which wiped out three quarters of the plant and animal species. They start in a seed pod in their Mama tree. They travel the world when the pod is released, meeting different life forms – including the mysterious Old One: Planet Earth. Eventually, Louise grows into a massive tree while Mervin is stuck in a rock crack for centuries. When they meet again, one sibling is a mature tree, the other still a seed. The

book ends with another tree child sapling, picked by a human child from a crack in a sidewalk, and transplanted into a pot to grow into the future.

Selznick's work does not offer cheap hope or a promise of success. What the story centres, though, is the ecocentric thrill of belonging in a larger community of life and the responsibility we all have to stand for life every step of the way. Without any direct calls to action, the book's cultural work is a message about everyone's responsibility to do our part to stop, contain and mitigate destruction.

Louise and Mervin learn this from their adventures. Louise is the first one to tune in to the voice of the Old One. For Mervin, this realization takes centuries, but he eventually starts hearing the Earth too. And this is what he learns in one conversation:

> *"Do you really think we can save you?"*
> "Mervin, I'm not sending out the message for myself."
> *"You're not? But aren't you the –"*
> "Yes, but I will survive. I have survived since the beginning. I've survived fires and floods and eons of ice. A billion years goes by pretty quickly for me. No, I'm not in danger."
> *"But if* you're *not in danger, who is?"*
> "You are, Mervin. All life is in danger. Remember, life began as a gift, and it must always be treated as such. No matter how unstoppable the danger seems, no matter how unavoidable, there's always something you can do." *(pp 433–5)*

Like the entities of Mervin's time, we too have refused to hear the voice of the Old One. And like Mervin, we need to engage in this conversation even as we are facing the accelerating climate emergency. Like for Mervin, so too for us the only way forward is through building communities – for there is always something we can do to honour the gift of life on a habitable planet. This is the agency and community that we are reminded of through the gifts of fiction.

Looking ahead, we will need to find creative ways to leverage stories as tools for the societal transformation toward an ecological civilization. In the US the current administration has already pushed the country – "back again" – into climate denial, dismantling of environmental regulations and reversing climate action. This time round, the effort is more comprehensive. It includes blocking any environmental and climate justice projects as well as strategic lawsuits against public participation – like oil giant's Energy Transfer against Greenpeace – to stifle dissent and protests. The recently announced US$660 million punitive damages Greenpeace allegedly owes the oil giant for "defamation, trespass, and civil conspiracy" is a form of intimidation that may well become the norm (Greenberg, 2025). Once denial and intimidation become policy principles, the US would effectively become a hostage of a story that can only accelerate the collapse in a very Birnam Wood fashion.

As the beast slouches toward Bethlehem, our challenge is to come up with stories that offer an alternative to the revanchist anthropocentric myopia

ascendant today. Personally, I find strength in two commitments. First, although it may be tempting to believe otherwise, Americans who care about climate, nature, trees, wildlife and oceans do not belong in one political camp only. Yale studies, for example, show that over 72 per cent of Americans believe that climate change is real, over 70 per cent believe it will harm future generations and over 58 per cent believe it is already harming people in the US today (Marlon *et al.*, 2024). These sentiments are dominant outside of the US as well, with 72 per cent of people across eighteen of the G20 countries supporting "making it a criminal offence for government or leaders of large businesses to approve or permit actions which cause serious damage to nature and climate" (Earth4All, 2024). These opinions increasingly transcend political and generational divides. They are effectively a shared space for acting together – and I hope we will.

Second, as Rebecca Solnit argues, if we fight for what we love, we don't get to give up only because a political outcome is different from what we expected. Instead, we mobilize differently, recognizing that past strategies have failed. This mobilization is not about finding hope. Rather, as Solnit (2024) puts it, it is

> *about being resolute and lining up resources, the way people generations ago laid up supplies for winter. Just like the fossil fuel industry loves doomers who give up on defeating it, so authoritarians love fear, surrender, people who've decided they're already defeated, who are already afraid to resist. Do not give them what they want.*

The future is yet unwritten. We all have a role to play in how it unfolds.

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