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**Clare Wall on Marc Di Paolo, _Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones_**

Climate fiction is increasingly gaining attention in public and academic spheres, with novels such as Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries* (2015), and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) becoming curriculum staples and films such as the dark allegorical comedy on climate change denial *Don’t Look Up* (2021) gaining significant public attention. The significance of environmental themes and thinking in works of literature and popular culture is highlighted in Marc DiPaolo’s *Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones*. In *Fire and Snow*, DiPaolo approaches climate fiction through a combination of thematic criticism and ecocriticism. *Fire and Snow* provides a broad overview of environmentally focused works of film and fiction from J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis through to contemporary ones, including those by Suzanne Collins, Margaret Atwood, and George R. R. Martin. DiPaolo specifically seeks to examine the secular humanist and Christian elements present in the environmental fiction written by these authors and how their works continue the legacy of environmentalist sentiments present in Tolkien's and Lewis's works.

DiPaolo’s prior scholarly research on war and politics in film and comics is visible in the insightful exploration of how *Fire and Snow*’s focal texts intersect with contemporary politics, popular culture, warfare, religion, and society. His monograph primarily examines contemporary novels, films, and television shows, drawing attention to the ways that these works have drawn inspiration from Lewis and Tolkien or built upon their established genre conventions and moral messages. By reaching back to Lewis's and Tolkien's oeuvres to compare prominent aspects of their novels with how they have been adapted by contemporary authors—especially the aspects of environmentalism, ethics, and antifascist messages—*Fire and Snow* highlights several cultural shifts in our understanding of nature and the environment. In doing so, DiPaolo also draws attention to the underlying anxieties and social concerns that continue to fuel contemporary works of climate fiction, connecting them to real events to illustrate their cultural significance and attempted interventions.

*Fire and Snow* also weaves two major themes into many of its chapters: the connection of violence and fascism with environmental destruction, and the ethics of empathy and compassion that
runs through ecofiction. These two critical threads are well established through the early chapters, such as the first chapter discussing Hollywood adaptations of films and their frequent failure to capture the environmental sensibilities of their origin texts. Here, DiPaolo provides a detailed analysis of how Hollywood has adapted a form of Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey,” but one that often omits “the return,” where the community to which the hero returns is ruined or corrupted and must be regenerated. DiPaolo presents a compelling argument that such a regeneration adds “an ecologically minded coda to the heroic fiction narrative template that makes it far more progressive and enlightening than the idea that the hero’s journey is solely concerned with the slaying of monsters” (p. 26). He builds further on this theme of the glorification of violence and the suppression of ecological narratives in film adaptations to lay the groundwork for a recurring thread of fascism and conflict, which he revisits throughout Fire and Snow. DiPaolo argues that the presence of fascist or proto-fascist villains is a staple feature in climate fiction spanning from the works of Lewis to those of contemporary writers such as Atwood. This identification of it as a genre feature and the critical attention DiPaolo gives to it add a novel approach to the works of climate fiction he discusses and help connect climate change and ecological destruction with their likely social consequences. This argument is one of the most significant presented in his monograph and its resurfacing in later chapters helps add cohesion to Fire and Snow as a whole.

Building on his discussion of warfare and the glorification of violence, DiPaolo revisits the topic of empathy—first introduced in discussing Tolkien’s and Lewis’s works—and extends it to his chapter on Suzanne Collins’s Hunger Games series (2008-10). As with many of the chapters in Fire and Snow, DiPaolo uses his earlier establishment of Tolkien’s Christian environmentalist and social sensibilities to examine how Collins’s series illustrates the lasting and devastating costs of warfare and presents a Catholic social politics akin to Tolkien’s that centers on compassion. This chapter uses Collin’s narrative to make arguments for the important roles of empathy and compassion in achieving social changes for a more sustainable future. DiPaolo once again returns to his earlier arguments regarding how environmental and antiwar messages are often erased or obscured in Hollywood adaptations of texts, arguing that the film adaptations of Collins’s series betray some of the core messages of the novels through their glorification of the battle scenes in the Hunger Games competitions. However, DiPaolo’s reading of the series protagonist, Katniss, as heroic in part because of her connection to nature (as when he states that “she is ‘of the hills.’ She is not a synthetic person,” p. 228), reasserts a problematic liberal humanist dichotomy that places technology or those modified by it outside of nature—a philosophical position that has been used not only to reduce compassion and care for said “unnatural” creatures/beings, but which has historically situated humans as outside of nature and thus in a position to have dominion over it. While DiPaolo draws valid critical attention to how Collins’s series is informed by a form of compassion-driven, socially engaged, and antiwar politics akin to Tolkien’s, a greater emphasis on how such empathy and compassion might lead to a transformative ecologically oriented social consciousness could have strengthened the chapter.

In fact, while Fire and Snow’s subtitle claims its focus is on “Climate Fiction from The Inklings to Game of Thrones,” DiPaolo’s work would have benefited from greater clarity in defining climate fiction as a subgenre. This criticism is shared by Kristine Larsen, who notes in her review of Fire and Snow that DiPaolo “never quite gets around to defining it beyond the quotation from [J. K.] Ullrich’s Atlantic article.”[1]. DiPaolo states that “climate fiction reaches several different genres and is identifiable in its dramatizing of issues such as deforestation, pollution, climate change, sustainability ... and the oppression of women and ethnic
minorities to create a self-contained ‘ecosystem’ of oppression’ yet proceeds to argue that “in a sense, for a climate fiction narrative to be centrally concerned with the environment is for climate fiction to be centrally concerned with life itself” (p. 8) and thus, in a sense, is “everything fiction” (p. 9). This is not a particularly clear definition of climate fiction, considering there are other terms that might be a better fit for his areas of discussion such as ecofiction, Anthropocene fiction, or environmentalist fiction. It may also post a confusing definition for those who may be new to understanding the genre and its conventions. While DiPaolo does note that climate fiction is not necessarily speculative or fantastic in nature, an important point considering his focus is on speculative texts, it is surprising that he does not offer his own definition to clarify his position on what constitutes climate fiction for the purpose of his monograph or why his selection of texts helps define significant features of it as a subgenre.

This lack of definition becomes a larger issue as the scope of Fire and Snow encompasses more broadly the theme of environmentalism as a whole, especially when chapters turn to explorations of Christian environmentalism. This may lead to a blurred understanding of just what climate fiction is versus the broader area of environmental literature. While climate fiction is certainly a subset of ecofiction, the emphasis on climate in shaping the narrative and the world the characters inhabit should be apparent. In many cases, texts that really could have brought in more diverse representation of authors and climate fiction futures such as Larissa Lai’s Salt Fish Girl (2002) and Cherie Dimaline’s The Marrow Thieves (2017) are overlooked, while works with more generic environmentalist themes such as the Dr. Who episodes discussed in his chapter “The Time Lord, the Daleks, and the Wardrobe” appear to have been included for their focus on antifascism and an homage to C. S. Lewis in one episode. Fire and Snow does, however, provide a broad examination of the ever-growing area of ecologically focused science fiction and fantasy across areas of literature, film, and television alongside contemporary political discussions and issues such as oil pipeline projects, thus helping position these works as relevant within a greater cultural context. While often painting with a broad brush, DiPaolo effectively foregrounds many of the complex interconnections between military conflicts, industrialization, equality, the rights of Indigenous peoples and women, and environmental issues such as deforestation and pollution that are all parts of the assemblage driving climate change.

In terms of audience and the critical tone, Fire and Snow is well researched and does not present heavy blocks of theoretical content, thus making it accessible to introductory college and university classes. As mentioned, it offers a broad discussion of several contemporary texts, themes, and comparisons of the extent to which ecological themes are visible in novels versus their film adaptations. Fire and Snow also positions itself clearly within the interests of those engaged in Tolkien and Lewis studies, as well as studies of theology, ecofiction, and popular culture. However, while it certainly brings together ecocriticism and theology, the primary focus on climate and environmental fiction gets lost in places, especially as chapters frequently cycle back to discussions of Lewis, Tolkien, and Christian theology. The effect of this varies from chapter to chapter, giving some a strong overall cohesion and leading to novel critical insights, but leaving the arguments in others at times somewhat awkwardly derailed.

One example of where the focus on Lewis detracts from the chapter’s unity is “Eden Revisited: Ursula K. Le Guin, St. Francis, and the Ecofeminist Storytelling Model.” DiPaolo’s introduction outlines that the chapter “explores the ideological overlap between ecofeminist theorists and science fiction writers who have written political and literary tracts about the moral imperative to reorient the world away from the imperial patriarchy, pollution profiteering, colonialism, and institu-
tional racism and sexism” (p. 18). The chapter begins with a discussion of ecofeminism, its criticisms, and its struggles against patriarchy before moving to contrast ecofeminist politics with Dominionist theological positions. However, to further contrast Christian environmentalism against Dominionism, DiPaolo then turns to Lewis, arguing that while Lewis is “often misunderstood as a misogynistic theologian,” he is “capable of surprising flashes of feminist thought” (p. 152). The discussion that follows attempts to position Lewis as less misogynistic than he is frequently understood to be, with DiPaolo then contrasting him with Tolkien, arguing that “from a feminist perspective ... it seems clear that Tolkien’s views of women were more problematic than Lewis's” (p. 154). This multi-page discussion of Lewis ends with DiPaolo suggesting that “it may well be overstating things to contend that C. S. Lewis was an early species of ecofeminist” (p. 155). In its own chapter, such a discussion about Lewis’s views regarding women could certainly have had a place, but in a chapter allegedly exploring ecofeminist thought, the shift in attention to Lewis results in an abrupt derailment and undermines the chapter’s supposed focus on ecofeminism. Positioning Lewis as a proto-ecofeminist seems not only an overstatement but an unconvincing connection that does little to advance either an understanding of ecofeminism or its influence on speculative fiction and fantasy—something that could have been much better accomplished with a discussion of someone like Rachel Carson who is considered not only a “mother” of the modern environmentalist movement but also a strong influence on ecofeminism and works of ecofiction. While the chapter does return to discussions of ecofeminism, the very small focus on Le Guin, despite being named in the chapter’s title, again upsets the balance. Instead of offering new insights into ecofeminist works, the theological and the ecological seem to chafe against each other in their demand for attention, with the comparison of a more moderate, stewardship-focused form of Christianity against the right-wing Dominionist positions overshadowing DiPaolo’s arguments regarding ecofeminism and its storytellers.

My other primary piece of criticism regarding Fire and Snow is its surprising lack of diversity in terms of its selection of contemporary writers/creators. Certainly, DiPaolo’s range of works offers a solid introduction to the many ways that ecological messages may be present across different mediums in literary and popular culture for those who may be new to climate fiction. Several well-known series and works are covered that could easily be cornerstone texts of a science fiction or fantasy syllabus—or one on climate fiction. However, DiPaolo misses an opportunity to truly give attention to the diversity of authors working within those mediums. Fire and Snow does have a chapter analyzing the interconnections of capitalism with class and race that includes a discussion of Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower (2000) alongside several works that present environmentally ruined capitalist dystopias, but it could have had a much stronger impact if it had focused in greater detail on works of climate fiction that highlight environmental racism and its intersections with class divisions through nonwhite authors’ works such N. K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth trilogy (2016-18).

The lack of any discussion of Indigenous climate fiction is also notable. The closest one comes is the focus on the Dakota Access and Keystone-XL pipelines included in the chapter “The Cowboy and Indian Alliance,” where DiPaolo focuses on fiction that emphasizes collective action and political solidarity to make progress on climate change, largely through examples from Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire series, HBO’s adaptation of it, and Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country (1991). The chapter concludes by connecting the moments of uniting against a greater evil to the real-life collective action occurring in the Keystone-XL and the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. This chapter does offer an insightful reading of Martin’s A Song
of Ice and Fire series (1996- ) as a work of climate fiction, and DiPaolo even touches on how the Children of the Forest function in the text as Indigenous inhabitants of Westeros who were displaced and slaughtered by the human colonizers. DiPaolo’s chapter then turns to a discussion of how Gene Roddenberry’s Star Trek (1965-69) took a similar approach in portraying the Klingons as “multivalent symbols that may stand in for a variety of real-world peoples, but they are consistently symbolic of cultures that the United States is currently involved in either a cold or hot war with ... they have also been evocative of members of African or Middle Eastern nations, as well as ‘Indians’” (p. 256). DiPaolo’s mention of race and stand-ins for Indigenous peoples in both works is valid, but in neither instance does he critique the use of such stand-ins.

Combined with the shift to these themes of collective action and the putting aside of conflicts and differences among conflicted groups and applying them to the real-world situation of unified collective action against the destructive capitalist despoiling of settler colonialism in discussing the Indigenous protests of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the chapter seems to skirt around issues of Indigenous reconciliation as a part of the fight against climate change. In discussing the pipeline protests, DiPaolo focuses on an event involving a showing of support by veteran groups who came to join the land defenders on the front lines. This discussion illustrates how uniting to achieve large-scale collective action on social justice may result in moments of healing and an overcoming of differences, but DiPaolo’s focus on this moment also reveals a lack of attention to Indigenous perspectives. Discussing the Sioux’s description of the pipeline as a “black snake,” DiPaolo makes the somewhat over-the-top argument that the “oft-employed environmentalist image of the pipeline as a ‘black snake’” is “clearly Tolkien-esque. The Pipeline is a snake... It is Smaug, the personification of greed, pride, mercilessness, the hoarding of resources, the burning of the land, and the waste-ful loss of life and mass devastation wrought upon the land during the unnecessary World War I” (p. 269). This statement omits a couple of important facts. Foremost is the fact that the black snake has its own non-Western mythology and symbolism independent from Tolkien’s European-inspired depictions of Smaug. Second, the black snake is not merely an “oft-employed environmentalist image”; it is a piece of Sioux prophecy regarding a black snake that would desecrate the water and land and cause terrible destruction upon going underground[2]—something that adds significance to their fight against the pipelines in that the pipeline as snake poses a direct threat to the land and people. While the Sioux’s serpent and Tolkien’s Smaug share commonalities in their embodiment of evil and both require a large, united effort to oppose them, not mentioning the significance of the black serpent in the Sioux cultural beliefs misses an opportunity to draw out some of the nuances of those despoiling figures. To his credit, DiPaolo does include a short list of nonfiction texts for those wishing to read up on topics of Indigenous culture and histories in America and includes quotes from Native American author Joy Harjo’s coverage of the Indigenous-led protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline. However, the lack of reference to any Indigenous climate fiction is notable. While certainly touching on Indigenous issues both in the works of fiction and in the real world, at times it seems as if this chapter is avoiding some of the more uncomfortable topics of coloni alist history, environmental racism, and North America’s horrific genocide of Indigenous peoples—all of which create challenges to achieving collective action and environmental justice.

Overall, Fire and Snow makes an important intervention in climate fiction scholarship, both by connecting aspects of environmentalism in the genre to Tolkien’s and Lewis’s genre legacies and in its analysis of how ecological messages are often overshadowed or lost entirely in film adaptations of environmental fiction—a point well worth further critical examination. The prose is clear
and written in a way that would likely also engage readers from a non-academic background. The connections drawn between works of film, fiction, journalism, or television and contemporary sociopolitical events and concerns also help situate the focal texts and ground their critical significance. While some chapters of *Fire and Snow* would benefit from a tighter focus and greater attention to works by BIPOC authors, the book overall presents several insightful and novel readings of texts not always recognized as intended climate fiction, drawing attention to how these works may resonate differently with audiences based on changing cultural preoccupations. The shared concerns that DiPaolo highlights throughout *Fire and Snow* also contributes to modeling ways that eco-fiction may help facilitate greater collective action and understanding across broad social, political, and cultural spectrums—a necessary movement for meaningful change to be achieved.

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment

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