



Mary Fifield, Kristin Thiel, eds. *Fire & Water: Stories from the Anthropocene*. New York: Black Lawrence Press, 2021. 250 pp. \$25.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-62557-028-4.

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As Naomi Klein said back in 2015, “climate change, changes everything.”[1] As the impacts of climate disruption, climate crisis, or climate dissolution (depending on what kind of sources one is reading) manifest as wildfire, extinction, migration, severe storms, heat waves, hard rain, and drought, so too does our human psychology develop new coping strategies: after denial lies anxiety, grief, solastalgia, and love. This is the “everything” encompassed in the seventeen stories collected in *Fire & Water: Stories from the Anthropocene*, edited by Mary Fifield and Kristin Thiel.

The anthology answers another famous challenge, a *call to arts* as it were, by writer Amitav Ghosh (*The Great Derangement* [2016]), who is mentioned in Nicole Walker’s introduction to *Fire & Water*. “Ghosh challenges fiction writers who invoke our current times to engage with climate change, not only because climate change is happening before our very eyes, in our current time, but also because mimetic fiction encourages writers to imagine how environmental catastrophe affects existing communities” (p. 1). In the preface, the editors note that the book began with a conversation in a Portland, Oregon, bar. As writers, how do we meet these times?

First there was cli-fi, a moniker for climate-themed fiction (and of course, there have been plenty of post-apocalyptic and science fiction an-

thologies to explore new, lost, and transformed worlds). An emergent subgenre in speculative fiction dubbed “hopepunk” provides an experimental ground for paradigm shifting through imagination. *Fire & Water*, however, is a different collection. This is a new type of literary fiction that is not “about” climate change (though it is) but rather about how different beings behave in a new reality that arrives slowly, and then all at once.

Fire & Water recalibrates the standards for literary fiction by invoking new realities, both external and internal. The contributors use description, myth, psychology, and a touch of magical realism to depict the current moment, as time and the world we know, slips through our fingers. While set in recognizable times and places, the stories are blurry in the details. No solutions are found here, no vision formed. In fact, the reader is left more uncertain about what happened, or what is happening, and these short stories (some are five pages, some are thirty) invite conversation and rereading.

Every story is well crafted, and fine sentences abound. This, for example, is the last sentence of the last story, “Nature Morte,” by Etan Nechin. The sentence reverberates in the reader’s mind like climate change itself, which is always present, yet never arriving. In a story where the protagonist

merges their identity with a dried-up pond, Nechin writes: “I fell slowly, in profound silence, in between everywhere I was before, descending like a drop of water that will never reach the ground, suspended by the absence of air” (p. 267).

At the beginning of the book, the introduction by Walker provides a comprehensive overview of the stories and insightful commentary on how they are or are not related. The stories themselves encompass a variety of settings (Europe, South Africa, Australia, the Caribbean, and several regions of the United States, including Alaska, California, and Wisconsin) and of characters (young and old couples, parents, a gay man, an indigenous woman, a seal, a blue bear). There are seventeen plots, each with its own climate-related twist: Germany freezes, wildfires take the suburban home of a thirteen-year marriage, dwindling rainfall is meticulously recorded, a teenager attends a summer camp for climate anxiety, civilians are conscripted into disaster management, and the scion of a tainted gazillionaire inherits a space-ark full of collected animals with nowhere to go.

Read separately, each story is a contemplation. Taken together, *Fire & Water* articulates the fractal nature of a crisis that is both invisible and ubiquitous, prompting the reader to take action by paying attention. This anthology raises the bar for climate-themed literary fiction and would be an excellent book club selection as well as a thoughtful complement to any academic inquiry into our planetary predicament.

Note

[1]. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 28.

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