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(Suivi s'il y a lieu, du nom d'usage)

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- **Document audio**

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How science fiction helps readers understand climate change

Can imagined futures of drowned cities and solar utopias help us grasp the complexity of climate change?

It's the year 2140 and two kids ride their skimboards in the heart of Manhattan, near the point where Sixth Avenue meets Broadway. If you are familiar with this junction you would know it is far from the US' current coastline. But in Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *New York 2140*, Manhattan is flooded after unabated climate change causes the sea level to rise by 50ft (15.25m). The amphibian city is now a SuperVenice, a grid of canals populated by vaporettos where characters must learn how to deal with a world both familiar and unrecognisable to us. Mid-Manhattan skimboarding is all too possible in this future.

Robinson's 2017 climate-fiction novel belongs to a growing cadre of works about drowned nations, wind farm utopias or scarred metropolises decades into the future. As diplomats draft the rulebook for the global response to the climate crisis and engineers race to produce better solar panels, writers have found their role, too: telling what Robinson calls "the story of the next century". In doing that, they might be helping readers across the world comprehend the situation in which we currently find ourselves.

Climate change is a notoriously elusive crisis to make sense of, particularly compared to other human-impact catastrophes. Drop some toxic chemicals in a river now and you will see dead fish within days, but what do you witness when you release carbon dioxide? And while, in 2018, a report by UN climate scientists stated that we are heading towards a catastrophe, who can truly imagine what that looks like?

This is where fiction comes in: it brings the abstract data closer to home by focusing on the faces and stories in these futures. Show readers a detailed and textured account of a climate-changed future, says Robinson, and they have an easier time imagining it. It feels real: characters in these novels worry about the welfare of their children,

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25 meddle in extra-marital affairs and grapple with train schedules, just as readers would on their daily lives.

“Science fiction gets people thinking in a way that another report on climate change doesn’t,” says Shelley Streeby, a Professor of Literature and Ethnic Studies at UC San Diego. “It helps people feel about what might be coming, but also about the present.”

30 The numbers for climate fiction, or cli-fi as some people call it, are hard to pinpoint – but they are growing fast. A 2016 review tallied 50 novels dealing specifically with man-made climate change and its effects, with 20 appearing in the previous five years, although this number includes all types of novels. That includes John Lanchester’s new environmental fable, *The Wall*, which has been described as “disquieting and quite
35 good fun at the same time”.

Science fiction’s penchant for extrapolation gives the genre an extra appeal, says Streeby. It is about taking certain conditions that exist nowadays, extending them into the future and throwing a bunch of characters into their midst.

40 It might be hard, for instance, to imagine the implications of a world where temperature has risen by more than 2C, an increase scientists conclude would disrupt much of life on Earth. It is also hard to make sense of the fact that our current lifestyle, without changes, can lead to such a situation. With sci-fi you can take current conditions forward by several decades and imagine what commuting or buying bread in 2080 looks like.

Adapted from Diego Arguedas Ortiz, www.bbc.com, 15th January 2019

