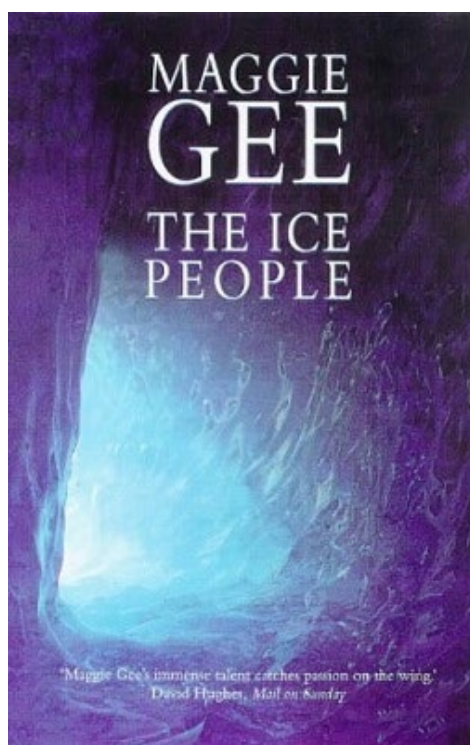


My 1998 'Climate Book of the Year'

Gee, M. (1998) *The Ice People*. London: Richard Cohen Books. 319pp.

This essay continues my series of monthly posts in which I select one 'climate' book to highlight and review from one of the 44 years of my professional career in climate research (starting with 1984, my first year of academic employment). The series will end in September 2027, the month in which I shall retire. [See here for more information](#) about the rationale for this series, and the criteria I have used in selecting my highlighted books.

This '1998 essay' can be [download as a pdf](#).



Can climate change be adequately understood by studying science, technology, economics and politics? In the late 1990s it seemed it could be. The IPCC's scientific assessment reports—the second of which appeared in 1996—took centre stage by revealing what was happening to the physical climate and by projecting what might happen in the future. And the first international political treaty—the Kyoto Protocol—had been negotiated in 1997 to begin the task of trying to arrest emissions of greenhouse gases. Efforts to widen public understanding of human-induced climate change leaned heavily on newspaper articles and TV and radio documentaries—remember, the internet was still in its infancy—explaining the science of the Earth System, the dependence of the world's energy systems on fossil fuels, and what might be done through technology and economics to reduce this dependence.

And then there were the first public campaigns by environmental advocacy groups urging behavioural changes and the beginnings of educational programmes from governments seeking to induce people to save energy.

Yet there was still little cultural engagement with the idea of a changing global climate. There was very little creative exploration of what climate change might mean for different social formations around the world, both now and in the future—whether this exploration be through poetry, film, art, sculpture, music, dance, or religion. This limited engagement was especially true of literary fiction. As Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra later explained in the introduction to their 2018 book 'Cli-Fi: A Companion', the emergence of cli-

fi [climate-fiction] as a new genre of film and fiction was still more than a decade away.¹ The abbreviation ‘cli-fi’, analogous to ‘sci-fi’, was [coined by the journalist Dan Bloom in 2011](#) to designate a new genre of creative fiction. It was only in the 2010s that ‘climate change fiction’ began to be widely recognised in blogs and reading forums, before becoming reified as a genre in academic literary criticism through Goodbody’s and Johns-Putra’s 2018 book.

In their survey, Goodbody and Johns-Putra point to some of the earlier isolated ventures into exploring climate change in novels, for example JG Ballard’s ‘The Downed World’ (1962), Ursula Le Guin’s short sci-fi novel ‘Lathe of Heaven’ (1971) and Arthur Herzog’s thriller, ‘Heat’ (1977). But they suggest that the “first flowering” of climate fiction occurred around the year 2000, naming in particular Maggie Gee’s ‘The Ice People’ (1998), Norman Spinrad’s ‘Greenhouse Summer’ (1999) and TC Boyle’s ‘A Friend of the Earth’ (2000). “As these titles suggest”, say Goodbody and Johns-Putra, “issues associated with climate change were, from the outset, commonly fictionalized within the framework of popular genres, namely sci-fi and, to a lesser extent, the thriller.”²

For my **1998 Climate Book of the Year** I have therefore chosen ‘The Ice People’ by the British novelist Maggie Gee, described by *The Guardian* newspaper on its re-issue in 2008 as “Dark, subtle, humane and utterly convincing, ‘The Ice People’ is one of the first great novels of the globally warmed world”. At the time, Gee was a 50-yr old writer, already with six published novels and having been recognised by the literary magazine, ‘[The Granta](#)’, as one of 20 writers in their 1983 list of Best of Young British Novelists. Gee went on to become the first female chair of the [Royal Society of Literature](#) (2004-2008) and she would later become professor of creative writing at Bath Spa University.

Despite these accolades, the publication of ‘The Ice People’ in 1998 was not straightforward. In an interview Gee conducted a few years later, it was noted that,

Gee knows more than most authors about the vagaries of publishing, having lost the second part of a big publishing deal with Flamingo [Press] in the 1990s, and having seen ‘The Ice People’ taken on by Richard Cohen Books shortly before it went out of business.³

Gee had also just had her previous manuscript, ‘The White Family’, rejected by her publisher—it was later published in 2002 by Saqi Books and was then short-listed for the Orange prize, now known as [The Women’s Prize for Fiction](#). For Gee, writing ‘The Ice People’ was a distraction from this disappointment, saying, “So, I wrote another book, ‘The Ice People’, which saved me from despair”.⁴

¹ Goodbody,A. and Johns-Putra,A. (eds.) (2018) *Cli-Fi: A Companion*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

² *ibid.* pp.3-4

³ Page,B. (2003) [Maggie Gee: A Playful Apocalypse](#). ‘*The Bookseller*’, 16 October.

⁴ p.6 in: Jaggi,M. (2002) Maya Jaggi in conversation with Maggie Gee: ‘The White Family’. *Wasafiri*. 17(36): 5-10.

At the time, most reviewers read Gee's novel as (post-apocalyptic) science fiction, with a "surreal, futuristic strain".⁵ For example, Nicolette Jones, writing in *The Independent* newspaper, praised the book for "work[ing] persuasively as science fiction", as too did Judith Cook in *The Mail on Sunday*—"classy science fiction".⁶ [In an interview with the author](#) the summer after publication, *The Guardian* newspaper described the research behind the book as "provid[ing] a scientifically believable basis for Gee's seventh novel, her first foray into science fiction".

So what is the storyline of 'The Ice People'?

The novel is set in the first half of the twenty-first century, in a Britain (London) and Europe where a warming climate in the early decades of the century flipped to the rapid onset of an ice age. Gee plays with the idea of a climate flipping between warming—in the novel implicitly blamed on humanity's actions—and cooling, a new ice age, the cause of which is never made clear. Her narrator, Saul, has a keen eye for science and sometime during the 2040s he comes across a scientific paper titled, 'Development Phases of Climatic Change'. "I started to read it", says Saul. "Two pages in, my heart began to race ... it took only *two decades* to move from temperature to permafrost [climates]". [p.141-142; italics in original].

A rapidly cooling climate serves Gee's purpose of pushing northern Europeans southwards, towards Africa, but it is interesting that around the years 1995 to 1997, as she was writing the novel, the idea that a warming world could trigger a rapid cooling was first being mooted in the pages of science journals. For example, the respected American oceanographer, Wally Broecker, writing in 1997 commented on the "disturbing characteristic" of the Earth's climate to undergo "abrupt switches" from one state to another.⁷ "There is surely a possibility", wrote Broecker, "that the ongoing buildup of greenhouse gases might trigger yet another of these ocean reorganizations and thereby the associated large atmospheric changes" that could cause a cooling of 5°C or so and widespread starvation.

However Gee arrived at her scenario, it provides the climatic background for Gee's examination of the fundamental roles and relationships of men and women, sexuality, robotic technology and gender politics. In the dysfunctional world of the 2060s, which this rapid climatic oscillation has brought about, an old man, Saul, lives in a disused airport with a gang of wild boys, who spare his life only because of his skills as a storyteller. Saul is one of the 'ice people', the threatened peoples of the northern hemisphere, who, watching their world freeze over, try to move south towards the equator.

As readers, we are privy to Saul's story, as he narrates it, starting from his youth in the 2010s and 2020s—the days of fierce heat and dwindling fertility when men and women began to live separately—"segging"—the women cluster around the rare children, and men turn to

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Reviews printed in the 1998 first edition of 'The Ice People'.

⁷ p.1588 in: Broecker, W.S. (1997) Thermohaline circulation, the Achilles Heel of our climate system: will man-made CO₂ upset the current balance? *Science*. 278: 1582-1588.

each other or to robot 'pets', called Doves. The novelist [Rose Tremain](#) summarised the story thus,

Set in the near future, ['The Ice People'] imagines ... an earth slowly returning to aridity and cold. A universal freeze has also descended upon relationships between men and women, who live in morbid segregation, with feathered robots as sexual partners. In a neat reversal of First World-Third World assumptions, Africa's relative warmth offers a last hope to northerly survivors as the novel charts one man's struggle to rescue his alienated son and bring him to where the sun shines.

So should 'The Ice People' be read as cli-fi? In his 2011 review of climate change novels, Adam Trexler includes 'The Ice People' as an example of literary fiction that deals with climate change, but only in an indirect manner.⁸ Yet, writing about 'Ice People', and Gee's later post-apocalyptic novel 'The Flood' (2004)⁹, Johns-Putra observed that both novels dealt with climatic change, but "they were published before widespread recognition of cli-fi as a literary category".¹⁰ The reception of 'The Ice People', says Johns-Putra, was therefore muted at the time, but also

...because it was released by a relatively small press, a move forced on Gee when HarperCollins withdrew as her publisher. It is only belatedly that Gee has been recognized as an author with environmental interests, and both novels have come to be read as engaging with climate change.

Comparisons have been drawn between 'The Ice People' and the later climate-infused novels of Kim Stanley Robinson. For both authors, great cities—London and New York respectively—are seen as synecdoches for the travails of humanity. Clare Colebrook also notes that for both authors climate change becomes "an opportunity to intensify the gender or class dynamics that already divide the planet: one can think here of the sexual politics of Gee's 'Ice People' (1998) or the Marxist finance analytics of Robinson's 'New York 2140' [2017]".¹¹ Comparisons are also made with Cormac O'Connor's widely read 'The Road' (2006), which came later. 'The Road' is commonly read as a global warming parable, despite its reticence to name it as such, and Johns-Putra observes that 'The Ice People's' early

⁸ Trexler, A. and Johns-Putra, A. (2011) Climate change in literature and literary criticism. *WIREs Climate Change*. 2(2): 185-200.

⁹ Gee, M. (2004) *The Flood*. London: Saqi Books. 220pp. See also: Dillon S. (2007) Imagining apocalypse: Maggie Gee's 'The Flood'. *Contemporary Literature*. 48:374-397.

¹⁰ p.95 in: Johns-Putra, A. (2018) Maggie Gee's 'The Ice People' (1998) and 'The Flood' (2004). pp.91-95 in: *Cli-Fi: A Companion*, (eds.) Goodbody, A. and Johns-Putra, A. Lausanne: Peter Lang.

¹¹ See p.265 and p.272 in: Colebrook, C. (2019) The future in the Anthropocene: Extinction and the imagination. Chapter 16 (pp.263-280) in: *Climate and Literature*. (ed.) Johns-Putra, A. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

novelistic engagement with climate change reveals the same “limitations of parental care as intergenerational ethics” as does ‘The Road’.¹²

It was a full decade after its publication that I first became aware of ‘The Ice People’. Between its publication in 1998 and its reissue in 2008—now with Telegram, an imprint of Saqi Books to which publisher Gee had transferred after the collapse of James Cohen—public attention to climate change had soared, and not just in the western world. The period 2006 to 2009 also witnessed rising political clamour and public expectation in the lead-up to COP15 to be held in Copenhagen in 2009, [the COP that would ‘save the climate’](#). It was a brief notification in *The Guardian* newspaper that prompted me to buy my own copy, in which I inscribed the date ‘15 November 2008’. *The Guardian* commented that when ‘The Ice People’ was first published in 1998, “climate change was barely making the front pages. Ten years on, Maggie Gee’s masterly science fiction novel is more relevant than ever, and more alarming ... This is a welcome reissue of an important book”.

Twenty-seven years after ‘The Ice People’ was first published, climate change is no longer a marginal topic in literature and cli-fi is now a discrete subfield in literary studies.¹³ In the intervening period, the idea that humanity is changing the physical fabric of the world’s climate has become more widely and deeply ingrained in the imagination of peoples around the world. The stories we tell ourselves about a changing climate—about our relationships with each other, with technology, and with the non-human world—have become of ever greater significance.

And the novel is one powerful form of storytelling, an essential tool with which to construct meaning. As Adam Trexler states in his book, ‘Anthropocene Fictions’, “The novel expands the reach of climate science beyond the laboratory or [the] model, turning abstract predictions into subjectively tangible experiences of place, identity, and culture”.¹⁴ Maggie Gee’s ‘The Ice People’ in 1998 was an early demonstration of this, placing the idea of climatic instability within the wider cultural dynamics of gender politics, racial divisions, artificial intelligence and the eternal human yearning for recognition, commitment and love.

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¹² Johns-Putra,A. (2019) The limits of parental care ethics: Cormac McCarthy’s ‘The Road’ and Maggie Gee’s ‘The Ice People’. Chapter 2 in: Johns-Putra,A. (2019) *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

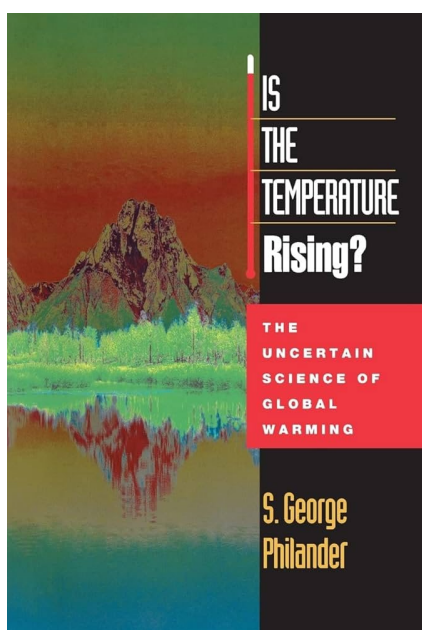
¹³ Johns-Putra,A. (2016) Climate change in literature and literary studies: From cli-fi, climate change theatre and ecopoetry to ecocriticism and climate change criticism. *WIREs Climate Change*. 7(2): 266–282.

¹⁴ Advertising blurb in: Trexler,A. (2015) *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press.

Other significant climate books published in 1998

Philander, S.G. (1998) *Is the Temperature Rising? The Uncertain Science of Global Warming*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 240pp.

As the 1990s progressed, and the climate sciences rapidly expanded in scope and reach, so educational programs in universities and high schools needed to refresh in order to take account of the new understandings being generated of the intricate workings of the

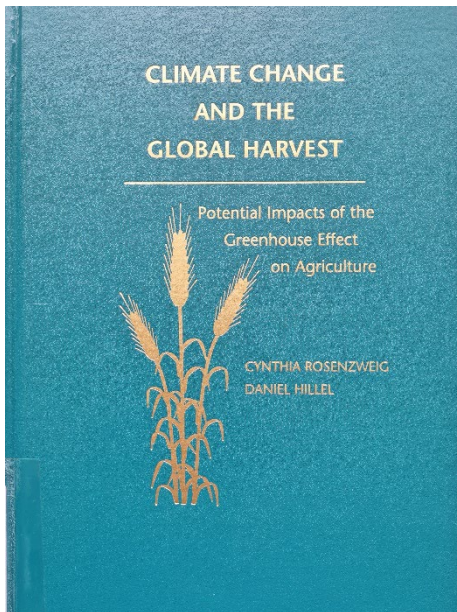


planetary climate system. S George Philander's 1998 book '**Is the Temperature Rising? The Uncertain Science of Global Warming**', was a notable contribution in this task by providing an entry-level university text book on the new science of climate change. Philander (b.1942) is a South African climate scientist, a professor of geosciences at Princeton University, an institution to which he moved in 1970 and at which he still holds an emeritus position. He made the study of the El Niño phenomenon his speciality and in the 1980s coined the term 'La Niña'—the girl child—to offer a symmetrical handle to describe the configuration of the Pacific ocean-atmosphere system in its anti-El Niño phase.

Well-distanced from the political climate wars reported the previous year by [Ross Gelbspan's 'The Heat Is On'](#), Philander's opening two chapters are an eloquent account of how a top-notch scientist at the end of the twentieth century—writing with lucidity, literary awareness and calm reserve—viewed the science of climate and the potential risks of climate change. As Philander explains, the book “attempts to explain to laymen the fascinating science of phenomena associated with our weather and climate ... to give insight into the science of intricate processes that make this planet habitable in order to shed light on controversial environmental issues”[p.4]. By such controversial issues, Philander primarily means stratospheric ozone depletion and greenhouse gas induced changes in global climate. The book ends with Chapter 13, 'Global warming, risky business', in which Philander concludes that humankind is playing with fire. He recognises the problem as “enormously complex”, with many scientific uncertainties remaining. But the balance of evidence suggests that serious problems lie ahead unless steps are taken to curtail emissions of greenhouse gases: “The growth is exponential, a dangerous situation that calls for action long before there is clear evidence of impending trouble.”

Rosenzweig,C. and Hillel,D. (1998) *Climate Change and the Global Harvest: Potential Impacts of the Greenhouse Effect on Agriculture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 324pp.

In 1998, the world's population was approaching 6 billion, just under 1 billion of whom were undernourished, that is with a daily food intake insufficient to provide the amount of dietary energy required to maintain a normal, active, and healthy life.¹⁵ Concerns about the effect



that a general warming of world climate would have on agriculture and food production had been rising through the decade. At the forefront of this field of research was the American agronomist and climatologist, Cynthia Rosenzweig. In 1998, along with her co-author, Daniel Hillel, they published '**Climate Change and the Global Harvest: Potential Impacts of the Greenhouse Effect on Agriculture**', a pioneering book which offered the most comprehensive overview then available of the relationships between climate change, agriculture and world food production. Rosenzweig (b.1958) had joined James Hansen's climate group at the Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS) in New York as a graduate student in the

early 1980s, an institute where she worked for most of her subsequent career. Her co-author and fellow agronomist Daniel Hillel (1930-2021) was also on the staff at GISS. Both Rosenzweig and Hillel were later to be awarded [World Food Prize](#) Laureates, Hillel in 2012 and [Rosenzweig in 2022](#) for "her pioneering work in modelling the impact of climate change on food production".

'Climate Change and the Global Harvest' outlines in ten chapters the multiple interactions between agriculture, soil, greenhouse gas emissions, climatic change, food production, adaptation, food economics and agricultural policy. Recognising the overarching challenge of "providing sufficient food for the world's people", Rosenzweig's and Hillel's book is a brilliant introduction to the "several complementary disciplines [which] must be combined in order to implement the complex task of assessing potential climate change impacts on global agriculture" [p.5]. As well as later serving as a Lead Author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Rosenzweig was also the founder of the international [Agricultural Model Intercomparison and Improvement Project](#).

¹⁵ Our World in Data: Key insights on Hunger and Undernourishment. <https://ourworldindata.org/hunger-and-undernourishment>.