

Young Adult Cli-Fi: Envisioning a Wrecked and Watery America

Pacific island nations understand the urgency of climate change advocacy because they do not need to look far to see the effects of a risen sea. Engineer/designer Jain Anab has argued that making climate change projections “concrete and tangible” for government leaders results in policy initiatives.¹

Like progressive design companies, YA cli-fi is actively anticipating the results of rising sea levels on North America. Adam Trexler’s exhaustive research into cli-fi finds that “fiction offered a medium to explain, predict, implore, and lament.”² At every stage of their quest, teenage protagonists must take into account the sea and its brackish infiltration of the human domain. With this in mind, cli-fi serves as a forum “for reconsidering our ways of living and surviving.”³

Children’s cli-fi does more than build watery settings. In this paper, I analyze how children’s cli-fi novels set in future versions of America systematically destabilize hopes for a protected American future. Instead, these novels argue that any pretense at American order and privilege will be undermined by the effects of a risen sea. These novels identify American childhood as a direct victim of the political and economic effects of climate change.

Each of the texts I consider—Marie Lu’s *Prodigy*, Sherri L. Smith’s *Orleans*, Kat Falls’s *Dark Life*, Paulo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* and *The Drowned Cities*—show the United States’ vulnerability when confronted with a risen sea. YA cli-fi recasts American society as a weakling on the world stage, a victim with no way of saving itself or its children. In this way, authors pit modern American hubris against the rising sea, and the ocean always wins.

¹ Anab Jain. “Anab Jain: Can A Glimpse of Tomorrow, Change Our Decisions Today?” Ted Talks. (2017) <http://www.npr.org/2017/09/15/547886265/anab-jain-can-a-glimpse-of-tomorrow-change-our-decisions-today>.

² Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia Press, 2015), 9.

³ Andrea Whitely, Angie Chiang, and Edna Einsiedel. “Climate Change Imaginaries? Examining Expectation Narratives in Cli-Fi Novels.” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 36, no. 1 (2016): 35. DOI: 10.1177/0270467615622845.