



# Green

ECOLOGY AND SCIENCE FICTION

# Planets

Edited by Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson

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*Kim Stanley Robinson*

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FOR THE FUTURE



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# Care, Gender, and the Climate-Changed Future

*Maggie Gee's The Ice People*

ADELINE JOHNS-PUTRA

Anthropogenic climate change, global warming, the sixth mass extinction event—whatever we want to call it—is now fixed in the science fiction imaginary: witness the recent success of Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2010) and consider Kim Stanley Robinson's near-future depiction of abrupt climate change in the *Science and the Capital* trilogy (2004, 2005, 2007).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps just as noteworthy is the recent spate of novels about future climate-changed worlds by authors who are not usually identified with SF. This includes writers of so-called "literary" fiction on both sides of the Atlantic: Margaret Atwood, T. C. Boyle, Cormac McCarthy, Will Self, and Jeanette Winterson.<sup>2</sup> Doris Lessing's return to futuristic world-building in her "Ifrik" novels is worth considering in this vein.<sup>3</sup> So too is British novelist Maggie Gee, and the environmental catastrophe she depicts in her novel *The Ice People* (1998).<sup>4</sup>

I will take as a critical given the idea that novels constitute spaces in which to explore inner life as it relates to the outer world of social appearance and action. The specific case of the climate change dystopian novel is no different. These dystopian visions consider the lived experience of climate change, and attempt to refract through the personal the almost incomprehensible scale of this global ecological crisis. They attempt, too, to adapt the conventions of the novel form—the insistently concrete questions of setting, character, and plot—to the notoriously abstract nature of climate change. Climate change, remarks philosopher of science Sheila Jasanoff, is "everywhere and nowhere"—everywhere because it is a global problem that has become a mainstay of our collective cultural life, but nowhere because it is knowable and solvable only at a remove, through the mediation of science and the machinery of politics.<sup>5</sup> In response to these representational contradictions, the climate change dystopia constructs

a vision of the future in which ecological crisis can be denied no longer and a consideration of its causes and possible solutions delayed no further. More often than not, in such novels, humankind's culpability in a climate-changed world, as well as our potential for change, become part of the psychological texture of the narrative.

In their assessment of humanity's collective hubris, such novels imply that we simply have not cared enough, and that the way forward lies in caring more. Many climate change dystopias offer object lessons in environmentalist empathy, suggesting that—quite simply—love will let us save, survive, or escape an ecologically degraded planet. Where SF has conventionally reveled in technological world-building, these novels push the dark, dystopian side of science to the extreme, and insist on care and love as its only viable alternative. In Lessing's *Mara and Dann* (1999) and its sequel *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2006), the eponymous sister and brother are a study in affective contrast: compassionate, motherly Mara is able to overcome the traumas of climate refugeeism, while emotionally blunted Dann finds only psychological dead ends. In Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2008), we find three interlocked time-shifting stories; each pits an environmentally and emotionally attuned protagonist called Billie (or Billy) against a world of technological brutality. The novel's refrain that "Love is an intervention" is confirmed when the last Billie finds happiness in death, a moment that facilitates a return to her long-sought-for mother.<sup>6</sup> Both Lessing and Winterson offer up eco-fables of a sort, but even in more considered assessments of environmental disaster, loving care provides the moral. In Atwood's dystopia-turned-apocalypse, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), life on Earth has been genetically engineered and ecologically exploited beyond recognition. Crake, a gifted scientist who decides to destroy humankind to save the planet, is therefore both villain and savior. His ultra-rational, anti-emotional solution effectively places the notion of environmental care under watch, even while science is taken to task.<sup>7</sup> Atwood returns, however, to the notion of care as optimal response in her characterization of Toby in the companion novel *The Year of the Flood* (2009), which narrates the experiences of a group of female survivors of Crake's apocalypse. Life for the women in both pre-apocalyptic dystopia and post-apocalyptic devastation is a matter of surviving a violent male-dominated techno-capitalistic society, and only Toby's successful application of the teachings of a fringe eco-cult secures the women's survival.

Obviously, that "care" is the answer to rampant scientism and ecological crisis is not a new idea and is certainly not restricted to the contemporary novel.

Indeed, it seems so apparently plain that a concept such as “earthcare,” put forward by Carolyn Merchant in the 1990s, seems hardly to need explanation. Merchant states her position unequivocally: “Humans, who have the power to destroy nonhuman nature and potentially themselves through science and technology, must exercise care and restraint by allowing nature’s beings the freedom to continue to exist.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Merchant’s seemingly commonsense assumptions about how we should care more and destroy less skim over some difficult territory, and the same could be said for countless other environmentalist calls to care. Questions need to be asked—questions about who does the caring and who or what is cared for; about who gets to make these decisions; about what models of human-to-human care might be invoked in the process (friendship, kinship, marriage, parenthood, and so on); about the gender dynamics of our models of care; and, finally, about the efficacy of care in and of itself as an ethical, psychological, and political position. Such questions need to be asked, then, of the contemporary climate change dystopian novel.

The context for this chapter is the emergence of care in the climate change dystopia as an appropriate response to technologically driven ecological crisis. I first interrogate the notion that care per se represents a useful environmentalist ethic and then investigate the vexed gender dynamics of care. This discussion provides a basis for reading Gee’s novel as a rare example of a climate change dystopia that actively evaluates the environmentalist ethic of care and its use as a counterpoint to a debased notion of techno-scientism. Ultimately, my contention is that the now ubiquitous celebration of care is deceptively simple, and that—in a time of ecological crisis—it warrants a close reading.

#### WHY CARE? WHO CARES?

By “care” I mean a feeling—translated into an ethos—of concern for and consideration of the needs of others, whether human or nonhuman. I certainly do not intend to suggest that an attitude of care is an inherently immoral or unethical stance to take, but I do wish to encourage a cautious approach to care, particularly when it is taken for granted as an ideal environmentalist outlook and its relationship to prior models of care insufficiently attended to. Perhaps another way to put this is that there is a need to complement care with thoughtfulness in both senses of the word, as a considerate and a considered response. This complicates any simple idea of care as pure or “natural” feeling versus science and technology as the product of ratiocinative reasoning.

Being thoughtful about environmentalist care means attending not just to what is said but to what is not said about it. What is often effaced is any distinction between what it means to care for humans and what it means to care for the nonhuman environment, even as it would seem that an admirable ethos of reciprocity and empathy is being celebrated. Such an elision occurs, for example, when Merchant defines earthcare as a “partnership ethic” that “means that both women and men can enter into mutual relationships with each other and the planet independently of gender.”<sup>9</sup> When examined closely, the human other and the (nonhuman?) planet sit uneasily together on this list of potential partners. To what extent can one’s relationship with another human be compared to, aligned with, perhaps mapped onto, one’s relationship with the planet, homogeneously invoked? While generally positive, environmentalist relationship ethics such as Merchant’s are more than a little presumptuous about speaking for “the planet” and all it betokens. The moment the planet (or the environment, or nature) is construed as a subject, it is subjectified, whether we like it or not.<sup>10</sup> Further, such discursive constructions as the planet or the environment conjure up suitably vague subjects, connoting a vast nonhuman and human collective. While appealingly inclusive on the one hand, the lack of specificity in these constructions render them all the more appropriable by the (human) initiator of that construction on the other. Needless to say, nature cannot speak for itself. The same may be said for rhetorical moves to equate care for the planet with care for tomorrow: what is concealed is the unevenness of the power dynamic between present and future, in addition to that between human and nonhuman. Worth considering here is political scientist John Barry’s suggestion that constitutional democracies establish an ecological contract between citizens and state to safeguard the welfare of “both non-humans and future human descendants.” In a parenthetical but utterly pivotal remark, Barry qualifies his conceptualization of these “moral subjects”; they are, he notes, “worthy of moral consideration but not morally responsible agents.”<sup>11</sup> The imbalance that allocates responsibility, voice, initiative, and, of course, *care* to one side and not the other is all-important: it is an imbalance of power.

Perhaps care always conceals power imbalance. Care must always be contextualized, the circumstances of both agent and object of care always attended to. For relationships of care risk exploiting either or both carer and cared-for; the role of carer is often maintained within the norms of self-sacrifice, and, equally, that of cared-for easily defined by powerlessness. As Chris J. Cuomo reminds

us, “Caring can be damaging to the carer if she neglects other responsibilities, including those she has to herself, by caring for another,” while “caring for someone can be damaging to the object of care, who might be better off, or a better person, if she cares for herself.”<sup>12</sup> Further, the narrow focus that care places on the dynamic of carer and cared-for has a distorting effect not only within this relationship but between this relationship and others. For Joan C. Tronto, parochialism ranks alongside paternalism as the “two primary dangers of care as a political ideal”: “Those who are enmeshed in ongoing, continuing, relationships of care are likely to see the caring relationships that they are engaged in, and which they know best, as the most important.”<sup>13</sup> What is often forgotten, then, is the way in which relations of care are imbricated within complex power plays, which need to be interrogated before promoting these as a model for political action.

These problems intensify when, as so often happens in environmentalist discourse, the caring relationship is intentionally aligned with gender roles. The deliberate gendering of the environmentalist ethic of care is best expressed as “ecomaternalism,” that is, the biologically deterministic construction of women as mothers and the subsequent alignment of them with the nonhuman environment under the signs of fertility and nurture.<sup>14</sup> In the wide-ranging discourse of ecomaternalism, “nature” and “woman” share everything from caring responsibilities for all species, to the status of victimhood at the hands of apparently masculinist technologies, to an exclusive relationship akin to a mother-daughter bond.<sup>15</sup> The climate change dystopias I have briefly considered all invoke this commonplace of public and environmentalist discourse: motherhood confers a sense of environmentalist wisdom (for Lessing’s Mara), becomes a nostalgic sign of what the world has lost (for Winterson’s Billie), or is denied by *mankind’s* exploitative impulse (for Atwood’s Toby).

Ecomaternalism’s assumption that core characteristics of womanhood parallel the core characteristics of “nature” is really a long-standing tenet of ecofeminism.<sup>16</sup> In the earliest “spiritual” manifestos of the ecofeminist movement, women are exhorted to celebrate a special relationship with nature, usually based on descriptions of early matriarchal religions. This relationship is underpinned by a shared capacity for connectedness—ecological interrelatedness and women’s apparently natural and ancient empathy for others are somehow the same thing.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, later ecofeminist writing, which tends to couch the discussion not in spiritual terms but in political or cultural contexts, insists on a structural link between women and nature, the product of patriarchal

degradation.<sup>18</sup> The focus is thus on “standpoints.”<sup>19</sup> As Mary Mellor explains, “Women, because of their structural disadvantage, can see the dynamics of the relationship between humanity and nature more clearly than can (relatively) privileged men.”<sup>20</sup> Despite differences across the ecofeminist spectrum, then, the movement has tended to be united in its emphasis on a woman-nature affinity. This affinity is grounded in the notion of care, whether as a “natural” compassion or a sociopolitical effect of exploitation. Thus heavily invested in the enduring cultural-feminist notion of an “ethic of care,” the critical wisdom of ecofeminism and ecomaternalism is that women are continually psychologically conditioned to care, as girls, as wives, and, most of all, as mothers; this is what makes them more environmentally conscientious.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of a woman-nature affinity is deeply problematic, and its problems must be considered in any evaluation of ecomaternalist care as both the ground and the manifestation of this affinity. For one thing, the idea reiterates a centuries-old version of the link between women and nature as a stereotype of the female as less-than-human.<sup>22</sup> In a not entirely straightforward tactic of reappropriation, ecofeminism attempts to combat what it sees as the blanket domination of women and nature with the very logic of that domination. For another thing, the insistence on an unmediated woman-nature link has opened ecofeminism up to the dreaded charge of essentialism, or—to use Cuomo’s more accurate phrase—“false universalization,” that is, a simplistically unified construction of femaleness and female experience.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, it is easy to poke holes in the spiritual ecofeminist version of the woman-nature affinity, given that this relationship is never rigorously analyzed. Yet even the more stringent “standpoint” arguments of ecofeminism display a relatively unnuanced identity politics. Where an informed or learned understanding of the environment is seen as a fundamental part of the female standpoint, this can in turn be troped as an empathetic trait automatically shared by all women. Ariel Salleh, for example, posits that “the actuality of caring for the concrete needs of others gives rise to a morality of relatedness among ordinary women, and this sense of kinship seems to extend to the natural world.” Although Salleh insists that her brand of ecofeminism “does not set up a static ontological prioritization of ‘woman,’” she presents a vision of “women’s exploitation,” “women’s oppression,” and “women’s lives,” all monolithically conceptualized. In other words, political ecofeminism does not always evade the risk of falsely universalizing female experience as environmental care. One might say that sociological, rather than biological, essentialism is essentialism nonetheless.<sup>24</sup>

Sweeping remarks about immanent states of being or universal standpoints tend to distract from a more useful understanding of the ecofeminist construction of the woman-nature affinity as a set of political choices. Indeed, not just the logical inconsistencies of the ecofeminist position but the fact that these are often concealed or brushed aside in ecofeminist writing should alert us to the extent to which this has been a tactical move (and, it must be said, a reasonably successful one at that). Rather than an ontological fait accompli brought about by women's natural or material conditions, the ecomaternalist ethic of care is worth considering as an ideological decision made in response to global society's prevailing narrative of technological progress. Such an idea informs the critique of ecomaternalist care mounted by Catriona Sandilands. Attacking what she sees as the identity politics of care at the heart of "motherhood environmentalism," Sandilands proposes as an alternative "a recognition of the impossibility of identity."<sup>25</sup> That is, identity, particularly in a political sense, is only ever forged in the ironic gap between the idea of identity and the knowledge of the contingency of that idea. Sandilands goes as far as to advocate a "strategic essentialism" for ecofeminism, based on the knowledge that neither "woman" nor "nature" possesses any stability as a concept.<sup>26</sup> In suggesting that identity is partial and provisional, and that much is to be gained from an ironic assumption of identity (or identities), Sandilands builds on Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism and its celebration of technology for enabling an identity-less world.<sup>27</sup> Sandilands, however, is concerned with ironic play not just as liberating but as politically productive of action and change. An ironic ecofeminism enables the assumption of ecomaternalist identity in order to elicit sympathy from others, say, or to inspire them to action, but always with the awareness that such a performance is equivalent to—not expressive of—identity.

A critical—or, one should say, thoughtful—perspective on ecomaternalism, described here in the terms provided by Sandilands, resituates care from being a fundamental element of female "identity" to a portable and contestable component of an ideological stance. Such a perspective enhances a reading of Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* and, particularly, its departure from the ecomaternalist ethos that underpins so many other eco-dystopian novels. In her fictional account of gender politics in a climate-changing, technologically driven world, Gee destabilizes the ethic of care, not just as a female prerogative in the face of masculinist scientism but as an ideal environmentalist response in and of itself.

## MAGGIE GEE'S *THE ICE PEOPLE*

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BRAVE NEW WORLDS & LANDS OF THE FLIES

Gee's first novel, *Dying, in Other Words*, appeared in 1981, and was followed by eleven more novels and, most recently, an autobiography. Critically acclaimed from the outset, Gee nevertheless remained relatively underrated until the 2002 publication of *The White Family*, a searching narrative about racial prejudice in contemporary England. Described by one scholar as a "compassionate humanist feminist," Gee displays in her work an interest in the tenuousness of middle-class life, investigating the impact on individuals—usually networks of family and friends—when what is taken for granted in political, social, or environmental terms is somehow lost.<sup>28</sup> Disaster is often enacted stylistically and structurally too: catastrophes occur as interruptions to Gee's normally realist style, for example, in the black pages and bird-shaped visual poetry that represent nuclear holocaust in *The Burning Book* (1983) and in the montage of disconnected paragraphs after London is deluged in *The Flood* (2005).<sup>29</sup> Gee's oeuvre is also characterized by its interrogations of gender inequity beyond simple equations of masculinist oppression and female triumph. In 1995, around the time of writing *The Ice People*, Gee remarked on the "black and white" tendency of "women's fiction": "I think it's too obvious to be a woman, and a feminist woman, writing about nice women and horrid men, which is a lot of what's going on, isn't it?"<sup>30</sup> *The Ice People*, then, is characteristic of Gee's fiction in its exploration of "average" family life devastated by environmental, social, and political change. In other ways, however, it is a one-off. It is so far the only one of Gee's books definable as SF, set in a future world whose technologies are described in detail.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it departs, quite intentionally, from her regular cast of characters, the intricate network of people that radiates outward from the White family and that tends to recur in her novels.<sup>32</sup> *The Ice People* thus focuses tightly on a single nuclear family unit, its psychological dramas serving as cause, effect, and even microcosm of national and global crisis.

The novel is set in the middle of the twenty-first century, when global warming suddenly experiences a rapid reversal: the world enters an ice age, and anthropogenic climate change is countered by an even more destructive "natural" climate phenomenon. Much of the novel, however, is told in flashback, as Saul, the first-person narrator, looks back on a life that spans the onset and development of one environmental crisis and then another.

Saul is born in London in 2005, at the start of what will become known as "the Tropical Time" (16). By his teens and twenties, global warming has reached its

height, but this is a time during which young men and women—feeling all the invincibility of youth—revel in, rather than worry about, climatic conditions. Along with climate change, the world has also experienced dramatic social breakdown—epidemics of diseases such as Ebola and mutant HIVs have just about shut down entire governments, including Britain's. However, the younger generation's response to all this is a kind of apathy. The twentieth-century battle of the sexes has given way to mutual antagonism and a trend for gender segregation, or "segging" (23)—it has become fashionable for young men and women simply to avoid each other. Such a society is recognizable as the logical outcome of the kind of masculinist-scientist-capitalist complex in extremis detailed in other climate change dystopias; this is a world very like the worlds described by Atwood and Winterson. The biosphere has been irretrievably damaged, medical tinkering in the form of antibiotics has produced resistant strains of killer diseases, and an unrestrained profit motive only further encourages social, political, and environmental dysfunction.

Granting the similarities to other climate change dystopias, however, there is a crucial difference with Gee's novel. This lies, in part, in Saul's status as a narrator; specifically, it lies in authorial manipulation of narrator unreliability, producing an interpretive—and gendered—irony. Intelligent, likable Saul is made all the more sympathetic by his first-person perspective. The reader is initially drawn into the novel as one is drawn into the typical science fiction dystopia, through empathy with the protagonist as outsider: he or she is "like us," and together we negotiate the brave new world of the text. It is difficult not to identify with Saul as he falls in love and settles down in an "old-fashioned," "twentieth-century" kind of way (28). However, Saul's seemingly commonsense description of his society is strikingly unreflective of the gender dynamics at play. He describes segging but cannot understand it. He cannot see, for example, that it is motivated by women, as a backlash against what they perceive to be the gender inequalities that still predominate in twenty-first-century life. Thus, it is Saul's wife, Sarah, who provides us with an alternative insight into segging. Employed as part of a state initiative to combat segging and to improve falling fertility rates, she teaches teenagers how to fall in love and finds that, while boys are receptive enough to the idea of "having women to love and support them," girls are "not all that excited about developing their nurturing sides" (36). The girls' concerns center on care as power imbalance: "I want to look after kids. . . . But why should I want to look after a man? They're not babies" (36). Sarah's attempts to explain the girls' perspective to Saul actually provokes an example of such imbalance:

“They’re quite thoughtful, when you listen to them. I think they have a point about housework, too.”

“But you enjoy it,” I said. “Partly because you’re so good at it. Your food always looks so beautiful. I mean, you turn that side of things into pure pleasure. I wish those girls could see what you do.”

She didn’t smile, but nodded slowly. “It takes a lot of time, though, Saul, you know.”

“Time well spent,” I said, kissing her. (37)

Sarah’s concerns and Saul’s response only clarify the inequities of care in traditional male-female relations so familiar to twentieth-century feminism: it is not just that the woman’s conventional role is to provide care, but care is too often neither returned nor adequately rewarded.

The novel’s analysis of gender relations occurs alongside its depiction of increasing environmental chaos. First, the breakdown of Saul and Sarah’s marriage is reflective of a global gender conflict: as Sarah and many women like her turn militant in their separatism, men like Saul become more resentful of women, more insistent on cultivating what they see as masculine traits, and, yet, more desiring of conventionally feminine care and attention. Then, the world descends into an ice age, and the trajectory of anthropogenic climate change is abruptly reversed. It is not just that Saul and Sarah’s battle of the sexes is part of an all-out war; it is significant that it takes place within the novel’s trajectory of two global climatic events—anthropogenic climate change and the onset of glaciation. In other words, the novel’s interrogation of shifts in gender dynamics is, when read alongside its two environmental crises, also an interrogation of two very different—and differently gendered—solutions to these crises. That is, the novel first critiques a very masculinist response to *man*-made global warming and then studies an ecomaternalist response to the ice age crisis.

The initial crisis of global warming is readable as a component of a larger whole, as one of the outcomes of a thoughtless, even arrogant, indulgence in a technologically enhanced lifestyle. Once the reader becomes attentive to Saul’s unreliability as a narrator, it is possible to read his careless description of these early days as part of a broader ideological context for runaway climate change: his casual jetting around the world for easy, exotic holidays; his soaking up the heat with no anxiety about the rate of temperature increase; his embracing a career in nano-engineering, with no consideration that technology might offer a solution to environmental crisis rather than a path to more affluence. Through

it all, Saul's experience—"I felt on the brink of owning the world. I was a man, and human beings ran the planet. . . . I was tall, and strong, and a techie, which qualified me for a lifetime's good money" (24)—is perceptibly gendered.

The onset of the ice age, however, coincides with the rise of an alternative, female political power. Wicca, the women's collective that Sarah joins during one of her many separations from Saul, is, in Saul's words, founded on "a wacky female nature worship, centring on 'the Hidden Goddess,' who apparently 'gave suck' to us all" (117). Wicca successfully wins the national elections on the promise of a "caring revolution" (137), with the tagline "Vote for Wicca. Wicca Cares" (138). This ecomaternalist appropriation of care—effectively rejecting the burden of caring for men but purporting to care for everything else—is expressed in Wicca's promises of "'revaluing nature,' 'nurturing the future'; 'the future is green.' We would 'bloom again' with the 'cooling earth.' We would 'give thanks to the Goddess' for water" (137). When the effects of glaciation become impossible to ignore, however, Wicca's technophobic stance means that it refuses to take seriously the "techfixes" (147) suggested by scientists, and neglects to meet the challenge of securing the necessary international cooperation and funding. In short, Wicca's ecomaternalist revolution, established as an alternative to the anti-nature, pro-technology, globally warmed generation, fails in its attempts to cope with the second environmental crisis. It gets caught up in arguments with its rivals, a men's collective that emerges as a kind of backlash to the backlash. The two sides become bogged down in a macro-version of Saul and Sarah's lifelong argument. Gender relations are exposed as a depressingly insoluble conundrum—where there is difference there is inequity—in both the "old-fashioned" world of domestic squabbles and the "segged" world of political point-scoring. The biosphere suffers collateral damage in the process.

The risks of an ethic of care are here laid bare. Wicca's political campaigning is a reminder of the extent to which ecomaternalist care is an ideological tool rather than an inherent aspect of female identity. To note this, recalling Sandilands, is not to undermine an ethic of care but to subject it to a different kind of assessment: ecomaternalism can be useful as a platform on which to initiate sociopolitical good. In the case of Wicca, however, it becomes not just means but an end, a way of asserting control in order to retain control, particularly over men. Care in this instance becomes a weapon in a gendered power play, with women claiming a monopoly on care and men counterclaiming it as something they can do just as well. This is evident in the controversy that escalates over the domestic robots called "Doves" (87). It is Saul's brand of nanotechnology

that is responsible for the Doves; thus, “as a techie, [he] is full of admiration for the basic Dove design” (94). Moreover, the cute, anthropomorphic Doves prove wildly popular with men like Saul, who rely on them not just for domestic chores but for affection and company. Meanwhile, the Wicca government exploits primarily female fears over incidents in which malfunctioning Doves have attacked animals and children, and the robots are banned. To men, the Doves symbolize the successful masculinist appropriation of the traditionally female functions of care; to women, they represent a flawed counterfeit of an authentically feminine trait. In all, the Doves underline the fraught gender politics of care.

The Doves’ destructive side also points to the dark side of care itself. *The Ice People* is a sustained reflection on the efficacy of care as a human response. As Tronto reminds us, a relationship of care is actually definable by selfishness, as the decision to care is necessarily about caring for one (or some) over others. Competing priorities of care are not always compatible. Neither Sarah nor Saul could be easily described as uncaring, but their arguments about care have a destructive effect on the person they would seem to care most about—their son. Correspondingly, the wider gender conflict about who cares more proves detrimental to the nonhuman environment, one of the supposed beneficiaries of that debate. (In this implicit link between child and environment, that common slippage between caring for the “environment” and caring for the “future” cannot escape notice.) Of course, this critique is refracted ironically through Saul’s first-person narrative, meaning that an understanding of the limitations of care must be gained alongside a compassionate response to this portrayal of fatherly love, for, because Saul cares about his son, the reader cannot help caring about him. As the world enters the ice age in earnest and European society begins to come apart, Saul abducts his son Luke from the Wicca commune. They head for the relative warmth and political stability of Africa (in another ironic comment, this time on the racial politics of environmental justice).<sup>33</sup> However, if Wicca’s brand of caring could not save the day and the planet, neither can Saul’s. He stops at nothing to save his son, but this means caring for no one else. Not only do they rob fellow refugees; they leave for dead the sympathetic Wicca member Briony who travels with them when they flee attackers in Spain.<sup>34</sup> Here, parental care has become Darwinian survivalism: “I told myself it was all for him. I had even sacrificed Briony” (272). Saul’s regrets that Sarah would never acknowledge his love for their son—“She never knew how much I’d loved him. . . . She didn’t know how much I’d cared for him” (301)—must coexist with his realization at the end of his life that “I wasn’t a hero, or a villain, or any of the things they say

in stories—but merely one tiny unit of biology, stopping at nothing to save his genes” (273). Luke, as it turns out, rejects this kind of care; he and many others of his generation run away from their fragile, fighting families and become the Wild Children of the Ice Age.

Yet this novel must not be misunderstood as a preference for one kind of care against another, for it is, if anything, a careful weighing up of care per se. The novel exhibits a deeply ironic interest in care—it cares about care and draws us in on this basis. Still, it reminds us that the dangers of care reside both in its metaphorical and its metonymic slips: it is too easily used as an alibi (that is, a symbol that conceals its status as symbol) for power, and it is also proximal to much less altruistic tendencies such as jealousy, possessiveness, and exceptionalism. Against Saul’s selfish, old-fashioned care sits Wicca’s failed and vindictive ideology of care, and, against these again, sits the nonsensical affection of the Doves. Then, there is the version of human relations with which the novel ends: the Wild Children and their animalistic pursuit of only the most basic needs. Looking back on his life, which he now spends with an entirely new generation of the ice age, the aging Saul asks: “How can I explain it to these crazy kids, who live for food, and fire, and sex? How love was so important to us. How tiny shades of wants and wishes made us fight, and sob, and part” (63). Saul, in other words, recognizes both the apparent necessity and the shortcomings of love and care in his climate-changed world.

*The Ice People* is, in common with other climate change dystopias, about an inadequacy in the contemporary human response to the environment. However, unlike these, Maggie Gee’s thoughtful vision of the future is no simple account of the inadequacy of the contemporary response in terms of a failure to recognize the necessity of care. What makes this climate change dystopia so poignant is that, first, it is about the inevitability of care in shaping our responsibilities to each other and to the environment, and then it is about the terrible cost of taking care for granted as a way of fulfilling these responsibilities.

## Notes

The research leading to this paper was carried out while a Visiting Fellow with the Humanities Research Centre, RSHA, Australian National University.

1. Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl* (San Francisco: Night Shade, 2010); Kim Stanley Robinson, *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004; London: HarperCollins, 2005), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005; London: HarperCollins, 2006), and *Sixty Days and Counting* (London: HarperCollins, 2007). For a comprehensive review of fictional treatments of climate change, see Adam

Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2, no. 2 (2011): 185–200.

2. Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003; London: Virago, 2004), and *The Year of the Flood* (2009; London: Virago, 2010); T. Coraghessan Boyle, *A Friend of the Earth* (2000; London: Bloomsbury, 2001); Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006, London: Picador, 2007); Will Self, *The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and Distant Future* (2006; London: Penguin, 2007); Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods* (London: Penguin, 2008).

3. Doris Lessing, *Mara and Dann* (London: Flamingo, 1999), and *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2006; London: Harper Perennial, 2007).

4. Maggie Gee, *The Ice People* (1998; London: Telegram, 2008). Future references to this novel will be presented in parentheses in the main text.

5. Sheila Jasanoff, "A New Climate for Society," *Theory Culture Society* 27 (2010): 237.

6. Winterson, *Stone Gods*, 83.

7. One could say that Atwood exposes the ethical fine line between environmentalism and misanthropy that characterizes deep green sabotage movements: a similar dilemma on a smaller scale faces eco-warrior Ty Tierwater in Boyle, *Friend of the Earth*.

8. Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 1995), xix.

9. *Ibid.*, 216.

10. For a brief but effective discussion of the "subjectivation" of nature in environmentalist discourse, see Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 77–78.

11. John Barry, "Sustainability, Political Judgement and Citizenship: Connecting Green Politics and Democracy," in *Democracy and Green Political Thought: Sustainability, Rights and Citizenship*, ed. Brian Doherty and Marius de Geus (London: Routledge, 1996), 122.

12. Chris J. Cuomo, *Feminism and Ecological Communities: An Ethic of Flourishing* (London: Routledge, 1998), 129.

13. Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 170–71. For a more recent critique of the promotion of personal care as a political ideal, see Sherilyn MacGregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 57–80.

14. The phrase comes from MacGregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth*, 20.

15. However, McCarthy's *The Road* remains an important exception. The novel, which some have read as a climate change narrative even though the catalyst for the destruction of the biosphere is never named, is a sparse but poignant description of the love between a father and son as they make their way through the devastated landscape. Yet love is carefully sifted here, for it is not clear if the father's steadfast, protective love for his son is really the best way to make sense of one's place in a dying world, compared with the boy's more trusting compassion for others.

16. For the invention of the term *ecoféminisme*, see Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Féminisme ou la mort* (Paris: Femme et Mouvement, 1974); see also Barbara T. Gates, "A Root of Ecofeminism: *Ecoféminisme*," in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation*,

*Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 15–22.

17. For Andrée Collard, for example, the apparent tendency in matriarchal religions toward respect for nature means that motherhood can be invoked as the essential link between women and the environment. Collard writes of early goddess societies, “Women’s skills developed beyond her famed endurance and purveyance of care and wellbeing. She learned the ways of plants. She learned the ways of other creatures of the land, air and sea. She learned them in a spirit of recognition and respect. And with a similar spirit, she partook of them” (11). This allows Collard to state unequivocally, “Pregnancies and child-bearing . . . are a woman’s link to the natural world and the hunted animals that are part of that world” (14–15); See Andrée Collard with Joyce Contrucci, *Rape of the Wild: Man’s Violence against Animals and the Earth* (London: Women’s Press, 1988).

18. See, for example, Mary Mellor’s version of ecofeminist political economy: “Feminism is concerned with the way in which women in general have been subordinated to men in general. Ecologists are concerned that human activity is destroying the viability of ecosystems. Ecofeminist political economy argues that the two are linked. This linkage is not seen as stemming from some essentialist female identification with nature, for which some early ecofeminists were criticised, but from women’s position in society, particularly in relation to masculine-dominated economic systems.” See Mary Mellor, “Ecofeminist Political Economy and the Politics of Money,” in *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology*, ed. Ariel Salleh (London: Pluto Books, 2009), 251.

19. Deborah Slicer, “Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory: Bodies as Grounds,” in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 49–73.

20. Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology* (London: Polity, 1997), 105–6.

21. The “ethic of care” was first put forward by Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), and further disseminated by Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

22. This is despite the careful historicist work by some ecofeminists in discovering and interrogating a dualistic system of thinking about women and nature at the heart of patriarchal thought. See, for example, Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 67–87; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990); and Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

23. Cuomo, *Feminism and Ecological Communities*, 117.

24. Indeed, as Sandilands reminds us, “social construction and essentialism are not necessarily opposed concepts”; Sandilands, *Good-Natured Feminist*, 71.

25. *Ibid.*, xiii, 209.

26. *Ibid.*, 121.

27. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism

in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 149–81. Material feminist Karen Barad has recently updated such ecofeminist critiques by showing how our relationship with the nonhuman is better understood in terms of agency rather than (gendered) identity, specifically, as what she calls “agential intra-action”; “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–31.

28. John Sears, “‘Making Sorrow Speak’: Maggie Gee’s Novels,” in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. Emma Parker (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 55.

29. Maggie Gee, *The Burning Book* (1983; London: Faber, 1985), and *The Flood* (London: Saqi, 2005).

30. Margaret McKay, “An Interview with Maggie Gee,” *Studia Neophilologica* 69, no. 2 (1997): 216.

31. Both *The Flood* (2004) and *Where Are the Snows* (2006) come closest to this, being near-future treatments of environmental crisis; Gee, *Where Are the Snows* (London: Telegram, 2006).

32. According to Gee, the novel was written as a distraction from the disappointment of her publisher’s rejection of *The White Family* for, among other things, its controversial race issues: “So I wrote another book, *The Ice People*, which saved me from despair. It dealt with a bi-racial child, but in a very different, light way”; Maya Jaggi, “Maya Jaggi in Conversation with Maggie Gee: *The White Family*,” *Wasafiri* 17, no. 39 (2002): 6.

33. That Saul is of mixed race is another aspect of Gee’s interrogation of the race politics of environmental crisis and justice, which is, unfortunately, outside the scope of this essay.

34. Saul’s survivalist tactics and Luke’s compassionate protests against these are echoed by McCarthy’s father and son in *The Road*, which, in a comparable way, questions the seemingly unquestionable “good” of parental care as a way of surviving environmental destruction.