

Books in Review

Edited by Gerry Canavan & Stanley Robinson

Green Planets. Ecology and Science Fiction,
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Green Planets is a critical anthology about science fiction literature in relation with ecology, nature, and environmentalism. The book was published six years ago but could not be more pertinent for current times. The Anthropocene is already showing us the consequences of decades of frenetic capitalism in the form of sea level increases, drought, illness, and species extinction. At the same time, we are beginning the most decisive decade to mitigate the worst impact of climate change, which will mark the future of all creatures, human and non-human. Moreover, a pandemic, possibly emerged from natural destruction and globalization, has suddenly stopped economic activity. In this context, the countries that contribute most heavily to the world's pollution have the opportunity to focus their economic stimulus plans to create a "new normal" that is truly sustainable, thus avoiding an accelerated spiral of uncontrolled environmental and health crises. Our current reality could well be part of a science fiction novel included in this book.

Green Planets is divided into thirteen chapters, organized in three parts, plus a compelling interview as an epilogue. The three parts allude to the categories that Samuel R. Delany borrowed from W.H. Auden: the New Jerusalem (an urban utopia where all problems are solved by science and technology), Arcadia (a pastoral utopia of nature and sustainability), and their dystopian/apocalyptic counterparts (the Bad City or Brave New World and the Land of the Flies, respectively). The chapters were contributed by fourteen different authors, including literary academics and researchers specializing in utopias and dystopias, environmental sciences and humanities, cultural theory and criticism, climate change, the intersection between

philosophy and ecological studies, and/or the role of the ocean and scuba diving in the humanities.

In the preface, Canavan highlights science fiction's role as an archive of imagination where science, story, and political struggle can converge and cross-pollinate. The metaphor of cross-pollination evokes interconnectivity in both nature, where networks of interaction are being simplified as a response to climate change, as well as in a globalized society, where we may find possible solutions to global problems through the cross-pollination of science, social justice, and politics, and based on international collaboration.

Part I, "Arcadias and New Jerusalems," starts with an essay (Chapter 1, Christina Alt) about the imagery of extermination, mass extinction, and ecological optimism in H.G. Wells' literature. In the wake of Darwin's theory of evolution, humans were positioned as another animal species, diminishing the idea of human dominance. However, with the emergence of new sciences at the beginning of the 20th century, ecology and related fields restored the public's confidence in humanity's ability to control the natural world. Christina Alt studies how the pessimism of the late 19th century and the optimism of the first decades of the 20th century are reflected in *The War of the Worlds* and *Men Like Gods*, respectively.

In Chapter 2, Michael Page expands these thoughts, reflecting on what he considers the major models of ecological thought in science fiction: an evolutionary optimism and an apocalyptic pessimism. To do this, he analyses four classic works of ecological science fiction, enriching the analysis with observations about ecology and how science

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fiction provides us with a methodology for formulating alternative solutions to ecological challenges (p. 53). In Chapter 3, Gib Prettyman provides a compelling critique of Le Guin's utopian fictions, how she used Daoism to broaden ecological thinking beyond classic rationalism, and how her literary contributions (partly due to the prevailing patriarchal perspective) were usually not understood by Marxist critics.

Rob Latham (Chapter 4) presents a critique of the New Wave movement and their ecological imperialism and genocidal fantasies. He explains how the consolidation of the discipline of ecology after WWII with the concept of ecosystem and the study of biological invasions (p. 82) may promote the imagery of technocratic and ecological imperialism in science fiction. He also assesses the evolution of ecological thinking due to an increasing concern for the impact of human activities in the 1970s, considering ethics and militant environmentalism on one hand, with the romanticization of nature on the other.

Part II, "Brave New Worlds and Lands of the Flies," starts with an analysis of the metaphor of the "space-ship Earth" (Chapter 5, Sagine Höhler)—an imaginative experiment that places a population in a spaceship with limited resources—which proliferated in the 60s and 70s along with the flourishing of animal population ecology. This literature addresses specific issues about allocation of resources, social justice, birth control, and euthanasia, and is driven by classic philosophical questions about freedom and responsibility. In Chapter 6, Andrew Milner explores conquest and colonization in Australian ecological science fiction. He analyses George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* and how it promotes environmental activism and conservation in Australia.

Adeline Johns-Putra (Chapter 7) analyses how care and gender are related to a future of climate change. She summarizes the basis of ecofeminism—in its essentialist and critical forms—throughout science fiction literature from the 90s, and various critical concepts of the "ethics of care." She then uses Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* to deepen her reflections about the causes and consequences of climate

change through the lens of gender. In Chapter 8, Elzette Steenkamp continues in this vein by exploring the intersections of gender, race, and indigeneity in relation to the sense of identity in South African speculative fiction. She analyses Jane Rosenthal's *Souvenir* and Neil Blomkamp's science fiction film *District 9*, steeped in the notions of identity and belonging to a place or ecology and thereby seeking connection between humans and non-humans. In Chapter 9, Christopher Palmer addresses recent post-apocalyptic fictions to bring us a reflection on how the role of the apocalyptic imaginary can give us some comic sensibility now that we are facing many real-life catastrophes.

Part III, "Quiet Earths, Junk Cities, and the Cultures of the Afternoon," starts with a reflection (Chapter 10, Eric C. Otto) about how Paolo Bacigalupi's ecotopias stimulate our imagination about a better future. Chapter 11 (Brent Bellamy and Imre Szeman) reflects on the notion of "science faction," a new subgenre of apocalyptic fantasy, using Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* to argue that imagining a world without humans can stimulate imagination, but can also lead to a pessimistic attitude that ends in inactivity and apathy about the human ability to solve these crises. Chapter 12's Timothy Morton reflects on globalization and capitalism through the story of the movie *Avatar* and how planetary awareness arises as a sense of ungraspable hyperobjects at the climax of evolution.

In Chapter 13, Melody Jue provides a brilliant reflection about oceans, depth, knowledge, and science, using Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* and Greg Egan's *Oceanic* science fiction novels as vehicles. An ecofeminist way of thinking arises here again as Jue classifies the ocean as feminine and discusses its nature, depth, and the unknown, via the lens of male scientists and their difficulties in understanding it from the classical androcentric viewpoint. Jue's reflection makes us think about how scientists interpret the world, and translate it to knowledge production, inviting us to rethink how we position ourselves in relation to others.



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In the *Afterword* part, Canavan interviews Robinson about ecology, science fiction and crisis. Canavan recognized that in this century, we are in a divergence point, where either we achieve a sustainable society or we will cause mass extinction. They also discuss Robinson's latest book (*2312*), concerning a future that posits the consequences of not acting against climate change, bioethics and how humans value non-human organisms, how scientists should read more science fiction, and the relation between science and politics, among other topics.

In short, *Green Planets* achieves its stated ambition—as stated by Canavan in the preface (p. xii)—of following the key moments in the vital conversation between science, story, and politics that has weaved

together more than a century of thought experiments of ecological science fiction. I believe that this anthology will also help further “cross-pollination” between ecologists and science fiction writers, critics, and readers.