


Environmental Literature, Climate Crises, and Pandemics

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We are living in the sixth major extinction event on this planet. The previous event most like ours was the Great Dying during which 90% to 96% of all species were extinguished (in the four other extinctions it was 70–75%). Our percentage will be determined by us, now.

Yet “serious” literature has been indicted by Ghosh (2016) and Wallace-Wells (2019) not just for refusing to meet this challenge, but for reinforcing the denial leading us to unimaginable disaster. Inevitably, they have resurrected thousands of years of debates about whether lies or truths are the foundations of literature and civilization itself. In any case, now we have just a few decades to humbly learn from the examples of science-fiction and climate-fiction if literature is to play a positive role in this crisis. Then we will be in a position to cite more traditional literary examples of unitive consciousness replacing the destructive dualistic of man vs. nature that is driving both zoonotic pandemics and climate change.

Can it be done? Let us consider a few examples. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe 1851) turned the tide against slavery. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (Coetzee 2003) shows us how to extend our sympathetic imagination to other animals enough to avoid more zoonotic pandemics. Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* (Kingsolver 2012) helps us understand the interaction between a scientist’s commitment to the truth about climate change and a citizen’s fear of it.

Fortunately, we need not be limited to these traditional methods and worldviews. The decline of print culture forces us to integrate literature with multimedia and the range of stories discussed in cultural studies. It is true that the powerful documentary *Cowspiracy* (Andersen and Kuhn 2014) already shows the necessary journey of the individual to collective action, and the undercover footage of *Earthlings* (Monson 2015) can convert all kinds of audiences, but both movies follow scripts we are trained to talk about and/or write ourselves.

In fact there are many more exciting possibilities for new modes of writing and reading “literature” in the twenty-first century. However, nothing could be more breathtaking or rewarding than meaningful participation in the movement to save our descendants, humanity, and other living beings on this planet.



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