


Book Review

Climate Change, PTSD, and Cultural Studies. Book Review: Robinson (2020). *The Ministry for the Future: A Novel*. London: Orbit. ISBN: 978-0316300162

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Abstract: This novel demonstrates how we can face our current crises avoiding both denial and despair. A plausible, positive ending makes this not only a very unusual book in this genre, but probably the most important book you should read on this subject. While there are many interludes and side plots, the focus is on Frank, an American aid worker suffering from heat-wave PTSD, and Mary, the director of the Ministry for the Future, an organization created by the Paris Agreement to advocate for future generations.

Keywords: climate change; Cultural Studies; PTSD; denial; emotions in texts and in readers

The Ministry for the Future has not received the attention it deserves, partly because the author has been typecast as a socialist science fiction writer, even though the economic model praised here is that of one of the top ten corporations in Spain. As for the other stereotype, see McKibben's review, "It's Not Science Fiction." This novel is not like the speculative science fiction of interstellar travel, technological fantasy, and aliens. Science tests its hypotheses in the laboratory, in the field, and in the thought experiment. One literary version of the thought experiment is the projection in realist fiction of the physical and emotional consequences of a proposed action, in this case, the creation of an organization to represent the groups most affected by climate change: those who will come after us (Figure 1). This novel is a simulation of the future, more like a cross between Carlson's and Aberly's scientific projection and the science fiction that creates laboratory worlds to explore social changes. Like a realist novel, it is characterized by "a practical view of life [and] of what can be achieved or expected" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Set just a few years from now, it has a plausible, positive ending conveyed by the realist's "novelistic sense of this is the way life is," as Robinson put it in an interview with John Plotz.



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Figure 1. Young climate protesters. Bonn, Germany credit Mika Baumeister. (Source: Unsplash).

How does the next generation feel about their future? How do we feel about it? How do we feel about them? As these questions suggest, this essay differs from previous reviews

of this book by focusing on emotion in readers as well as in the text, especially as they converge in Robinson's assertion that PTSD is "the great affect of our time," and his use of the phrase, "the structure of feeling of our time." As we shall see, Robinson challenges us to become aware of the number and variety of negative emotions generated in us by the daily news; how these feelings become heavier and heavier as they compound within us; and how they drive us into a denial or despair comparable to that of PTSD victims that subverts almost all attempts to deal with our current crises. Hence, the importance of an understanding of PTSD may help us counterbalance denial and despair with a practical optimism like that of the characters in the novel.

To evaluate Robinson's assertions, our first task is to trace the origin of the initials, "PTSD." Our second is to ask, how do they apply, if at all, to groups as well as individuals? (The second question involves cultural studies, as we shall see). Both questions necessarily involve citing sources other than the author himself. For this purpose, we will consult David Morris's *The Evil Hours: The Biography of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2015), Andrea Stanley's "The Coming Age of Climate Trauma" (2021), Will Self's "A Posthumous Shock: How Everything Became Trauma" (2021), Charles Blow's "America's Pandemic PTSD" (2022), and Simon Lewis's account of the IPCC report (2022).

1. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD was diagnosed in Vietnam vets around 1980 and grew in importance until it became famous with the publication of Morris's book and Van Der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014). Morris concluded that now, "for better or worse, we deal with trauma and horror almost exclusively through a complex, seemingly arbitrary cluster of symptoms known as post-traumatic stress disorder. "PTSD" (and "trigger") have become a sort of global lingua franca, a label, an identity, a way of understanding the self, a cultural meme, a political interest group, a scientific mythology, and even a theory of time."

2. PTSD and Literature

When Morris, survivor of a roadside bomb in Iraq, began researching his PTSD diagnosis, he found literature to be the obvious place to start, because "for most of human history, interpreting trauma has been the preserve of artists, poets, and shamans." Now, we can add journalists to the list. Since 9/11, "it is not uncommon to hear journalists describing entire countries as being stricken with [PTSD] and writing lengthy articles" about it (Morris).

Traditional literary history remains a key resource, however. Take, for example, the time Dickens witnessed a train accident. Seemingly unhurt, "he hurried to help those who'd been injured. However, when he was recounting the incident for a letter a few days later," he recalled, "But when writing these scanty words of recollection I feel the shake and am obliged to stop" (Self). His shaking hand was all that remained of the incident, his original words almost immediately submerged into his unconscious, no longer accessible to even one of the most prolific of writers.

Our primary literary example of PTSD is Robinson's male protagonist, Frank, whose trauma was worse than Dickens's. He fits the official DSM-5 definition of PTSD, exhibiting, like Dickens, the long term symptoms of "exposure to actual or threatened death." Frank, however, not only witnessed but personally experienced and no doubt blamed himself for the mass death event. When he was found, "he looked completely mad. Like a different kind of being entirely."

Presumably, he experienced what is known as a "Big-T" trauma: one that "can destroy the soul and drive the victim mad with hallucinations and permanent insomnia; Big-T traumas don't merely trip the amygdala into a short-term survival response, they actually overload it, damaging its ability to respond in a predictable fashion, almost like a broken thermostat" (Andrea Stanley). Yet, Robinson does not associate his character, Frank, with any of these symptoms, nor does he send him to in-patient care. On those grounds one

could question the veracity of Frank's treatment for PTSD in the novel. On the other hand, focusing on Frank in a long-term care home would have meant a different and probably less successful novel.

In any case, the opening of the novel has the most powerful representations of "extreme heatwave" trauma in literature. One of the best examples in journalism is Andrea Stanley's account of the horrific fires in Paradise, California (Figure 2a). The name of the town invites a revision of our cultural history, beginning with the heat imagery of Dante's inferno or Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise (Figure 2b). Robinson focuses on one human experience of heat-wave trauma.



Figure 2. (a) California Highway Patrol video, (b) *The Inferno*. (Source: Dreamstime).

We identify with Frank, a kind, giving American health worker in a clinic in India. When a predicted climate change heat wave becomes truly unbearable, the clinic's air conditioner and generator are stolen. Frank is forced to ask his patients to submerge themselves in a nearby lake to escape the heat. Soon, Frank has to join them. When the sun heats the water hotter than their body temperatures, Frank loses consciousness of his place in the world: "hot water in one's stomach meant there was no refuge anywhere [in] the world, both inside and outside." When Frank lifts his head out of the water, he sees that everyone else is dead.

Frank here certainly fits the official DSM-5 definition of PTSD: exhibiting the long-term symptoms of "exposure to actual or threatened death." Those words are typical of medical technical writing. The contrast with literary diction is striking. Metaphor, simile, and evocative prose help the reader experience Frank's inner life: "In the jungle of [his] mind a wandering went on ceaselessly, finding a clearing here, a pool there, all in the murky light of [his] sputtering thoughts, . . . No words fit. A shaft of fear cut through him like a blade."

Frank's life becomes marked by anger, panic, flashbacks, and "triggers": traumatic details generating "recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories." The PTSD aggression within him emerges as irritability, anger, kidnapping, and attempted murder. After he gets out of prison, he begins to notice that some versions of his emotions now seem to be those of billions of "normal" people all over the world, especially when they "doomscroll," avidly devouring the news, including images of the bodies in the Ukraine and of current examples of global climate catastrophe.

3. Social Emotion and Cultural Studies

As we have seen, Robinson begins with a convincing case of PTSD and then expands our awareness of the feelings associated with it to suggest that some version of it is "the great affect of our time." Obviously, applying an official psychiatric definition of an individual disorder to a group can result in gross oversimplification, hence the need for a slightly different term, such as "PTSS," with the final "S" standing for "Symptoms." PTSS can be used for the collective emotional symptoms of shared trauma (while the ghost of the original "PT" can still remind us of the structure of the official definition).

To explain how the group or public version of PTSS works, Robinson borrows the phrase “structure of feeling of a time” from a founder of Cultural Studies. Raymond Williams was referring primarily to “ways of thinking” (*Oxford Reference*), but Robinson uses the phrase to mean either thought or emotion or some combination of them. When he says “things feel like this or that,” he is usually talking about collective emotions that “are linked to periodization, because our feelings are not just biological, but also social and cultural and therefore historical.” We are caught in the prison-house of language, to cite one of Jameson’s titles, locked “into systems of emotions that are different in different cultures and over time.” So, “when time passes and that structure changes, how you feel will also change—both in your body and in how you understand it as a meaning.”

Sometimes, Robinson locates these social emotions in the global unconscious. For example, as Los Angeles is flooded by torrential rain, the death toll is mounting, and people begin to conclude that “it could happen anywhere. Was that right? Maybe not, but it felt that way. Some deep flip in the global unconscious was making people queasy. Despite this sense that the world was falling apart, or maybe because of it, demonstrations in the capitals of the world intensified . . . It was a different time, a new structure of feeling, a new material situation.”

This and other social emotions are discussed by Frank and Mary, as they try to define “a different form of PTSD—or a new type of trauma entirely . . . an existential kind of trauma . . . a trauma you may experience yourself, to some extent, sooner or later, just because you are living on this planet at this time.” If the salient effect of “Big-T traumas” is the way they make you feel helpless, overwhelmed, and disordered” (Andrea Stanley), an ordinary person could begin to identify with them, maybe even eventually agreeing with Morris that the PTSD brand of suffering has become so widely recognized that it has in fact “permanently altered the moral compass of the Western world and changed our understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to feel pain.”

One of Frank’s therapists talked “about avoiding triggers. What they were glossing over with this too-convenient metaphor was that life itself was just a long series of trigger events. That consciousness was the trigger. [Frank] woke up, he remembered who he was, he had a panic attack.” When Frank mentioned this, the therapist said to him, “everyone walks that sidewalk over the abyss, that’s life.”

4. Death of the Individual, of Civilization, of the Species, of All Life

When Mary visits Frank on his deathbed, she recalls the death of her husband. Remembering about how traumatic the death of a loved one can be, Mary wonders to what extent that experience can be labeled PTSD: “maybe it was a matter of degree. Everyone was post-traumatic, it was universal, it was being human, you could not escape it. Some people had it worse, that was all it came down to. They were haunted by it, stricken, disabled. Sometimes it was bad enough they killed themselves to get free of it. Not uncommon at all.”

Morris strikes a similar note in a chapter that begins, “IN TERROR’S SHADOW WE ARE BORN in debt, owing the world a death. This is the shadow that darkens every cradle. Trauma is what happens when you catch a surprise glimpse of that darkness, the coming annihilation not only of the body and the mind but also, seemingly, of the world.” If someone thinks seriously about death in this way, they might well be traumatized, especially when they see the evidence for the imminent demise of civilization.

Most of us have spent all our lives repressing fears, especially fears of death. We have certainly had a lot of practice denying the fact that our consciousness, the “I” thinking these thoughts, will end with the death of “my” body. Civilization has evolved primarily as an elaborate defense against this fear of the death of the individual. We expect civilization to preserve our legacies, what Becker calls our “immortality projects”: children, fame, wealth, and our group identities (our race, gender, class, nationality, religion and so on). But now, for the first time in our history, we are asked to face the death of all forms of civilization.

How can that not be traumatic? No wonder we deny it, but if you are a scientist or a conscientious voting citizen of a democracy, you must face it.

EMOTIONS COMPOUNDED: “a union, combination, or mixture of elements,” as in “It was not fear, it was not ardour,—it was a compound of both.” (*O.E.D.*)

Many have testified that everywhere they turn, the compounded suffering becomes *too much*. Already, “entire populations of people are routinely and consistently traumatized or living in a state of anxiety [with a] profound impact on our mental health. PTSD takes such a cumulative toll that it can determine how society functions. The problems of mental health are not invisible scars. They drip into our lives individually, politically, economically and socially, day after day” (Andrea Stanley).

5. The “Everything Feeling”

In this context, Mary and Frank try to define what they think might be a new feeling. Frank suggests that Moll Flanders did not suffer from PTSD: she just got on with the daily struggle of survival. Mary: but she “was not trying to take on the whole world’s trauma, as I recall.” Frank: “But we should be, right? . . . we all live in a village of eight billion neighbors. That’s our now. It’s all of us succeed or none of us is safe. So we take an interest in how the others are doing.”

Frank thinks about “Those people in the caves, they only knew that there were a few hundred people alive.” Mary replies, now, “‘eight billion people, all stuffed in here.’ She tapped her chest. ‘No wonder it feels so crowded. All smashed into one big mass. The everything feeling.’ Frank nodded, trying that on. That feeling of pressure in his chest. The headaches. . . . A new feeling, or a new blend of feelings . . . Made sense that it resembled being somewhat stunned. Not unlike despair . . . [So], say we feel the global village, but in a mixed-up way. . . . mashed together”. Later Frank wondered to what extent she was talking about him: “that he was not all there: true. That he was mashed together into a thing he couldn’t grasp: true. The everything feeling.”

6. Climate Change Dystopia Realized

One of Frank’s therapists prescribed the standard male solution: “Try not to think. Try not to feel.” But Frank thought, after “flattening of all feeling, then what? . . . March through life like an automaton, that’s what.” Instead of joining the living dead, Frank tried to live as fully as he could. What about the rest of us? Without intervention, without recognition of emotions generated by our traumas, what does Robinson say we should expect?

Looking just a few years ahead, the narrator proclaims that the 2030s will be the “zombie years. Civilization had been killed but it kept walking the Earth, staggering toward some fate even worse than death.” Everyone seemed to be feeling PTSS: “the culture of the time was rife with fear and anger, denial and guilt, shame and regret, repression and the return of the repressed. They went through the motions, always in a state of suspended dread, always aware of their wounded status, wondering what massive stroke would fall next, and how they would manage.”

7. Climate Change Utopia Realized

The good news, in the novel, is that Mary and her organization do manage to get carbon under control and reduce our fears of the death of civilization, our species, and all life on this planet. The great news, in the real world, is that just two years after the publication of Robinson’s novel, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change produced an annual report signed by all the world’s governments committing them to reduce carbon’s presence on the land and air . . . and fight fossil fuel companies as long as they oppose the necessary changes. In other words, “Scientists have just told us how to solve the climate crisis—will the world listen?”. One clue is that some of the other solutions proposed by Robinson are already in the works, including some of the less believable ones, such as expensive land bridges to allow animals to cross freeways—already under construction in California.

8. The Ultimate Emotion

What, then, is the final emotion? Robinson uses the word “solidarity” probably because it requires a connection to someone other than you, usually many “someones”: “—there’s no feeling like it. People talk about it, they use the word, they write about it, they try to invoke it. Naturally. But to really feel it? You have to be part of a wave in history. You can’t get it just by wanting it, you can’t call for it and make it come. You can’t choose it—it chooses you! It arrives like a wave picking you up! It’s a feeling—how can I say it? It’s as if everyone in your city becomes a family member, known to you as such even when you have never seen their face before and never will again.”

When this solidarity expands into a unified global vision, thinking precedes feeling: “Support growing fast. Could cross a tipping point and become what everyone thinks. A new structure of feeling, underlying politics as such. Global civilization transcending local differences.” When the global vision is realized, literary similes help us feel the emotions: “like coming back from a time of illness. Like healing, like getting healthy. The structure of feeling in our time.” Will it be? It’s up to you.

As George Canavan said at the end of his review:

“if you’re reading this, you *are* the Ministry for the Future.”

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