



BOOK REVIEW:

*Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative Fiction: Narrating the Future*

*Paul Williams*

Dědinová, Tereza, Weronika Łaszkiewicz, and Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun, editors. *Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative Fiction: Narrating the Future*. Lexington Books, 2021.

Anxieties related to the Anthropocene – the epoch of humans altering the individual and collective ecologies of planet Earth – have become a dominant topic in academic discourse. Today, more and more conferences and books are dedicating their energies to explore and respond to the increasing evidence of environmental degradation. *Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative Fiction*, an edited volume of twelve essays, enters into this conversation and proposes a shift in the ecocritical discourse of SFF. The collection is strongest for its fresh take on the Anthropocene, pivoting away from apocalyptic rhetoric and more towards coping with environmental changes already made. Additionally, the collection impresses with the variety of approaches it offers. Admittedly, the eclectic nature of the collection means none of the essays can dig too deeply into its argument, and the entire collection, for all its novelty, does more to suggest ideas for further scholarship than actually providing that new scholarship itself. Still, the strengths of the collection are real and effectively outweigh these flaws.

The editors' central premise is a familiar one – namely, that literature has a part to play in the Anthropocene because we must address the Anthropocene on the level of individual human experience and culture, not just as scientific fact. Literature's ability to project the consequences of human actions, they argue, empowers it to provoke a humane response to the climate crisis in ways that other environmental messaging cannot. Even more interesting is how

the editors wish to promote a necessary shift in environmental humanities discourse, focusing less on doom-speaking in the hopes of preventing the Anthropocene, as if it were still a future event, and instead accepting that we already live *in* the Anthropocene and must therefore learn to cope with our new circumstances. This is not to say that enormous and critical changes to stymie future collapse are unimportant, but while confronting that frightening future is necessary, we must not neglect the here and now. The editors offer an optimistic approach, suggesting that the “Anthropocene is yet another chapter – hopefully not the final one – in the grand story of humanity’s existence on Earth” (8). So while the Anthropocene is a calamity unlike any other humanity has faced in recorded history, it need not prove our destruction if we can learn to adapt.

However, survival – especially survival that is also just and equitable – will require a great deal of heavy lifting to bring about needed cultural changes. The editors contend that speculative fiction is one of the best tools available for inspiring and guiding such cultural work. They contend that speculative fiction is especially apt for analysing the Anthropocene because of its ability to “invent (semi)fantastic realities which can freely dismantle existing power structures, undermine established laws, and provide provoking scenarios of alternative history by pursuing the simple question: ‘what if?’” (12). For the editors, the central conceit of speculative fiction is its ability to project and depict the non-real, working out essential questions before we ourselves have to. In this way, speculative fiction may help us avoid the worst-case scenarios, work through the questions which underpin the Anthropocene, and respond accordingly. The essays collected in *Images of the Anthropocene* demonstrate various ways of exploring the editors’ claims. While they share the basic components in terms of discussing the Anthropocene through SFF, each shows a unique pathway into that conversation, verifying both speculative fiction’s versatility for engaging the crisis and certifying the raw complexity of the Anthropocene and the work needed to confront it.

The most surprising aspect of the book is the primary texts analysed. Ecocritical readings of speculative fiction tend to coalesce around an enduring locus of stories – *Lord of the Rings* for its indictment of industrialisation; *Earthsea* for its themes of harmony between humanity and Nature; and N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy with its geologic magic jumps readily to mind as a newer but frequently cited text. And while *Images of the Anthropocene* does interact with some of the usual suspects, the majority of texts analysed within the book are brand new – at least for me – for speculative fiction discussions of environmental studies. For example, in “The Fantasy of Wilderness: Reconfiguring Heroism in the Anthropocene, Facing the Age of Ecocentrism”, Lykke Guanio-Uluru looks past the many infamously problematic aspects of the *Twilight* books and focuses on the transhumanism of Meyer’s vampires. Identifying how these vampires function as hyper-consumers of resources, Guanio-Uluru notes that Meyer seems to have produced a veritable “global warming villain” (93). Other such surprises include Dariya Khokhel’s discussion of how climate change entangles with immigration in Patricia Briggs’s *Mercy Thompson* (2006–present) series and Anna Bugajska’s posthumanist reading of James Patterson’s *Maximum Ride* (2005–2015) series. I am not used to seeing these titles studied through an ecological lens (or any other lens, really). In this way, I find *Images of the Anthropocene* refreshing – even daring

– for how its essays defamiliarise my own sense of the Anthropocene and how its mark can be found in the most unexpected of places.

An important manoeuvre of the book is how the essays combine more traditional literary theories with the concerns of ecocriticism. This furthers ecocriticism's goal of not only identifying and understanding the cultural underpinnings of the Anthropocene, but also of signifying important remedies that challenge old traditions to change according to new understandings of our world and societies. One excellent example is Carrie Spencer's "Young Adult Fantasy to Save the World? Retelling the Quest in Maggie Stiefvater's *Raven Cycle*", which begins as a structuralist analysis of how the *Raven Cycle* deconstructs Campbell's monomyth, then expands to demonstrate how the Anthropocene necessitates that revision. Spencer argues that the traditional monomyth emphasises cyclical time and the human individual. These fuel the attitudes that disregard the future and promote human exceptionalism. In the *Raven Cycle*, Spencer contends, the monomyth is reorganised to advocate for the collective over the individual, uniting the human and non-human worlds without devolving into dystopia. The chapter is a productive fusion of both structuralism and ecocritical concerns, and it can be applied to studies in both disciplines while advancing the central claims of the present collection.

Another chapter that stands out is Maria Quigley's "Fantasy, Myth, and the End of Humanity in M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*". Quigley works from the stance that one of speculative fiction's most powerful abilities in working through issues relevant to the Anthropocene is the way it can manifest events and ideas not yet existent, but often unsettling. The chapter meditates on the powerful allure of the unparalleled catastrophe trope in speculative fiction. Quigley argues that the notion of some sort of apocalypse ultimately speaks deeply to humanity because we presume that the end times must give way to some sort of rebirth. However, she emphasises that while the end of the known world and society may not be entirely bad, an intrinsic reality that goes along with it is that humanity may not be able to retain its current identity: "For humanity to endure, it has had to evolve beyond what we think of as human" (132). It is uncomfortable to have to rethink humanness itself, and rather difficult to do in mimetic fiction, but this is one of the essential purposes for speculative fiction.

The most audacious entry in the collection would certainly be Dwight Tanner's "The Development of Realist Speculative Narratives to Represent and Confront the Anthropocene", which is bold on a few levels. First, because its chosen primary texts for analysis are *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver (2012) and *Solar* by Ian McEwan (2010), two mainstream all-stars (and, at least in McEwan's case, pathologically averse to being considered writers of SF). Second, Tanner proposes a new generic label and set of hermeneutics, what he terms "speculative realism", meaning texts that present themselves as realistic narratives, but where the subject matter and presentation might seem like speculative rhetoric. For instance, in his chosen texts, Tanner highlights how scientifically rational happenings, such as extreme weather changes, are coded and received as fantastical, despite being natural. "These occurrences are neither uncanny nor require a shift in the laws of reality because they're scientifically proven as inevitable ... but these facts do not make climate change any less incredible" (236). Tanner's neologism will require further exploration and application to determine its usefulness, but it has the potential to enlarge

the scope of speculative fiction studies. At the very least, it provokes renewed discussions about how we understand the relationship between fiction and the Anthropocene by questioning whether or not we have dismissed very real warnings and examinations thereof as artistic hyperbole rather than accepting their mimetic representation.

Still, there are a few shortcomings in the collection. Most noticeable is how the essays trade depth for breadth. Many of the individual chapters read more like the starting point of much larger theoretical arguments. None of the essays fully flesh out the implications of their arguments, and that does make the book less satisfying on its own. Also worth noting is the mixed value of the book's diverse selection of primary texts. On the one hand, I am not aware of any significant scholarly work on many of the series analysed in the book (*Mercy Thompson*, *Maximum Ride*, etc.), and their inclusion does signal potential starting points for further analysis. On the other hand, it may be more difficult to make use of the essays which focus on these less-often studied texts in further scholarship without stronger ties to existing scholarship beyond the larger topic of the Anthropocene. Scholars in search of a new or definitive treatment of the Anthropocene or, at least, a thorough new theory of environmental humanities will not find it here.

That being said, these weaknesses do point to the greatest value of *Images of the Anthropocene*: it functions best as a gateway to the variety of ways readers can analyse and respond to the climate crisis through SFF. Seen from this angle, *Images of the Anthropocene* can strongly benefit scholars new to environmental humanities, and also those looking for new approaches applicable to their own favourite texts. All told, *Images of the Anthropocene* marks at least a dozen new potential pathways into the study of ecocriticism.

*Biography:* Paul Williams received his M.A. in English from Idaho State University in spring 2018. He has published original scholarship and several book reviews. A former high school English teacher, he is now completing his PhD at ISU, writing his dissertation on alternate histories and fantasy fiction. He served as Editorial Assistant for *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* from 2018–2020.