

# BEACONS

*Stories for Our Not So Distant Future*



Edited by Gregory Norminton



ONE WORLD

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# INTRODUCTION



Gregory Norminton

The window of opportunity for averting climate chaos is narrow, but this book looking through it was a long time coming.

It began at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, where early in 2007 I attended a public lecture about the impact of man-made climate change on Scotland's wildlife. After a display of alarming graphs and hair-raising statistics, my head was in my hands. It takes a strong mental constitution to look into the abyss, and I found myself wondering how on earth, as a novelist, I could hope to approach a topic so enormous, so daunting and inescapable.

Thankfully Mike Robinson, then chairman of Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, stood up to speak my mind. Mike is a lean, wry, and tenacious man, a straight talker who isn't embarrassed to show his passion. The science is clear, he said, the stories that accompany it less so. When a society faces upheaval, it looks for fresh narratives to help make sense of events. Statistics cannot motivate us as stories can, yet where are the George Orwells, the Aldous Huxleys and William Morris of the ecological crisis?

Since Mike asked this question, a growing number of genre and 'literary' authors have written about, or around, the issue. Sarah Hall and James Miller have given us compelling dystopias in *The Carhullan Army* and *Sunshine State*; Helen Simpson has written a brilliant set of stories; Liz Jensen has thrilled us with *The Rapture*, and Ian McEwan's *Solar* has examined the cognitive dissonance that

keeps us from changing those habits that hurt us. As the symptoms of climate change begin to hit home, more and more writers feel compelled to engage in some way with the new reality. Back in 2007, things seemed very different.

I stopped Mike after the event and introduced myself. How about a book of specially commissioned short stories – a charity project to raise funds for, and awareness of, the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition? It would be, I said, a metaphorical gauntlet thrown down to challenge authors to imagine our worst and best possible futures.

The book you hold in your hands is the slow-grown fruit of our efforts – and the efforts of scientific advisers, community activists, and, above all, the writers who have given of their time and talent. Every story was written specially for this collection. In making their contributions, the writers have had to find ways of approaching a seemingly forbidding brief. How do we write fiction about the ecological crisis without lapsing into cliché? Is it possible to do so without becoming hectoring or portentous? We must tell the truth, but is that done best when, in Emily Dickinson's words, we tell it slant? How, indeed, can prose fiction, which is rooted in psychology and social drama, encompass planetary change? For global warming is a predicament, not a story. Narrative only comes into our *response* to that predicament. Yet the truth of the crisis almost defies comprehension. The scientists, working their way through vast quantities of data, give us their best guesses on our likely fate – and we shy away from their findings.

Lord Stern, in his 2006 *Report on the Economics of Climate Change*, wrote that 'climate change is a result of the greatest market failure the world has seen'. It is also a failure of the imagination. Because we do not want to look at what we're doing, we retreat into various forms of denial, we cling to hopes of a 'technofix' or minimize the dangers of exceeding our planetary limits. In Britain it remains difficult – hosepipe bans and summer floods notwithstanding – to wrap the mind around the consequences of runaway climate change. Inuit on collapsing headlands don't have this trouble; nor do the people of Kiribati, the first nation likely to disappear as a result of sea-level rise. But it is still possible, for urbanized Westerners, to disbelieve

or ignore predictions of a depleted world, of mega droughts and firestorms, acidified oceans, mass famine and migration, wars over water, and, at home, the distressing experience of watching familiar landscapes warp out of recognition.

Perhaps our primary task is to break through the protective caul of our incredulity. We have a collective duty to imagine what we fear to look at, for in looking away we fail, not only to avert the worst for our children, but also to create the happier and more just society in which we should wish them to live. More than ever we need stories that tell us where we stand, that help us imagine our predicament. Let them serve as beacons to warn of approaching danger, to unite us against adversity, to celebrate what we have and, perhaps, to show a path away from harm.

It is important to note that this book is not polemical; nor is it a policy document or a lifestyle guide. It is, rather, a meeting place for new stories that recognize where we are and where we might be heading, a forum in which contemporary authors try out different ways of encompassing what so often puzzles the mind and paralyses the will: thinking and feeling a path through dislocation and dismay.

In the following pages you will find dystopian satire, speculative and historical fiction, metaphorical flights of fancy, domestic naturalism, quiet tragedy, and farcical comedy. Some of the stories have a pervasive sadness; others pack an angry punch. Yet none, it seems to me, is that editorially dreaded thing, 'depressing'. Hope, in the words of Seamus Heaney, glossing Václav Havel, 'is a state of the soul rather than a response to the evidence. It is not the expectation that things will turn out successfully but the conviction that something is worth working for, however it turns out. Its deepest roots are in the transcendental, beyond the horizon.'

If hope is a moral imperative, telling stories may be one way of obeying it.



# LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

*If you want to see an endangered species, get up  
and look in the mirror.*

*John Young,  
former NASA astronaut*

# A IS FOR ACID RAIN, B IS FOR BEE



Joanne Harris

YOU NEVER WENT OUT ON RAINY DAYS. Health and Safety wouldn't let you. Instead, you played games online, or read books, or talked to your friends on your smartie, or even watched a movie – they still had live movies in those days, before ceegee took over for good (so much safer than real life, of course, but somehow not as exciting). In those days before the Cloud, you actually still *went* to school, instead of doing it all from home, and friends were people you saw every day, and games were what you played outside – that is, if it wasn't raining.

In a minute. Come here first. I hardly ever see you, kid. Yes, that's right. Climb onto my knee. Let me tell you a story. What about? Well, let me see. Do you like animals? No, *not* ceegee animals. I mean actual, real-life animals. Tigers and elephants and whales and such.

No kid, I've never seen a tiger. But listen and I'll tell you about the time I once saw a bee. You know what a bee is, don't you, kid?

No, don't say *bug*. It's an *insect*.

Why? Well, a *bug* is something gone wrong. A glitch in a machine. A cockroach is a bug, I guess. A *bee* – well, that was something else: a living cog in a machine more complex than the Cloud itself—

What's a cog? Another time. Let me tell you about the bee. It was in the summer of – well, never mind. A long time ago, when I was your age. I used to go to school just round the corner, where the

Parklands building is now. My school was called Saint Oswald's. Even in those days, it was pretty old. There was even an actual park nearby, with trees and grass and everything. We used to have a lot more of that in those days. Now you don't really get it much, because of the rain. And flowers too. In those days flowers grew mostly *outside*.

That was where the bees came in. Of course, they were pretty rare even then. People said they were dying out. Some kind of disease, or the rain, or the sun, or maybe smarties, which some people said were interfering with the special signals the bees gave out to find their way back to where they lived.

In any case, we hadn't seen a real live bee for years and years. But by then I guess most of us didn't know what a bee looked like anyway. Trust me, those cartoon bees in stripy sweaters that you see in books and games look nothing like the real thing, so you can't really blame folk for getting confused. But that day, we *all* saw the bee, Philip and Johnny and Frankie and me. For all we knew it might have been the very last bee in the whole world. In any case, we never saw another one after that, and by the time I left school, the park was gone to make way for these apartment blocks. Couple of years later, the school went the same way. It was a very old building. It never passed Health and Safety tests. Still, we kind of liked it. Parklands Estate, they call it now. There hasn't been a park there in fifty years.

I know, I know. The bee. Well, in those days, some of us kids still *walked* to school. A lot of people thought that was wrong: Health and Safety did, of course, and the Social Services. But it was only ten minutes through the park, and I guess my parents thought it would be OK, as long as it didn't look like rain, and as long as we didn't loiter.

That day was fine. Not a cloud in sight. No, not *that* Cloud; we used to call that the Internet in those days, before it really took off. Clouds were just what you saw in the sky on days when it wasn't raining. No, that doesn't happen much now. Listen, do you want to hear this story or don't you? Right, then. We were walking to school. It was warm, and you could smell the flowers. Yes, smartass, they used to smell. Like what? No, not *quite* like that. They had all kinds of different smells, and that was why bees used to like them. Why? Because it means pollen, that's why, and pollen means making honey.

You know all about honey, right? Yes, of course, you learnt it at school. Let me guess – in history.

Well, kid, in my day you could still buy honey online, from abroad, but it was really expensive, and I only had it once or twice. No, it wasn't yucky at all. I know it kind of sounds that way. Bee-spit. But it wasn't. It wasn't like anything you've ever tasted, or ever will.

What's it like? Like an *old* taste, somehow, like living history on your tongue. And it smelt of flowers, and sunlight, and air, and it was sweet enough to make you feel a little dizzy, a little drunk; and there was all kinds of secret stuff in there they never learnt to synthesize; and all of that comes out of flowers and grass, and only the bees knew the secret.

Well, Philip and Johnny and Frankie and me, we were in no hurry to get to school. We stopped for five minutes in the park – I didn't have a smartie then, and we couldn't play games without one. But we could still play football, the old-fashioned way, with a regular ball, and Johnny used to bring one hidden in his schoolbag. Of course, we wouldn't have got away with that at school. Health and Safety didn't allow it. But in the park, you could still run about, and to be fair, although I fell over quite a *lot*, it never did more damage than a few grass stains on my knees.

It was there that we all saw the bee that day. Philip had managed to kick the ball into one of the flower beds, and we all ran up to retrieve it. It was sitting in a big patch of some kind of tall pink flowers, and Phil reached in to get it back, lost his balance, grabbed one of the stems and—

'Ouch! Damn thing! It *stung* me!'

'Must be a rose,' said Frankie. Roses had thorns in those days, you know; not like the ones you can buy in the shops. They had a scent in those days, too, and I guess the bees must have liked them. Because there it was on the flower, the bee; no bigger than my fingertip, and nothing like the ceegeed bees you see in animations. For a start, it was *brown*, not yellow; a kind of tabby brown, with delicate stripy markings, and when you looked at it really closely you could see that it was *furry*, somehow, with little feathery feelers. This, and not the rose bush, was what had stung Philip; this single bee, now clinging onto

the palm of his hand and arching its back like an acrobat – because bees were able to *sting*, you know – only in self-defence, I guess, but Phil had put his hand on it, and it got him good. He shook off the bee, and I saw the mark, as big as a pound coin, I guess, and his fingers already beginning to swell. He wasn't crying – well, not yet – but I could see it hurt a *lot*.

'They say when a bee stings you, you die!' said Johnny, not helping the situation much.

Philip's eyes got very big.

'No, dummy, it's the *bee* that dies,' said Frankie, who was a smartass, like you.

'What if I've got an allergy?' said Phil. 'You can get them to bee stings.'

'In that case, you're a goner,' said Frankie.

Philip started to cry for real.

'No way,' I said. 'A tiny thing like that?'

'That sting could get infected,' said Frankie. 'We ought to tell Health and Safety. Or—'

'Listen,' I said. 'It's making a noise.'

It was true; the bee was *buzzing*. At first, it sounded like a circular saw heard from a million miles away. Then it rose and became a whine; intermittent; protesting.

'Kill it!' said Johnny.

'No way,' I said. I took it gently between my hands.

'It'll sting you,' said Philip.

'No it won't. A bee can only sting once.'

Well, kid, in the end we had to take Phil to the walk-in centre to get an anti-allergy shot. We got into terrible trouble at school. After that, we weren't allowed to walk to school through the park any more. But I kept the bee in my pencil case, hoping it might somehow survive. It didn't, of course. Frankie was right. It's the bee, and not the person, who dies. Pity. I'd always wanted a pet.

I never saw another bee. They all turned out to be hover-flies. Or wasps, which can sting you as often as they feel like it. But I told Mrs Teague about it at school, and she showed me an old glass collecting case from on top of a pile of stuff to throw out.

'People used to collect insects,' she said. 'These were collected a long time ago, before it became illegal. For some reason, this box has survived. I think someone left it to the school, an old man who used to live nearby. He was a lepidopterist. That means he collected butterflies. But he also collected other insects. Perhaps you'd like to have this.'

And so I took the glass case. I never told anyone about it. For a start, Health and Safety would have said that it was unhygienic; I might have picked up some kind of disease or allergy from those dusty old things. For a long time I kept it under my bed, and looked at it in secret. There were thirty-five specimens in that case, all held in place by long steel pins and labelled in tiny brown writing. *Bumble bee. Carpenter bee. Stingless bee. Leafcutter bee. Orchid bee. Cuckoo bee. Hornfaced bee. Orchard bee.* And here, at the end of a row, *my bee: Apis Mellifera*, the European honeybee, banded in brown and honey-gold under a layer of feathery dust. All of them extinct now, as well as a lot of the plants they served. Funny to think that only fifty years ago, those bees were flying all over the place, making honey, building nests, making that funny buzzing sound and flitting from flower to flower.

What's that, kid? No, I don't have the collecting case any more. The rules on that kind of thing are too strict. I'd have to have a license. But I do remember all their names. Would you like to hear them? Yes, I know. I'm repeating myself. But it's so good to see you. We so rarely see children around here nowadays. Why? Oh, Health and Safety, I guess. Unless there's some other reason, kid. Allergies, maybe. Acid rain.

What? Is visiting time over so soon? Well, maybe next time you'll stay longer. Tell your mother I love her, kid. Tell her to call me once in a while. I still have dreams about that case, you know; those carefully labelled specimens. I once read somewhere that there used to be nine hundred *thousand* insect species in the world, and more being discovered every day. Now so many seem to be gone. Except for the cockroaches, that is. They'll always be around.

What happened to make things change this way? Were we somehow responsible? Of course, there's no actual proof that we did anything at all. No one knows why the bees died out, or whether their disappearance had anything at all to do with allergies, acid rain,

the disappearance of our parks or the fact that I can sometime spend days or weeks before seeing even a single kid. And yet, I can't help thinking. Maybe the earth is allergic to *us* – maybe we're the insects, and all this is the final stage in a long, slow process of rejection.

We used to be kings of this world, kid. Or so we thought. But kings get overturned in the end, and sometimes all it takes is a stone to bring down the oldest of empires. We always thought the cockroaches would end up ruling the world. Perhaps they will. Rain doesn't hurt them, they're immune to UV. They don't even have any allergies. Next to them, we're soft and weak. They're bound to do better than we did.

We used to be kings of the world, once.

Not any more, kid. Not any more.