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Collapse

The 2014 science fiction film *Interstellar* depicts a planet that is suffering from freak weather, extreme drought and hunger. It falls to the hero, played by Matthew McConaughey, to not so much save the earth, but to find a new place in the universe for humankind. While *Interstellar*'s earth is characterized by a dry and dusty landscape, the planet that humankind eventually settles on is futuristic – humans live in giant bubbles – and at the same time pastoral in depicting a typically Midwestern countryside, albeit one made slightly weird by the existence of several suns in the sky. In presenting the possibility of terraforming as a solution to the destruction of earth's environmental systems, *Interstellar* is an apt example of the popularity of environmental collapse as a narrative in contemporary culture. Since the turn of the century, dozens of films have appeared that in some way or another depict environmental collapse, whether as a key challenge to be overcome (Wall •E, 2012), or as setting for a future world (*Mad Max: Fury Road*). In literature, a similar trend is underway, as reflected in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy and other works of climate fiction (or cli-fi), such as Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013) and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012).¹ *Interstellar* exemplifies many of the problematic elements of these depictions of environmental collapse. While the makers of *Interstellar* were supposedly careful not to include anything in the film that would violate physical laws ('Interstellar – Trivia' 2014), the inherent techno-optimism of the film – expressed by its tagline 'Go further' (*Interstellar* 2014) – hints at a denial of the severity of climate crisis that is unhelpful in understanding its true scale and magnitude. Many climate fictions similarly seek a balance between capturing crisis as well as offering a sense of hope. In Atwood's trilogy, this is exemplified by the continual existence of humans after the waterless flood and even in the flood-ridden New York depicted by Rich a new society is formed.

In this chapter, I explore three postmillennial British novels that engage with the challenges of depicting environmental collapse. My focus is primarily on two central elements: first, on the temporal distance between the time of the novels' initial readers and that of the stories themselves, and second, on the importance of narrativity. Temporal cues are particularly important in describing environmental collapse because they determine to what extent the reader feels that this collapse is imminent or, conversely, reassuringly far away. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007) and Sam Taylor's *The Island at the End of the World* (2009) rely on what Marie-Laure Ryan has termed 'the principle of minimal departure' to, especially in Hall's and Taylor's novels, refuse the sense that collapse is far away and instead create a sense of eerie proximity. At the same time, all three novels challenge the possibilities and limits of narratives and narrativity. As such, this chapter engages with ecocritical and environmental humanities' debates about the importance of storytelling in a time of climate crisis.

Throughout this chapter, I explicitly do not describe the narrative of environmental collapse as an apocalyptic narrative. In this respect, I respond to the environmental humanities' call for new narratives of nature in a time of climate crisis, and at the same time react against the predominance of the apocalyptic narrative in many discussions of climate crisis, especially in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century ecocriticism. In emphasizing the narrative of environmental collapse rather than that of apocalypse, my discussion responds to literary works that move away from the latter, as do the novels in this chapter. Apocalypse is, as Lawrence Buell suggested in 2003, 'the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal' (Buell 1995: 285). Yet, the apocalyptic narrative is also highly problematic, not least because it has the tendency to reduce complex issues to 'monocausal crises involving conflicts between recognizably opposed groups' (Garrard 2011: 105). Apocalyptic narratives are also ill-suited to contemporary climate crisis because they have come to be associated too much with the fictions of disaster films or science fiction. A 2006 report by the British think tank Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) suggests that depictions of environmental crisis that rely on the apocalyptic narrative often exclude 'the possibility of real action or agency by the reader or viewer' (Ereaut and Segnit 2006: 7). Perhaps due to the popularity of apocalyptic narratives

in films, apocalypse's 'sensationalism and connection with the unreality of Hollywood films also distances people from the issue' and even 'positions climate change as yet another apocalyptic construction that is perhaps a figment of our cultural imaginations, further undermining its ability to help bring about action' (Ereaut and Segnit 2006: 7). Consequently, as the authors of the report argue, people are less inclined to act on environmental collapse, or see it as a reality, and instead delegate it to fiction and films, essentially denying the crisis that is taking place. The result is frequently a kind of apocalypse or crisis fatigue: 'environmental warnings have often taken on an apocalyptic tone ... it is to be expected that the public greets them with a certain weariness' (Hamilton 2010: xi). Apocalyptic narratives, to put it differently, present a world that is falling apart, giving viewers and readers a sense that at least the 'real' world is fine – much as the film *Interstellar* does by providing a way out.² Indeed, the failure of apocalypse to materialize has made the narrative a political liability (F. Buell 2003: 201) and climate sceptics have used such 'false' prophecies of apocalypse to argue that climate crisis is by no means as urgent as environmentalists suggest. Yet traditionally, apocalypse does not denote the end of the world event that sceptics critique. Biblical apocalypses, Sarah Dillon notes, 'describe, reveal, or predict cataclysmic events but only and always with the structural guarantee of a postcataclysmic continuance, be it in this world or the next' (2007: 376). In those instances, apocalypse has become a way of life, as F. Buell also suggests about contemporary environmental circumstances (2003: *passim*). Nevertheless, the popular idea of apocalypse as 'the end of the world' might stand in the way of productive, rather than defeatists, engagements with climate crisis. The environmental collapse narrative that *Cloud Atlas*, *The Carhullan Army* and *The Island at the End of the World* present is an example of such a more productive approach.³ Environmental collapse holds none of the connotations of 'end of the world' that makes popular apocalypse so problematic. Rather, typical of the narrative of environmental collapse is that climate crisis coincides with and leads to socio-economic and political collapse, despite which, however, one or several people survive, allowing for the story of what happens after the collapse to be told.⁴ In the remainder of the chapter, I focus on how postmillennial British novels navigate issues surrounding imagining and narrating environmental collapse in more detail, starting with a discussion of the importance of time and temporal cues in the depiction of environmental collapse.

Environmental collapse and the challenge of narrative time

Richard Kerridge suggests that '[t]he inability of political cultures to address environmentalism is in part a failure of narrative' (1998: 4), arguing that the political failure to act is inherently related to the literary difficulty of imagining apocalypse and environmental crisis (2010). In other words, if we were able to imagine environmental collapse with more certainty, people would be more likely to take action because they would know what to prevent. In a similar vein, L. Buell argues that 'environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it' (1995: 2). The difficulty, even impossibility, of imagining environmental crisis in narrative recurs in ecocritical and environmental humanities scholarship. The scale of environmental crisis is frequently seen as the major stumbling in this respect: 'the Anthropocene', Timothy Clark writes, 'enacts the demand to think of human life at much broader scales of space and time' than that typically offered by narratives (2015: 13).⁵ Similarly, Greg Garrard argues that '[n]one of the traditional forms in literature, film, or television documentary is unproblematically suited to capturing the geographical and temporal scale, complexity, and uncertainty of climate change in particular' (2009: 709).⁶ But while conventional narrative forms and realism are often dismissed as unsuitable to depicting environmental collapse,⁷ more experimental narratives may also be highly problematic. Alexa Weik van Mossner's discussion of Dale Pendell's *The Great Bay: Chronicles of the Collapse* (2010) demonstrates this especially well. The novel favours geological and climatic timescales over human ones, yet in doing so runs the risk of 'losing readers' empathic engagement with characters they understand well enough to care about their hopes and goals' (Weik von Mossner 2014: 205). Indeed, the true challenge in representing climate crisis and environmental collapse may not be finding or developing new genres, but rather unifying the temporal and spatial scale of environmental crisis with a scale more suitable to human understanding. Nevertheless, much ecocriticism and environmental humanities scholarship argues the other way around, and tries to bring the human on the scale of environmental crisis. In his readings of scale, Clark suggests an ecocritical analysis that interprets narratives on the global as well as the personal and national scale. His example, Raymond Carver's short story

'Elephant', becomes more than a story about the demands of family, or about consumerism. Placing the story in a 600-year time frame results in a reading in which seemingly personal and small-scale events, such as discussions about car ownership, come to demonstrate 'the oppressive, all-pervading and destructive effects of being born into a fossil-fuel-based infrastructure as aggressive as an occupying army' (Clark 2015: 104). While this argument may succeed in putting relatively small-scale developments on a larger global scale, it similarly runs the risk of creating a sense of dissociation of the kind Weik von Mossner identifies in relation to Pendell's novel.

The difficulties – if not impossibilities – imagining the global scale entails are foregrounded by cognitive narratologists. Human minds are best at grasping events and environments on a medium scale – or what David Herman terms 'person-level experiences' (2002: 81). Humans' mental capacities, he argues, 'are optimally suited for navigating situations and events that are encountered at a particular spatiotemporal scale or degree of resolution' (2002: 81). Indeed, narratives themselves, Herman suggests, are 'instruments for sense making that are optimally calibrated for molar minds' (2002: 83). The medium-scale rather than the large-scale may hence be much easier to grasp, which suggests a gap between the scale that climate crisis is played out on and the much smaller scale on which human minds operate. In the three novels I explore in this chapter, this gap is bridged by the use of temporal markers. On the one hand, these markers help readers determine when in the future the novels are set. On the other hand, the use of temporal markers leads to the realization that the environmental collapse depicted in the fictions is much closer to the present than we might be comfortable with. As such, temporal cues create narratives of environmental collapse on a medium scale, a scale that might be much more effective than the large scale frequently called for. In focusing on time, this chapter forms a counterpart to both Chapter 4, which emphasizes the spatial dimensions of polar narratives, as well as Chapter 2, in which time is explored as a key feature of pastoral narratives. Indeed, pastoral and environmental collapse are two sides of the same coin: pastoral is often framed by nostalgia and a connection to the past, whereas environmental collapse, even though it has become our present, is often explicitly discussed in terms of the future. Moreover, pastoral is popularly

associated with retreat to an idealized landscape, while environmental collapse brings disaster and destruction and the realization that the ideal is forever lost.

What Marie-Laure Ryan terms ‘the principle of minimal departure’ is central to the process of determining the temporal setting of *Cloud Atlas*, *The Carhullan Army* and *The Island at the End of the World*, especially when explicit clues aren’t (immediately) given. Ryan argues that readers use their own world and environment as the starting point for understanding a narrative and its world: ‘we construe the central world of a textual universe ... as conforming as far as possible to our representation of AW [the actual or real world]. We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text’ (1992: 51). *Cloud Atlas* consists of six stories, of which the first two are set in the past, the middle two more or less in the present, and the final two in the future. While the principle of minimal departure plays a role in the way readers determine the settings of all six stories, the two future sections are most interesting in respect to the environmental collapse they suggest will happen in the initial readers’ future. In the first of the two future stories – ‘An Orison of Sonmi~451’ – the reader is quickly transported into the future world when she is confronted with concepts unknown in the contemporary world, such as a ‘silver egg-shaped device ... called an orison’ (Mitchell 2004: 187). Another temporal cue that transports readers into the future are the first words of the section: ‘Historians still unborn will appreciate your cooperation in the future’ (Mitchell 2004: 187). The rest of the narrative confirms that Sonmi’s story is set a few centuries into the future, as readers encounter androids, a world largely uninhabitable and a language in which brand names have become generic. Indeed, throughout the entire section, language plays on the principle of minimal departure: the reader recognizes words such as ‘nikes’, ‘nikons’ and ‘disneys’ and deduces that these have become the words for shoes, cameras and films. By making brand names generic, the story achieves an uncanny sense of familiarity, transporting the reader into a future that is both recognizable and strange. In the sixth and temporally most distant story of *Cloud Atlas*, ‘Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After’, language is one of the clearest markers of futurity as well. In the future, this section of the novel suggests, language has eroded, as the first sentence demonstrates: ‘Old Georgie’s path an’ mine crossed more times’n I’m comfy

mem'rying,' an' after I'm died, no sayin' what that fangy devil won't try an' do to me' (Mitchell 2004: 249). The story is being told by Zachry's son – though from Zachry's perspective – demonstrating how in novels such as *Cloud Atlas*, *The Carhullan Army* and *The Island at the End of the World*, '[t]he present is the object of a future memory' (Currie 2010: 5). Incidentally, the future sections in *Cloud Atlas* aren't the only ones that make the reader expect future disaster. In the sections set in the past, historic settings and events become markers for the future themselves. From the beginning of the novel onwards, characters such as Adam Ewing, the protagonist of the first story, remark on the destruction seemingly inherent to the human race. The readers of the novel are aware of Ewing's future and can thereby interpret his remarks as a kind of prophecy – not only in terms of the initial readers' past, but also in terms of their future.

In *The Carhullan Army* and *The Island at the End of the World* fewer cues are given as to the temporal setting of the textual world. In both novels, I want to argue, the representation of future environmental collapse depends on the way in which the principle of minimal departure is used. In fact, both novels play with this principle, by rarely or not at all making explicit when exactly they are set, and therefore how far into the future the reader has to travel to access the textual world. The effect of this is that the novels create an eerie sense of immediacy in which far-reaching environmental collapse and various sociopolitical crises can never be safely relegated to the more distant future. In the absence of a structure of the kind in *Cloud Atlas*, the reader of *The Carhullan Army* has to rely more on temporal cues. Hall's novel begins with a notice about a transcript – 'record no.498' – that has been recovered (Hall 2007: loc. 6). A link is hence created here between the future of the narrative – a time in which the record is recovered – and the time in which the novel is set. A doubling of the future takes place, as it were, where a future is added to the narrative set in the reader's future. Initially, however, few clues are provided to suggest the temporal setting. The first pages describe that the prisoner – 'Sister' – was the last woman to go looking for Carhullan and that she left an as-yet unspecified place in 'a wet rotting October' (Hall 2007: loc. 20). When a cue does appear that suggests the narrative is set in the future, it is a cue that connects political collapse to environmental collapse: 'Each year after the Civil Reorganisation summer's humidity had lasted longer, pushing the colder seasons into a smaller section of the calendar, surrounding us constantly with

the smog of rape and tar-sand burning off, and all of us packed tightly together like fish in a smoking shed' (Hall 2007: loc. 28). Interestingly, when musing on the weather, the narrator adds another temporal dimension, one that brings the setting of the narrative even closer to that of the actual world that the novel's initial readers inhabit. Sister remembers her childhood in which the weather had been cooler, the seasons more distinct: 'I still recall the fresh ticking of hail on my face in March as I stood to catch the bus for school. And autumn blusters, when objects large and small were bellowed back and forth. The deep-vein chill of January' (Hall 2007: loc. 28.) Only later, by piecing together Sister's family history and particularly the passing down of a gun from the Second World War, can the reader approximate when the novel is set. When she leaves the city for Carhullan, Sister packs an old Second World War gun that used to belong to her father. He held on to it in spite of the weapons amnesty, telling her that this gun used to belong to her great-grandfather who was at Osterley, site of the training school of the Home Guard. Depending on the length of a generation, Sister's great-grandfather serving in the Second World War would place the novel in the 2040s or early 2050s.⁸ A later reference to events at the turn of the century makes the earlier date more likely. On her hike to Carhullan Sister walks through a village she visited with her father on one of their hikes when she was a child. It had consisted of a working school and farms that 'had survived the troubles at the turn of the century' (Hall 2007: loc. 273). Given the abandonment of the village in the novel's present, and the rapid decline of the countryside and its settlements, it seems more likely that Sister saw the school and farms at a date closer to the turn of the century – perhaps in the early 2020s – than at a later date, for instance in the late 2030s.⁹ Both dates are only a few decades from the novel's publication in 2007 and the initial readers' actual world in the late 2000s or early 2010s.

Passages like the one about the abandoned village emphasize that the textual world of Hall's novel is an extension of the actual world of the novel's first readers. This sense of extension is further foregrounded by a reference to flags of the United States and the United Kingdom hanging from the same flagpole (Hall 2007: loc. 422). In the *Carhullan Army*, the United Kingdom has become largely dependent on American food and is 'little more than a dependent colony' (Hall 2007: loc. 483). Contemporary readers will recognize the sense of connection between the two flags – and two nations – as an echo

of the unequivocal, and heavily criticized, support of the United Kingdom for the United States during both the war in Afghanistan, started in 2001, and that in Iraq, started in 2003. Further cues to the recognizable, actual world of the readers are provided by references to the The Hague Tribunal (Hall 2007: loc. 2467) and a region Sister's father's generation had called the Lake District (Hall 2007: loc. 105). The weather, too, befits that of a world similar to our own, as well as the extensive flooding predicted for our future. The sense of immediacy that the novel achieves depends not only on temporal cues – through which the reader may interpret Sister's world as similar to her own – but also spatial cues. References to the Lake District and towns in Cumbria contribute to the eerie proximity the novel suggests to its first readers' present. The sense of familiarity that the landscape in *The Carhullan Army* evokes is also a result of narrative layering: underneath the narrative of environmental collapse is that of the pastoral. The dystopian landscape of Hall's novel, Deborah Lilley argues, relies on the pastoral conventions it presents and disrupts (2016: 65). Or, in the context of this chapter, the environmental collapse narrative intersects with and builds on that of the pastoral. Essentially, the novel develops the tension between past and present, ideal and reality that, as I explore in Chapter 2, is so central to pastoral. Lilley, too, acknowledges that the pastoral may be made productive in a time of climate crisis or environmental collapse. In *The Carhullan Army*, the dystopian pastoral landscape, she argues, might even point to ecological alternatives.¹⁰ The novel, then, is not only an apt example of what I term 'the narrative of environmental collapse'. It also foregrounds the connections between the environmental collapse narrative and that of the pastoral and, importantly, how the pastoral narrative frequently underpins, runs parallel to or intersects with narratives more readily associated with climate crisis.

While there are differences between the readers' actual world and the textual world of *The Carhullan Army*, these are hardly explicitly flagged by the narrator, and never explained in much detail. Readers learn that a collapse of some sort happened, that there are food shortages and wars, that the countryside is largely abandoned and forced population control is the norm. By never explaining what has happened, *The Carhullan Army* replicates some of the epistemological uncertainty characteristic of a time of climate crisis. Much as in *The Carhullan Army*, the temporal setting of *The Island at the End*

of the World is also never made explicit, but the epistemological uncertainty characterizing Hall's novel is largely absent here. Indeed, the title of the work itself provides a spatial and temporal cue that suggests that the novel is set either far away ('at the end of the world' as a spatial cue), or in a (distant) future in which the world as the novels' initial readers know it is about to end. Taylor's novel begins with a diary entry, written by the main character – the father – in the Biblical language typical of him. He writes of an unspecified enemy coming nearer the island where they live. Within the first ten lines, the reader is told that the father and his children have been living on the island 'since the Great Flood seven springtimes ago' and that unlike the rest of the world, they are 'UNCONTAMINATED' (Taylor 2009: 3, original emphasis). References to this Great Flood continue throughout the novel: Finn, one of the children, mentions the 'befor' world' (Taylor 2009: 8) in his own erratic writing, and the father thinks of his own parents, who must have drowned in the 'great wave that crashed down on us' (Taylor 2009: 16). While it is made apparent almost from the start what happened, when exactly the novel is set is not made explicit, although it can be roughly deduced. The world on the island bears similarities to the actual world of the early twenty-first century: the father owns a computer which is powered by means of solar panels, although he hides it from his children, and his secret library contains the Don DeLillo novels *White Noise* (1985) and *Underworld* (1997), amongst other works. The temporal setting of the novel can be approximated through a reference the father makes to the first flood he experienced as a five-year-old. The post-apocalyptic landscape he remembers echoes images of Hurricane Katrina, in 2005. If the father is in his late-thirties to mid-forties in the novel – he had a job for a few years, and his eldest daughter is a teenager – and he was born in 2000, the novel is set around the 2040s. This too is a date close to the initial readers' actual world. The sense of proximity to the first readers' actual world is moreover achieved through the novel's genre. As a story about a family stranded on an island, it echoes not only that of Noah's flood but also Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the popular books and television series about the *Swiss Family Robinson*. In Taylor's novel, the narrative of exploration, in some form, underpins the narrative of environmental collapse, much as the pastoral narrative does in *The Carhullan Army*. Indeed, as I explore in the final chapter of this book, exploration and environmental collapse are closely connected,

the former not infrequently leading to the latter. In *The Island at the End of the World*, environmental collapse supposedly leads to exploration: to the search for – albeit only for a number of years – an idyllic place of escape. Yet towards the end of the novel, the environmental collapse narrative is turned upside-down. As I discuss in more detail below, the father's stories of the flood are false. He created the island he and his children live on himself, by flooding a large piece of land. Their mother, who he told them was dead, is still alive, having left him before he created the island. Although the Great Flood the father speaks of echoes historical and existing floods, and predictions of the future, it not being true in the world of the novel also destabilizes the narrative of environmental collapse *The Island at the End of the World* seems to be telling.

Textual cues are not the only way in which narratives transport readers into the future. In *Cloud Atlas*, the reader is also led to believe that Sonmi's and Zachry's narratives are set in the future because of the structure of the novel: the first two narratives are set in the past, the next two in the present and the final two in the future. Having read two sections set in the past, followed by two set more or less in the present – the 1970s and 2000s, respectively – the reader naturally expects to now read two narratives about the future, or at least is more likely to interpret the final two narratives as set in the future. This conclusion is supported by the textual cues in Sonmi's and Zachry's narratives that I explored above. The novel's representation of time, however, is also significant to how the reader interprets the consequences of social, environmental and political collapse in especially the temporally more distant narratives. Indeed, the structure of the novel has variously led critics to interpret the narrative either as hopeful or more pessimistic of the future. *Cloud Atlas*' structure has been described as 'Russian-doll like', as depicting a 'boomeranging arc' (Hicks 2010: par. 4), as resembling an ouroboros, the snake or dragon eating its own tail (Dimovitz 2015: 77; Ng 2015: 107) and, by the novel itself, as a 'sextet of overlapping soloists' (Mitchell 2004: 463).¹¹ Halfway through each story, it is suddenly interrupted and followed by the next. The sixth story is the exception to this: 'Sloosha's Crossin'' is told in full. Then, as Ian Baucom aptly puts it, having taken its reader into the distant future, the novel 'pivots back in time ... to hunt for clues of what has made Zachry's long-Anthropocene ruinous present' (2015: 151). Following Zachry's full story, the second half of Sonmi's is provided, followed by the second half of Timothy Cavendish's story set in the

2000s, and so on until the final section, made up of the second half of the story that the novel started with, Adam Ewing's nineteenth-century travel journal. Most critics agree that the novel's cyclical structure is a way of going 'beyond' or offering an alternative to conventional linear conceptions of time. As Gerd Bayer suggests, '*Cloud Atlas* refuses to submit to the linearity of temporal developments' (2015: 345). A similar argument is made by Heather Hicks, who points out that the cyclicity of the narrative creates connections between the narratives that a linear narrative would perhaps not foreground. One of these connections is the setting of the chronologically first and final narratives: both Adam Ewing's travel journal and Zachry's oral narrative are set in the Pacific (Hicks 2010: par. 26), and Pacific cultures, Lynda Ng notes, frequently take a non-linear approach to temporality, as the novel does (2015: 119).

Interpretations of *Cloud Atlas* as cyclical depend on foregrounding the *syuzhet* rather than the novel's *fabula*. Only if readers interpret the novel as it is told, i.e. as it is constructed (*syuzhet*), is the narrative cyclical. If not, and the novel is read chronologically, it ends with Zachry's oral narrative, an ending that holds little to look forward to for the future of humanity. A reading focusing on the *syuzhet* makes the comments that Adam Ewing makes at the end of the novel prophetic of the future but also of the novel's previous sections, since this future is told before the final part of Ewing's diary is offered. In the final pages of his journal – and the novel – Ewing contemplates the fate of humankind: 'one fine day, a purely predatory race *shall* consume itself... Is this entropy written in our nature?' (Mitchell 2004: 528, original emphasis). This comment is prophetic: read chronologically, according to the *fabula*, the six narratives of *Cloud Atlas* indeed form a record of entropy, in which human civilization eventually runs down. Consequently, 'humanity is caught up in an entropic cyclicity that is fated to repeat itself' (Shaw 2015: 111). Like Adam Ewing's, the final story of the novel similarly touches on issues of predacity and greed. Zachry's tribe is visited by Meronym, a Prescient, a group of people who seem to have retained some knowledge of the world before it collapsed. When Zachry asks her what caused this collapse, she tells him that the 'Old'uns' 'tripped their own fall' with their 'hunger for more' (Mitchell 2004: 286) – much as the apocalyptic events in the five other narratives are caused by human hunger. Meronym's comment, consequently, reveals both the historical past, as well as the parts of the novel that the reader has yet to read. Her remark, particularly

given her status, also suggests a prophecy about the future after 'Sloosha's Crossin'', in which continuing human greed will cause ever more destruction. Nonetheless, some critics suggest that 'Sloosha's Crossin'' leaves room for humankind's survival. To Kristian Shaw, *Cloud Atlas*' structure suggests a revision of the future, producing 'an overriding framework which confronts the crises inherited from history, incorporated ... as redirected hopes for the future' (2015: 111). Hicks similarly interprets the novel's *syuzhet* or structure as providing a way out of apocalypse: 'through its basic structure, *Cloud Atlas* invites us to consider how cyclical understandings of time might serve as a way out of apocalyptic events, since this is what the book itself enacts' (2010: par. 8).¹² The connection between cyclicity and hope is emphasized by Peter Childs and James Green, who note that '[i]f, during the first half of the text, humanity appears to be shackled to its apocalyptic destiny ... the reversal of this forward momentum opens up an alternative perspective' (2011: 35). This 'alternative perspective', they suggest, means that 'the novel argues the case for ethical choices made by individuals and societies reasserting the potential for enlightened political agency' (Childs and Green 2011: 35). In other words, they propose that 'Sloosha's Crossin's' world of tribal warfare after 'the Fall' implies that Zachry and his tribe put the knowledge gained from Meronym to the betterment of humanity, making *Cloud Atlas* a narrative of progress along the lines of such narratives idealized by Ewing's mid-nineteenth-century contemporaries. Yet, none of these critics take into account that while *Cloud Atlas*' structure may suggest cyclicity, its chronology doesn't. In terms of its *fabula*, the novel is open-ended, leading to nothing but to the orison with Sonmi's confession, which Zachry's children hold in their hand at the end of the narrative. Even a cyclical view of the novel cannot obscure the record of crisis, entropy and human greed that the stories form. Furthermore, at the end of Zachry's section, which is, no matter how the novel is interpreted, set furthest in the distance, the odds of humanity surviving are bleak. A mysterious disease is sweeping a world ridden by tribal violence, and even though Zachry's children have survived long enough to tell his story to a group of other people, nothing suggests that there is in fact hope – except the novel's structure, which then returns to what is essentially the past, bringing home yet again how the societal, political and environmental collapse of Zachry's world came about. In terms of environmental collapse, *Cloud Atlas*, then, doesn't only suggest that

humanity will eventually essentially destroy itself – emphasizing the novel's theme of cannibalism and predacity – but also that, as Bayer proposes, 'the kind of apocalypse traditionally envisioned as an event to be encountered in the future is, in effect, already taking place' (2015: 345).¹³

In essence, *Cloud Atlas* sketches environmental collapse as both something enduring and recurring, in the past, present and future. Imagining the future in terms of the past is a tactic frequently employed in crisis discourse, as the resurfacing of apocalyptic narratives in various different settings demonstrates. This technique, which holds the middle between analepsis – flashback – and prolepsis – flashforward – is applied in similar ways in *The Carhullan Army* and *The Island at the End of the World*. Both novels describe floods: in *The Carhullan Army* the narrator notes the swelling rivers and increased flooding after the Civil Reorganisation, and in Taylor's novel the flood motivates much of the narrative. Indeed, the father styles himself as a contemporary Noah – he even calls the ship he and his children live on 'the ark'. Floods are a powerful image of climate crisis and, as Adam Trexler writes, 'the dominant literary strategy for locating climate change' (2015: 82). The strength of the flood image as part of the environmental collapse narrative is that it is both a recognizable image lodged in readers' cultural memory, as well as projected for the future by climatologists. Moreover, the kinds of scenes described by Sister in *The Carhullan Army* are rapidly becoming all too familiar to British readers in the early twenty-first century. Sister talks of how the river Eden, in Cumbria, has broken its banks in the rains and the cottages in the villages are window-deep in the river's current. Floods have become common in Sister's world: she mentions smelling 'the *familiar* smell of flooded homes', of wet mortar, fabric and silt (Hall 2007: loc. 102, emphasis mine). Indeed, in recent years, the river Eden has frequently flooded – by which the narrative blurs not only the temporal but also the spatial distance between the world of the text and that of the reader. As the readers' actual world is catching up to the textual world of especially *The Carhullan Army*, and to a lesser extent *The Island at the End of the World*, the future is becoming the present, and the lines between the projected crisis and the actual crisis we might be living are further blurred. Sketching a future that is an extension of the present and which corresponds to projections of the future consequently closes the gap between future and present. It also brings the large scale of environmental collapse to the medium scale of human

experiences and brings home the reality of environmental collapse much more than a novel that depicts a future that is less familiar and further away does. Yet whereas they use narratives and storytelling as a technique for depicting environmental collapse, all three novels also destabilize the role that narratives play in this respect.

The problem with narratives

While the ecocritical and environmental humanities' search for 'new narratives' sounds promising and necessary in a time of climate crisis, I'd argue that this much-repeated suggestion is more complex, and significantly more problematic, than scholars usually propose. The challenge goes beyond the challenge to devise narratives capable of representing the scale and complexity of environmental crisis. Rather, it lies in the nature of narratives themselves. Cognitive narratologists have long argued that stories help us make sense of the world. Since stories, as Herman puts it, 'furnish an optimal environment for making sense of what goes on by allowing circumstances and events to be dovetailed with the intentions, desires, and experiences of persons or, more broadly, intelligent agents' (2002: 73)¹⁴ narratives are ideally suited for representing and coming to terms with environmental collapse. As Baucom argues, following Donna Haraway's work on companion species, relation is a vital element in our understanding of climate crisis. Fictional lives – characters – he suggests, embody these relations (2015: 154). Yet stories, and characters, can also – wilfully or by accident – distort reality or otherwise mislead the reader. Stories can be manipulated, altered and (partly) destroyed, which hardly makes them the kind of stable and uncomplicated entities the term 'new narratives of nature' suggests. In *Cloud Atlas*, *The Carhullan Army* and *The Island at the End of the World*, the dominant narrative of environmental collapse is explored especially through the novels' problematization of narratives. In various ways, all three novels give centrality to storytelling and narratives while challenging the function of narratives and the role they might play in imagining environmental collapse. To put it differently, the novels affirm the ecocritical and environmental humanities argument that climate crisis is a failure of the imagination (e.g. Garrard 2009: 709; Kerridge 1998: 4)

while destabilizing these arguments. Narratives, they suggest, are inherently unreliable, corruptible and unstable.

The most obvious way in which *Cloud Atlas* emphasizes narrativity is through the novel's combination of six different stories and six different genres.¹⁵ The different genres in particular draw attention to the extent in which our experience of the world is narrated – and shaped by the form, or genre, that our narratives take. 'Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery', the third section, is an apt example of the effect of genre on the depiction of environmental collapse. The story is set in the United States in 1975, a time when fear of nuclear disaster and war intersect with the burgeoning environmental movement. Luisa Rey is a young reporter investigating the construction of a new nuclear reactor by the Seaboard Corporation. When she discovers that the corporation building the plant is trying to cover up a report that deems the new reactor unsafe, her own life is threatened and some of the scientists contributing to the report are killed. This section of *Cloud Atlas* is written as a crime thriller, a genre whose aims and characteristics to some extent coincide with those of environmental discourse. One of the genre's features is that, as David Glover notes, 'the *scale* of the threat [in the crime thriller] may appear to be vast, its ramifications immeasurable and boundless' (2003: 138, original emphasis). Both nuclear crisis and environmental collapse are vast in scope, and their effects – particularly when it comes to environmental collapse – are unpredictable. Moreover, the crime thriller lends itself well to the kind of story told in 'Half-Lives' because, unlike the detective novel – which, according to Julian Symons, expresses conservative social attitudes – the crime thriller is 'often radical in the sense of questioning some aspect of law, justice or the way in which society is run' (Symons 1992: 163). Consequently, the genre creates a space in which governments, corporations and the status quo can be challenged, for instance, by the environmental activists who, on their campsite near the power plant, literally inhabit an outside position that allows them to critique those in power.

The role that narratives play in how we interpret the world is most explicitly addressed in *The Island at the End of the World*. The father in Taylor's novel allows his children to read only a book of fairy tales, the Bible and a collection of Shakespeare's works, depending on their age. These works literally shape how they perceive and interpret the world. Alice, the oldest daughter, has

had doubts about the sea surrounding their island actually being a sea for a while. Her doubts are founded in Shakespeare's works: 'in Shakespeare the sea's always moving. There are waves and tides and tempests and ... in Shakespeare the sea has a special smell, it makes a special sound' (Taylor 2009: 142), whereas the body of water surrounding their island is calm and still, without the briny, salty smell of the sea. Her strictly religious father, conversely, interprets Alice's disobedience in terms of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Bible. When Will, the father's nephew, unexpectedly arrives on the island, the father tries to keep his children from discovering the truth about the world: that there was no flood and that the children's mother is still alive. Alice, however, is curious: she is always 'wanting yearning needing to KNOW' (Taylor 2009: 54, original emphasis), much like Eve in the Bible. When Will and Alice fall in love, the father interprets this as a betrayal on the scale of the sin committed by Adam and Eve in Genesis. His subsequent description of discovering Alice and Will together merges his actual experience with a God-like focalization in which he borrows from the book of Genesis:

At an easy pace I move forward. And they heard the voice of the Father walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Will and Alice hide themselves from the presence of the Father amongst the trees of the garden. And the Father called unto. But no, I keep silent, and walk on, until I reach the sunflowers ... And the Father said to Alice, WHAT IS THIS THAT THOU HAST DONE?

(Taylor 2009: 112; 113, original emphasis)

His God-like perspective and the religious lens through which he sees the world become a legitimization for the act the father subsequently commits. Much like God expelled Adam and Eve from paradise – and made them mortal – he kills Alice and Will.

Especially through the father's interpretation of the present in terms of the Bible, the novel addresses the danger of interpreting the future in terms of the past. By practising a kind of Biblical exegesis, and framing his daughter's relationship with Will in terms of Adam and Eve, he projects the essential failure of the Biblical narrative unto his own life, and that of his children. In her father's eyes, Alice commits Eve's sin, by having a sexual relationship with

Will and searching for more information – more knowledge – about the true reason for the flood. In other words, the father's attempts to create a paradise for himself and his children is founded on the failure of Biblical paradise. While we may, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, 'normally envisage the future with the help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past' (2009: 197), doing so is not without risk. In the novel, the position of narratives as reliable entities is even further destabilized when Will's arrival demonstrates that the entire world didn't flood. While this is the story that he had been telling his children, it turns out that the father flooded a large plot of land when his children were little, in the belief that this would save them from a wicked world. In *The Island at the End of the World*, then, narratives and storytelling play a role in both the establishment and destabilization of a potentially environmental collapse narrative. Moreover, it could even be argued that the destabilization of the collapse narrative in this novel foregrounds the extent to which climate discourse relies on narrativity in order to bring across a message of environmental crisis. Narratives, the novel suggests, might always be corrupted, or severely coloured. This shows for example in Daisy's interpretation of events. As the youngest of the children, she is also allowed to read only fairy tales and hence frames the world in terms of those stories. She interprets Alice's sin – and eventual murder by her father – not in terms of the Biblical fall, and thereby as an ending, but as just another passage in a fairy tale. Consequently, she comforts her father towards the end of the novel by telling him that 'Evry things go-ing to be all right. This is the bad part of the story but its go-ing to get better you no it is. Weare all go-ing to live haply/Everafter' (Taylor 2009: 215).

Libraries, as collections of narratives, feature explicitly in all three novels: the father's secret library in his cabin in *The Island at the End of the World*, the library Sonmi has access to after her escape from the diner in *Cloud Atlas*, and the library at Carhullan, the farm building to which the protagonist flees in *The Carhullan Army*. Indeed, by including six different stories and six different genres *Cloud Atlas* is itself a collection of stories that demonstrates the effect that, as I suggested above, the choice of genre has on depictions of the environment. In all three novels, narratives also fulfil another function: libraries in the works provide a link to the (pre-collapse) past, but also foreshadow (possible) events in both the initial reader's future and in the characters' future. In both *The Island at the End of the World* and Sonmi's narrative in *Cloud Atlas*, the books are of

the dystopian kind: Sonmi encounters books by Orwell and Huxley (Mitchell 2004: 220), while the father's library in Taylor's novel verges between survival manuals – the *US Army Survival Manual* – and the dystopian – Don DeLillo's *White Noise* – with the tongue-in-cheek addition of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (Taylor 2009: 45). The selection on the shelves of Carhullan's library is less obviously dystopian. In her first days at the farm, Sister reads Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Hall 2007: loc. 1696) and later discovers books by Osgood, Fuller and Douhet (Hall 2007: loc. 2209). These four authors and their works point to the past, both prior to the novel's publication and the characters' past, the narrative's present and the future. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom's* account of the First World War serves as a reminder of the wars of the past, and the introduction of global warfare. Richard Buckminster Fuller's use of the concept Spaceship Earth prefigures the initial readers' future, and sheds light on the textual world's past. In *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1968), Fuller proposes that earth is a spaceship with a finite amount of resources: resources that in *The Carhullan Army* have largely run out and that are decreasing in the early twenty-first century. The name Osgood might refer to the head of UNIT – the United Taskforce Intelligence – in the science fiction series *Doctor Who*. By including this name in a list of authors in the real world outside of the novel, *The Carhullan Army* blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, in much a similar way in which the temporal distance and proximity to the reader's presence creates a blurring of the boundaries between the first readers' future and their present. Finally, the mention of Giulio Douhet prefigures Sister's future, and potentially also that of the readers. The group of women Sister joins at Carhullan have secluded themselves completely from society, yet are planning a revolt. This insurgency is described in the final pages of the novel. Little is made known about the Carhullan Army's actions at this point, but Sister's account gives some sense of what took place:

I was a willing participant in the siege on Rith, and the occupation of Authority headquarters. I led the patrol that bombed the clinic and I gave armed support to attacks on three other targets, including the refinery and the railway station. I do not know how many men I have killed. We regretted the civilian casualties and civilian deaths that occurred in the first few weeks of the conflict.

(Hall 2007: loc. 2741)

An Italian general, Douhet is best known for his belief that during war a quick victory can be won by an early air attack on the enemy's vital centres. The civilian population, he argued, must also be directly targeted. The mention of Douhet's name around three-quarters into the novel hence prefigures the attack on Rith: although it is not made clear whether the Carhullan Army has the means to attack the town from the air, their targeting of the Authority headquarters, clinic, refinery and railway station, as well as Sister's mention of civilian casualties, is a nod towards Douhet's theory. For the reader, the books at Carhullan consequently come to serve as connections between her own period and that of Sister – and provide a frightening image of the societal and environmental collapse that awaits.

While serving as a connection to the past, a foreshadowing of the future and an explanation for what has gone wrong, books also serve another purpose in the novels. In fact, the emphasis on narratives and books functions as a legitimization of novels and their significance in the world as well as affirming the environmental humanities project. Literary works, Derek Attridge argues, may offer consolation to readers, especially 'when the experience of the work enables the reader to reconceive his or her situation' (2004: 77). Attridge here echoes cognitive narratologists' argument that narratives help make sense of the world. Yet his suggestion may also be used as a rationale for exploring novels depicting climate crisis, as I do in this book. Most significantly, however, he aims to legitimize literary works. The three novels I explore in this chapter participate in this legitimization, and have a vested interest in it. Yet at the same time they challenge, even undermine, the importance and role of narratives by showing how narratives can be manipulated and by emphasizing the frequently distorting influence narratives can have on our perceptions of the world. Consequently, the loss of written narratives becomes a symbol, even a synecdoche, for the loss of Western civilization. Not only do the novels hereby legitimize their own position and significance as guardians of civilization, they also use the most definite end they can depict – the end of the very language and narratives novels are made of – as a powerful representation of environmental collapse and even the end of humanity.

In *Cloud Atlas*, *The Carhullan Army* and *The Island at the End of the World*, the loss of knowledge, written narratives and language go hand in hand with a (supposed) societal and cultural collapse. *The Carhullan Army* is structured as

a series of records, some complete, some partly destroyed, in which Sister talks about her life at Carhullan and, in sparse detail, the attack on Rith. The further the reader progresses in the novel, the less material becomes available. What exactly happened in Rith and how Sister has come to be – as we can assume – questioned about her activities remains unknown. She herself provides the reason for that: all official records were destroyed by the women of the Carhullan Army (Hall 2007: loc. 2747), and supposedly all other records are also incomplete. At the same time, Sister's story, fragmented as it is, is presented as significant. It is important, Carhullan's leader tells her, to 'tell them about us. Tell them everything about us, Sister. Make them understand what we did and who we were. Make them see' (Hall 2007: loc. 2738). The records and the story she tells are consequently a way in which she both reveals and obscures: with the destruction of all records, the census has been wiped as well and the woman who identifies herself as 'Sister' tells her supposed interrogator: 'You will not find out who I am. I have no status. No one does' (Hall 2007: loc. 2747). At the same time, her actions have weakened the regime, which may have led to more chaos and insecurity. The record of Sister's interrogation echoes a similar story in *Cloud Atlas*, that of Sonmi~451. After her arrest for activities that undermine the totalitarian regime in which she lives, a so-called archivist records her story. As in *The Carhullan Army*, the importance of the narrative and of recording is emphasized: 'Historians still unborn will appreciate your cooperation in the future, Sonmi~451. We archivists thank you in the present' (Mitchell 2004: 187). A similar impulse surfaces in *The Island at the End of the World* in which the father keeps a diary because, he writes, 'I knew I had to leave them [his children] some clue to their past, to the nature of the world beyond this island' (Taylor 2009: 31). Yet while in Taylor's novel the father's diary provides the only truth, since everything he tells his children is a lie, a surprising twist occurs at the end of Sonmi's (filmed) narrative. She tells the baffled archivist that everything that happened to her was part of a 'theatrical production' (Mitchell 2004: 363), scripted by those in charge, hence making her not a resistance fighter, but a knowing ploy of the regime. The story that the reader had taken for real for hundreds of pages is suddenly overturned and any belief in the transparency or reliability of narratives challenged.

The trouble of recording stories and knowledge is even further complicated when the medium most commonly used in Western culture – the written

word – is lost. This connection between written narratives and civilization is not unique to the three novels I discuss in this chapter. In his discussion of twenty-first-century dystopian fiction, Peter Boxall notes that at the heart of this fiction ‘is the perception that the narrative mechanics which have allowed us to negotiate our being in the world, to inherit our pasts and to bequeath our accumulated wisdom to the future, have failed’ (2013: 217). *Cloud Atlas* presents an explicit correlation between on the one hand the faith in the written words that underpin much of Western civilization and on the other hand population collapse. In Zachry’s section, the final story of the novel, scientific and cultural knowledge, including of what came before, has largely been lost. Only a tribe known as the Prescients has retained some of the knowledge of the ‘Ancients’, but for illiterate tribesmen such as Zachry this is unavailable. What remains in ‘Sloosha’s Crossin’ is instead an oral narrative, characteristic of the way in which civilization has reverted to a pre-literature, pre-civilized state. Hicks recognizes that *Cloud Atlas*’ use of letters, diaries and other types of narratives ‘can be read to comment on the role the loss of the written word may play in global collapse’ (2010: par. 44), but is unsure about why the dissolution of literacy matters, since in the novel ‘the reading of the narratives – or even the viewing of the media – has little or no effect on the unfolding of events’ (2010: par. 45). Indeed, within the world of the novel, the different types of texts or the forms that the stories take may perhaps not play much of a role. On the level of the novel as a whole, however, the loss of literacy is a way in which the novel legitimizes itself as an important form. To put it differently, the novel’s progression into a time in which the written word has been largely lost, coincidentally also a time of massive societal collapse, positively correlates written narratives – especially literature – with the continued existence of civilization. However, the novel complicates this reading in several ways. Zachry’s section, for instance, is the only of the six sections that is – as far as the reader knows – edited. Unlike in the five other stories, we don’t get Zachry’s unmediated story, even though it’s a first-person narrative. Instead, his son is the one who tells the story to his children and tribesmen. The loss of written narratives as symbolizing the loss of civilization is moreover a very Western perspective that leaves out both non-Western civilization and the rich tradition of non-Western oral narratives. Such a neglect of oral narratives over written narratives is also apparent in criticism. Boxall, for instance, refers to Atwood’s

Oryx and Crake and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as two novels in which 'the exhaustion of narrative is the corollary to the death of the planet' (2013: 217), not acknowledging that in both oral narratives survive. Emphasizing written narratives as more valuable than oral narratives also belies the importance that narratology assigns to all narratives as important tools for sense making. In a culture dominated by the written word, oral narratives might function as resistance, or an alternative to a culture that is alien and even destructive. The turn to oral culture in the final section of *Cloud Atlas*, then, may also tie in with a critique of Western civilization that runs through especially Adam Ewing's journal that bookends the novel. In his descriptions of the Chatman Islands, Ewing is particularly perceptive about the destructive results of colonialism and of Western civilization. The loss of Western civilization in the most distant of *Cloud Atlas*' six stories, then, might not be such a bad thing.

The oral future that *Cloud Atlas* envisions, however, leaves little room for the novel as a genre. The novels discussed in this chapter hence employ other strategies to depict the end of humankind as corollary to the end of narratives. Paradoxically, in doing so they both attempt to legitimize the novel as an important vehicle for environmental collapse narratives while destabilizing it. Language entropy or erosion of the kind that takes place in both Sonmi's and Zachry's stories is an example of the end of narratives coinciding with societal and environmental collapse.¹⁶ Nowhere in the novel is language so explicitly foregrounded as in 'An Orison of Sonmi~451' and 'Sloosha's Crossin'. In Sonmi's narrative, a commodification of language has taken place, in which brand names have become nouns: shoes are 'nikes', coffee is 'starbucks' and cars are 'fords'. Spelling has also simplified – 'slightly' has become 'slitely' for instance – a development that is exaggerated in Zachry's narrative. The final 'g' in words ending in '-ing' is routinely dropped, leading to, for instance, 'fishin', 'clackin' and 'boilin'. In much the same way, 'and' has become 'an' and 'finally' and 'family' have become 'fin'ly' and 'fam'ly', respectively. The simplification, or erosion, of language is extensive. The frequent use of parenthesis in words such as 'und'stand', 'mazement' and 'barb'ric' suggests an almost literal falling apart of the language, much more than a natural development inherent to languages. In this respect, *Cloud Atlas* uses a technique that Joshua Masters also identifies in McCarthy's *The Road* in which the end of language is employed as a means of imagining the end of the world (2012: 114). Through 'death of language',

Boxall suggests, *The Road* ‘traces a vast sundering between word and world, between historical form and unnameable present, an unloving time without precedent and without succession’ (2013: 218) – an argument that could very well be applied to *Cloud Atlas* and *The Island at the End of the World* too. In the latter novel, the idiosyncratic language of Daisy and Finn strengthens the idea that the reader – along with the majority of the characters – is led to believe: that what we are perceiving in the novel is the end of the world. Without written language, these novels suggest, we have little left to interpret the world with. Entropy is consequently employed in *Cloud Atlas* and *The Island at the End of the World* as a metafictional device that illustrates the confusion of environmental collapse, and the future that awaits. As such, it may well be the most powerful device that written narratives have at their disposal. Much more so than telling the reader about the effects of environmental collapse, *Cloud Atlas* and *The Island at the End of the World* foreground confusion and dissolution by breaking up language, the very thing that the textual world is made up of, and the only thing that gives the reader access to it.

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Environmental collapse as depicted in *Cloud Atlas*, *The Carhullan Army* and *The Island at the End of the World* takes various forms: floods are a recurrent feature, as are sociopolitical and economic instabilities. In *Cloud Atlas*, Sonmi talks about large parts of the world that have been poisoned so extensively that they have become inhabitable, and a large pandemic is killing off what remains of humanity in Zachry’s narrative. By blurring the line between present and future and playing on the principle of minimal departure, the three novels employ realism to bring the large scale of environmental crisis down to the smaller scale of human understanding. I would argue that especially their reflexivity, their use of metafictional techniques such as language erosion and their challenge to the role of narratives make these novels most interesting, particularly from an ecocritical and environmental humanities perspective.

Novels such as those explored in this chapter invite a more critical ecocritical approach that focuses on the possibilities and limitations of narratives. This approach shows that narratives may always be suspect, and are never transparent, but importantly also that our perceptions of the world, including environmental collapse and climate crisis, are never unfiltered or unbiased.

This need not be problematic, or lead to climate crisis denial, yet should be an inherent part of any form of cultural, especially literary, criticism. Being sensitive to the role that narratives and narrativity play foregrounds how *Cloud Atlas*, *The Carhullan Army*, *The Island at the End of the World* and other novels open up a space of uncertainty that echoes some of the uncertainty of climate crisis.¹⁷ When the reader's attention is drawn to the instability, corruption or loss of narratives within a novel, she may also reflect on a similar instability when it comes to interpreting climate crisis discourses and predictions. Narrative instability hence becomes a metafictional device by which postmillennial British novels engage in the broader cultural awareness of climate crisis. For ecocritics and environmental humanities scholarship, it is vital to similarly be more critical towards their own methodologies. Such an attitude, this chapter demonstrates, can affirm what Attridge calls the singularity of literature, while acknowledging the limitations of (literary) texts. Environmental collapse, then, is also a challenge to cultural criticism to explore more fully the creative and critical capacities of the postmillennial novel.

Yet, climate crisis narratives are not only those in the foreground of the environmental imagination, those dealing with environmental collapse and, in the final chapter of this book, the melting poles. They are also those stories underlying these narratives, the ones that tell of older or more immediate relationships of identity that people have with the changing non-human natural environment. The narratives of pastoral and urban nature that I turn to next are narratives of climate crisis in their own right, part of and shaping the current environmental moment.