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Conclusion

The brochure for a thirty-two-day cruise through the Arctic promises its guests ‘unprecedented adventures and unsurpassed luxury ... in the footsteps of intrepid explorers’ (Crystal Cruises 2016: n.p.). The ship will sail through ‘unparalleled landscapes of grand glaciers, stunning fjords, and rare wildlife sightings as you learn the Arctic culture and its fascinating people’ (Crystal Cruises 2016: n.p.). Priced at just under 22,000 dollars per person, the 2016 cruise through the north-west passage was quickly sold out. On the website of Crystal Cruises, passengers can also buy the right ‘gear’ for their cruise: not bathing suits, tropical hats or evening wear – although black tie is suggested for some on-board dinners – but lightweight hoodies, waterproof pants and thermal socks. The website selling the gear features images of the polar explorers Roald Amundsen and Henry Stanley supposedly endorsing the ‘full package’ and ‘the *bear* essentials’ (Ship to Shore 2016a: n.p., emphasis mine). But even when passengers don’t buy the full package consisting of everything from long underwear to snow boots and neck gaiters, they probably have little to worry about. Temperatures in the Arctic in summer are, the company promises its guests, ‘not as cold as might be expected’ and ‘temperatures can be pleasant and sunny’ (Ship to Shore 2016b: n.p.).

The north-west passage cruise and the advertising around it are thick with ideas about nature, both past and present. By deliberately framing its journey in terms of exploration, and nature as an adventure, the company ties its advertising in with the idea of polar exploration as a noble and glorious act. Yet, the references to and pictures of polar adventurers also offer a kind of legitimization for the cruise. A twenty-first-century cruise to a region in crisis, the brochure suggests, is not problematic or suspect but rather an act as celebrated and unchallenged as Victorian journeys to the Arctic were. At the same time, of course, the background of exploration adds a frisson of

potential danger to the luxury cruise that may appeal to tourists who want more than sip cocktails on deckchairs by the pool. What is not addressed in the brochure is the reason why the north-west passage has become navigable for a 68,000-ton luxury cruise ship. Global warming has melted the Arctic sea ice to such an extent that the passage, thought to be unnavigable by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorers, has now become passable. The burning of fossil fuels – for instance, by global shipping – has played a considerable role in global warming, which is particularly wry considering the large footprint of cruise vacations (Pearson 2016: par. 5). The comment that temperatures ‘can be pleasant and sunny’ in the Arctic is even more cynical than the cruise itself. 2016, the year in which the cruise was first offered, once again showed record high temperatures in the Arctic. While the temperatures may feel pleasant to the ship’s passengers, for the Arctic they are a disaster. The 22,000 dollars passengers pay give them a luxurious front seat for the unfolding of climate crisis – from the comfort of their own state-of-the-art cabin. Moreover, the wealth of the people that the cruise attracts stands in stark contrast with that of the people living in the Arctic. As exploration, tourism and climate crisis eroded traditional hunting grounds and destroyed traditional social structures, much of the remaining population of the Arctic struggles with poverty, addiction and poor health.¹ As such, even the prize of a place aboard the ship functions as a metaphor of global climate crisis in which the poor are disproportionately affected by the actions of the rich. In her book *The Magnetic North*, Wheeler describes going on an Arctic cruise as well. In 2008, she and her son joined an international group of tourists aboard a Russian icebreaker to travel across the Arctic Ocean. When the tourists spot their first polar bear, Wheeler is struck by the wry irony of the cruise: ‘we were absorbed in the wonders of the natural world having burned up hydrocarbons by the tonne to reach them. Knitting at the guillotine? Or fiddling while Rome burned? Either way, this particular ship of fools illustrated the environmental conundrum of our times’ (2009: 279).

Crystal Cruises’ journey through the north-west passage and Wheeler’s cruise are examples of extinction or ‘last chance’ tourism in which people visit a destination because it is under threat. Another example is the Great Barrier Reef. In a 2015 survey, 69 per cent of visitors to the reef said that seeing it before it was gone was one of their most important reasons to visit (Piggott-McKellar and McNamara 2016: 11). At the end of the cruise, Wheeler’s son expresses a similar

sentiment: 'he was sad to think he might not be able to repeat the journey with his own son, if the ice really does melt' (2009: 299). Both the Arctic and the Great Barrier Reef are on a list published by *Time* in 2014 of '10 amazing places to visit before they vanish', which includes Venice, the Maldives and the Alps – all (future) victims of climate crisis (Gibson 2014). Though last chance tourism is not new or unique to the twenty-first century (Piggot-McKellar and McNamara 2016: 3), lists such as that provided by *Time* and vacations to the Great Barrier Reef and the Arctic are particularly apt examples of contemporary human–nature relations. Indeed, few things better illustrate the complexity of people's engagement with the natural world in a time of climate crisis. The fact that so many people give 'to see the reef before it's gone' as a reason for visiting the Great Barrier Reef shows the extent to which cultural awareness of climate crisis has even influenced decisions about where to go on holiday. Yet, the example of the Great Barrier Reef and the Arctic cruises also show the dark irony at the heart of climate crisis. Visiting a destination because it is about to be lost to climate crisis is a way of contributing to that same crisis. Indeed, the tourist who in an article in *The Guardian* said that he came to the Great Barrier Reef because he'd heard that 'tourism is killing it' (Mathiesen 2016: par. 9) is engaging in an act of imperialist nostalgia he's probably not aware of himself. Last chance tourism consequently functions as a kind of feedback loop: tourism exacerbates climate crisis, which in turn increases the appeal of certain regions for some people.

Approaching climate crisis through the narratives that surround it shows the influence it has on the twenty-first-century imagination and the role that art plays in depicting this crisis. The central argument of this book is that postmillennial British fictions reflect widespread cultural awareness of climate crisis, but also participate in the renegotiation of the stories we tell about it by suggesting modifications of older narratives and offering new ones. The novels I discuss especially emphasize the role that storytelling plays as a sense-making strategy. Such narrative framing goes beyond literature. When people describe the countryside as a place to 'get away from it all' they frame it in terms of the pastoral narrative, while Crystal Cruises' decision to frame their cruise to the north-west passage in terms of polar exploration is a deliberate appeal to the polar narrative I discuss in Chapter 4. Foregrounding the role that narratives play in depicting and communicating climate crisis, as I do throughout this book, also contributes to increased awareness about how narratives might

be employed to manipulate readers or, in the terms of television advertising, viewers. The Nissan LEAF commercial I describe in Chapter 4 draws on the narrative of polar nature to present an essentially polluting industry in terms of environmentalism, with the polar bear as its poster child. Similar greenwashing happens in the British Gas commercial that I mention in the introduction and which uses a penguin – wrapped up warm in a hat and scarf – to promote insulation. In suggesting that the penguin is looking for, as the commercial puts it, ‘a warm home’, the viewer might initially feel that she is doing something good for the environment by insulating her house. At a deeper level, however, the commercial is deeply cynical: it uses the narrative of polar nature and wider climate crisis discourse to cover up the fact that the burning of fossil fuels contributes to climate crisis. The penguin, of course, is not looking for a warm home – its habitat is threatened because continued demand for fuel is making its home too warm. Twenty-first-century novels provide a particularly valuable context in which to explore the role that climate crisis plays in the contemporary cultural consciousness. They present a sense of immediacy and familiarity that makes readers recognize the climate crisis discourses depicted and that ties in with other narratives and cultural artefacts in the reader’s immediate environment, like films and commercials. As such, postmillennial novels are a valuable context in which to explore how climate crisis is being imagined now, and which stories are developing around it.

In a time of increasing and extensive climate crisis, it is the threatened quality of nature, a kind of econostalgia, that has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary human–nature relations. Polar bears floating away on an ice shoal, monkeys losing their habitat and other animals common to environmental campaigns all address this sense of ‘about to be gone’. While these campaigns aim to inspire a sense of guilt or compassion, they also contribute to a wider cultural image of nature as about to be lost. Econostalgia and extinction tourism hence fit in with the narratives of environmental collapse and polar natures that I discuss in Chapters 1 and 4 – yet at the same time are premised on the loss of an idealized nature such as that which the postmillennial pastoral narrative (Chapter 2) challenges. While climate crisis is predominantly about loss, awareness of climate crisis also leads to the emergence of new ways of thinking about nature. A particularly good example of that is urban nature (Chapter 3), a topic which has received

increasing attention over the past decades. But even the pastoral narrative, the most traditional of the ones I explore in this book, is being reinvigorated. The narratives that shape how we imagine, interpret and make sense of climate crisis in the twenty-first century, then, aren't only narratives of loss. In fact, they are explicitly also about change and a productive rather than merely mournful response to nature, suggesting novel means by which to engage with the non-human natural world other than defeatism in the face of climate crisis.

Chapter 1, on the narrative of environmental collapse, discusses climate crisis head-on. The narrative of environmental collapse, while infused by crisis, destruction and loss, also provides a counterpoint to the traditional narrative of apocalypse frequently used for environmental and climate crises. The apocalyptic narrative often results in defeatism or denial. That of environmental collapse, on the other hand, shows characters living with crisis – even if the future is bleak or, as can be argued about *Cloud Atlas*, the end of humanity is near. As such, the narrative of environmental collapse illustrates Greg Garrard's suggestion that 'the real moral and political challenges of ecology may lie in accepting that the world is *not* about to end, that human beings are likely to survive even if Western-style civilisation does not. Only if we imagine that the planet *has* a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it' (Garrard 2011: 116, original emphasis). Using the principle of minimal departure as a means of playing with temporal distance, the narrative of environmental collapse brings home crisis to a far greater extent than less realist and more futuristic apocalyptic narratives have hitherto done. The novels explored in the first chapter also introduce a sensitivity to, or even a scepticism of, narratives and the act of storytelling that runs through the book.

Chapter 2 shows a shift from the pastoral narrative as predominantly associated with the problematic idealization of nature, to a narrative that provides a space in which to come to terms with the changing functions of the countryside. This reconceptualization of the pastoral narrative has taken place over the past decades at the same time as climate crisis has become increasingly important in the cultural imagination. While climate crisis might not be always explicitly addressed in the pastoral narrative, then, it provides ways of engaging with climate crisis nonetheless by providing a middle ground between an all-too-frequent desire for idealized nature on the one hand, and knowledge of climate crisis on the other. Particularly through the use of

pastoral traces, in which the city (return) appears in the countryside (retreat) and vice versa, novels such as *August* and *Wish You Were Here* illustrate how the pastoral narrative becomes more suitable to postmillennial environmental circumstances. In *Wish You Were Here*, for instance, the pastoral retreat that the Robinsons seek in the countryside is repeatedly interrupted by BSE, death and an extramarital affair. As such, the pastoral narrative in the novel makes explicit the impossibility of retreat without return, much as idealization of nature in the twenty-first century should acknowledge climate crisis. At the same time, the pastoral narrative foregrounds that other developments are also at work in the twenty-first century that are affecting the non-human natural environment, and that may be largely separate from climate crisis. The change from a predominantly productive landscape to a landscape that is perceived much more in aesthetic terms, for instance, has changed relationships of identity between people and the land in much the same way as is also happening due to climate crisis.

The destabilization of dualities suggested by the pastoral narrative is continued in the narrative of urban nature (Chapter 3). Of the four narratives explored in this book, that of urban nature provides the most explicit contrast to the discourses of loss and destruction typically associated with climate crisis. Although cities are uniquely susceptible to climate crisis and play a role in causing it, they also form the background against which new, typically urban natures come into being, such as the wasteground in *The Translation of the Bones*. Regeneration and gentrification have led to an increase of urban green areas in many cities, while developments such as the alternative food movement bring nature to the cities through farmers' markets, organic food and 'real' food. As the narrative of urban nature shows, cities consequently provide an engagement with nature especially also for those who do not have access to, or are far away from, sites more traditionally associated with nature. Particularly in cities, then, a broader cultural awareness of climate crisis may lead to new engagement with the nonhuman natural world.

From the more localized environments of pastoral and urban natures, the final chapter of the book returns to the larger scale of climate crisis as it is played out in two very particular environments: the Arctic and Antarctic. The narrative of polar nature encapsulates many facets of twenty-first-century human-nature relations, as the example of the north-west passage cruise

shows. Postmillennial novels such as those I explore in Chapter 4 tend to situate the polar narrative in historical contexts – not to avoid contemporary realities but rather to highlight the parallels between past and present concerns with polar regions. Moreover, historical fictions emphasize how the twenty-first-century polar narrative is historically embedded and provide a revision of the past as well as a distance that sheds light on the present. The historical events the novels depict shed light on the problematic nature of many of our contemporary engagements with the Arctic and Antarctica, whether through tourism, advertising or environmentalism. Both past and present interactions with polar spaces, I suggest in Chapter 4, are fuelled by similar discourses about nature, such as that of increased value once a species or landscape becomes threatened, or the appeal of a species or landscape that is about to be lost.

At the intersections of ecocriticism and narratology

In its concern with narratives of climate crisis, this book provides an extension of the two approaches I draw on most: ecocriticism and narratology. In the preceding chapters, I engage with a set of novels that has been largely ignored by ecocritics. My readings of these works demonstrate the value of the ecocritical study of twenty-first-century British fiction, particularly in terms of analysing climate crisis in a contemporary cultural context. Throughout the book, I make concepts that have been deemed problematic by ecocritics productive – such as the pastoral (Chapter 2), urban nature (Chapter 3) and the historical novel (Chapter 4). Both pastoral and the historical novel, I show, are utilized in postmillennial novels by framing idealization (pastoral) and the past (historical novels) in terms of contemporary climate crisis. Rather than leading to problematic escapism, then, the pastoral narrative and the genre of historical fiction comment on twenty-first-century environmental circumstances. Moreover, I suggest in Chapter 2 that the pastoral narrative itself functions as a middle space between idealization and despair that aptly captures contemporary perceptions of nature. My discussion of the narrative of urban nature shows that the postmillennial narrative of urban nature is aware of climate crisis and loss, but also enchanted with the positive possibilities provided by urban nature. In extending ecocriticism, I also problematize issues

popular in ecocriticism, such as the use of the Anthropocene as a cultural concept (introduction) and ecocriticism's faith in the cultural imaginary (Chapter 1). Although 'Anthropocene' is frequently used by ecocritics and environmental humanities scholars, I don't use it in this book as I believe it to be as yet too imprecise to be a useful term for literary analysis. As I argue in the introduction, more fleshing out of 'Anthropocene' as a cultural concept rather than a concept taken from geology is required. Finally, the novels I discuss in Chapter 1 complicate the use of narratives in a time of climate crisis, foregrounding how stories and storytelling can be misleading or suspect. By doing so, these novels provide a commentary on ecocriticism's faith in the role that narratives might play and the suggestion underlying much ecocritical scholarship that finding the 'right' narratives might counteract climate crisis (cf. Clark 2015: 19–20). Finally, the book provides a significant extension of ecocriticism through its use of narratological concepts. While traditionally concerned more with the construction of actual, physical landscapes, ecocriticism as I apply it throughout this book is also invested in the textual or narratological construction of nature. The genre of a novel, the temporal and spatial cues the narrative provides and the focalization it presents are examples of how the narratological dimension shapes the environment that the reader becomes immersed in through the act of reading. This is true for novels, such as *August* in which a contrast is created between the narrator's description of the landscape and the characters' focalization, as it is for other narratives. A narrative feature such as characterization may contribute to greenwashing, as in the British Gas commercial I describe above in which the use of a penguin suggests environmentalism and covers up the company's implication in burning fossil fuels and other activities that contribute to climate crisis.

In turn, the book also provides an extension of narratology's limited engagement with issues of space and environment. Narratives are not only events set in time, but particularly also in space. How this space is described might determine the tone of the story and is tied in with other narratological concepts such as perspective and characterization. A character's relationship with her environment and the environment itself often considerably influences the story. In *God's Own Country* (Chapter 2), the Yorkshire Moors provide the main character Sam with a space to roam after having being expelled from school. Significantly, the landscape also provides the means for him to run away

with Jo and to hide from the authorities, while his descriptions of the natural world and his conversations with sheep and foxes contribute to the reader's image of him as mentally disturbed. Space, then, functions as background but especially also as an agent in narratives. This is not only the case in the novels I explored in this book, or only in novels set in a rural environment, or only in postmillennial or contemporary novels. In an ecocritical reading of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1818), Robert Kern remarks on the ideological filters, particularly those of the picturesque, through which characters and by extension the reader view the landscape. Consequently, the grounds of Mr Darcy's home Pemberley become a positive reflection of the man himself, precisely because they confirm to the picturesque ideal (Kern 2000: 14–16). Beyond literature, space frequently functions as an agential force in environmental advertising, but also in film. In the introduction to this book I describe *The Revenant* as a classic tale of men struggling with and in the non-human natural world. The wintry landscape of nineteenth-century North America is of particular significance to this film, not the least because of the many sweeping landscape shots included in it. Moreover, it is the landscape that causes much of the struggle the main character experiences. Although a film considerably less concerned with the environment than *The Revenant*, space and nature are key elements to the development of the story of Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015) as well. The remote location of the cabin provides a convenient setting for murder, yet it is the resulting snowstorm which prevents the murderers from leaving and that leads to the escalation of the situation in a way that would otherwise not have happened. As a narratological concept, then, space is of vital importance to stories, and readings such as those in this book contribute to the much-needed extension of the field that is currently underway.

In its concern with narratives of climate crisis, ecocriticism and narratology, this book is an example of the relatively new field of econarratology. One of the ways in which I explored the intersections between ecocriticism and narratology is by making time and space central to my discussion of the novels in this book. Not only are time and space key narratological concepts, they are also central to twenty-first-century literature (Boxall 2013: 5; 7) and to climate crisis. Emphasizing these two elements foregrounds how we navigate the present in light of the past and the future, as well as how we relate to natural

spaces and the different meanings these may hold. Time and space are inherent to depictions of nature: whether in associating the pastoral retreat with the past as in *Wish You Were Here* (Chapter 2), or in creating a sense of futurity in the narrative of environmental collapse, as in *The Carhullan Army* (Chapter 1). Space is significant in the narrative of urban nature (Chapter 3) as well. It provides the kind of belonging that ecocritics typically associate with the non-urban natural environment, which TJ experiences in *Clay*. Tying ecocritical ideas of space and place in with the narratological concepts of topological and projective locations in Chapter 4 demonstrates how projective locations are used to deliberately negate a sense of belonging in the polar landscapes depicted in *The Collector of Lost Things* and *The North Water*.

Looking ahead

As climate crisis develops and most likely worsens, the narratives that surround it will also develop. Some might disappear, while others will emerge. The cultural dominance of the four narratives in the broader contemporary culture suggests a continuation of these narratives in the future. At the same time, as I explore throughout the book, narratives are fluid and flexible, and their potential lies in the way in which they adapt to different circumstances. The narratives of environmental collapse, pastoral, urban nature, and polar are consequently also bound to transform. The narrative of environmental collapse will no doubt continue to be dominant in imaginations of climate crisis, particularly once the kind of collapses sketched in postmillennial novels of the 2000s and 2010s start to occur. As the effects of climate crisis become more visible, the narrative of environmental collapse will also bring forth distinct regional narratives. While the novels I explore in this book themselves are already examples of regional narratives – focusing explicitly on a British setting and the narratives that emerge from it – such regional diversity is bound to increase. In a British context, for instance, the climate crisis flood narrative is becoming increasingly popular in postmillennial literature, while in other areas around the world the drought narrative will become more central.

In the pastoral narrative, the movement of the pastoral escalator identified by Raymond Williams will mean that in the future, the present is likely to become

the past to which the narrative will return (1973: 9). In other words, whereas, for example, 1960s Wales functions as the pastoral retreat the characters look back at in *August*, in the future the 2010s might fulfil this function. At the same time, the development of climate crisis will also necessitate a continuing framing of the idealization inherent to the pastoral retreat. Indeed, once the consequences of climate crisis become more visible these effects – rather than traces of city life (*August*), mental illness (*God's Own Country*) and death (*Wish You Were Here*) – will increasingly start to function as pastoral traces. This will particularly be the case if the predictions of the IPCC about rural areas become true. Its 2014 report notes that '[m]ajor future rural impacts are expected in the near term and beyond through impacts on water availability and supply, food security, and agricultural incomes, including shifts in production areas of food and non-food crops across the world' (2014: 19). In the future, an increasingly urbanized population will seek more new ways of engaging with nature, whether through food, gentrification or architectural projects such as the Highline in New York and the proposed Garden Bridge across the Thames in London. Yet, the inequality in terms of who gets to experience urban nature in this sense and who doesn't is likely to increase as well. Climate crisis will mean that the poor and disadvantaged – like Fidelma and Mary-Margaret in *The Translation of the Bones* – remain poor. As the IPCC suggests, 'climate change impacts are projected to slow down economic growth, make poverty reduction more difficult, further erode food security, and prolong existing and create new poverty traps, the latter particularly in urban areas and emerging hotspots of hunger' (2014: 20). This will be particularly the case in urban areas since these are the places where, the IPCC report notes, '[m]any global risks of climate change are concentrated' (2014: 18).

With the Arctic ice reaching a record low in 2016, the poles will remain a significant part of climate crisis discourse. The narrative of polar nature will, however, also change. As global warming increases, the Arctic in particular will change from being a canary in the mine, as I discuss in Chapter 4, to being a record of missed opportunities. In other words, while in the early twenty-first century the Arctic and Antarctica are symbols of climate crisis because they are at the forefront of this crisis, in the coming years the disappearance of the Arctic's ice will embody the failure to act on climate crisis. Polar narratives are consequently set to become more elegiac, but at the same time also more

infused with the danger that the warming of the poles poses to sea levels and the regulation of the earth's temperature.

This book and the four narratives I focus on also provide a response, even a corrective, to the techno-optimism that shapes many contemporary imaginations of the future and of climate crisis. In the film *Interstellar* planet earth is doomed, yet at the last minute a new planet is discovered on which humans can live with the help of technology. This is the idea behind the dream of colonizing Mars, and the excitement in the press when a planet believed to be similar to earth was discovered in August 2016 – an event described by one astronomer as being 'like finding prime real estate in our neighborhood' (Chang 2016: par. 11). The hope for a new planet just like ours obscures the realities of climate crisis and is consequently highly problematic. Techno-optimism makes the kind of literary fiction that I discuss in this book especially valuable. In the lifetime of contemporary readers, another planet earth will not be reached, and climate crisis is making life on the planet we inhabit increasingly difficult. The ways through which narratives of climate crisis confront the challenge of coming to terms with the crisis at hand is therefore likely to be more useful than the dream of starting anew elsewhere in the universe.

The four narratives that are central to this book are not merely means of imagining contemporary climate crisis, but are also a record of shifting ideas about nature. Each of the four narratives reflects changes in how we perceive nature: whether in the mourning of a lost nature in environmental collapse narratives and the changing countryside central to the pastoral narrative, to the centrality of urban nature to contemporary experience and the ideas projected on the polar landscape. In the years and decades to come, narratives of climate crisis will even more become a record of changing environments and the stories we tell about them. Increasingly, novels such as those I explore in this book and other works of art will ask questions about the imaginative function of nature – particularly once climate crisis has made it wholly impossible to hold on to the traditional ideas of nature that still influence much of our thought today. While questions about nature's imaginative appeal may be answered anthropocentrically – we need nature to enjoy it, or to define ourselves against – other answers may surface as climate crisis continues. Narratives, for instance, in literary fiction, play a key role in offering answers to such questions and in providing examples of productively engaging with climate

crisis. They help us find the right balance between realism and possibility, between despair and looking away. In the future as much as today, narratives will provide the imaginative space in which to think through climate crisis. As I show in this book, narratives reflect contemporary ideas and conversations, and, importantly, play a role in shaping and creating new imaginations as well. How this shaping and reshaping continues, and the role that the imaginative capacities of novels and other artworks play, will remain vital to our response to climate crisis, now and in the future.