

## Writing climate change: the novels of Liz Jensen

### I. Liz Jensen's work: an overview

As a preliminary, I would explain that I have tried to adapt my analysis to be suitable to both literary specialists and environmental studies specialists, and it is for this reason that I have concentrated more on ideas than textuality in this particular instance, although I have done a great deal of textual analysis on Jensen's work in the past.

To give a brief overview, Liz Jensen is an increasingly successful contemporary British writer, whose work has been translated into twenty languages. In passing it may be said that her fifth novel, *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax*, in which a young boy in a coma lives a double life, is currently being made into a Miramax film,<sup>1</sup> so it is probable that she will be getting more exposure in the near future. Jensen is the author of eight novels to date, all of which can be categorised as literary thrillers. At first glance, the expression may appear to be a contradiction in terms, since a thriller, by its nature, tells a story, whereas a literary novel, in the wake of postmodernism, tends to be to some extent self-reflexive and to make some commentary on its own textuality – in other words, to be metafictional.<sup>2</sup> Liz Jensen's novels undoubtedly deploy elements of the popular, drawing on science-fiction, with devices such as genetic manipulation, time travel and thought transference featuring prominently. They may also be considered popular in their engagement with the issues of the day, particularly with ecological crises. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Aitken Alexander Associates: directed by Alexandre Aja, produced by Tim Bricknell and Anthony Mingella, and adapted by Anthony Mingella. <http://www.aitkenalexander.co.uk> , November 26th 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Waugh defines metafiction thus: "(M)etafiction [...] simultaneously (creates) a fiction and (makes) a statement about that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinction between 'creation' and 'criticism'" (Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*. London/New York: Methuen, 1984: 6). The term postmodernism as used here designates the general movement – embracing architecture, cinema, and so on – of which metafiction, a purely literary device, is part.

very mixing of genres, and the self-consciousness created by this, with the various parts of the text illuminating and undermining each other, is what lends these novels credibility as serious artefacts.

Jensen is very much interested in, and committed to, climate change, and has declared, “More and more, I feel that climate is the only thing worth writing about”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, eco-literature and ecocriticism are often considered to be among the defining trends of the novel in the twenty-first century. Not all ecothrillers are disaster texts, with some simply foregrounding the natural world. In *Egg Dancing* and *Ark Baby*, for example, the natural world, including its animal life, is more than simply background or a setting, but an integral part of the novel, so strong is the relationship between people and place. However, Jensen’s novels have a certain affinity with the recent flowering of eco-apocalyptic texts, as represented by established women writers such as Margaret Atwood (*Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*), and Fay Weldon (*Chalcot Crescent*), among others. In *The Paper Eater*, *The Rapture* and *The Uninvited*, Jensen conjures up explicitly ecological disasters.

Nonetheless, and importantly, Jensen has also declared her desire to write without propaganda.<sup>4</sup> Although her work occasionally tends to the didactic, she writes highly imaginative novels, which are very varied in form and style, spanning the genres of realism, fantasy, speculative fiction and science fiction. But Jensen’s is also a unified oeuvre, in terms of a number of concerns: the relationship of humankind with the natural world, gender, utopia-dystopia, apocalypse, and the critique of capitalism, are all recurring themes. Climate change is also a unifying theme in her work: she herself has said that it is central to her output, although of course the critic has the prerogative of reading otherwise, and reading more, as we will see in the final section.

For the purposes of this paper, I will refer mainly to *The Rapture*, the strongest exposition of the climate change theme, and will also mention to a lesser extent three other novels, *Ark Baby*, *The Paper Eater* and *The Uninvited*, all of which fall into the

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<sup>3</sup> Liz Jensen, in private correspondence.

<sup>4</sup> “First of all, I don’t actually think that novels are a vehicle for propaganda, and I don’t think they should be. I use my novels to explore what I don’t know about. I don’t start out with a view on climate change [...] I start out thinking, ok, where can we go with this, what can I do with this that hasn’t been done before, what can I do that’s new for me? The novels I write really are a voyage of discovery. I go in there with the ‘what if?’”

Interview with Liz Jensen: Fantasticon 2013 (interview by Martin Schjønning)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NM\\_Ph\\_ZbCiI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NM_Ph_ZbCiI) .

category of what the British and French tend to call “ecofiction”, and the Americans “clifi”.<sup>5</sup> To give a quick introduction to the plot of each of these novels, *Ark Baby*, Jensen’s second novel, published in 1998, has a double time-span: in the Victorian epoch, Tobias, half-man, half-monkey, but brought up by a parson, discovers his true identity, while in the contemporary part of the novel, a plague of infertility is visited on modern-age Britain following a toxic flood brought on, ostensibly, by climate change – although it can be interpreted in other ways, of which more later – and Tobias’s direct descendants, five generations later, prove to be the only two women in the country able to reproduce. This novel thus has an eye on post-humanism as well as climate change. *The Paper Eater* is a full-blown utopia/dystopia, the only one in Jensen’s oeuvre, and charts the rise and fall of a human-made island, Atlantica, located between Britain and America, which has been set up to treat the waste of the world in an artificial crater, and is billed as an ideal society – until, within a timespan of a few years, the crater implodes, the protagonists are cast out of the island like Adam and Eve from Eden.

While these novels undoubtedly foreground climate change, the seventh and eighth novels are part of a projected “climate-change trilogy”. *The Rapture* (2009), opposes evangelical and ecological visions of the end of the world, while *The Uninvited* (2012), highlights the perpetuation – or otherwise – of the human race, with a vision of a barely human future generation which fights against capitalism and the destruction of the world, but ends up destroying civilisation, even to language itself. In my study on Liz Jensen, I have defined the (as yet incomplete) trilogy as a “third wave” in Jensen’s work, in which environmental issues are the dominant theme, the first wave having being characterised by the creation of otherworlds in time and space, and the second by the murder mystery, which largely, although not entirely, moves away from climate change as a theme. In what follows, I will first demonstrate how Liz Jensen’s work fits into the clifi template, before asking whether it is possible to “read against” clifi rather than “reading for” it – or at least, reading *exclusively* for it. My conclusion will examine those ecocritical theories which seem to me the most essential to retain.

## II. Jensen’s “third wave”: “clifi”

Moving on from the murder story of the “second wave”, the “third wave” takes up the detective story but in a new light. Rather than family members playing detective to find out how and why a mother came to kill her newborn daughter during the second

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<sup>5</sup> This term is attributed to the journalist and writer Dan Bloom.

world war, for example (in *War Crimes for the Home* (2002) part of the second wave), here we have “environmental detectives”, who are neither actual detectives, nor actual environmentalists, but rather people who get caught up in ecological “adventure” (and misadventure).

*The Rapture* is set in an apocalyptic eco-dystopia, in, to borrow Margaret Atwood’s phrase, a “near future” relative to the time of publication, and qualifies for the label of “speculative fiction” in that the dystopian vision it presents is made up of real, or easily realised, circumstances and events; that is, “our” world, although altered, is recognisable. Britain in 2013 in *The Rapture* is on the very verge of a crisis which is apparently linked to climate change, with drought and freak weather events having become customary. A series of short info-dumps establishes the parameters of the disaster: “The latest projections predict the loss of the Arctic ice cap and a global temperature rise of up to six degrees within Bethany’s lifetime” (*ibid.*, 23). It becomes clear that a battle against the elements is played out on a daily basis, with sunglasses and sunscreen among the absolute necessities carried at all times by the wheelchair-bound protagonist, the psychologist Gabrielle Fox (*ibid.*, 35).

This is a world which is no longer evolving, no longer developing or growing, but, rather, is waiting for the end, a recurrent chronotope in Jensen’s work. It is also a world which is rapidly running out of oil, and which has never recovered from the “global financial crisis” of 2008 (*ibid.*, 10), placing this novel within the category of “credit crunch lit”, an identified movement in twenty-first century literature.<sup>6</sup> There is no sense of a future, only of a past which has gone drastically wrong – and of uncertainty as to how the now-inevitable end will come about. The “interesting times” in which *The Rapture* is set, characterised by “food shortages and mass riots and apocalyptically expanded Middle East war” (*ibid.*, 10), provide an all-too-possible scenario, with an already-difficult eco-political situation having moved into what can be read as a logical next phase.

The main preoccupations of the society in which *The Rapture* is set are ecological disaster and evangelical millarianism. Dire economic circumstances are in some part responsible for the rise of both the faith wave and the recrudescence of the ecological movement. The ecologists and the faithwavers offer two different readings of the crisis

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Paul Crossthwaite: “Soon the economic system will crumble: financial crisis and British avant-garde writing”, in Patricia Waugh, and Jennifer Hodgson (ed), *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Fall 2012, Vol XXXII. *The Future of British Fiction*. Columbia University Press: 38-48.

facing the world as it hastens towards destruction and the threat of the extinction of the human race, since for the members of both these movements, the faith-wavers and the ecologists, imminently expect the end of the age. In fact, in some respects, their beliefs coincide, and they will prove to share common ground: both faithwavers, and ecologists are scanning the horizon for some final showdown, the faithwavers to embrace it, the ecologists either to accept it as inevitable, or to try to prevent it from coming about, according to their lights. Thus the novel navigates between twin horizons of terror, each offering its own perspective for the end of the age, each competing and overlapping with the other.

Gabrielle Fox and another main character, the physicist Frazer Melville join forces with a number of Melville's fellow researchers in order to make it their mission either to save the world from disaster or, failing that, to warn the populations at risk of the disasters to come. Theirs is a proactive position, and contrasts with the passivity adopted by Harish Modak and his followers, who represent another strand of ecological thought. Known as "Planetarians", they support James Lovelock's Gaia-theory,<sup>7</sup> according to which the Earth is a self-sustaining system, ultimately capable of repairing itself, in spite of the damage inflicted on it by humankind. The group's motto is "the fewer the merrier" (*ibid.*, 43), since they believe that the population of the planet should be vastly reduced, and that humankind is of little importance in the great scheme of things.

### **III. Bethany in *The Rapture*: a conduit for the pain of the planet**

In a previous paper, I described how in the course of the diegesis, Gabrielle Fox, who is neither a Christian fundamentalist nor an eco-warrior, finds herself exposed to the extremity of each of these positions, both of which are embodied in the character of Bethany Krall, in an eschatological double-whammy. To resume, interned in Oxsmith, the psychiatric institution to which Gabrielle has recently been appointed as a psychologist, Bethany is at once the product of an evangelical fundamentalist family, who anticipate the Rapture, as event, and so wish to prepare themselves and their daughter to be fit to be caught up to heaven, and the conduit for prophecies of ecological disaster, which also appear to signal the end of the age. Bethany, then, is the bridge between two seemingly incompatible, although structurally similar, ideologies.

One of the recurring topoi in Jensen's work is the closed institution – the children's

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<sup>7</sup> The term is Niall Harrison's, and is used in a review of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* ([www.livejournal.com/users/coalescent/23015.html](http://www.livejournal.com/users/coalescent/23015.html)).

home, the old people's home, the prison, and in the case of *The Rapture*, the psychiatric ward. These settings provide closed societies, functioning along utopic-dystopic lines. Bethany, a fifteen-year-old matricide, finds herself interned in Oxsmith Adolescent Secure Psychiatric Hospital, described by Gabrielle as "a human dustbin" (*The Rapture*, 7). As an inmate of Oxsmith, Bethany has almost no agency of her own, but she proves to be, as the thriller unfolds, a passive conduit for the suffering of the planet, with her body as microcosm, the Earth as macrocosm: it emerges that her ECT sessions allow her to tap into the Earth itself and to experience within her body what the Earth is experiencing.

Brought up with Christian fundamentalism in spite of herself, Bethany finds herself party to the opposing ideology of ecological activism during her stay in Oxsmith. Once again, being enlisted in a cause is a passive process – it is imposed upon her. Having grown up with the faith wave, Bethany is no stranger to prophecy, or to apocalyptic visions. Prophecy functions in this novel as a further overlap between the evangelical and ecological ideologies, and within this schema Bethany is a sort of breakaway prophet: while she has rejected the religious content of prophecy, she retains the form. Bethany's prophecies are not concerned with biblical events or religious imagery, as such, but, rather, with ecological catastrophes. Following her ECT sessions, she is able to predict, with a certainty which is borne out by events, dates of natural disasters, and to pinpoint their locations accurately on a globe, even when she has not consciously heard of the places in question. One by one she warns – correctly – of various natural disasters which kill many thousands.

Bethany, with her extreme religious background, does not hesitate to mix the language of biblical prophecy into her apocalyptic visions:

And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.<sup>8</sup> (...) Behold, the Lord maketh the Earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down, and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof<sup>9</sup>

(*The Rapture.*, 42).

Gabrielle, as a clinical psychologist, can only attempt to understand Bethany's visions by studying her unconscious, but Bethany is resistant to this approach. Having predicted disaster, she insists to Gabrielle: "Listen. This is what you don't get. This isn't about what I'm feeling. It's about what's going to happen" (*ibid.*, 42). The disaster in question does indeed come to pass, on the predicted date, 29<sup>th</sup> July: in Rio de Janeiro, the

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<sup>8</sup> *Revelation* 20: 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Isaiah* 24:1.

statue of Christ the Redeemer falls from its place, killing thousands. When, some little time later, Bethany predicts with similar success a spectacular earthquake in Turkey, and a series of lesser weather events (*ibid.*, 134), Frazer Melville, as a physicist, begins to take her power as a prophet seriously.

The climax in the action of the novel, and indeed the event that triggers the end of civilisation for a large part of the British Isles, comes in the form of a methane disaster (*a posteriori*, in the light of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010, Jensen's thesis in this novel appears remarkably prescient), the effects of which are accurately foreseen by Bethany, although she is ignorant of the causes. The methane disaster scenario is competently summed up by Ned, one of the consortium of ecologists who try to warn of the catastrophe to come and to persuade their compatriots to flee inland, who explains to Gabrielle the dangers involved in the exploitation sub-oceanic hydrates in order to provide oil reserves for the future:

“Since the energy companies started trying to exploit the sub-oceanic hydrates, the drilling's increased the threat. Dramatically. Post-peak oil, everyone's after it. China, the US, India. Hundreds of experimental rigs, planted off coastlines all round the world.”

“How do they access the gas?”

He made a contemptuous noise. “By playing Russian roulette. You can inject hot water beneath the seabed to destabilise the hydrates. Which will force a pressure change and release methane. The gas moves along the cracks and works its way up. Then you can liquify the hydrate on the ocean floor and pipe it up like oil and gas. Or release frozen chunks of it from the sea floor and trap them at the surface of the ocean in giant tarpaulins. Exploit the hydrate fields safely, and there's no such thing as an energy problem.”

(*ibid.*, 212-13).

This is Bethany's most spectacular prophecy to date, and a lot of the action of the novel turns on the eco-group's efforts to avert this particular disaster.

#### **IV. Reading through ecocriticism**

How, then, can these problematics be approached through ecocritical theories? In terms of “first-phase” ecocriticism, Bethany's assaulted body can be read as a corollary for the damaged planet, a position which corresponds to an experience-based ecocriticism, soliciting an emotional response and a call to arms: by setting up a corollary between Bethany and the planet, the novel conveys a message that to save Bethany is to

save the Earth. To return to a question posed at the beginning of this paper, would reading *The Rapture* like this mean falling into the trap of interpreting the novel didactically rather than textually? Or is the nature of ecocriticism, and of ecocriticism, such that this type of interpretation should not be dismissed? Cheryll Glotfelty expresses the particular nature of ecocriticism by saying, “As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land ; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human” – the non-human in this case being the Earth itself.<sup>10</sup> Not only is ecocriticism an “engaged” approach, but it is one which has in the past, according to Terence Gifford, in an article on *The Rapture*, deliberately rejected theorizing in favour of what he calls “enlarged personal awareness”.<sup>11</sup>

An important part of the second phase of ecocriticism<sup>12</sup> was also the setting up of a corollary between the Earth and the female, in which women, by dint of their role in the continuation of life, were considered to have a privileged relationship with nature, denied to men. Elements of this type of approach can be applied to *The Rapture*: Bethany’s “reception” of the messages she seems to get from the Earth go through her blood, and while blood is not of itself feminine, there is a dense nexus of imagery associating menstrual blood, the blood sacrifice of Christ, and the female martyrs of the past, while in Gabrielle’s case the devastation of the Earth is reflected in the devastation of the infertility which she believes, for the most part of the novel, that the her car accident and subsequent miscarriage have brought in their wake.

Nonetheless, positing a privileged relationship between women and the Earth is a problematic approach in terms of gender equality, in terms of defining women as consisting of their reproductive organs, and in terms of the exclusion of men (such exclusion has been condemned, and inclusion revindicated, by many masculinist critics: for example, Scott Slovic claims that men have been “scapegoated”, by “the habitual identification of stereotypical male attitudes and behaviours with social and environmental destruction”, and calls for a rehabilitation of the male, and an end to gender dualism<sup>13</sup>).

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<sup>10</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction : Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis”. In Cheryll Glotfelty et Harold Fromm (ed.): *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1986). Athens and London, University of Georgia Press, 1996: XIX.

<sup>11</sup> Terence Gifford, “Biosemiology and globalism in *The Rapture* by Liz Jensen”. In *English Studies*, Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group), 91, November 2010: 713-727.

<sup>12</sup> “The second phase [of ecocriticism] is represented by a diversity of revisionist approaches in environmentally focused cultural studies [...] ecofeminism [...]” (ibid., 716).

<sup>13</sup> Scott Slovic, “Taking care: toward an ecomasculinist literary criticism?” in Mark Allister, *Eco-man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*. University of Virginia Press, 2004: 66-82: 70.



“Third-phase” ecocriticism, however, allows for different readings, “outside the confines of gendered dichotomies”, as Serpil Opperman puts it.<sup>14</sup> Gender dualism thus becomes redundant, and contemporary feminist ecocriticism tends to theorise the opposition between masculine and feminine differently: for example, Wendy Lynne Lee argues that the dominant relationship of human beings with the earth – a binary opposition, with the second term coming off worse – can be read as an analogy of male/female relations.<sup>15</sup> What Lee’s position does not do is to differentiate between the genders as regarding ecological engagement, which according to her stems from aesthetic appreciation: rather, she reads the binary opposition of male/female as an analogy for the equally harmful binary opposition between human/non-human, or human/environmental, and calls for action equally from men and women. From this position she goes on to make of ecocriticism an “emancipatory quest”<sup>16</sup> – the environment, like the female gender, in this perspective stands in need of not only reappraisal, but ultimately liberation.

I would contend that elements of all these phases in ecocriticism can fruitfully be applied to reading *The Rapture* – that the novel works, in fact, on all these levels. However, it is also possible to read “against” the ecological discourse, as will be seen in the next section.

## V. Reading against the dominant ecocritical discourse

The corollary between the violation of the Earth and the violation of Bethany emerges only towards the end of the novel, once she is outside the constraining and silencing confines of Oxsmith, and when she has learned to trust Gabrielle: it turns out that she perpetrated her mother’s murder in attenuating circumstances, having suffered prolonged and severe physical and emotional abuse from both her Christian fundamentalist parents:

What happens to someone who burns a Bible because they think Genesis is full of shit?

(...)

She gets tied to the stairs. They try to get the Devil out of her and then they tape up her mouth so the Devil can’t curse them and then they keep shaking her but the Devil won’t come out so they tie her up and the next morning the Devil’s still there so they

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<sup>14</sup> Serpil Opperman: “Feminist ecocriticism: the new ecofeminist settlement”. *Feminismos* 22, December 2013: 68.

<sup>15</sup> Wendy Lynne Lee: “On ecology and aesthetic experience: a feminist theory of value and praxis”. *Ethics and the Environment*: Spring 2006, 11, 1: 21-41: 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 22.

shake her some more and that goes on for three days and they won't let her eat or sleep and she's tied up the whole time and the Devil won't come out.

(*ibid.*, 274).

The murder – an event to which Bethany refers as “the big bang”, which can connote both a beginning and an end – followed on directly from this chain of events, occurring as soon as Bethany could free herself from her restraints.

What is interesting here, then, is the working through of the clifi problematic within the character of Bethany herself, indeed, within her very body, her corporal experience. It is clear that Bethany experiences herself and her body – it may be recalled that for Lacan, the body, the image of which is constituted during the mirror stage, is in the imaginary order – as in some way mirroring, in microcosm, the damage inflicted on the Earth. Gabrielle diagnoses something for the sort early on, commenting, “Bethany’s pain is planet-shaped and planet-sized: she has her own vividly imagined earthquakes and hurricanes, her own volcanic eruptions, her own form of meltdown” (*ibid.*, 36). The parallels between Bethany’s suffering and that of the Earth become even clearer to Gabrielle when she visits Bethany, in St. Swithin’s, the place “where you end up, locally, if you can’t even get suicide right” (*ibid.*, 180), and witnesses the following exchange between Bethany and Frazer Melville:

“Bethany, you’ve made some drawings that interest me” (...) “This vertical line,” he says pointing. “Can you tell me what it is?”

Bethany glances at it reluctantly and hesitates. “It’s hollow,” she mumbles.

“What I need to know is, where does it go to?” (...)

“Underground. All the way in, like right under the skin.” Her eyes seem to turn inward. “It digs its way inside and then explodes and the whole thing cracks open and boom.” I flinch and picture Leonard Krall: his canine eyes, his energy, his creepy charisma.

(*ibid.*, 182).

It is clear that Gabrielle sees in Bethany’s account of the methane disaster to come a parallel to the forcing of her own bodily and psychic boundaries, and it is not gratuitous that the post-apocalyptic wasteland of Bethany’s visions is a place she names for herself. From early on in the novel, Bethany talks of Bethanyland, an apocalyptic vision of a world laid waste, which she describes as “a completely fucked-up place. The trees are all burned. Everything’s poisonous. There’s a lake there (...) You wouldn’t want to swim in it. All the fish are dead and there are mosquitos buzzing around everywhere, the kind that give you malaria” (*ibid.*, 47). Bethanyland can be read as an exteriorisation

of her own state, in a perverse sort of pantheism.

To give a perhaps controversial reading, Bethanyland will finally prove to be the third term in the irresolvable duality imposed on Bethany by the opposing, but similar, forces of the church and the ecological movement. Bethany tries to efface, to rewrite, to escape, the discourse which has been imposed upon her by religion which has constrained her, only to find that she steps into another pre-configured discourse, which can be read as almost exactly equivalent to it. In *The Rapture* the two will join not just in theory but also at the level of plot of the novel, since the faithwavers who gather for the Rapture they expect imminently find themselves drowned by a tidal wave, provoked by the methane explosion below the sea-bed, while the group led by Frazer Melville is helicoptered to “Bethanyland”, the “fucked-up place”, the “world not ours”, which is now the only safe part of the UK to live in, and in which Bethany has figuratively dwelt for most of her life. Meanwhile Bethany throws herself out of the helicopter in which ecologists escape to their new home and last resort. Bethany’s dive through space and into the chaos below brings to mind a sacrifice, a scapegoat, or a fallen angel, in the popular sense as well as the Miltonic:<sup>17</sup>

It’s an almost languid movement. Balletic and calm. A smooth, considered rotation. Her eyes are wide open. She knows what she is doing. (...) Bethany keeps rolling, until she has rolled to the very edge of the world.

And then over it.

(...)

The crest of the giant wave has sluiced on, leaving in its wake a sheet of glassy, liquefied flame, bobbing with charred bodies and black detritus, a foul fizzing stew of water and gas and heat (...) I see her cartwheel down through the vapour (...)

And then nothing

(*The Rapture*, 340).

Suicide proves to be the only way in which Bethany can escape from the pre-told tale in which she finds herself trapped by religious, psychiatric and ecological discourses, and from the unbearable reflection of her own pain which Bethanyland, the only place of escape, represents. Thus it is possible, although this reading goes against Jensen’s intentions – but intentionality is no way to read – to conclude that in this novel the ideology of faith wave Christianity fuses with, and is finally superseded by, that of

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<sup>17</sup> Him the Almighty Power/Hurled headlong flaming from th’ethereal sky/With hideous ruin and combustion down/To bottomless perdition (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I: 44-47. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams, 2 vols (London/New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986) (1962).

ecology. However, pitting the one against the other is not a simple substitution of the green agenda is for the Christian. This is only partly a didactic work about ecological disaster.<sup>18</sup> The fact that eco-apocalypse comes to pass, whereas the Christian expectation of apocalypse remains unfulfilled, does not render a “green” or pro-ecology reading valid, and it is possible to contend that *The Rapture* posits the resemblance between two apocalyptic discourses in order to render both hollow – that ecology and Christianity are posited to a great extent in mirror-image, and *can* be read as two totalising discourses, set against each other in what is finally revealed to be an empty polemic.

The point that I am trying to make here is essentially that Jensen’s work is open to other readings, and that it is important not to read *clifi*, as a totalising discourse, or to allow it to become a totalising interpretation, the one “correct” way to read this body of work. A number of arguments can be put forward here. Firstly, it is possible to read the crises in climate change evoked in these novels as pretext for the thriller genre, since ecological disaster now presents a threat to human survival, just as, in previous eras, the nuclear bomb or other engines of destruction did, giving rise to thrillers of their own.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, and as a logical follow-on to this idea, something “more”, something outside these thematic confines, can be found in Jensen’s work. While time constraints in this paper do not allow for much discussion of Jensen’s very extensive deployment of intertextuality, it should be acknowledged that her work references not only poets from John Donne to T.S. Eliot, but also any number of writers of all sorts, and, most centrally to this argument, a whole series of biblical intertexts, mainly those relating to creation (Genesis) and apocalypse (Revelation<sup>20</sup>).

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<sup>18</sup> In the Acknowledgments to *The Rapture*, Liz Jensen writes, “Although the disaster that takes place in *The Rapture* is within the realms of possibility, the likelihood of extreme global heating happening so suddenly is small. However, in reality we face a far more potent and immediate threat. If climate change continues unabated, the consequences will be more devastating than most people – including me – would care to imagine.”

<sup>19</sup> “Our planet is getting mad as hell and it isn’t going to take it any longer. It’s an old theme but a rich one, and in the 1950s and 60s provided plots for dozens of science-fiction disaster novels. Cities were drowned, oceans eradicated and pastures killed off as authors such as J.G. Ballard, Charles Eric Maine and John Christopher subjected civilisation to a welter of different indignities – apocalyptic literature that mirrored the era’s cold war uncertainties. Today, in these more strained ecological times, this kind of storytelling has taken on a harder edge and eco-thrillers have become a more robust genre [...] In short, environmental fiction is moving away from its roots in science fiction and is becoming part of mainstream literature – as is revealed by some of the most recent novels to tackle themes of climate change and the like” (Robin McKie, “Read all about the end of the world”. *The Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2009).

<sup>20</sup> New Testament references often cited in support of the rapture include Revelations 1: 7 and I Thessalonians 4: 15-17.

The most obvious parallels between *The Rapture* and Jensen's previous work, are, nonetheless, with *Ark Baby*, in that the End is expected imminently in both these novels, although the means by which it is expected to come about are different, with a slow fading induced by the plague of infertility in the second novel, as opposed to a single event in the seventh.

The floods, while different in nature in *Ark Baby* and *The Rapture*, the first being a particularly heavy rainfall thought by some to have brought with it toxins which have caused the wave of infertility, by others to be symbolic only, the second being a full-scale tidal wave which wreaks wholesale destruction, also unite the two novels, as does the intertextual reference to the Noah story. While very much more developed in *Ark Baby*, the story of Noah is also present in *The Rapture*, as the suggestion that the flood is a punishment shows. Furthering the allusion to Noah, the Australian member of Frazer Melville's group of scientists, the climatologist Ned Rappaport, works for an organization called "The National Ocean and Atmospheric Association", the role of which is "modeling climate disaster scenarios and making recommendations" (*ibid.*, 207). The acronym for this predictor of oceanic disasters is "NOAA", which sends the reader back, once more, to the Old Testament story.

These biblical references from Old and New Testaments combine to set up a parallel between Noah's flood and the second coming, the central event of *The Rapture*, as apocalyptic events which come as a surprise, which cannot be predicted, which are inscribed immutably in a divine plan for the creation. However, as well as taking up the reference to the story of Noah, *The Rapture* also includes some reference to a mythology other than that of the Bible, with the Scandinavian character Kristin Jonsdottir citing the Scandinavian Ragnarök, the "doom of the gods, and the end of the world" (*The Rapture*, 228).<sup>21</sup> There are some similarities between it and the biblical predictions of the End Times, according to certain interpretations: the prediction of a certain number of years which must pass before the End actually arrives (three in Ragnarök), the raising of the dead, and destruction by fire, but most strikingly, the sinking of the world into the sea – in other words, a flood.

What I would like to suggest is that the biblical and mythical intertexts in Jensen's work function in a sense as Lyotardian "metanarratives" – as what Lyotard calls "the grand stories which structure the discourses of modern religion, politics, philosophy and

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/mythology/myths/text/ragnarok.htm> . See also Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*. New York, Scarecrow Press, 1962.

science”,<sup>22</sup> which preceded postmodernism, and which have been brought into question in it, and by it. According to Brian Nicol, such narratives, understood as “a legitimating, empowering force”, are now, in a postmodern world, “on the wane”,<sup>23</sup> and Andrew Gibson evokes a similar swing away from the guiding and containing narratives of the past, describing “a more and more developed awareness of moralities as myriad, groundless, incommensurable and interminable”.<sup>24</sup> One way in which Jensen’s work recuperates the authoritative metanarratives of the past, then – those casualties of postmodernism, which grew, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, out of a “crisis of cultural authority”,<sup>25</sup> is by rehabilitating biblical, and mythical texts – but always ironically and always with great complexity, and never as a way as attempting to “go back” to the certainties of past times.

Thirdly – in this list of reasons not to allow ecocriticism to become a totalising discourse – the relationship of Liz Jensen’s fiction to the concept of The End (of the world) can be seen as the reflection of a necessary condition for creativity, as James Berger argues.<sup>26</sup> It should be pointed out in passing that Ragnarök is ultimately a myth of renewal, and places apocalypse precisely within a cyclical process: “The earth will rise again out of the water, fair and green. The eagle will fly and catch fish under crags. Grain will ripen in fields that were never sown”.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the framing mythology, the “end” in Berger’s view is not one definitive bang, marking the end of human life. Rather, Berger sees the various “holocausts” of the twentieth century – the Shoah, the nuclear bomb, ecological disasters – as each constituting an end, but also as anticipating the great Apocalypse to come. It can be argued that Jensen’s clifi novels present worlds in which apocalypse does not represent one lone event which puts an end to everything, but that apocalypse here is, as James Berger puts it, “structural rather than historical”. It is not only an event, but a condition of life, and, moreover, on another level, a condition of creativity, for Berger argues that that “apocalypse – some form of utterly destabilising disaster – is a universal condition of life and symbolization”.<sup>28</sup> Thus it is that the creative drive in Jensen’s work is intimately bound up with destruction, and, paradoxically, even thrives on it.

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<sup>22</sup> Brian Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. CUP, 2009: 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: 12.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*. Routledge, 1999: 14.

<sup>25</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 2002 (1989): 138.

<sup>26</sup> “Apocalypse – some form of utterly destabilising disaster – is a universal condition of life and symbolization” (James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis/London, University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 22).

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/mythology/myths/text/ragnarok.htm> .

<sup>28</sup> James Berger, *After the End*: 22.

## VI. Ecofictions (clifi) /ecocriticisms: what to retain?

In spite of my contention that ecology and religion can be read as unsatisfactory mirror-image discourses, there remain other ecofictional aspects of this novel, to which other ecocritical approaches – for such approaches are myriad – can be applied. To be brief, ecocritics have, over the years, asked questions such as does ecocriticism kill literature, does it threaten the very existence of the contemporary novel? Is ecofiction itself alien to creativity? Terence Gifford raises the question of whether ecocriticism is equipped to deal with “fiction that is theoretically informed”.<sup>29</sup> This is a central and essential question in any discussion of the novel, and my own conclusion is that clifi, far from “killing” creativity or compromising fiction, can provide a tool to mine a seam which is very novelistic indeed: not only the sense of something spoilt which can never be made right, but also the search for home, and the sense of lack. This last can be related to a Freudian-Lacanian reading of castration (the end-game of the Oedipus complex) as essentially representing lack. Such concerns underlie many fictions, and I would like to suggest that certain aspects of clifi can be read as a new way in to this age-old problematic, which predates the novel itself by many centuries. To return to the Bible, the story of Adam and Eve can be seen as a representation of the flight from home and the inability ever to return: Eden, the original, happy state, can never be found again – but the very longing and lack inherent to this story is what makes humankind human. Michael Ortiz Hill brings together the loss of home and the post-“apocalyptic” (in Berger’s sense) psyche when he comments as follows:

The psyche is sheltered and contained by culture, land, kinship network, home – a background of social reality from which it gains coherent meaning. There is no way to exaggerate the stark, raw nakedness of the apocalyptic psyche when it has lost this encompassing ‘home’.<sup>30</sup>

This allows for another reading of Gabrielle’s sense of of “a world not ours” at the end of *The Rapture*, once the tidal wave has swept over Britain, and Bethanyland is all that remains. Once again, the surface protest against what some

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<sup>29</sup> Terence Gifford, “Biosemiology and globalism in *The Rapture* by Liz Jensen”, *op. cit.*: 713.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Ortiz Hill, *Dreaming the End of the World*. Cit. in Shierry Weber Nichol森, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World*, *op.cit.*: 162.

call “ecocide” is placed in a wider context. It can be read to some extent as “pretext” – as a condition for the creation of the apocalyptic conditions in which certain types of creativity flourish, and ultimately as a way to comment on the human condition, rather than “simply” on humankind’s relationship with the physical world.

None of these conclusions are intended as univocal, or as dogmatic. My intention has been to explore various aspects of the questions raised by Jensen’s use of clifi, and to stress that while clifi is undoubtedly a very important part of Jensen’s writing, her fiction cannot be “reduced” to it. The interest of these novels also lies in what goes beyond clifi – and in Jensen’s work, on every level, there is a very great deal of “beyond”, both ideological and textual.



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