

Melt. Murray, J. 2019. Wellington, New Zealand: Mary Egan Publishing. 289 p, paperback (ISBN 978047347053). NZD 35.00.

Melt is a novel.

Three degrees of climate change by 2100, and its impacts, are locked in. The Pacific island nation of Independence is becoming uninhabitable due to increasingly frequent severe storm events. New Zealand had offered settlement for its 20,000 inhabitants but is slowing this down as the realities of global change become clearer. However, an influential property developer wants to help relocate refugees to the south of New Zealand and build a city as big as Hong Kong. New Zealand is also a gateway to a rapidly melting Antarctica which is forecast to host 90 million people late in the century (p. 130). Indeed, the entire world is undergoing “the great reshuffle” (p. 215), to quote a recurrent theme, as some parts become uninhabitable and the balance between society and the environment shifts towards self-preservation for the elite. Antarctica is increasingly seen as a “saviour location” (p. 180), a continent for widescale exploitation. An unanticipated alliance – China, America and India – is about to sign an agreement to manage Antarctica’s settlement.

Within this world, the book’s lead character, Vai Schuster, is told that others will help. Yet no one is effective. Realising that she is alone, she takes matters into her own hands. Vai negotiates various adventures: surviving a tropical cyclone in Independence, sinking a Japanese whaler on the Southern Ocean from a protest ship, mountaineering with members of the Chinese base in Antarctica and a mild romantic frisson. And it is Vai’s personal story that provides the main metaphor – can she, and her people, survive, and what does she have to sacrifice to enable that?

There are some thought-provoking constructs “... the settlement of Mars. Antarctica is just a practice...” (p. 189) and some counter-intuitive calls: “helicopter rides to Antarctica” (p. 166) not to mention the retro “coloured wallpaper” (p. 146). As a researcher, it is sometimes difficult to engage with the well-written prose as it races from one crisis to the next without tripping up on the science and policy assumptions. Precisely which, of the many permutations of Representative Concentration Pathways, their associated Shared Socio-economic Pathways, and Shared Policy Assumptions, is being considered? How did the Madrid Protocol fail by 2048 (p. 64) and mining start (p. 188)? And quite how did the world transition to an alliance of China, America and India (p. 154) from the positions currently held by Xi Jinping, Donald Trump, and Narendra Modi? How did the Antarctic become governed by “the southern hemisphere plus three” and the other countries bases “put into a heritage group and eased out over the ten-year period” (p. 154). Yet fiction is just that. It is not predictive, it is provocative. It advocates for a particular storyline that might stretch the imagination beyond its comfort zone. Part of its purpose is, at least in this book, to stimulate the reader, not just entertain. It is for researchers to provide the basis on which others can make judgements. That is why polar literature is an important part of polar studies and for the boundaries across the disciplines to become blurred so that future novels will continue to stretch the readers’ imaginations.

This is why this book and many others provide important insights that do not easily arise through biophysical science. Such fiction on Antarctica has a long heritage: Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) through H. P. Lovecraft’s *100 years to At the Mountains of Madness* (1936); Ursula Le Guin’s *Sur* (1984); Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Antarctica* (1998); and Ilija Trojanow’s *The Lamentations of Zeno* by (2016). The genre is explored by literary scholars such as Elizabeth Leane of the University of Tasmania and, as part of the wider climate change discourse, as noted by Alexandra Nikoleris et al. from Lund University in *Climatic Change* (2017).

What then does Melt really have to say? Unlike, say, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), it is not entirely dystopian. It offers a vision of adaptation to an emerging catastrophe. It describes a near-term future that considers how ideas of change, and how humanity and complexity might develop. These are certainly not utopian for many, if any. However, they do express a future that lies between a delusional heaven (“the green-growthers stuffed us right up” (p. 62)) and the hellish future of *The Road*. Yet it would be for many a deeply disturbing future where tradeoffs are

estimated, deals brokered, and the winners and losers know which side of the balance sheet they are on. Perhaps, it is this new space that novels like *Melt* will open up – not necessarily on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) spectrum, but certainly important enough to be considered.

So what was the impetus to write *Melt*? Its author is a New Zealander who works with local government and Māori organisations. *Melt* is his first book. He was inspired to write it after a climate scientist's presentation at Cambridge University. Part of which included a discussion of the difficulty to engage the public on climate science because people had trouble thinking about apocalyptic failure. At one level, Murray's novel seeks to be a bridge between science and the public's willingness to believe. He argues that fiction is a powerful medium to emotionally link people to the complex narrative of climate science. While his

focus is on the human implications for New Zealand, it is to be hoped that many other books will be published about local impacts of climate change and about the roles of the polar regions in those futures.

One aspect that is unique to *Melt* is its geographical setting. While many Antarctic travellers have set out from New Zealand and some have recorded those departures, it is the specific sense of people and place that make climate change futures real. More local works of fiction need to be written, and read, and thought about. (Bob Frame, Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand Email: research@frameworks.nz)

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