

Drowning in the Pacific: Climate Change, the Apocalypse and the Future of Australia

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Abstract

Australia, akin to much of the Pacific, contends with a barrage of natural disasters, pandemics, and crises. Science fiction, particularly when scrutinized through ethical criticism, becomes a valuable tool for understanding past anxieties and preparing for the future. In the Pacific, the imminent threat of rising sea levels is inseparable from broader environmental, social, and political repercussions. This article explores the impacts of climate change, rising sea levels, and social inequality through the lens of two Australian science fiction works, separated by three decades. George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* (1987) interrogates the societal consequences of climate change in a fictional twenty-first century Australia, where rising sea levels create a distinct class divide between the employed "Sweet" and the unemployed "Swill." This narrative echoes Turner's observations of Australian societal classism in the 1970s and 1980s. In a contemporary context, Briohny Doyle's *The Island Will Sink* (2016) unfolds on Pitcairn Island as it succumbs to the ocean, under the constant surveillance of Max Galleon. Doyle critiques corporate surveillance, globalisation, and the voyeuristic pleasure derived from witnessing global disasters. Through an ethical lens, this article evaluates and demonstrates the importance of ethical messages within works of science fiction, probing the environmental, political, economic, and social impacts of a changing climate in Australia and the Pacific, both in the past and the future. Through ethical analysis, both climate change novels will explore how the Australian beachside is drawn upon as a site of both positive nostalgic optimism and sites of destruction.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Ecology, Climate Change, Australia, Pacific

Introduction

It is perhaps unsurprising that one of the earliest examples of climate change fiction, *The Sea and Summer*, is set in Melbourne, Australia. The majority of Australians live on the coastline of the continent, so we are a population well connected to the ocean and have been impacted by rising sea levels. Climate change fiction is a subgenre of science fiction that has increased in popularity as our understanding of the ramifications of anthropogenic climate change has grown. Although apocalyptic and end of the world fiction is nothing new, just as nuclear fallout became a key end of the world scenario for science fiction between the 1940s and 1960s,¹ climate change and its affects have become a new primary concern for writers thinking about

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¹ The best-known Australian example is by English-born immigrant Nevil Shute, *On the Beach* (London: Vintage, 2010 [1957]).

the future. As Gerry Canavan notes in his introduction on *Ecology and Science Fiction*, there has been a paradigm shift from the anxiety about nuclear weapons to concerns of climate change.² The effects of environmental disaster are not just felt and explored in the physical impacts on the planet but also through the ways in which these impacts social cohesion. This article examines both the impacts of climate change through two works of climate change fiction: *The Sea and Summer* and *The Island Will Sink*. I explore how these novels use real world locations, Melbourne and Pitcairn Island, as the backdrop for their predictions to emphasise the very real dangers of our complacency to the impacts of climate change. Finally, this article will explore how the ocean environment, with its nostalgic meaning in Australian society, is used in both novels to evoke emotional responses in their intended readers. While the focus of this article is on Australia, it will also discuss the implications for the Pacific islands, like Pitcairn Island, stemming from the threat of rising sea levels. For Martha Nussbaum, it is important for literary theory to focus on the ethical, how the works speak to us and about our lives, emotions, and ethical choices.³ Ethical theory asks questions like what living well looks like, and inquiries into ways in which the works of fiction explore this. According to Annette Federico, ethical reading does not involve passing judgement on individual texts but rather engaging in how the works affect the reader.⁴ This article, using this framework, explores the ethical messaging in both works of fiction.

The Sea and Summer was published in 1987 by George Turner, an Australian writer (the US title was *Drowning Towers*). For reviewer Bruce Gillespie, the novel “is the best Australian novel of 1987” and also one of the most ignored.⁵ Gillespie suggests the work’s limited reception might have been due to the fact that it was a “fast-paced” thriller rather than a “tract” and that it had distribution problems.⁶ The acclaim of Turner’s work is echoed by Lucy Sussex who notes that *The Sea and Summer* is “variously termed the first and greatest novel” of the cli-fi genre.⁷ Turner was born in 1916 in Melbourne, and worked as a young man for the *Herald and Weekly Times* before joining the Australian Imperial Forces in World War II.⁸ On returning from the war, Turner worked various jobs including a reviewer for the *Australian Science Fiction Review*, and also wrote reviews for *The Age*. He wrote science fiction and general fiction, winning both the Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowship and the Miles Franklin Award. The inspiration for his most famous novel, *The Sea and Summer*, occurred from a short story, *The Fittest*, commissioned by Harlan Ellison. After the story was rejected for not being Australian enough (Ellison wanted to see more outback dystopias like *Mad Max*) it was reworked into *the Sea and Summer*.⁹ The novel has two plot lines. The main setting occurs in the past, and depicts the lives of the Conways, a Melbourne family who

² Gerry Canavan, “If This Goes On”, in *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, eds. Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014) p. 4.

³ Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 171.

⁴ Annette Federico, *The Ethical Turn in Engagements with Close Reading* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 123.

⁵ Bruce Gillespie, “*The Sea and Summer*: George Turner”, *Dreams and False Alarms*, no. 5 (1989), pp. 41-42.

⁶ Gillespie, “*The Sea and Summer*: George Turner”, p. 41.

⁷ Lucy Sussex, “An Anthropocene Tale and its writer: *The Sea and Summer*”, *Sydney Review of Books* (2017). At: <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/anthropocene-tale-writer-sea-summer/>.

⁸ “Turner, George,” *AustLit* (2014). At: <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/A24113>.

⁹ Thomas H. Ford, “George Turner’s *The Sea and Summer* (1987)”, in *Clifi: A Companion*, eds. Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), p. 46.

struggle to live in a city beset with climate change disasters and social unrest. Their world is divided into two distinct classes, the Sweet (the small number of people that have jobs) and the Swill (those who do not). The Swill live in large, overcrowded towers on subsidies from the government. Peppering the story of the Conways are sections of the novels written from the Autumn People, people centuries into the future tracing the history of those families that lived in the time of the Conways, at the time where they, more or less, destroyed the planet by ignoring climate change.

Briohny Doyle is an Australian academic and writer, and has written several books that explore magical realism, Australia, and themes of natural disasters and climate change. In an interview with *The Garret*, she talks specifically about writing on non-humans. For Doyle, she is interested to “show how thinking about the more than human, the non-human, the natural world” and to remember despite moments of grief or disaster that “human society as I know it isn't the only thing.”¹⁰ *The Island Will Sink*, despite being well-received, was shortlisted as “the Small Press Network’s Most Underrated Book” in 2017. A key feature of the novel is showing the repercussion of humanity ignoring the effects of climate change but in a different way; one that focuses on things like “pleasure, humour and survival” and the role the media machine has in shaping how we think and feel about it.¹¹ *The Island Will Sink* takes part in the not-too-distant-future, depicting Pitcairn island as it is on the verge of falling into the ocean. The climate change disaster, still in full swing, is viewed by Max Galleon, an unreliable narrator who watches the sinking via the island’s EcoEvent live stream. Max himself is a creator of virtual reality disaster films and is going through a mid-life crisis as he tries to regain his memories and reconnect with his family. The science fiction tropes of self-driving cars and corporate climate change mascots (Pow-Pow the Panda) demonstrate the almost comedic and sad trivialisation of climate change disasters as they continue to plague society.

End of the world scenarios, climate change, catastrophe and apocalyptic visions have been long held tropes of science fiction. In an early example of speculative fiction, H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, we are met in the final chapter with a visceral image of the dying sun, and through the eyes of the narrator thousands of years into the future, we witness the slow decline of the world.¹² For George Turner, Wells’ bleak vision changed and influenced him as a writer of science fiction.¹³ Catastrophic images stay with us, both in science fiction and real life, we watch in horrific fascination as islands sink beneath the sea, floods consume entire towns, and fires devour forests whole. In Australia and across the Pacific, populations huddle on sought after coastal spaces. As sea levels rise, liveable land become less available. When this is combined with increased costs of living and overpopulation, the divide between rich and poor becomes further apparent. Climate disaster then, is not just an environmental issue, but a social one as well.

¹⁰ Astrid Edwards, “Briohny Doyle on elegy, time and the non-human world”, *The Garret* (2023). At: <https://thegarretpodcast.com/briohny-doyle-on-elegy-time-and-the-non-human-world/>.

¹¹ Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell, “Apocalyptic Climate Fiction in the Third Media Revolution: Briohny Doyle’s *The Island Will Sink*,” *Australian Literary Studies* (2022). At: <https://www.australianliterarystudies.com.au/articles/apocalyptic-climate-fiction-in-the-third-media-revolution-briohny-doyle-the-island-will-sink>.

¹² H.G. Wells, “The Time Machine”, in *The Dover Reader* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2016), p. 65.

¹³ George Turner, *In The Heart or In The Head: An Essay in Time Travel* (St. Kilda: Norstrilia Press, 1984), p. 30.

The Australian Beach Motif: A Site for Wilderness and Nostalgia

The feature of science fiction that makes it an ideal medium to explore ethics is that its works generally have clear didactic meanings. The texts can act as warnings or promote utopic visions. For Turner, who writes non-fiction essays on the genre, the purpose of science fiction is to understand some of the issues of tomorrow in a meaningful way that does not bypass the messy part. The how did we get here, what we can do to stop it, and exploring the start of the end of the world are just as important as depicting a brutal wasteland visions.¹⁴ For Turner, it was important that his science fiction was not only enjoyable to read but had a political, social, and ecological message.¹⁵ In a similar vein, Briohny Doyle, writes in a post-apocalyptic imaginative sense, where the works purposefully try and disrupt capitalist progress.¹⁶ For Doyle, the post-apocalypse does not revel in the penultimate end of the world, but becomes dislodged from linear time and space, dislocated.¹⁷ These works focus on future environmental and technological scenarios removed from the typical revelation of religious apocalypses. In *The Island Will Sink*, there is no clear resolution, and the future setting is used to explore not only the negative ramifications of climate change but also the human story of Max's connections to his family, his career, and himself. Both *The Sea and Summer* and *The Island Will Sink* follow the lives of characters at the forefront of large global and social disasters. As readers, it is this journey of reading and empathising with the character by which we become acquainted with the problems of climate change, overpopulation, and other global issues.

In Australia, a well understood nostalgic vision that exists across all generations is the image of a sun-drenched beach, of eating icy poles, wearing thongs, getting sunburnt and playing in the crystal-clear waves. For Matthias Stephan, Turner draws heavily on nostalgia in an Australian setting to emphasise the threat of climate change disaster.¹⁸ The beach is tied up, located somewhere in an idealised 1980s Australia, with our modern identity as a country. Both *The Island Will Sink* and *The Sea and Summer* contain elements of an idealised utopic society as well as the marks of dystopias. A key metaphor in both, and the most visceral in terms of climate change risks, is the ocean. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 85% of Australians live within 50 kilometres from the coast.¹⁹ Most Australians have postcard-like memories of spending time at the beach, particularly as children. However, these spaces are also sites of chaos and violence, with powerful coastal storms another common feature of our collective memories. Turner and Doyle use this space as a reference point to highlight the power of the ocean and the risks of climate change, by disrupting the sugar-coated image of Australian beach life. These are wild spaces and destinations for the ramifications of climate change disasters; cyclones, sea levels rising, storms, and erosion. That Australia should be an

¹⁴ Turner, *In The Heart or In The Head: an Essay in Time Travel*, p. 212.

¹⁵ Andrew Milner, "The Sea and Eternal Summer: An Australian Apocalypse", in *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, eds. Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), p. 116.

¹⁶ Briohny Doyle, "The Postapocalyptic Imagination", *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 131 no. 1 (2015), p. 99.

¹⁷ Doyle, "The Postapocalyptic Imagination," p. 100.

¹⁸ Matthias Stephan, "Nostalgic Narrative and Affective Climate SF in George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*", *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 48, (2021), pp. 108-123.

¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), "How many people live in Australia's coastal areas?" (2001) At: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/previousproducts/1301.0feature%20article32004>.

ideal location for both utopias and dystopias is no surprise as, despite the size of the continent, it is still very much an island. As Andrew Milner notes, the isolation and fact that it is a self-contained location make it the perfect setting for science fiction narratives.²⁰

A central motif in *The Island Will Sink* is the gradual sinking of Pitcairn Island, documented and recorded by the main character Max Galleon. As Pitcairn sinks, Max undergoes a psychological journey to discover himself against the backdrop of a society preparing for ongoing climate disasters. In the future, the response to environmental disaster is intertwined with corporate interests and every thought and process is under surveillance. While not explicitly set in Australia, being Australian Briohny Doyle ties in ideas and concepts familiar to both Australia and the surrounding Pacific Islands. Early in the novel, Max meets with his friend Jean who retells a story of his time in a small town on the east coast of Australia. He describes the beaches in Australia being “wild” and even the rock pools giving him rashes and scraping his legs.²¹ The coastline for Jean represents “endless wilderness” and conjured images of hidden treasure, pirates, and outlaws.²² Beaches for Doyle in Australia are romantically described, with ominous mist, gnarly trees and an incipient storm pregnant with tension. As the storm hits, Jean describes images of “whipped branches of eucalypts” and golf-ball sized hail in a tone of awe, respect, and bewilderment at the power of nature.²³ Max hears this and states that the first psychological disaster film was *On the Beach*, referring to Stanley Kramer’s 1959 post-apocalyptic film. Australia is an obvious choice for Kramer’s work, which depicts a nuclear fallout with Australian and American sailors slowly dying from radiation sickness, the streets of Melbourne empty, humanity all dead and a single salvation army sign stating, “There is still time ... Brother!” Like Kramer, Doyle describes this Australian storm in detail, inverting and subverting childhood memories of calm sunny days spent by the coast. Australia’s proximity to the natural environment makes it an ideal setting for both Kramer and Doyle due to its mixture of both familiarity and anxiety.

In *The Island Will Sink* climate change disaster responses are quick and efficient, to the point of humans and human needs being almost obsolete. In Doyle’s work, the future is prepared for natural disasters, with the houses of the wealthy being built with state-of-the-art technology to avoid acidic air, storms, extreme heat and cold, creating a shell-like structure over the picturesque buildings in Bay Heights (where Max and his family live). Max reflects on how houses use to be built; with malleable and soft materials like wood and plaster – materials that “flamelick,” “salt rot,” and “deluge.”²⁴ He lists other things he remembers which no longer exist in the future setting of the book, including dogs and dust clouds. Dogs were no longer justifiable in a society hyper focused on environmental efficiency. He asks himself:

Remember how national edicts came to be replaced by scar-words? Ravaged, scoured, burned, sodden, smashed. Remember the slow rebuild? Is there before and after, or only now and then, and then again? Everything is now powder-coated and pre-emptive.

²⁰ Milner, “The Sea and Eternal Summer: An Australian Apocalypse”, p. 115.

²¹ Briohny Doyle, *The Island Will Sink* (Melbourne, Victoria: The Lifted Brow, 2016), p. 28.

²² Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 28.

²³ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 28.

²⁴ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 128.

The only poor materials left are skin, flesh and organ meat. Human remnants. The final permeability, the traces.²⁵

The future is so efficient, the implication is that soon humans themselves (with our weak and malleable bodies) will become obsolete, unable to survive or needed in the future. The frequency of natural disasters, the cyclones, the storms (like Max's films) are witnessed only as brief experiences before moving onto the next disaster. As Max is driving past an old Ecovillage that was knocked down and bulldozed over after a chaotic storm, he notes that he is to "just forget the past and focus on the future".²⁶ He goes from one disaster and catastrophe to the next, with the cold efficiency of the clean-up crews removing any real need to mourn or feel pain and instead realise the "global micro-catastrophe chain" can only be understood intellectually. Society must not give up or despair or know that we have in fact entered the Praeteranthropocene (a term in the book denoting the following epoch after the Anthropocene in which humanity can no longer revert the effects of climate change on the planet).

Similarly, Turner positions the Australian beach as a nostalgic zone where the effects of climate change are both physically and psychologically felt. In *The Sea and Summer* society consists of a small portion of those who have jobs and prospects (the Sweet) and those that are unemployed, supported by social welfare, and live in densely packed environments (the Swill). In the novel, the Conways struggle to adapt to this new way of life after becoming Swill. In Turner's work, the Australian seaside consists of two contrasting vignettes; one of joy, safety and blissful ignorance and a darker image that highlights the ramifications of climate change. Alison Conway, one of the main characters in the novel, reminisces about Australian coastal life, stating that as a young girl she had revelled in the warming of the planet. To her, the never changing season was enjoyable as it felt like endless days of sea and summer.²⁷ Indeed, as a self-titled surf brat she paddled at Elwood with the sun shining, danced and giggled under garden hoses, and revelled in the "lush wavelets of cuddling water."²⁸ While Alison enjoyed her ignorantly blissful childhood, the increased global temperature was causing havoc to food security. The lack of cooler temperatures resulted in the wheat belt becoming a dry dust bowl and the world increasingly unable to feed its growing population.²⁹

Despite these warnings, people ignored the underlying risks of climate change on the basis that they were too big, too hard, and that more studies were needed - until it was too late. These earlier images of a blissful endless summer are contrasted with the older Alison, now desiring to wake up in the morning to cold temperatures and the winds of winter again, as sea levels cover the beaches she remembers. Alison notes, "The sea is rising over the beaches of the world; the coastal cities face death by drowning."³⁰ As the rising seas continue to encroach on the streets, and the once placid Yarra River bursts its embankments, Alison now loathes the endless summer.³¹ Like Doyle, Turner purposefully crafts familiar images of Australian beaches to foreshadow the risks of climate change. Australia and the rest of the Pacific pride

²⁵ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 129.

²⁶ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 252.

²⁷ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 21.

²⁸ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 21.

²⁹ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 22.

³⁰ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 22.

³¹ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 22.

themselves on having some of the most pristine coastal environments in the world, areas which are, and will continue to be, negatively affected by climate change. Turner and Doyle seem to reflect the same message, if we want to maintain our way of life, and protect our coastal towns and spaces we need to take urgent action against climate change.

Towers as Sites of Social Tension

Apartment towers are used in both Doyle and Turner's work as physical representations of the class tensions in their futuristic fiction. The towers, like their inhabitants, are located on the fringes of the community. Occupying the outskirts of the major cities, the towers geographically embody this segregation from the upper classes. Towers within the novels are used as symbols and sites for societies that are overpopulated; they are ill prepared, badly organised and have no resources. In Turner's work, the towers first and foremost represent the disenfranchised and unemployed population (the towers contain ~70,000 people across seventy floors); however, as the novel progresses, they are also sites of hope and industrial action. In *The Island Will Sink*, towers are remnants of failed attempts of government agencies creating 'Envirotowers'. These Envirotowers now house vagabonds and hippies squatting in the abandoned buildings. In Doyle and Turner's works, the towers are seen as sites for both class struggle but also radical ideas and collective action.

As overpopulation continues and housing costs increase, people around the world are more frequently opting to live in apartments. As of 2021, over half a million Australians live in high-rise buildings (a high-rise being considered a building that is nine or more storeys in height) and 10% of Australians live in apartments of all kinds.³² With rising sea levels and an increase in climate refugees, population increases will continue to force individuals into close quarters with one another. In *The Island Will Sink*, the once promising Envirotowers have been, due to government neglect, rendered a ghetto bordering the airport.³³ In a dialogue with his son Jonas, Max tries to explain why people still live in these towers but struggles to explain the complexity of the situation. Max explains that the Envirotowers were a chance for society to practice and fail before they eventually got it right.³⁴ The grim reality that people on the fringe of society now fill these decaying towers, is underscored to both Max and the readers by Jonas' child-like inquiries. The suffering of those in these towers is overlooked, considered a failed experiment and a sad sacrifice for the new climate change response.

Life in these fringe communities is violent and bleak, the Envirotowers are abandoned by most and societal supports removed with people left to fend for themselves. Gabrielle, the psychologist in Doyle's novel, describes her life in these communities as being "an extremely violent period on the fringes" where she slowly watched everyone in her block sell their houses, transport systems shut down, and people unable to afford to even run their cars. This lack of transport isolated people within the community from the rest of society and left them unable to

³² Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), "2021 Census count includes Australians living on wheels and water, but most of us still firmly on land" (2021). At: <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-count-includes-australians-living-wheels-and-water-most-us-still-firmly-land>.

³³ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 9.

³⁴ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 11.

visit hospitals or schools.³⁵ Max is frightened by Gabrielle's suggestion that she would take him to visit the abandoned Envirotowers. In the conversation that follows, Gabrielle accuses him of being xenophobic.³⁶ Max is uncomfortable with the "idea of the place," which he says acts as a symbol of failure. For Max, these fringe spaces and poor areas are something to be avoided and forgotten. By contrast, the people in the fringe represent hope. They develop a religion based on the Japanese principle of *nomono aware* or "the ah-ness of things" where they take hallucinogenic drugs and try to connect with people from the past through old objects: items such as abandoned books or even a rocking chair.³⁷ These objects, in the hyper-efficient world that Max inhabits, have been removed for their lack of utility; moved and forgotten much like the people that now venerate them. This similarity is echoed again when Max returns to find both the towers and the fringe gypsy camp have been demolished. He notes:

According to the location grid they should be here, but the very earth they dwelled on has been tossed. Waste Not Want truck crews are gathering debris. They suck up the odd shoe, a car part, a biodegradable fork. They church the mundane necessities into mulch; flatten uneven ground into cryptic ripples. The whole area is refreshed. Rubbish. Shit. Tears. Sweat. Shame all ploughed into the dirt.³⁸

The space has been destroyed in the name of progress, the human items buried, and society is to move on. Far from being a distant prospect, the marginalisation of the inhabitants of the Envirotowers is an increasingly relatable experience. While the Envirotowers in Doyle's novel is exaggerated, as climate change continues, we will continue to push people further to the fringe and further into more densely populated environments.

In *The Sea and Summer*, the society of the future is drastically segregated, the majority (the Swill) living on the outskirts of the city on the fringes of society, in high rise buildings. In the novel, nine out of ten Australians are Swill.³⁹ Turner's novel contains a framing narrative of the Autumn People, a futuristic society re-tracing the history of Australia during this time and how they contributed to destroying the planet. When viewing the remains of ruins of one of these Swill towers, one of these Autumn People, Andra, comments on how the apartments consisted of rooms that were 3 by 2.5 meters connecting to each other.⁴⁰ He is shocked to discover that rather than being a flat for one person, these buildings often housed seven or eight people with each having less than 4 square meters of living space for each person and their belongings.⁴¹ The stark difference in society was not just echoed in the physical locations of the sweet and swill but clear in the attitudes of the characters, depicted in the state-controlled television put in place to keep society socially segregated. Francis Conway, one of the Conway children, knows the way society is divided: Sweet had an income and a job whereas the Swill

³⁵ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 123.

³⁶ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 139.

³⁷ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 140.

³⁸ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, pp. 251-252.

³⁹ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 24.

⁴⁰ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 8.

⁴¹ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 9.

survived on State subsidies, with even servants looking down on them.⁴² Socially, the Swill are considered less than human. Billy, one of the characters who is Swill, states that the:

Swill are nothing because they do nothing because there's nothing for them to do. It costs the State money just to keep them alive. How long can that last? One day the State will begin killing them off because it can't afford them any longer. They'll be wiped off the books and respectable Sweet won't have to go on hiding from their own guilt.⁴³

While in the book, this takes on a conspiratorial tone, the despair and resignation to the social segregation of society is felt strongly both within the novels and in contemporary Australia.

The experience of Turner of a 1980s Melbourne with demonstratable inequality between classes is only more so evident in 2022. The Gini coefficient for Australia has risen from 0.313 from 1981 to 0.358 according to the World Bank coinciding with a 250% increase of house prices since the 1990s.⁴⁴ Due to lower income earners no longer being able to buy property in larger cities, they are moving further to the outskirts where there fewer jobs.⁴⁵ Michelle Sydes and Rebecca Wickes, drawing on Bill Randolph and Andrew Tice's research, note that this trend in location distribution demonstrates "a growing spatial divide between the haves and have nots," and has resulted in the "suburbanization of disadvantage."⁴⁶ In Melbourne in 1994 to afford to buy a house, those with an average income could live within ten kilometres from the CBD; however in 2009, this has become forty kilometres.⁴⁷ As in *The Sea and Summer*, people are pushed out to the fringes of society. This is before taking into consideration further repercussions of climate change disasters like increased sea levels, overpopulation, resources depletion and other issues that are ongoing.

Climate Change and Scientific Inspiration

Both *The Sea and Summer* and *The Island Will Sink* use real location settings and base their climate change predictions on scientific theories which help situate the location of the fiction not in some far away planet but in the real world. According to the IPCC 2021 report, in the twentieth century the average sea levels rose faster than they have over the last three millennia, accelerating to 2.3 mm per year from the period 1971-2018 to 3.7 mm a year in 2006-2008 and continue to rise.⁴⁸ Many Pacific islands, like Pitcairn, are normally only a few metres above

⁴² Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 24.

⁴³ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 45.

⁴⁴ Michelle Sydes and Rebecca Wickes, "'The Land of the 'Fair Go'? Mapping Income Inequality and Socioeconomic Segregation Across Melbourne Neighbourhoods", in *Urban Socio-Economic Segregation and Income Inequality: A Global Perspective*, eds. Maarten van Ham, Tiit Tammaru, Rūta Ubarevičienė, and Heleen Janssen (Cham: Springer, 2021), p. 230.

⁴⁵ Bill Randolph and Andrew Tice, "Suburbanizing disadvantage in Australian cities: Sociospatial change in an era of neoliberalism", *Journal Urban Affairs*, no. 36 no. 1 (2014), pp. 384–399.

⁴⁶ Sydes and Wickes, "'The Land of the 'Fair Go'?", p. 230.

⁴⁷ Sydes and Wickes, "'The Land of the 'Fair Go'?", p. 233.

⁴⁸ Baylor Fox-Kemper et al., "Ocean, Cryosphere and Sea Level Change," IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (2021). At: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>.

sea level.⁴⁹ As well as sea levels rising, these Pacific islands are also at risk of threats like increased storms, coastal destruction, saltwater affecting crops and limited access to fresh water.⁵⁰ As Saber Salem states, countries like Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu are already experiencing saltwater affecting their crops.⁵¹ By placing Pitcairn Island's sinking at the centre of her novel, Doyle paints a very real warning of the repercussions of climate change:

The setting of Pitcairn is a major theme in the book, as characters watch its sinking on the news, Max plans his film around the destruction, and it becomes to symbolise a movement towards the Praeteranthropocene. The news reports the sinking through a 24hr live streaming event: "At dawn on Thursday the 17th of February Pitcairn Island drops 0.0000785 mm below its last registered sea level... For several minutes I lie still – clammy despite the climate control - watching a chopper circle that island like a bird of prey. Tiny children speckle the cliffs in antish processions, antennae waving at the clouds, giving the view the disorienting feeling of guilty, goldlike voyeurism."⁵²

Max watches this live coverage and feels somewhat uncomfortable, witnessing and taking a part in the islands and its inhabitants' destruction. In *The Island Will Sink* a morbid voyeurism and obsession is described as characters become heavily invested and involved in the lives of Pitcairn as it accelerates to its eventual destruction. The reasons behind the sinking are described as occurring mainly because of rising sea levels which have grown exponentially, as the news anchor states:

The South Pacific is registering an increase in sea level at almost three times higher than it was just five years ago. That might not sound like much to many of you, but if you just think of a glass slowly filling with water at a tiny fraction of a drop per second, and then the water begins dropping at three times that rate, you'll have an idea of how much damage that can do. It's not good. It's potentially devastating" ... "Now," he continues, "if you think about that slowly filling glass of water floating in a sink, itself almost full, you tell me what happens when the weight of that glass of water eventually causes it to drop completely into the brimming sink. Overflow. Fact."⁵³

Doyle includes specific descriptions of the ramifications of sea levels rising, to highlight this very real risk to the Pacific and Australia. The ramifications of the rising sea levels could further destroy the already endangered icecaps leading to more natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Doyle reminds us through the voice of the news anchor, that "what we have to understand is that everything is connected."⁵⁴ Using a real Pacific Island like

⁴⁹ "An Existential Threat: How Climate Change is Impacting the Atoll Countries", *The Asian Development Bank* At: <https://www.adb.org/news/videos/existential-threat-how-climate-change-impacting-atoll-countries>.

⁵⁰ Hussain Rasheed Hassan and Valerie Cliff, "For Small Island Nations, Climate Change is not a Threat. It's already here", World Economic Forum, 2019. At: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/island-nations-maldives-climate-change/>.

⁵¹ Saber Salem, "Climate Change and The Sinking Island States in the Pacific", *E-International Relations* (2020). At: <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/01/09/climate-change-and-the-sinking-island-states-in-the-pacific/>.

⁵² Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 3.

⁵³ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, pp. 75-76.

⁵⁴ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 77.

Pitcairn rather than a fictional one, Doyle positions the risks of climate change to the here and now and refocuses the reader's attention.

Corporatisation and Voyeurism in Climate Change Disasters

The obsession of society in *The Island Will Sink* on climate change is coupled with an almost voyeuristic lust for its eventual destruction, where characters use headsets and devices to “feel” what it feels like for the end of the world. In the novel, characters are so obsessed with the event itself (typified by Max's psychological disaster film centred on the island) that they do not try to prevent it or allow themselves to really feel the existential dread caused by the disaster. After the lengthy and scientific description of the sinking of Pitcairn by the news reporter, he asks, “what will that look like” and puts on VR headsets to try and relive through a virtual reality of what the Pitcairn's might feel when the island is sinking.⁵⁵ In the novel, it is noted in this moment that any fear in the news reporter's voice is now gone as she excitedly starts to experience the end of the earth, with the lights dimming like it is “a party game.”⁵⁶ As society in the novel gets inundated with disasters and calamities, they become desensitised to the real ramifications and idealise the experience. For Pitcairn, the rest of society views them with a morbid fascination, live streaming and filming the inhabitants' houses and belongings complete with their tiny little soft toys, mounted fish and souvenirs, small conch shells and other objects.⁵⁷ The camera zooms into their lives like a version of Big Brother, trivialising and objectifying the disaster. The lives of the doomed Pitcairners are viewed and experienced, with the audience revelling in the tragic nature of the event.

In Doyle's *The Island Will Sink*, the environmental movement is controlled and maintained by large corporations and typified in the fictional character of Pow-Pow. Pow-Pow is a power-saving panda mascot, a corporate strategy to reduce water and electricity use. It appears as a projected pop up when you are showering, when you use water, and gives individuals a star rating or “panda points.”⁵⁸ Like a Tamagotchi, Pow-Pow is like a virtual pet that apparently can be killed if it is neglected. Pow-Pow is less pervasive in the Envirotowers and trailer parks (poor people seem to have other concerns) but exists as a continuous theme within the novel. Doyle's vision of the future in the book is one in which corporate interest becomes heavily tied to the environmental movement, and surveillance is employed so that people comply. Max's daughter Lily is obsessed with Pow-Pow, her room decked out in motivational posters that tout sayings like “Even solar energy is energy, so remember to Pow-Pow-power down” and “Take the train and hide your tracks!,” and she has multiple merchandise, from a Pow-Pow themed lunch box to a solar light by her bedside.⁵⁹

The corporate eco-future is Orwellian in nature, with pressure placed on individuals to report anyone violating any of the EcoLaws, with Pow-Pow whispering in characters' ears and pressuring characters that their social standing is tied to how many panda points are

⁵⁵ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 77.

⁵⁶ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 77.

⁵⁷ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 131.

⁵⁸ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, pp. 5-6.

accumulated.⁶⁰ This cynical vision of Doyle seems more believable when we examine the shift of emphasis on corporations in having a socially accepted brand. Corporations are taking more time to understand what consumers want and what they believe to be socially popular. The firm EY stated that “consumer-facing companies urgently need to anticipate that kind of consumer is emerging,” with EY even creating its own Consumer Index to help track these changing concerns.⁶¹ This sentiment became more strongly felt during the Covid-19 pandemic, where businesses and corporations desperately tried to create a feeling of solidarity with consumers, like one big family. While this does seem to have some positives, like companies adopting more environmentally conscious objectives however it is difficult not to feel cynical. Regardless of whether these changes are occurring for positive or negative reasons, Doyle seems to suggest we keep our eyes open for a system that pressures us into informing on each other and is run by corporate greed.

Conclusion

The disastrous results for society and climate change in *The Sea and Summer* was due to what is described as “the Greed Syndrome”, or capitalist greed.⁶² In the novel, politicians blame everyone except themselves and spend money as people starve and the population grows, repeating the mantra “I want, I want” as the earth’s resources (which were viewed as endless) are depleted beyond repair.⁶³ In *The Sea and Summer*, Turner warns against complacency to climate change and passing the buck to the next generation. This is reflected throughout the novel when the Autumn People discuss the eventual ice age.⁶⁴ This eventual climate change disaster is “a long way off”, “it’s somebody else’s business” and “I’m no scientist.”⁶⁵ The problem is seen as being that of the government or scientist but as Lenna the historian reminds us, it might seem far off, but we do not always know that and in addition suggests that our attitude to climate disaster is to keep abreast with the scientific information as best you can, take the actions you can and “be like the Swill, aware but unworried.”⁶⁶

This article has explored the environmental and social implications of climate change in two works of climate change fiction: George Turner’s *The Sea and Summer* and Briohny Doyle’s *The Island Will Sink*. Both authors were born in Melbourne, Australia and use these as points of inspiration for the effects of climate change in their work. The repercussions of climate change are not just physical and environmental but also social. Both works have a clear divide between the haves and have nots, with large groups of society living on the fringes of cities. In addition, they are critical and questioning of corporate and capitalist’ interests and the role they have in making society less equal. Finally, the beach and coastal environment is used

⁶⁰ Doyle, *The Island Will Sink*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Kristina Rogers and Andrew Cosgrove, “Future Consumer Index: How Covid-19 Is Changing Consumer Behaviours” (2020). At: https://www.ey.com/en_au/consumer-products-retail/how-covid-19-could-change-consumer-behavior.

⁶² Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 74.

⁶³ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 74.

⁶⁴ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 115.

⁶⁵ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 115.

⁶⁶ Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, p. 115.

as a nostalgic metaphor most people in Australia and the Pacific are familiar with to create very real visceral concerns about rising sea levels and the implications of climate change. This article has drawn on these literary tropes with an ethical reading lens to better understand the important place of climate change literature to impel us to take climate change more seriously.