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Not a bedtime story

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Has anyone been to the end of a rainbow lately? A solution to climate change beats a pot of gold. (Photo courtesy of Alex Féthière)

Fifteen years ago, we received an urgent message. Well, those of us who were willing to pay for a movie ticket received it. Al Gore told us frightening stories of impending doom.

Because it was so long ago, my memory has distilled the production down to graphs, preaching, TED-style talks and sanctimoniousness. I don't think that style has aged well. I understand the backlash against its technocratic evangelism.

Since then, some have used narrative to make the figures more compelling. My time working on land has been greatly enriched by library audiobooks, podcasts and Audible. Amazon probably has rich data veins on me, which is why its recommendation of "The Ministry of the Future" by Kim Stanley Robinson was prescient.

There are several scientific theories on climate change with which I have only passing familiarity. Take the geoengineering approach discussed by Elizabeth Kolbert in her recent "Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future": filling the atmosphere with reflective particles to keep the sun's heat from broiling our planet.

This theory was derided in "Snowpiercer," a thoughtful action blockbuster (a la "The Matrix") from 2013. Its talented director, Bong Joon-Ho, later received more acclaim for "Parasite." Small wonder, given the narrative arc of "Parasite," which was so much more Hollywood than "Snowpiercer's" jeremiad.

Its comparatively neat finale was not the open-ended provocation "Snowpiercer" presented: a world in which the white-sky technique of mitigation had dramatically failed and frozen the entire planet, except for a train that must remain in constant motion through the snow.

What these stories have in common is their use of climate change as a narrative device. "Cli-fi," punning on "sci-fi" and climate change, tries to make ol' Al Gore's PowerPoints more engrossing. "Ministry" is also classified as "hard science fiction" because of its basis in fact.

Given all of its research-based chops, "Ministry" can't get bogged down with traditional fiction devices like character development. The characters feel to me as though they're delivering lines. But the

summary of science and dramatization of phenomena like a heat wave that kills 20 million in India drives the book aggressively — inventorying puzzle pieces of climate change solutions and the complex interlocking political, historical and logistical considerations that have challenged their implementation.

I can't believe that the author "solves" climate change by the end of the book. That alone is enough to have made it a New York Times bestseller.

Not having finished it yet, I'm wondering how much of a role individuals will have in this solution. "An Inconvenient Truth" ended with a series of recommendations for personal practice to stop climate change. These sound like cringeworthy sops today: use more efficient light bulbs, recycle, buy carbon offsets. Fifteen years on from the movie, those haven't been enough by half.

What interests me as a writer is how one tells a story of individual action that stops climate change, or at least that makes a meaningful contribution. I don't even know my carbon footprint, but living in a county that gets 87% of its electrical power from hydroelectric makes me feel better than the nuclear energy I ran on in New York City.

Ten hours into the audiobook, there's been no mention of forests. I knew a guy who had property in Vermont and Brazil, where he spent every winter. He had calculated his carbon footprint, which was larger from all the air travel, and offset it by planting trees all over his hundreds of acres in both places. Nice work if you can get it, but we don't all have hundreds of acres.

Northwesterners also must address our forest fires in any arboriculture. Permaculture is the only system I know of that aims to create self-sustaining niches in the ecology, and I look forward to designing fire-proof, carbon sequestering, productive forests.

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