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Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones by Marc DiPaolo

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Tolkien's Children

***Fire and Snow: Climate Fiction from the Inklings to Game of Thrones* by MARC DIPAULO**

SUNY Press, 2019 \$29.95 USD

Reviewed by **JAMIE CAMPBELL MARTIN**

Marc DiPaolo's new book discusses environmental fiction stretching from *Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s to *The Hunger Games* trilogy in the 2000s. While his coverage is sweeping, his goal is narrower: to shape the reading habits, sympathies, and political alliances of liberal Christians like himself, Christians who care about the environment but may hesitate to embrace secular environmental fiction if they feel it contravenes Christian values. DiPaolo hopes to convince these Christians that they share more, in terms of values if not doctrine, with secular writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Margaret Atwood than with conservative Christians who support environmental depredation.

Writing from Oklahoma, DiPaolo traces the split between liberal "Christian stewards" who believe "God gave us the earth to take care of" and conservative "Dominionist" Christians like Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, who believe God "granted man dominion over the earth" (117). With fracking ascendant in Oklahoma and Donald Trump "muzzl[ing] . . . the EPA" nationally, DiPaolo hopes that "[liberal] Christians, atheists, and agnostics" will let environmental fiction "show us how" to "put aside our cultural differences [and] work together to save our environment" (274, 9–10).

For a reviewer minimally grounded in Christian discourse, DiPaolo provides a valuable opportunity to listen in on the Christian debate about the values one should look for in fiction. Many scholars of environmental fiction are concerned not only with anatomizing texts, but using the insights they glean from fiction to galvanize political action, and so a greater understanding of the concerns of this large audience will be helpful to many.

Yet if DiPaolo provides a detailed picture of Christian authors and readers, he is less nuanced when he describes environmental fiction by secular authors. He sees an author like Ursula K. Le Guin as writing "spiritually informed genre fiction" that is largely continuous both with the earlier work of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis and with contemporary work that has come to be called climate fiction (DiPaolo 7). But not all scholars would agree: there is debate over how climate fiction should be categorized. Many definitions of climate fiction reach beyond sci-fi and fantasy to include "mainstream" novels such as Ian McEwan's *Solar* or Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*. At the same time, many definitions are more limited, suggesting that climate fiction has features not shared by other environmental fiction, such as the "catachronistic" sense of time proposed by Srinivas Aravamudan (Irr 6). Though DiPaolo's subtitle refers to climate fiction, he does not consider climate fiction as meaningfully distinct from other environmental fiction; rather, climate fiction is simply environmental fiction that addresses the challenge before us today.

Similarly, DiPaolo sees secular environmental fiction as largely embodying the single theoretical perspective of “ecofeminism,” which he characterizes as the belief that “all oppressions stem from the oppression of the universal ‘feminine’” (149). Much of DiPaolo’s argument works to show that Christian authors like Tolkien and Lewis are in closer sympathy with this perspective than many have realized. Tolkien “confronts the racist, sexist, and exploitative [masculine] worldview . . . with its mirror image: a worldview that fosters a love of the feminine, of feminine values such as education, caregiving, conflict resolution, [and] stewardship of the environment” (150). Lewis is not the “misogynist theologian” he has been called: although he “frames God in strongly masculine terms,” Lewis nonetheless “depicts the female body as good and beautiful and sexuality as natural and not evil” (152, 155, 153).

Yet here too, many might ask whether the author deeply understands eco-feminism or indeed, whether ecofeminism is a large enough umbrella to cover the various visions of a good society seen throughout secular environmental fiction and the criticism it has inspired. Describing the state of ecocriticism, Alfred K. Siewers wrote in 2010 that “practitioners have moved beyond a first wave of criticism related closely to . . . late twentieth-century philosophical movements [such as] ecofeminism” (206).

Alliances depend on strategically overlooking differences. One might ask, however, whether DiPaolo collapses important distinctions in his eagerness to build ties. Would the secular writers he discusses recognize themselves as working within a common genre or advocating a common philosophy?

DiPaolo ends his book by identifying the contemporary writer he sees as Tolkien’s torchbearer: Suzanne Collins, author of *The Hunger Games*. DiPaolo argues that Collins is “Tolkien’s kind of Catholic” and today’s best champion for environmental fiction (221). She qualifies as an ecofeminist, in his sense of the term, because she “challenges reader expectations of gender roles” by centering a female hero, Katniss Everdeen, and inviting both male and female readers to identify with her (232). The example of Collins, DiPaolo concludes, should make clear to liberal Christians that today’s authors of environmental fiction, whether Christian like Collins or secular like Atwood, only take a step further on the trail Lewis and Tolkien blazed.

In this sincere and urgent address to a Christian audience, DiPaolo has given less consideration to the secular side. Much as DiPaolo has traced fault lines among Christians, doing further work tracing distinctions within environmental fiction and the theory it has inspired may allow for a more robust alliance among all those who hope to protect our earth.

Works Cited

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