

Tatiana Prorokova  
Philipps University of Marburg, Germany

Book Review: Antonia Mehnert, *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 254 pp.



One of the most difficult issues humanity is facing, climate change has drawn the attention of many scientists, scholars, politicians, and activists worldwide. While the dominant approach is still a purely scientific one, humanities scholars insist on examining the phenomenon as a cultural issue and propose analyzing various artifacts that tackle the problem of climate change in one way or another. Among such scholars is Antonia Mehnert, who in her recent book *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* investigates the portrayals of global warming in literary fiction.

From the first pages on, Mehnert argues that cultural representations, including those in film and literature, “make an important contribution to our understanding of climate change by depicting how future generations might adapt or might fail to adapt to climatic changes” (2). She makes a pivotal addition to her contention: “[C]ultural texts pose ethical questions concerning not only the extent of the human impact on the planet, but also decisions about who or what is saved or left to die in a climatically changed future” (2-3). Mehnert thus attempts to examine literature as a medium that is capable of reflecting the socio-political complexity of climate change. She views literary narratives not just as texts but rather as tools that “mediate and shape our very reality” (3). *Climate Change Fictions* encompasses an analysis of twelve literary narratives ranging from novels to short stories, written by both already established and newly emerging authors. It is divided into six chapters in which Mehnert skillfully interweaves the political, scientific, social, and cultural aspects of global warming. She begins with the chapter entitled “Climate Change Fictions in Context: Socio-Politics, Environmental Discourse and Literature,” in which she provides an overview of U.S. attitudes towards climate change, drawing the reader’s attention to the political and social ‘climate’ of the issue. In doing so, Mehnert draws a line from the apocalyptic fears of ecological disaster as they emerged in the years after WWII to the changing attitudes towards the issue of global warming up to the presidency of Barack Obama. In the same chapter, Mehnert elaborates on how climate change can be located within the field of ecocriticism, discussing the relationship between literature and nature, and tackling the problem of representing climate change in film and literature.

The chapters that follow provide an extensive analysis of selected climate change texts. Thus, in the second chapter, “Scaling Climate Change: The Transformation of Place in Climate Change Fiction,” Mehnert zeroes in on Steven

Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* to "explore how a planetary transformation such as climate change impacts our understanding of locality and place and illustrate how these climate fictions ultimately present novel ways of envisioning climate change as the deterritorialized crisis it is" (53-54). From the issues of space and place, Mehnert moves to that of time, constructing a cluster of dimensions that climate change exists in and within which it should be examined. Chapter 3 – "Reimagining Time in Climate Change Fiction" – focuses on T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* and Jean McNeil's *The Ice Lovers* to discuss perhaps the most problematic question that surrounds global warming: "How does one think about something as intangible and invisible as climate change, which does not affect one's life immediately but possibly at some time in the future?" (93). One of the functions of literary fiction, Mehnert suggests, is to give concrete form to the real but elusive danger of global warming.

"Manufacturing Uncertainty: Climate Risks in an Age of 'Heightened Security'" – the fourth chapter in the book – is devoted solely to Nathaniel Rich's recent novel *Odds Against Tomorrow*. In this section, Mehnert examines various political and economic factors that construct and influence climate change. She also looks at the matter from a reverse perspective, analyzing the pernicious influence global warming will have on politics and the economy, and investigating how Rich "not only critically challenges the growing importance of probabilistic calculations for political and especially economic decision-making, but also raises questions of how to navigate through and adequately respond to varying uncertainties in everyday life" (127). In Chapter 5, "ClimateCultures in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital Trilogy*," Mehnert provides an extensive analysis of *Forty Signs of Rain*, *Fifty Degrees Below*, and *Sixty Days and Counting*. In her reading of these three novels, Mehnert makes a crucial contention, namely that it is wrong to dichotomize the study of climate change according to the issues of nature and culture, and proposes to recognize "human embeddedness in nature" (150). Drawing on numerous scholars, Mehnert persuasively argues that nature and humankind are as indivisible as nature and culture, and that therefore only a complex analysis that forgoes these categorical distinctions can attain a full understanding of climate change as a multifaceted phenomenon. In the book's final chapter – "Representing the Underrepresented: Climate Justice and Future Responsibilities in Climate Change Fiction" – Mehnert examines Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Dana Stein's *Fire in the Wind*, Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, as well as Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Tamarisk Hunter" to illustrate the ways in which climate change fiction deals with ethical questions such as responsibility and justice. Mehnert showcases how certain people and/or territories come to be regarded as expendable by those in power. In the narratives selected for this chapter, "climate change aggravates processes of maldistribution" (191), reflecting the ways in which real-life socio-political inequalities are compounded by environmental change.

Examining climate change from multiple perspectives informed by political science, the natural sciences, and the humanities, Mehnert masterfully demonstrates the significant role each discipline plays in the analysis of environmental crises, even as she always foregrounds “literature’s particularly well-suited means to envision this elusive and abstract phenomenon called climate change” (228). *Climate Change Fictions* is an ambitious, valuable, and above all timely contribution to environmental and literary studies. The book will be of interest to anyone who strives to understand the culture of climate change. It is, without a doubt, an essential resource for scholars and students of ecocriticism.