

“Write like it’s the end of the world” sounds like an inspirational wall hanging for a person struggling with writer’s block. But now there’s a new literary genre that depends entirely on writing like it’s the end of the world, or at least the world as we know it.

Climate fiction, or “cli-fi,” is a fiction genre that boasts stories about the world post-climate disaster. Short stories and novels in this area range from flooding in Chicago to a mass of Monarch butterflies taking over a town. The genre lets artists and writers interpret climate change however they want, but still keep the stories rooted in fact.

Shanna Yetmann is the communications director for Loyola University Chicago’s Institute of Environmental Sustainability (IES) and a flash fiction writer. Flash fiction is an incredibly short story that still contains plot and character development. Yetmann’s stories range anywhere from 300 to 700 words. She credits her colleagues for giving her ideas and inspiration to write climate-focused stories, but also finds that using her imagination is one of the only things that makes her feel optimistic about the future.

“Oh, just walking around this place is enough for a couple of stories,” said Yetmann, waving her hands around the four-story glass greenhouse inside the IES. “Sometimes, all I can do to make sure I’m able to do my job as a science communicator is to imagine a healthy planet in the future, and to write that down of course.”

Almost all the protagonists in Yetmann’s stories are young adults.

“Well, who else is going to be here to live these stories I write?” she asked.

While cli-fi sounds like a distant cousin of science fiction, authors are taking care not to bring apocalyptic tones into their stories. The protagonists are usually young people and while not all the stories aim to fear-monger, the growing uncertainty about what the world will look like just a few decades from now is oftentimes all the suspense an author needs.

As cli-fi grows from a niche into a regular category, media and scholars are catching on. In 2016, WBEZ commissioned more than a dozen writers to come up with fiction pieces on the future of water in Chicago. The stories were read at open-mic nights and on the radio, a haunting reminder of what could happen, or what we’re now capable of envisioning.

The societies seen in climate fiction stories aren’t your typical “Hunger Games” dystopia, but an exaggerated version of the inequity climate change is already bringing. In “New York 2140,” Kim Stanley Robinson tells the story of a flooded New York City where motorboats are a commodity and the wealthy live in newly constructed skyscrapers. Michele Morano, a professor

of literature at DePaul University, said these instances of environmental justice are not far from the truth.

“It’s impossible to write about the future without writing about climate change,” Morano said. “What I admire about this new genre is that the climate is used as the great equalizer. And if environmental injustice isn’t what hurt these societies the most then it was the idea of ‘man vs. nature,’ that we have to dominate the Earth instead of co-existing.”

Morano believes that of the common themes of conflict in fiction writing such as man vs. self or man vs. man, man vs. nature is the most harmful. The goal, she said, isn’t to overcome the climate crisis so that we can maintain our way of life, it is to use the lessons learned through disaster to develop a new way of life. She remembered when her son watched “WALL-E,” a 2008 Disney film about a trash-cleaning robot on a long abandoned Earth. The human’s gloomy observation that their new habitat would face the same fate eventually brought them back, but Morano said we don’t have the benefit of a Disney movie moment of realization.

In addition to providing insight, comfort and a healthy dose of existentialism, the genre is entertaining. Environmental engineer Gajan Sivandran said he reads a lot of climate fiction, looking for inspiration for better infrastructure for the future.

The uncharted waters he faces every day become clearer when reading climate fiction, as if imagining the future is the next step towards planning for it.

“So, as an environmental engineer, I make these plans that estimate how long a piece of infrastructure like a pipe, bridge or tunnel will be efficient,” Sivandran said. “Due to the unpredictable and violent nature of climate change, my estimates are sometimes years off. How do you plan for something that unprecedented? I read.”