



## A Conversation with Joanne Stubbs

BY RUBY CONWAY

*"There is a fish on the sand; I see it clearly. But it is not on its side, lying still. It is partly upright. It moves. I can see its gills, off the ground and wide open. It looks as though it's standing up."*

Joanna Stubbs' debut novel, *The Fish*, explores an uncanny environmental event set in the not-so-distant future. Three narratives run alongside one another, interchanging between the perspectives of Cathy, Ricky, and Margaret in turn, as they deal with the effects of these events on their everyday lives, relationships, and commitments. The three characters reside in different corners of the globe: Cornwall, New Zealand, and Kuala Lumpur.

From the novel's onset, a climate-change-induced new normal already exists - Cathy and her partner Ephie's back garden has been turned into a rice paddy, New Zealand is plagued by biblical-like storms, Kuala Lumpur



is now a coastal city. But the disturbance becomes unignorable when sea creatures begin to encroach upon the shores and land, unable to cope with the polluted waters any longer. Starfish linger like snails on windows, fish begin to walk, and a blood-red mist begins to gather. As scientists scramble to find out what has happened, casualties occur and the news erupts, Stubbs focuses on the individual emotional chaos: fractured lives, despair, anxiety and in some cases, determination and hope. By creating multiple narrative perspectives, a natural comparison is drawn between the different ways people cope with disaster. But above all, Stubbs looks at those ways we accept, continue, and go on with the everyday in the wake of the unexpected.

Highly conceivable and imbued with just the right balance of scientific detail, Stubbs has created a timely and very human environmental narrative.





**For those who don't know, could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your novel?**

I've always wanted to write a novel since I was a child, which is probably what most writers say, but at school, I ended up following the science route. I had my current day job and that didn't really leave a lot of space for creativity, so I never really pursued the idea of wanting to write until I was in my mid 20s. I had saved up some money to go travelling because I wasn't really enjoying having a full-time desk job; I'd kept a blog while I was away and really enjoyed the process of putting words on the page, or the digital page. Nobody had read it except for family and friends; it wasn't a I'm-going-to-be-an-influencer kind of blog; it was just for me. I got home from my travels and realised I had written the equivalent of the length of a book in a year without realising it,

because I'd just been enjoying it! So, I thought, "Oh, I can totally do this, I can write a book", although I had no idea what to write a book about at all.

I ended up doing the Masters Creative Writing course at Bath Spa, which was kind of amazing for me. I didn't really know anybody previous to that course interested in writing, and then I met fifty other people who also wanted to write a book, many of whom didn't know what they were doing either, and many who did and were a lot further along that journey. I started writing *The Fish* on that course, which began as a short story.

I took the short story class to force myself to write two stories in the space of the term, to be more imaginative. In the second one that I wrote, I wanted to do something quite playful that I would enjoy, which was quite different. I got this idea of writing a story where I looked at the way that humans treated the oceans, but flipped it on its head by thinking about how fish would treat the land if they came out of the sea. I called it *The Cod Delusion* and I set it in a fishing village in Cornwall; I had cod fish leaving the sea and doing a tourist tour of the town and looking around; in the same way that we would go and see the Great Barrier Reef, they were seeing a fishing village in Cornwall. People seemed to like it and I'd really enjoyed writing it. As soon as I got the fish on land idea I thought, 'Great, let's spin this out into something bigger', and then the book came quite easily. One of my tutors on that course was Fay Weldon, who was amazing. She told me that one of the difficulties of making this into a full-length novel would be that a 'what if' story is incredibly hard to finish, which in retrospect was very good advice!

**What do you think she meant by that? That it's harder to tie up loose ends?**

I haven't read any Stephen King books, but my boyfriend's read a lot of them and says that they often end a bit like, 'Oh it was aliens.' You've created a scenario that's really interesting, but actually how on earth could you ever explain it away? I think in my novel, I tried not to worry too much about it. In fact, I had a friend recently who read the novel and said that she thought that, since we've all been through Covid, the ending of my novel worked. That idea of things just slowly stopping and going back to normal might have felt a bit inadequate previously, but now we've actually lived through an experience of that, it's easier to understand.

**When you were originally writing the short story, did the idea come from following the news or being environmentally engaged? And why did you choose fish of all things?**

Good question. I suppose I grew up in the countryside and I am quite a country bumpkin; I do really, really love nature, so I suppose the kind of core of me writing this is because I feel passionate about nature and the environment, and worried about the changing climate.

The fish idea actually came from a song lyric by an amazing Australian singer-songwriter called Courtney Barnett. One day, I was driving to university listening to that song in the background and it includes this line about a seal that keeps washing up on the beach:

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*I see a dead seal on the beach*

*The old man says he's already saved it three times this week*

*Guess it just wants to die*

*I would wanna die too*

*With people putting oil into my air*

That line of thinking about the seal's air made me think about what they would do to our air if the sea creatures started leaving the sea, so that was how it ended up being fish – not because I'm particularly knowledgeable about fish...

**I was struck by how believable you were able to make the unusual concept of fish walking. You achieve that new-normal sentiment really well, but I wondered whether it was difficult to strike the balance between uncanniness and normality?**

Thank you for saying that. I think in early drafts I wasn't very explicit about how the fish moved and walked. I thought, 'Oh, it's fine. The reader can suspend their imagination and figure that out for themselves'. In retrospect, it was hard to have to try to think about how I would actually write that and, to an extent, I think I still avoided that – there's not a huge amount of description of the physical adaptations of how the fish are moving about, but over the various rounds of editing, it did become clear that people actually would want to see a walking fish if they were going to read a book about it.

**With the fish themselves, I often found myself thinking of bigotry and xenophobia in the way some of the characters were reacting to them. If that was intended, why did you do that?**

It wasn't intended, but I think in that first short story, one of the really clear discussions that the writing group had around it was, 'Is this an allegory for immigration?' It's quite a them-and-us scenario, and I suppose that was more enhanced because it was just one small village. So, I was aware of that going into writing the novel, but it wasn't something that I was really focused on.

**I guess it goes back to what you said about the idea of flipping what's going on environmentally on its head by exploring how the characters reacting to the fish mirrors our own actions towards the sea.**



Definitely, I mean the fish represent climate change really –they're this sort of weird change that might be threatening and maybe aren't, and maybe we can ignore it, or maybe we should do something about it... So, I suppose I wanted them to be almost like a benign tumour. And they're also a natural phenomenon which we should treat with respect. I suppose I wanted them to sit in a place between being friends and being a threat.

**Did you intend the book to be didactic, to shock and warn people about global warming?**

No, I hope it doesn't come across as such. I suppose subconsciously, there was a message I felt compelled to get across. I feel a bit cheesy saying it, but I did mostly write this book for me. I don't know if I would have done that if I hadn't had to write at least half of a novel for a submission for a writing course, but because I had to do that, there was no thinking about the audience I'm selling this to, or who the reader would be. I really wrote it for me.

For me, I just find the concept of climate change vast and quite unapproachable, and it makes me feel quite powerless; so, writing this novel was a way for me to turn a topic that's too big to hold in my head into something that I could explore. If other people feel that they get any of that out of it, that's great.

**Moving to the narrative and the characters, why did you choose to split your narrative into three perspectives across the globe? Was it important to you to highlight the different personal reactions that each of the characters goes through? And why did you focus on this personal level rather than a vast, global experience?**

I mean there's loads of reasons. I already had my setting of Cornwall and the couple that lived there, and when I was developing it into the novel, I added in the other two locations. There's a bit of self-indulgence in that I've spent time in the two other locations – Kuala Lumpur and New Zealand – and it was a really nice way for me to go back there on the page. I wanted it to be global because climate change isn't something that is just happening in Cornwall, so I suppose the other elements show that it's a global phenomenon that manifests itself in a local way.

I think one thing that I find really fascinating about humans and their environmental responses is whether we, on a daily basis as individuals, actually have the capacity to spend time worrying about really big topics which we can be a bit ineffectual towards. People who are trying to pay their rent or raise two small kids, do they really have the time to think about things like climate change? Or not think about them, but spend time worrying about it? That was why I wanted to focus on the individual responses; I wanted to see what happens when you introduce people to a setting where there's the external pressure, which was walking fish in this scenario, and how that affects the things that they've already got going on, such as cracks in relationships forming, and friends falling out, that sort of thing.

**Did the fact that you were writing during Covid have any impact on your work or the publication process?**

I sent the book to Fairlight, the publishers, at the start of 2021, but I'd written it pretty much entirely before Covid, and then we did the edits with Fairlight last year. I think they were quite keen to not make it too Covid-focused, because it felt a little too on the nose. I didn't have any luck getting this published pre-Covid and people have said that maybe it was just because it wasn't the right time for it to come out, and that the book actually makes more sense now.

It was quite bizarre that when I was doing the editing in 2021, I'd written phrases like, 'We've been advised to stay at home other than for essential business'. I actually think that if I had written it after Covid, I would have understood the characters' emotional responses better. I found it really hard to write at the time because I didn't know how they would react, and actually Covid was a good insight.

**Do you think people are writing about climate change enough? I often think there's not that many books, or at least there's not much fiction, about it. Maybe that's to do with people ignoring it, or being unable to speculate about it – what do you think?**

In general, I don't know whether publishers think climate change is a topic that people want to hear about. And I thought that when my novel came out; there's not any controversy in it, but it's a bit like that film, *Don't Look Up*, which just really annoyed some people because they were like, 'Actually I really don't want to look up'. So, I think there is always going to be a readership who don't have the appetite for that, who may think, 'Please don't tell me about it, I'm trying to ignore it'. But I think we've really gone a long way down the nature writing route, as there are so many nature books about climate change out at the moment.

**Have you read Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea*? Kathy's narrative reminded me a bit of her novel, there's a lot of parallels: it's about two married women, one of them is a biologist and goes on a deep-sea mission and comes back six months later semi-aquatic. It's quite subtle sci-fi, in the same way yours is. I think there's something that works well with that because you get that balance of normality and uncanniness. Are there any other books that inspired your writing?**

I haven't read that, but I will! A writer that I'm a big fan of is Barbara Kingsolver and, actually, she does have her book *Flight Behaviour* that's kind of climate focused. I think her writing is beautiful and I'm looking forward to reading her new book. She just sort of carries you along through her stories. Her book *The Lacuna* was the reason I wanted to go travelling in my mid 20s; she'd opened this novel with howler monkeys in Mexico screaming down from the trees. I also read *The Wall* by John Lanchester, but that's very much more dystopian, and I didn't want to write a dystopian novel.

**My last question is something we ask all the authors we speak to, which is, do you judge a book by its cover?**

Probably! I like books that are a bit different and that don't fit a traditional mould, so I look for covers that tell me that.

## Read the interview...

Explore this wonderful list of books recommended by Joanne Stubbs.

