

# Positivity in the apocalypse: can a climate fiction novel be uplifting?

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**Opinion - Children** Thursday, 2nd September 2021

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*My climate change novel shows that climate crisis is solvable, writes Lauren James*



As a former physicist, I write fiction in which science is always an important element. I've written a book about space travel inspired by special relativity (*The Loneliest Girl in the Universe*), a post-apocalyptic novel based on extinction and evolution (*The Quiet at the End of the World*), and multiple other stories with scientists at their heart.

From the beginning of my writing career, I've wanted to write about climate change - but I could never find a "way in". It's such a huge, complex topic that I didn't know how to tackle it in a way that felt uplifting. My writing is primarily character and story-focused. It's funny and romantic. That tone felt impossible to capture in a book about climate change, a topic that is discomfoting at best and soul-destroying/terrifying at worst.

And while it's a huge issue that should be treated seriously, the best stories are those that are enjoyable to experience. Those books reach the widest audience, having a better chance of spreading awareness of the climate crisis.

Eventually, I realised that I needed to write about characters who are working to slow climate change, rather than writing a story showing the terrors to come. I'm not interested in dark dystopias about a climate-ravaged planet. We know the dangers already. I want to read inspiring, optimistic stories that show a future where we've done things right.

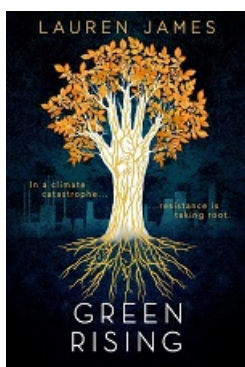
**"We should not be telling a generation of children that their future is unavoidably broken"**

The climate debate needs to move beyond fear at rising sea levels and pollution towards a more solutions-based view. I feel strongly that we should not be telling a generation of children that their future is



unavoidably broken. Change is possible. The climate crisis is an urgent, yet utterly solvable issue. Our fiction should reflect that.

In *Green Rising*, the characters are teenagers who can grow plants from their skin. They use their powers to rewild the planet, and stand up to the profit-hungry corporations that want climate change to continue (because the end of the world is going to be very profitable to certain people). It shows the positive changes we can make to the environment which will help store carbon in huge quantities, often through plants: kelp forests, peatlands, reforestation.



I expected the writing process to be depressing and mentally exhausting. But, in fact, immersing myself in the climate debate helped me to stop feeling anxious and helpless about our future. I could see all the things that needed to be done to fix the future.

I was doing something to help (like setting up the Climate Fiction Writers League, a group of over 100 authors writing about climate change). I was no longer a helpless observer.

I'm not great at reading scientific publications - it feels too much like homework. But I am good at wasting time on social media. So I tricked myself into researching climate change through online resources like the Heated newsletter, Lights On newsletter and Inkcap Journal.

My research clarified what I wanted to do with my writing. I was surprised by how many aspects of the climate crisis I didn't know about. Often, the science behind the issue has been obscured by politics or fossil fuel smear campaigns and ads. I decided to focus the story on some of those factors. I trust my readers to know the basics of climate change, but they might not necessarily know about the other discussions in progress.

A big thing which is going to become increasingly topical over the next decade is geoengineering - the idea that we can take measures to slow the temperature increase while continuing to burn fossil fuels, like spraying chemicals into the atmosphere. However, we have no idea what knock-on effects geoengineering might have on the planet.

I wanted to explore *Juliana V US* - an ongoing legal case where young plaintiffs argue that the US government has violated their constitutional rights by failing to act on climate change. I'm interested in the way youth activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion are treated by the press - as extremist terrorists and moral heroes standing up for the planet, often simultaneously.

I wanted to explore how billionaires are investing money in accessible space tourism, rather than fixing Earth. Issues like metal poisoning from coal ash, microplastics and the garbage patches in the ocean.

And I wanted to do it all in a positive way, in a book for teenagers. It was a lot to tackle.

I tried to look at both sides of debate, because the way that climate deniers talk about the topic can often be really helpful for creating narratives (because why not let them do the hard work of being creative with arguments?). Books about climate change need characters who are working against climate action, just like in real life.

Those people - whether the CEO of an oil company, a billionaire trying to launch a space mission, or a politician with investments in fossil fuels - won't see themselves as the "bad guys". They'd be really surprised if you accused them of being one of the key people destroying the planet. To them, they're community-builders, providing jobs and energy to keep the world running. I tried to write characters who felt that way.



The very human ways we interact with climate change, from fear to anger to ignorance to defiance, can be a great starting point for creating characters. I subscribed to a very niche geoengineering forum, where scientists debated what should happen in future. Eavesdropping on their highly technical bickering gave me a lot of insight into the people working at the forefront of this issue, on both sides of the equation. I kept track of memes and viral Twitter threads about climate change, trying to isolate the core ideas and concerns that people were sharing online.

Once I'd taught myself as much about the topic as possible - from the science, to the politics, to the economics - I started writing. I tried not to get bogged down in the science, even though I was overflowing with anger and frustration at the world. Story always has to come first. It's useful for me to be aware of all the context, but the reader needs only to know the things that are relevant for that particular scene or plot point. The rest can come later.

Ultimately, climate change is a political topic - it has to be. It's unavoidable. The end of the world is profitable. My characters are angry they're being told to reduce their climate footprint, that they're being made to feel guilty about their personal pollution when industry is responsible for the vast majority of emissions.

It feels impossible to comprehend the scale and immensity of the dangers of the climate crisis. But with every book we write, we get a little bit closer.

**Lauren James is the twice Carnegie-nominated British author of many young adult novels, including *The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker*, *The Loneliest Girl in the Universe*, and *The Quiet at the End of the World*. Her latest, *Green Rising*, is out today (Walker). She is also a creative writing lecturer, freelance editor, screenwriter, and the founder of the Climate Fiction Writers League.**

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