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► **To cite this version:**

Marion Moussier. Generic Hybridity and the Imagination of Environmental Risks in the Contemporary British Novel: Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009). New Voices in English Studies: ASYRAS 7th Conference, ASYRAS Association, Jun 2021, En ligne, Spain. hal-04391667

**HAL Id: hal-04391667**

**<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04391667v1>**

Submitted on 12 Feb 2024

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# **Generic Hybridity and the Imagination of Environmental Risks in the Contemporary British Novel: Liz Jensen's Climate Fiction *The Rapture* (2009)**

Marion Moussier

## **1) Climate Change and the Move Towards Hybridity**

### **A) The paradigm Shift from Binaries to Hybridity**

Since the coining of the term Anthropocene, the suggested name for the epoch where the environmental consequences of human activities have taken geological proportions, it has become crucial to reconsider traditional understandings of nature. Many scholars across disciplines agree that the definition of 'nature' as untouched by and separate from humans is outdated and deceptive (Plumwood 2002; Latour 2017). For Bruno Latour, nature is a composed, hybrid assemblage of the natural, the social, the cultural, the material and the discursive (Latour 2017). Anthropogenic climate change in particular deeply questions the conventional assumptions behind the term 'naturalness'. As the by-product of modernity and our collective agency, climate change does not fit with the dominant cultural understanding of nature for it blurs the traditional boundaries between the human and the non-human. It is the first natural, cultural, environmental, social crisis and one of the most striking instances of the complex fusion of society and nature. Therefore, geographer Mike Hulme calls it a boundary-dissolving, "mutating hybrid entity" (Hulme 2009, 268). For risk theorist Ulrich Beck, modernity means living in a 'world risk society' characterised by increasingly hybrid risks (Beck 1992). According to risk theorists (Giddens 1990 ; Beck 1992) hybrid risks such as climate change are embedded in multiple scales and levels, among which are the ecological, technological, social, local and planetary.

Consequently, critics argue that novels dealing with climate change, commonly referred to as 'climate fictions', should try to represent it as a hybrid, networked phenomenon. However, many scholars have judged the conventional novel form unfit to address climate change's massive scales and hybridity (Ghosh 2016; Trexler 2015) due to its restricted temporal and geographical focus.

## **B) Towards Generic Hybridity**

Many critics noted that, in order to face the hybridity of their topic, climate fictions witnessed major formal generic innovation, with a notable move towards generic hybridity (Marshall 2015 ; Watkins 2012 ; Preda 2019). Since the majority of these fictions are genre novels, they offer clear evidence of how climate change induces literary innovation by pushing and blurring conventional generic boundaries. Although generic hybridity is not strictly speaking a recent phenomenon, it is taking an increasingly prominent place in climate fiction, with novels that combine realist, gothic, thriller, and science fiction tropes, for instance. *The Rapture* is a particularly convincing instance of this generic hybridity and illustrates the way climate fictions are pushed to rely on tropes and conventions from various genres in order to turn abstract climate change data into an understandable narrative. As climate change is blurring the boundaries between science fiction and other literary genres, the generic labelling implemented by market structures seems rather restrictive. *The Rapture* was conspicuously labelled as a thriller by the editor. Likewise, newspapers reviews displayed on the book cover and on the first pages emphasise its generic identity, so that the reader is immediately told what type conventions to expect.<sup>1</sup> Literary genres are associated with protocols providing readers with established guidelines to find meaning in the text and read it from a particular perspective. As critic Eric Otto points out, when labelled and read as a thriller, *The Rapture* brings little education on environmental issues since most eco-thrillers merely exploit the environmental disaster to create a dramatic plot (Otto 2012). Although the editor and reviewers chose to emphasise this generic aspect of the novel, a less superficial appraisal of it reveals a more complex superposition of genres embedded in the text. To widen the scope of its possibilities and diversify its meanings, the novel blurs and expands its generic boundaries beyond mere thriller conventions.

After briefly introducing the novel, I will suggest some of the dominant generic forms that it borrows, adapts and combines in a way that mirrors the hybridity of its topic.

## **II) A Case Study of the Generic Hybridity in Climate fiction: Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009)**

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<sup>1</sup> See : Jensen, L. (2019) *The Rapture*. Doubleday.

*The Rapture* takes place in London, in a near future world where extreme weather has become the norm as a result of climate change. The psychiatrist protagonist meets teenage Bethany, a new patient, who has visions predicting natural disasters with uncanny accuracy. When Bethany predicts that a devastating tsunami will hit Northern Europe, the protagonist manages to attract the attention of a group of scientific experts. They eventually trace back the scientific veracity of this potential disaster in a natural gas mining rig that threatens to destabilise the ocean floor and, consequently, cause the massive release of methane in the atmosphere. However, the government dismisses their warnings as a hoax and the energy company responsible for the mining rig denies their evidence to protect its economic interests. In response, British citizens are divided between two radical groups who both advocate inaction, a radical environmental movement in favour of human extinction and a religious movement who welcomes climate change as divine retribution. Thus, we read that “clashing opinions and interpretations vie for dominance in an atmosphere of excitement tipping into mass panic” (71). While the nation is torn by a controversy over the significance of climate change, the prediction comes true and the novel ends with the apocalyptic flooding of London.

Not only does *The Rapture* illustrate some of the multiple actors behind climate change risks, but it also suggests that diverging interpretations of the issue lead to the impossibility of collective action. Indeed, experts in risk perception deplore that, since there is no universal way to speak about climate change, we are given a multitude of constructed conflicting discourses, which leads to confusion and controversy. Philip Smith suggests that taking the approach of narrative theory shows that the climate change controversy is made up of numerous layers of competing genres (Smith 2015). This is an interesting point to mention here, since a similar layering can be found in *The Rapture*, which combines tropes and conventions from various literary genres in a way that mirrors the discursive plurality surrounding its topic.

First of all, I would like to suggest that the novel takes a factual and informative approach to climate change, which significantly shapes the narrative style. In order to channel scientific data, *The Rapture* adopts a journalistic, educational and didactic tone that endows it with an

almost documentary aspect reminiscent of a certain sub-genre of realism, documentary realism.

### **A) Documentary Realism**

Many scholars have noted that generic hybridity in climate fictions was often rooted in traditional literary realism, as most of them attempt to depict plausible scenarios extrapolated from empirical reality. According to Auerbach, the realist novel genre can be defined as “the serious treatment of everyday reality” and “the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history” (Auerbach 2013, 491). Although the claims of realism are deeply challenged by climate change, some critics have emphasised the crucial role of its different subgenres, such as documentary realism, in addressing the question. According to Lars Sauerberg, as opposed to realism, documentary realism “explicitly or implicitly acknowledges borrowing ‘directly’ from reality, that is, from kinds of discourse intended for nonliterary purposes” (Sauerberg 1991, 3) and consists in “deliberately integrating the factual into the fictional” (Sauerberg 1991, 4) which, “in contrast to traditional realism, [it] relates to verifiable events and / or figures” (Sauerberg 1991, 6).

The plot of *The Rapture* is based on real-life risk assessments, one of which was issued in the 2012 San Diego meeting, warning against the dangers of hydraulic fracking, a method of natural gas extraction that consists in mining methane from the ocean floor. In order to approach the issue, *The Rapture* employs a journalistic style akin to documentary realism, incorporating existing facts and embedding non-literary discourses into the fictional text. For instance, as the protagonist investigates the cause of the upcoming tsunami her patient predicted, the first person narration is overtaken by a documentary, technical style which reflects the scientific text she is reading:

What can you mine underwater that's frozen cold? I make coffee and switch my laptop open. Within a few minutes I have encountered the word clathrate [...] A clathrate, also known as gas hydrate, is a thin coating of ice that has developed around a gas molecule, forming a shell. When I learn what is trapped inside these ice hexagons, I put my hand to my neck and note its heat. Methane [...] many times more powerful than carbon, I learn that there are millions of square kilometres of it locked

frozen on to the sea floor, all around the world, in the form of a crust [...] water pressure and cold temperature are what keep it down there. Without those, it would shoot to the surface in huge sheets [...] and burst into flames. It is so volatile that until recently, there was no serious discussion about harvesting it for energy purposes (188).

The lay reader is thus invited to learn facts alongside the protagonist as the scientific information is filtered through her mind. Since her level of knowledge on the topic is probably representative of that of the average British layperson, her learning process is therefore mirrored by that of the reader who discovers with her factual information grounded in existing scientific data. Two types of discourses merge as the protagonist's thoughts are replaced with scientific, technical non-fictional text extracted from our contemporary reality. The documentary aspect of the novel becomes even more salient as the protagonist and her team pinpoint the place of the future mining accident in a real-life location where risk assessments have previously been carried out on these matters, the Storegga Slide. This time, it is through a conversation with a climatologist that we find the facts embedded in the narration:

Have you heard of the Storegga Slide? ... It's a massive package of sand and mud off the continental shelf that stretches for hundred kilometers, from Norway to Greenland. It's the result of the biggest submarine upheaval we know of, eight thousand years ago. It generated a huge tsunami that washed over most of the British Isles. This rig is sited on the edge of the Storegga [...] A huge underwater collapse anywhere in the Storegga region will cause a tsunami that will devastate the entire area (254).

Furthermore, the climatologist's monologue turns into a risk assessment explaining the forming process of the tsunami and subsequent accelerated global warming in a style that is both accessible, technical and informative:

The sediment will destabilise and trigger a submarine avalanche. Possibly leading to the release of the entire methane reserve buried under the explored hydrate field. Thereby removing vast amounts of sediments above and adjacent to the methane. Creating further cascades across the whole area [...] followed by a huge tsunami. Which is likely to destabilise more sediment packages, leading to more massive landslides [...] Which in turn is highly likely to trigger a further cycle of landslides and more tsunamis [...] With more of the hydrate field being dislodged and releasing more methane. Methane is ten times more powerful than CO<sub>2</sub>. If the whole thing spreads and escalates, we get runaway global warming on a scale that's beyond anyone's worst nightmare... I used to be called the clathrate gun hypothesis (228).

*The Rapture* provides factual information based on contemporary scientific data, papers and risk assessments verifiable for the reader outside of the fictional text. The shift in narrative style blurs the conventional boundary between literary and non literary discourse, which both disrupts the illusion of fictionality of the novel and invites the reader to investigate the issue beyond the text. In doing so, the novel participates in raising awareness on the dangers of a practice regarded with optimism as a green alternative to fossil fuels. By choosing to focus on such a topical issue and relating it to accelerated global warming, *The Rapture* exemplifies the entanglement of economic, technological and natural factors behind the climate crisis, thereby emphasising its condition as a hybrid risk.

Thus, beyond its thriller elements, *The Rapture's* engagement with documentary realism allows it to channel under-publicised scientific knowledge on greenhouse gases and ocean floor destabilisation. Environmental issues are not merely exploited for narrative effect but for informative purposes with a didactic, educational function.

Furthermore, in order to extrapolate the consequences of this contemporary scientific data, *The Rapture* borrows from the generic conventions of a particularly popular genre within speculative environmental literature, Science Fiction.

## **B) Science Fiction**

In recent climate fiction criticism, many critics such as Ramón Saldívar have noted that speculative realism was the new popular hybrid form combining realism, metafiction, science

fiction and other genre forms such as the thriller (Saldívar in Marshall 2015). Realism and science fiction make for a compatible generic blend since both can, as Andrew Milner points out, present environmental issues as part of a wider crisis of society (Milner 2012). Some critics, such as Eric Otto, have argued that *The Rapture* was particularly representative of this generic blend, as it relies on conventional features of the science fiction genre to support its plot (Otto 2012).

According to Darko Suvin, Science-Fiction is characterised by three literary devices : cognitive estrangement, a novum and extrapolation (Suvin 1972). Cognitive estrangement consists in offering a mirror to ourselves and our society which is both alienating yet recognisable in order to provoke critical reflection. Estrangement is created by a plot organised around a novum which resonates with the reader's present historical context. According to Patrick Parrinder, the novum could be defined as the presence of a new element significant enough to change the whole surrounding of the world and distinguish it from our current reality (Parrinder 2000). In Suvin's words, the plot must be structured by “the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional ‘novum’ [...] validated by cognitive logic” (Suvin 1979, 63). This novum acts as what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a ‘chronotope’, meaning “a particular configuration of time and space that generates stories through which a society can examine itself” (Bakhtin 1982). Extrapolation consists in taking a fictional hypothesis from the author's empirical environment and depicting its consequences with scientific rigour in a realistic setting. All of these conventions can be identified in *The Rapture*.

While in many novels climate change is but a setting, it occupies a dominant role in *The Rapture* as an active force shaping the plot, the world and the whole life of the characters in a way that differentiates the novel from the reader's present. Therefore, Eric Otto suggests that it works as a novum (Otto 2012). The first opening lines of the novel instantly establish the presence of this novum, showing that surviving extreme weather has become part of the characters' ordinary life:

That summer [...] June seemed to last for a thousand years. The temperatures were merciless [...] The sky pressed down like a furnace lid, shrinking the subsoil, cracking concrete, killing shrubs from the roots up... asphyxiated, you longed for rain. It didn't come' (3). Similarly, we read later: 'The heat has become so ferocious



that venturing outside is an ordeal, something one must gear up to, armed with drinking water, sunglasses, cream, headgear. Items that were once optional accessories are now survival kit (124).

Moreover, the novel is pervaded with statements making clear that a shift that has occurred between the reader's reality and the fictional world:

Five years ago, the British season made some kind of sense. Not any more' (54), or again 'Just a few years ago, being able to swim outdoors in Britain in October would have been esteemed as outlandish as the arrival of seahorse colonies in the Thames or commercial papaya orchards in Kent (265).

This clear rupture with our time allows the possibility of cognitive estrangement: it is a mirror to our world both alienating yet recognisable enough for critical comparison. Furthermore, the novum rests on the extrapolation of current scientific predictions and social trends, which situates it in the plausible continuity of our present. Indeed, the protagonist describes Bethany as “a classic product of the last decade's ‘interesting times’, of its food shortages and mass riots and apocalyptically expanded Middle East war, and [...] of the Faith Wave that followed the global economic crash” (10). The novum is presented as a networked, hybrid phenomenon whose consequences span the globe in many levels in a world set in the logical continuity of our eco-political situation. Moreover, extrapolation invites the reader to take enough distance to consider our society from a new angle, that is to say, to see the present as history in the making. Therefore, Gary Wolfe states that extrapolation appeals to a cognitive function which consists in making links between the present and imaginary scenarios through rational means, a protocol readers expect to find in science fiction novels that will shape their understanding of the meaning of the text (Wolfe 1979). As Eric Otto suggested, reading *The Rapture* according to this protocol shifts the attention from its thriller elements to the multiple factors that lead to the final disaster (Otto 2012). The critical and didactic functions of these generic features encourage ethical reflection on our current society and invite us to consider its historical role in environmental degradation.

Last but not least, *The Rapture* unites its realist and science fictional features with one of the most ancient literary genres, apocalyptic literature. Fusing realism and apocalypticism may sound antithetical, yet, by combining these two traditions particularly efficiently, *The Rapture* expands the scope of realism to express a new understanding of nature and the human.

### **C) Apocalypticism**

The Apocalypse is one of the most ancient tropes related to the nature/man relationship. Despite their ambivalent status, secular apocalyptic narratives have been a very influential type of risk communication in environmentalism. While countless climate fictions draw on the apocalyptic tradition, *The Rapture* shows a deeper engagement with its generic features with regard to characterisation, chronological patterns, tropes, themes and function.

#### **Prophets, Omens, Apocalypse, Tribulation and Rapture**

First, in terms of characterisation, we find echoes of canonical apocalypse in the protagonist's patient, whose uncanny sensitivity to the earth turns her into an eco-prophet. After the electric shock treatment that gives her visions and knocks her unconscious, she compares herself to a biblical figure, saying "my body wakes. I come back from the dead [...] Like Lazarus. Or Jesus Christ. I can see things [...] Disasters" (26). Her biblical attributes are heightened throughout the novel as she constantly speaks with intertextual references to the Bible. For instance, we read that "and whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire", the literal ending for the Londoners engulfed by the burning waters (35). Furthermore, the novel follows the chronological pattern of the canonical apocalypse: the predictions are confirmed by omens which herald the apocalypse, followed by the Rapture and the Tribulation. In the novel, signs of environmental disruption such as apparently insignificant weather events or animal behaviour stand for omens of the final disaster. For example, we read, as the tsunami is approaching London, that "unusual behaviour of marine life [...] is further confirmation that an instability on the sea floor could soon become critical" (301). After the apocalypse, which is equated with the methane mining accident, comes a series of catastrophic events referred to as the Tribulation, symbolised by the resultant accelerated global warming, a "climatological point of no return" (144) after which human life on Earth is compromised. In canonical apocalyptic speculation, while mankind is left to

endure the Tribulation on Earth as punishment for its sins, the virtuous are raptured to heaven. The novel exploits this tradition for its plot, depicting vast numbers of Christian fundamentalist cheerfully awaiting the tsunami which they believe will lead them to a new transcendent reality. According to critic Helen Mundler, the novel is, although parodically, inscribed in a tradition of rapture literature, a specific literary genre through which rapture beliefs were conveyed for converting purposes (Mundler 2016). Rapture literature, just like canonical apocalyptic texts, served to assert and strengthen group identity in uncertain times. This theme is both exploited and subverted in *The Rapture*, as each community finds a different interpretation of climate change, which leads to the strengthening of their group identity yet to the fragmentation of national cohesion. Moreover, one could make a meta-textual parallel between this function of canonical apocalyptic literature and the didactic purpose of the novel in appealing to a sense of global belonging and shared vulnerability with an apocalyptic ending that transcends national boundaries.

### **Endings and New Beginnings**

Another feature of the conventional apocalypse that the novel adapts to the context of climate change is its original meaning. In its original meaning, the apocalypse is an unveiling: it reveals the end of a world and the birth of a new one. In the novel, the apocalyptic ending works as an unveiling on the destructive consequences of modernity, the vulnerability of society and the unpredictable agency of geological forces, as many realisations that characterise the Anthropocene. According to Connor Pitetti, apocalyptic events in a text provide structure and coherence to history, acting as transitional moments between epochs (Pitetti 2017). They give meaning to our experience of historical time by organising it around the idea of finiteness, as suggested by Frank Kermode (Kermode 2000). Apocalypticism in *The Rapture* conveys a sense of closure of our historical epoch and illustrates the general idea expressed throughout the novel that, “the Anthropocene era - the reign of man — is hurtling to a close” (88). The novel's closing lines are elegiac in tone and give no hope of continuation for humans. Earth is described as “a place where every day will be marked by the rude, clobbering battle for survival and the permanent endurance of regret, among the ruins of all we have created and invented” (314). Contemplating this future, Gabrielle adds: “I look out onto the birthday of a new world [...] A world not ours” (341). In addition, the traditional

meaning of the apocalypse as new beginning is shared by the scientific characters who stress its geological dimension, stating that “the collapse of Homo Sapiens as a dominant species means the dawn of a new era for a million other lifeforms” (246) and that “geologically speaking, it's just business as usual. One era comes to an abrupt end, the biosphere takes a severe knock, and a new era begins” (293). Adding that “the present universe has undergone innumerable deaths and rebirths” (256), the novel places the climate crisis within one of many planetary cycles at the geological level.

### **Sublime Natural Agency and Flood Myths**

Finally, another major feature of the canonical apocalypse that is echoed in the novel is the depiction of nature as an active force with its own destructive agency. Just like climate change, the apocalyptic narrative reveals the vulnerability of what we take for lasting and stable. By engaging with the apocalyptic narrative *The Rapture* symbolically expresses the contemporary realisation that the illusion of passivity and predictability of our environment as mere background for human history is gone. The final disaster is depicted in a tone of the apocalyptic sublime where all four natural elements are unleashed, with a description that blurs the distinction between canonical and secular apocalypse:

The fire spreads greedily across the landscape, as though devouring pure oil, yellow flames bursting from the crest of the liquid swell [...] With a deep throated bellow the wave gushes across the landscape, turning buildings and trees to matchwood in an upward rush of spume. [...] The scene shrinks to a brutal eloquence: a vast carpet of glass unrolling, incandescent, with powdery plumes of rubble shooting from its edges, part solid, part liquid, and part gas - a monstrous concoction of the elements from the pit of Earth's stomach (339).

The narrative choice to end the novel with a man-made apocalypse triggered by methane drilling weaves together reality and myth, plausible risk assessment and biblical visions. It is worth noting that this apocalyptic ending borrows from a mythical subtext with a particularly significant tradition in British fiction, flood narrative. The flooding of London, a recurring trope in British fiction since the 19th century is likely to resonate with the cultural and

affective background of the readers.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, since flooding is the greatest threat posed by climate change for British people, this narrative combines literary tradition with real life anxieties. This anxiety is explicitly expressed by the protagonist who, while gazing at the ocean, states : “it feeds my unease and reminds me [...] that an island is a prison” (288). Furthermore, in climate fictions, this plot device often has a didactic function. Indeed, experts in risk communication stress the importance of focusing on national and familiar places, so as to show people their own vulnerability and challenge the misconception that climate change cannot impact rich countries. Therefore, *The Rapture*’s use of this narrative template through its engagement with the apocalyptic genre endows the text with multiple layers of meaning beyond its thriller, realist and science fictional aspects.

The pervasive presence of biblical generic conventions, tropes, themes and intertextual references throughout the novel illustrates the way in which climate change discourse is often associated with this cultural template. Although the apocalyptic discourse tends to rest on a simple worldview that reinforces the nature/culture binary, *The Rapture* subverts this distinction by rooting its cause in a clear instance of a hybrid nature/culture disaster which resonates with Anthropocene concerns.

## **Conclusion**

As a conclusion, *The Rapture* exemplifies that, in order to deal with climate change, the novel form is evolving away from generic limitations, reflecting the need to express a multifaceted reality in more than a single perspective. Old myths resurface and traditional genre conventions are juxtaposed, leading to a plurality of embedded discourses that mirrors the hybridity of their topic and challenge unilateral worldviews. Beyond its thriller genre, *The Rapture*’s engagement with generic conventions from documentary realism, science fiction and the apocalyptic narrative endows it with rich layers of meaning and various didactic functions. This generic hybridity echoes the hybrid causes of the disaster pictured, part natural, part technological, part economic and cultural. Dramatising an accelerated global warming scenario triggered by methane drilling allows *The Rapture* to illustrate human geological agency within the limited scope of the novel form while stressing the entanglement of natural and technological risks behind climate change. In doing so, it

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<sup>2</sup> Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Jefferies's *After London* (1895) for instance.

challenges conventional binary definitions of the human and nonhuman and testifies to a new understanding of our relationship with the natural world.

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