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EUROPE

# Move Over Sci-Fi: 'Climate Fiction' Finds Way Into Classrooms

By REUTERS APRIL 10, 2015, 1:37 P.M. E.D.T.

LONDON (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Students at a Massachusetts college have just read "The Windup Girl", the tale of a dystopian future Bangkok where climate change has pushed up temperatures and sea levels, and viruses acquired from genetically modified food are killing people.

The book, by debut novelist Paolo Bacigalupi, is the product of a new class at Holyoke Community College on "climate fiction" or "cli-fi", a relatively new variant of science fiction.

Around the world, from the United States to Britain to India, cli-fi classes are creeping into timetables as academics try to bring a growing international concern into the classroom in a lively way that combines science and emotion.

"Cli-fi is capturing what is in the air now, the human impact on the environment, and I think literature is a great tool to raise awareness for this," said Elizabeth Trobaugh who teaches the class at Holyoke and earlier taught a class looking at real-life science in science fiction.

The class led by Trobaugh and fellow professor Steven Winters, called "Cli-Fi: Stories and Science of the Coming Climate Apocalypse", includes a two-hour science lab each week.

"We take some scientific topic introduced in the literature that can work as a lab and explore some of the themes discussed using an experiment," Winters said.

While reading "The Windup Girl", the class extracted DNA from strawberries to understand the genetic manipulation that occurs in the novel.

"They like learning science in the context of reading a story and it allows students

to thrive in science and English," Winters said.

### LOOKING OUT

At Temple University in Philadelphia, doctoral candidate Ted Howell, chose cli-fi as a topic for his fiction class "Cli-Fi: Science Fiction, Climate Change and Apocalypse".

The class examines novels such as H.G. Wells' "The Time Machine", a look at the future written in 1895, and Margaret Atwood's "The Year of the Flood", in which characters warn of a disaster that will dramatically reshape life on Earth.

Howell says he tries to stagger the reading between science fiction and climate fiction to see how both genres depict climate change.

"Our key questions will be these: How can something so gradual, so significant, and so mind-boggling as climate change be treated in literature? And can fiction help to alter our conceptions of the earth and our role in changing it?" he wrote in the class syllabus.

But it is not just a trend in the United States. In Britain the University of Cambridge's Institute of Continuing Education offered a cli-fi course at its summer school and the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur may launch a class this summer.

English professor T. Ravichandran is seeking approval to teach a course analyzing cli-fi novels and films to "help identify and understand the driving forces causing ecosystem degradation", according to his course proposal.

The class would look at popular cli-fi books including Harry Harrison's "Make Room! Make Room!" – which explores the consequences of unchecked population growth – and Jim Laughter's "Polar City Red", which looks at life in 2075 in Alaska.

Students would also watch movies such as "Interstellar", "Soylent Green", and "The Day After Tomorrow".

Ravichandran admits it isn't always the case that "cli-flicks accurately portray climate change".

"In fact, they get most of the facts wrong ... yet they serve a good purpose in presenting the facts in an exaggerated manner," he said.

"Cli-flicks give a much-needed shock treatment to those who refuse to act on what is so blatant .. There are already millions of scientific materials available on climate change yet they have not effectively reached a huge populace."

(Editing by Laurie Goering and Belinda Goldsmith)

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