



Recent Fiction by Joan Givner, Lydia Millet, and Amy Plum: Cli-fi Takes Off into a Dark Future

—Daniel Bratton

Givner, Joan. *The Hills Are Shadows*. Saskatoon: Thistledown, 2014. 264 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 9781927068915. Print.

Millet, Lydia. *Pills and Starships*. New York: Black

Sheep, 2014. 256 pp. US\$11.95 pb. ISBN 9781617752766. Print.

Plum, Amy. *After the End*. New York: Harper, 2014. 328 pp. US\$19.00 pb. ISBN 9780062225603. Print.

My journey into the world of middle-grade and young adult environmental fiction began with Canadian author Joan Givner. Back in the early 1980s, I came across Givner as a fellow—and earlier—biographer of Mazo de la Roche. Impressed by her feminist/psychoanalytical approach to life-writing, I continued to read her stories and essays as they appeared. Her turn to writing fiction for children, however—Groundwood Books published her three Ellen Fremedon mystery novels between 2005 and 2010—resulted in a bit of a reading hiatus for me.

Recently, I discovered that Givner has been at work on a fantasy trilogy marketed by her current publisher, Thistledown Press, for a middle-grade audience. Since this is the market for which Givner is now writing, it

seemed a good idea not to wait any longer and to have a look at this trajectory.

Upon receiving a copy of the second of Givner's Tennyson trilogy, *The Hills Are Shadows*, I was curious as to what has been going on in the field of juvenile fiction. To be honest, from almost the first page, I was rather stunned by Givner's literary concerns. As most readers already know, what has happened is that middle-grade and young adult novels have embraced a much darker vision of our world and our future.

Not only have young people been watching *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* as part of their vicarious rites of passage, but also they have been reading, if not the works upon which these television series have been based, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy and Suzanne

Collins's *The Hunger Games* books. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* and its sequels (likewise translated into film) and books such as Monica Hughes's *The Dream Catcher* and Zilpha Keatley Ryder's *Green Sky* trilogy have enjoyed tremendous popularity among teens; Lois Lowry's dystopian novel *The Giver*, also made recently into a movie, is another good example.

Since reading *The Hills Are Shadows*, however, I have come to appreciate that it is part of an even more particular field than middle-grade or young adult fantasy. In her recent article "It's Not Climate Change—It's Everything Change," Margaret Atwood credits blogger Dan Bloom with coining the term "cli-fi" to describe fiction about climate change, whether present or impending. Atwood refers as well to Piers Torday, whose article in *The Guardian* summarizes effectively this phenomenon:

Cli-fi as a new genre has taken off in a big way and is now being studied by universities all over the world.

But don't make the mistake of confusing it with sci-fi. If you think stories showing the effects of climate change are still only futuristic fantasies, think again.

For example, I would argue that the only truly fantastical element in my books is that the animals talk. To one boy. . . . Other cli-fi elements of my story that are often described as fantastical or dystopian, include the death of nearly all the animals in the

world. That's just me painting an extreme picture, right, to make a good story? . . . I wish.

Although middle-grade and young adult cli-fi includes a wide range of narratives, this review focuses on three recent entries, Givner's *The Hills Are Shadows*, Amy Plum's *After the End*, and Lydia Millet's *Pills and Starships*. Givner's trilogy will be rounded out soon, and Plum's second novel in her "duology," entitled *Until the Beginning*, appeared in May 2015. These three particular novels, however, all published in 2014, possess several correspondences worthy of investigation.

In *The Hills Are Shadows*, Givner takes four children—not unlike Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—and essentially dumps them in the middle of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Givner's protagonist, Anne Tennyson Miller, who goes by the nickname Tenn, has already been through harrowing coming-of-age experiences in the first volume of the trilogy, *A Girl Called Tennyson*, referred to in this second book as "a pocket of time [that] had opened and closed up again" (10). In this first novel of the trilogy, Lewis's wardrobe becomes a British Columbian ferry that transports Tenn to another realm, the Greensward. In this second book, Givner's protagonist returns from her first adventure to discover that "a catastrophe in another part of the world" has changed everything from the weather to the ocean at home. Dark forces have been loosed on the world, with "armies on the march everywhere" (25).

It is perhaps not coincidental that Tennyson's first name is Anne. In Givner's novel, it is as though Anne of Green Gables has stumbled into the twenty-first century, holding on to her belief in "kindred spirits" and in the transformative power of poetry—like L. M. Montgomery's Anne, Tenn even shares a love of the Victorians, in particular her namesake—only to find herself in the middle of an apocalypse.

Tenn and her friend Una from the Greensward hit the road in the company of two mysterious boys from a faraway country, and together, they flee the ever-rising and menacing tides that swallow up Tenn's home, school, and community. Some time ago, Tenn's parents and brother had headed to the distant mountains to escape from this catastrophe while she was occupied fighting the forces of evil in another time and place.

The uncanny thing about all this is that the setting is clearly Vancouver Island. Driftwood Bay, Tenn's deluged hometown, reflects aspects of Mill Bay, to which Givner retired after many years as a professor of English at the University of Regina. Salish Island, reached by ferry, suggests Salt Spring Island. This may be fantasy, but at the same time it is set frighteningly in our own Canadian landscape in a not-too-distant future. Givner seems to be issuing a literary wake-up call to her young readers, telling them that they had better prepare themselves for such eventualities.

And what a world Tenn and her three companions discover once they embark on their quest! The sea is

perpetually rising, a hungry beast "nipping at their heels like an angry dog" (150), a "great monster after its prey" (199). Tenn leaves behind all the associations that a middle-grade reader might hold dear—her home, with all its happy memories of family; her school, whose library, theatre, and classrooms will soon be submerged in water, full of the fearful monsters that have appeared in the harbour of Driftwood Bay; and her community, which has already been utterly abandoned.

Things do not improve once they are on the road. Not only are the children held up at gunpoint after taking shelter in an abandoned Winnebago, but also they are imprisoned at a farmstead by a group of hedonists. Readers who came of age in the 1960s may be attracted to the *carpe diem* philosophy espoused in songs such as "Let's Live for Today" or treated in the later film *Dead Poets Society*, but in Givner's world, not worrying about tomorrow means that one will likely drown in the ever-rising sea. There's no room for anything but thoughts of raw survival, as the children discover even when finally they escape to the mountains.

At the last farmhouse before this wilderness, a wise woman provides shelter and provisions; she even sends her devoted German shepherd, Kaya, to protect Wen, the youngest of the boys. There is scant comfort here either, however: Kaya is soon killed saving their lives, fending off a vicious bear, which retreats into the forest to die. Wen is so traumatized by the death of his beloved dog that he enters a state of physical decline that eventually will lead him to the brink of death.



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The children understand further the need for basic survival when, upon finally getting to the mountains after days of near starvation, they are taken prisoner (again) and brought to a place called Bamberfield. This military camp existed for a long time before the present catastrophe, housing a group of insane survivalists led by a cult figure, Bamberfield himself. Prisoners and hostages live four to five in cramped and foul cages, facing starvation.

The four captives are relatively lucky, finally being left on the mountainside without food or shelter. Fortunately, they are rescued by two compassionate scouts from another mountain settlement, Camp Eyrie, who lead Tenn to her family, along with many other former residents of Driftwood Bay, who have built a communal society. Her joy in being reunited with her parents and her brother is cut short at the end of the novel when Tenn realizes that she and Zumi, the older of the two boys from the mysterious mountain kingdom, will fill the place of the two scouts who have been captured and are likely being tortured in Bamberfield. Readers have the sinking feeling that the third book in the trilogy will not occur in a Pollyanna world either. We have already learned that Bamberfield and other barbaric mountain settlements have their eyes on Camp Eyrie's trees and water, and attempts at invasion are inevitable.

Givner's Camp Eyrie has certain aspects in common with the setting at the opening of Amy Plum's *After the End*, although in this case the apocalypse has been faked and the dystopia is bogus, a lie visited upon the generation of the protagonist, Juneau Newhaven, by surrounding adults. This group of children, brought up in a remote part of Alaska to believe that the Third World War wiped out nearly the whole human race in the spring of 1984, live in a secret commune established that year by fifteen countercultural

survivalists devoted to James Lovelock's Gaia theory. Led by scientists, they have ingested and then administered to their offspring Amrit, a drug originally intended to save endangered animals but subsequently discovered to stop aging and to prevent disease in humans. Although Juneau and her peers have been taught that the starbursts in one of their eyes come from being close to the Yara, the "current that moves through all things" (6), these starbursts are in fact a genetic mutation from the drug.

Still, Juneau possesses remarkable psychic powers, her ability to transform herself and make her body disappear testifying to why she has been chosen to become clan Sage. From the time of her mother's drowning when Juneau was only five, it has been understood that she will succeed her mentor, Whittier Graves, the mastermind behind Amrit, in this capacity. Whit now appears to have gone over to the dark side, however, betraying the potential of the drug to major pharmaceutical companies, which have led to the kidnapping of Juneau's entire clan and to the destruction of their commune.

Plum has created another on-the-road *Bildungsroman*, with Juneau's search for her clan taking her to Anchorage, Seattle, Salt Lake City, and Los Angeles, with many adventures on and off the highway along the way. A bit like a modern-day Jack Kerouac, Juneau has a great affinity with street people who are deemed mentally deviant and others who live

on the margins of society. They become her mediums. In Anchorage, which turns out to be only a three-day hike from the survivalist camp in which she has spent her seventeen years, she meets a bag lady whom she recognizes as a gift from the Yara, while in Seattle she encounters a street man known as Crazy Frankie, who tells her she must connect with a male whose "name will take [her] far" (74). When she meets a teenaged boy named Miles, Juneau knows she has found her man, although Frankie has warned her that Miles is not to be trusted: shortly after meeting him, she wisely zaps his cellphone. Crazy Frankie is dead on in his advice, for Miles has come to Seattle specifically to look for Juneau. His father, who heads Blackwell Pharmaceutical, has left out a notepad detailing his plan to track down Juneau in his quest to acquire this great elixir, for "[t]he girl is the key" (50).

Miles, a handsome rich kid and a smug city boy, had been headed for the Ivy League until he cheated on a final exam; he now needs to win back his father's approval by delivering Juneau to Los Angeles as a trophy. Not surprisingly, he considers his intended prey initially to be crazy, with her talk of the Yara, her psychic channelling through a crow named Poe, and her complete lack of knowledge about contemporary life. A quintessential Generation Y cynic, with a penchant for one-liners and glib mockery masking a good heart and emotional vulnerability, Miles is gradually won over by Juneau's magic powers and a growing awareness that he

has been completely mistaken in attributing her curious behaviour to paranoia and psychopathology.

What makes this much more than an adolescent love story, however, is Plum's open delight in magic and spirituality. Although Juneau, in tapping into Poe's memory, acknowledges that "this is not Narnia. No talking animals" (124–25), her belief in the Yara, where even rocks have memory, is anything but delusional. At the same time, like Givner's Tenn, Juneau is a strong, endearing, and remarkably mature young woman whose influence on Miles's spiritual development finally causes him to muse: "I want to be someone she respects. Admires. But in order for that to happen, I'm going to have to change. To become stronger. As strong as her" (287–88).

And while not, strictly speaking, a dystopian novel, *After the End* is definitely cli-fi, and here lies much of its interest. First of all, while Juneau's elders may have lied to her generation about the Third World War, when she reads up on what has happened since the early 1980s, the accuracy of their account of the conditions leading to this supposed cataclysm becomes apparent: "Whole species becoming extinct. Natural disasters becoming commonplace. Diseases running rampant . . . diseases that could be avoided in a healthy setting, following the Yara, treating nature as it should be treated and receiving the reward" (189).

The ecological theme is also prominent when Juneau, musing on the attempted suicide of Miles's

mother, does not understand how people in the outside world can acquiesce to the illnesses of their loved ones: "I remember asking my father how men could willfully destroy the earth and destroy themselves. How something as precious as life could be treated with such disdain." His answer: "They chose temporary ease over long-term stability" (188).

This is all part of the underlying current in the novel, the visionary power of Lovelock's ecological theories. Indeed, one of the two epigraphs in the book is from Lovelock's *The Ages of Gaia*: "Just as the shell is part of a snail, so the rock, the air, and the oceans are a part of Gaia. Gaia, as we shall see, has continuity with the past back to the origins of life, and extends into the future as long as life persists" (n. pag.). Plum pays her young audience the compliment of assuming that they will be able to apply this principle to what they are about to read.

The pharmaceutical industry rears its ugly head again in Millet's novel, set in the mid-twenty-first century, after an environmental "tipping point" (9). As the publisher's press release notes, "The 'pills' in *Pills and Starships* refers to the medication all people must take in order to survive the corrupted environment (keeping the population constantly medicated also allows "corporates" to rule over a docile and complacent population)." The seventeen-year-old protagonist, Nat, and her younger brother, a rebellious fourteen-year-old "hackerkid" named Sam, were born



The pharmaceutical industry rears its ugly head again in Millet's novel, set in the mid-twenty-first century



on the cusp of this tipping point, before which people's problems "weren't chaos pouring down, just regular-size problems you could work around" (14). The children of a mother in her eighties and a father in his nineties—the pharmaceutical industry has extended privileged people's longevity tremendously—Nat and Sam find chaos raining down as a result of climate change, for theirs is a world in which Maude Barlow's worst fears for water (and food) have come true, the migrations of displaced humans have become global, people have stopped having babies, and support and social systems have collapsed.

Now, heading into the latter part of the century, an aging, decrepit population in the First World is pitted against a young, overcrowded, and overwhelmed Third World, where whole populations have been "taken out by corp-army actions," including the deployment of gases and chemicals and the poisoning of water supplies (243). George Orwell's worst fears have also come true: forced indoors by extreme weather events and a proliferation of new diseases resulting from global warming, people communicate by facenews (also known as face) and receive a steady diet of "corpspeak."

This is an epistolary novel, the "starships" in the title referring to an imaginary person in a capsule in space to whom Nat is directing the entries in a journal she has been given to record a five-day "holiday" in a corporate Hawaiian resort, even though the occasion of this "vacation" is her parents' assisted suicide by pills: former environmental activists, they can no longer suffer a world transformed so violently. Nat's form of escape, in addition to collecting beautiful things, is to imagine life beyond earth—that is, until she and her brother flee from their controlled life to a subversive colony hidden in the mountains beyond the hotel complex.

They are led to this alternative world by a renegade resort masseur named Keahi, an Indigenous Hawaiian whose name means “flames”—an appropriate appellation in that he ignites for Nat and Sam the possibility of getting off the “pharma grid” and waking from the Orwellian nightmare into which they have been born. As Keahi reminds Nat, “No one’s promising we can win. But the point is we have to fight for it. Life is for *trying*” (129). After she and Sam (and, it turns out, her mother, although in an induced coma) have escaped to Keahi’s group, Nat muses: “This would be an unmanaged life. From now on, we had the others but we didn’t have our pills. . . . The best part of it all was the rawness of life without pharms—how exposed I was to things that might happen but, in exchange, how much more this felt like living” (281).

Interestingly, like Juneau in Plum’s novel, who describes her mother as having inherited long, straight hair from her Chinese mother and “wide-set full-moon eyes and high cheekbones from her American dad” (21), Nat and Sam are of mixed ancestry, partly of Seminole background. Millet’s novel suggests that the future, if there is one, rests in a diversified world, not one controlled by a dominant yet atrophied elite. Nat recalls tutorials on “faceschool” that supported American exceptionalism as part of a class entitled “One Great Nation,” being “mostly corpspeak” about “our human achievements” in “America the beautiful.” She records that “once, in our past, we thought that bigger was

better. As far as I can tell, that was our main idea. More, bigger, higher. . . . [T]hey talk like the system collapse was kind of a tragic accident, like a random asteroid strike” (15). This is, in fact, a very political young adult novel: Millet observes in an author statement that she works for a non-profit “that petitions and litigates over climate and related problems,” and there is no denying that *Pills* is a call for action—or at least for growing awareness—on the part of today’s young readers.

Symbolically, Millet’s plot climaxes with a Category 6 storm (the previous century did not have storms that went to that level) bearing down upon the Corporates’ death resort, utterly destroying it and wiping out most of its occupants. For now, at least in this part of Hawaii, the future belongs to the heterogeneous army of subversives who live close to the land and who reject the pharmaceutical industry, corporate authority, and a moribund way of life. Significantly, hope rests with the young. This rebel camp not only harbours endangered sea-turtles and other forms of wildlife, but also it is home to babies who are smuggled in from the poor parts of the world. It is the first time that Nat sees a newborn, having been too young to remember her younger brother in his infancy, at the time procreation became illegal in the New World Order.

This leads us into another common thread in these works of fiction. Not only does each feature a strong, sympathetic, and engaging female protagonist, but each of these young women discovers that she is essentially

on her own. Tenn, albeit with a friend, returns to an empty house, her parents and brother having fled to the mountains. Juneau's whole quest is centred on her sense of betrayal by her elders: "If the fundamental element of my life—who I am, why and where my clan lived as we did . . . are all lies, then what can I believe? I have no idea what is truth and what is fiction. I have been brainwashed my entire childhood" (70). Later, she comes to a similar conclusion: "My father deceived me. My very own mentor is out to get me. I am the only person I can trust. I have never felt so alone" (108). Nat's parents have consented to euthanasia by drugs, preoccupied with checking out of life rather than with the needs of their children. Indeed, in her author statement included in a press release for the book, Millet has acknowledged that, to her, the tragic backdrop of the novel is not so much the dystopian future as the dysfunction within Nat's family, where "well-meaning and even quasi-stable parents of teenagers agree to abandon them" (n. pag.).

It is difficult not to infer from their situations that these three young women in many ways represent their generation, the much-maligned Generation Y, left to navigate their existence in an increasingly chaotic and hostile world. To quote once again from Millet's author statement, "Without a long personal history on the earth, I speculated, young people might not be operating on the same assumptions as adults, and as such they might prove more resilient, more fluid in

their response to the new world than those who knew it before it was transformed" (n. pag.).

As well, there is a great deal of hope in another common theme, the transformative power of the imagination, particularly in the hands of wordsmiths. *The Hills Are Shadows* emphasizes the importance of stories, the fundamental human need for storytelling. Givner's central theme is that words are what keep us from despair. The imagination is what gives us strength when our illusions are drowned by cold reality, as cruel and relentless as the ever-rising tides in the story. Juneau realizes the importance of inferring the meaning of both verbal and non-verbal messages: "Oracles are never wrong—only our interpretations of their prophecies, I remember Whit saying" (124). Also, the epistolary nature of Nat's narrative drives home the human need for communication, even though her audience is imagined.

At the same time, although in many ways abandoned, Tenn, Juneau, and Nat all benefit from the wisdom of older women at crucial moments in their quests.

Tenn meets Ursula, the wise woman, who tells her that "the population is split in two—those who understand the danger and those who refuse to believe it." She also cautions the young people that there will be "scarcities of everything necessary to life" in the new world they are about to face, and that, in order not to fail in their journey, instead of pinning their hopes on

a dream, they should prepare for the worst: “Failure comes from trusting in dreams that fade and leave the dreamer weak and empty” (165).

In *After the End*, Tallie, a survivalist off the grid, harbours Juneau in a large, completely hidden log cabin built by her own hands, teaching her young “sister in sign reading” how to interpret her great-grandmother’s possum bones and reconnecting her to the Yara. When Juneau confides that perhaps all the “bells and whistles” she has been taught by Whit might in fact be getting in the way, Tallie advises:

Doubt everything, Juneau. Doubt everything at least once. What you decide to keep, you’ll be able to be confident of. And what you decide to ditch, you will replace with what your instincts tell you to be true. You’ve been living in a crystal tower that just had the foundations knocked out from under it. . . . But now it’s up to you to decide whether you’re going to wallow around in the wreckage or rebuild something sturdier. (224)

Later, Juneau remarks to Miles that she and Tallie have talked “about finding truth by taking only what you believe from your upbringing, leaving behind what doesn’t work for you. So that’s what I’m doing with the Yara” (255). This takes us back to the common theme in teen cli-fi of young people

needing to challenge the values with which they have been inculcated if they are going to survive in a transformed environment.

The wise woman in *Pills and Starships* is Kate, Keahi’s mother, although there is also Aviva, who guards the babies and dresses Nat’s wounds following a harrowing escape from the resort. It is Kate, however, who is behind Nat’s acceptance into the rebel camp, for upon discovering that Nat’s mother had heroically resisted the corporate authorities in her days as an eco-warrior, she and members of the rebel council determined that their colony “might be the best opportunity” for Nat (111). Moreover, it is Kate who, at the end of the novel, reunites Nat and Sam with their mother, telling them she will now have to be brought out of her medicated sleep so that the pathways of her brain that have been altered by pharmaceuticals can be reshaped, allowing the rediscovery of her true identity.

If words are tools of survival, stories may prove our salvation. Some adults may consider cli-fi for young readers too gloomy and frightening, yet in the current times, it is arguably writers’ responsibility to acknowledge such dire possibilities in their narratives; after all, teens know about zombie apocalypses already. One thing is for certain: if the unfettered imagination is humanity’s best hope for survival, Givner, Plum, and Millet present storytelling as a life preserver for coming generations struggling to stay afloat in rising seas.

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