



COLUMN: Tackling the climate crisis through storytelling

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“Failure of imagination,” according to Wikipedia, is a phrase indicating a circumstance wherein something undesirable, yet seemingly predictable, was not planned for.

Climate change fits that definition to a T. For decades, scientists have been warning of environmental degradation caused by our fossil fuel fed lifestyle. But we have failed to plan for damage mitigation, and we are now at a tipping point.

One of the reasons for our laggard behavior could be a literal failure of imagination; an inability to truly imagine what our own personal lives would be like after a climate disaster. That’s where films, TV shows and books can help, by telling stories that incorporate climate change, stimulating our imagination and ultimately impelling us to take action.

So far, however, fiction is reportedly not doing this very well.

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According to climate and storytelling nonprofit Good Energy, most TV and film scripts are ignoring the climate crisis. Good Energy recently analyzed more than 37,000 TV and movie scripts produced between 2016 and 2020 and found that only 2.8 percent of the scripts included any climate-related terms such as “global warming,” “sea-level rise” or “solar panels.” Even fewer (just 0.6 percent) explicitly mentioned the term “climate change.”

And many bestselling books are no different.

Authors and screenwriters face a dilemma: they want their works to address the important issues of our time, but they also want to entertain. Thankfully, the news media is expanding coverage of climate change (ex: the Boston Globe’s “Into the Red” coverage), but we also increasingly feel a need to escape from daily reality. And the last thing we want is to be preached to about a subject that stresses us out already.

So, Good Energy advocates for a realistic depiction of the climate crisis. Not all fiction needs to mimic disaster films like “The Day After Tomorrow.” References to heat waves, new energy policies or clean energy solutions can be worked in where they make sense, while allowing the story to go where it needs to in terms of characters and plot.

Two works of fiction born right here in Marblehead do just that: Marblehead resident and National Book Award-winning author Julia Glass’s most recent novel, “Vigil Harbor,” and Sustainable Marblehead founder John Livermore’s upcoming movie, “Tipped: The Point Beyond.”

On Jan. 26 at 7 p.m. at the Old Town House, Sustainable Marblehead will host a book talk with Julia Glass to discuss her work.

“Vigil Harbor” is, according to Penguin Random House, part of a growing branch of literature dubbed “Climate Fiction,” or “Cli-Fi,” which deals with the effects of climate change on human society.

As Amazon describes it, the book takes place “a decade from now, in the historic town of Vigil Harbor, where there is a rash of divorces among the yacht-club set. A marine biologist despairs at the state of the world, a spurned wife is bent on revenge, and the renowned architect Austin Kepner pursues a passion for building homes designed to withstand the escalating fury of relentless storms. Austin’s stepson, Brecht, has dropped out of college in New York and returned home after narrowly escaping one of the terrorist acts that, like hurricanes, have become increasingly common.”

Clearly fiction, but also, by Glass’s own admission, based on her home turf of Marblehead.

“Tipped: The Point Beyond” is also set in a small seaside New England town in the near future. Filming is set to take place in Marblehead. According to Livermore, the movie tells the story of three generations of a family living on the precipice of an irreversible climate tipping point and unfolds against the backdrop of world events, as the global climate is starting to spin out of control.

Livermore and his wife, Kelley, his partner on the film, aim to go beyond feeding the imagination of their film’s viewers. They want to motivate people to take meaningful action on the climate crisis. “Tipped: The Point Beyond” is the first step of the “Moviemment,” which, according to Livermore, will combine a visual entertainment experience with a collective action movement. The companion Empowerment website will ask each member of the audience to take three easy actions which, together, are designed to create an unstoppable wave of people-powered climate action.

These two works of fiction, and others like them, will hopefully help us picture why it’s necessary to take action to stop climate change now.

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