

**KAREN TAY**

EXEGESIS: Love in a Cold Climate

THESIS: Ice Flowers

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## Abstract

*Ice Flowers* is the draft of a post-apocalyptic dystopian novel which forms the thesis part of a Master of Creative Writing project. It is accompanied by the exegesis *Love in a Cold Climate*, which frames the creative work within the speculative fiction genre and in terms of literary style and thematic explorations. The novel *Ice Flowers* has as its backdrop a combination of human-caused and natural catastrophes, with the physical setting of the work acting as a reflection of the main characters' inner mental and emotional turmoil. It shifts between two narrative points of view, those of a young woman named Raina, who is the first-person narrator and her husband Toby, who narrates in the third person. The exegesis frames *Ice Flowers* in terms of the debates surrounding speculative fiction, specifically the argument that most authors who write under the genre are condemned to the "literary ghetto", the traditions of post-apocalyptic fiction and how *Ice Flowers* dealt with some of its limitations and constraints, and the use of language to construct and deconstruct worlds and states of mind.

## Love in a Cold Climate: An exegesis to *Ice Flowers*

If you knew what was going to happen, if you knew everything that was going to happen next – if you knew in advance the consequences of your own actions – you’d be doomed. You’d be ruined as God. You’d be a stone. You’d never eat or drink or laugh or get out of bed in the morning. You’d never love anyone, ever again. You’d never dare to. (p.517)

- Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

### Introduction

*Love in a Cold Climate* is an exegesis accompanying the thesis *Ice Flowers*, the draft of a post-apocalyptic novel which follows some of the strictures of the speculative fiction genre, but also looks into the idea of the redemptive power of language when it comes to constructing and deconstructing fictional worlds. This exegesis will frame my thesis within the existing canon of post-apocalyptic literature, genre conventions, in terms of literary style, and thematic explorations, with a special focus on the works of post-apocalyptic authors that fall within the field of literary speculative fiction. The concluding, autoethnographic component of the exegesis will discuss some of the approaches I used to stimulate the creative writing process, in particular investigative research into the areas of climate change, global warming and peak oil, experiential practices, and the more reflective kind of hermeneutic research that creative writing inevitably involves. The thesis, *Ice Flowers*, is primarily an attempt to answer one of mankind’s biggest conundrums: what happens to love, one of the most basic but powerful human emotions, when tested under situations of extreme duress?

In the case of the novel, the almost-total apocalypse was precipitated by a string of causal events including the release of a virulent genetically-engineered virus with an excessively high morbidity rate, global political instability, accelerated climate change and social and moral collapse. The underlying internal struggle for the characters in the novel is the question of *choice* – which also influences the occasionally fragmentary nature of the narrative. I wanted the novel to resemble a puzzle, where the pieces only come together when the reader steps back to view the picture as a whole. As Allan



Gibbard says in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (1990), “choices can be wise or foolish, and feelings can be apt or off the mark” (p. 349). Gibbard argues that to ponder how to live is, in effect, asking the question of what is a rational life – and what part, if any, morality should play in that life.

The genesis of *Ice Flowers* came from the idea of a love story between a couple, Raina and Toby (the protagonists of the novel), who live in a decaying post-apocalyptic world where society has experienced total collapse. Their struggles are as much internal as external as they are each unfulfilled and restless, yet unable to define the ambiguity of their feelings toward each other. One possible reading of the narrative is as a straightforward love story between a boy and a girl in a post-apocalyptic setting, which would be an accurate surface level exploration. But a different and perhaps deeper textual analysis of *Ice Flowers* is of the novel as a universal tale of human actions and consequences as it pertains not just to romantic relationships, but to humanity’s symbiotic connection with our natural environment, which in the narrative has been destroyed to the point of no return.

I employed a couple of key literary methodologies to frame the internal conflict experienced by the two main protagonists – notably, the use of non-linear timelines and the framing of the story within the device of an existing fairytale, Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen*, to carry the story forward and mirror Raina and Toby’s journey with that of Kai and Gerda’s, as well as the use of flashbacks, which became important portals to distinguish between the world of *Ice Flowers* before and after “the fall”.

This exegesis will look at some of the debate surrounding speculative fiction, the idea of “literary” post-apocalyptic fiction in works by authors such as Margaret Atwood, Cormac McCarthy, James Kunstler and David Mitchell, the use of language as a form of literary redemption and the examination of the notion of choice – that is, how much (if any) control people really have over their emotional lives. In particular, I will examine the traditions of post-apocalyptic fiction and its constraints and how this was overcome in *Ice Flowers*, the use of language to construct and deconstruct worlds in the novel and as a form of emotional escapism, and the “literary ghetto” of speculative fiction as a genre. Offering current news reports around the world as a parallel, I will also delve into the environmental backdrop of *Ice Flowers* and the foundation of the novel’s bleak dystopian canvas.

## Post-apocalyptic Fiction: Influences, Constraints and Subversions

Most post-apocalyptic fiction is concerned with the failure of society as we know it, whether through environmental catastrophe or other man-made disasters such as warfare, either biological or nuclear. As Claire P. Curtis suggests in *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: We'll Not Go Home Again* (2010), apocalyptic events are often understood to destroy functional government, food distribution, organised medical care and the infrastructure we rely on for a functioning society. Consequently,

Postapocalyptic fiction provides a window into that imaginative possibility. These novels focus on the very idea and possibility of starting over, with all of the potential hope and utopian imaginings starting over implies. (p.2)

Notably, Curtis remarks that post-apocalyptic fiction is “often grounded in the day to day”. I think the logical question that follows then is, what is the shape of the new day-to-day, what does society look like after the apocalypse? Assuming the world that has gone before is much like ours and rooted in consumerism, the post-apocalypse offers a reversal of that, by its very nature more concerned with subsistence-level survival. In *Ice Flowers*, readers can jump between the new world and old through a series of flashbacks, imbuing the text with a certain nostalgia for a past which is never clearly defined, much like the way human memory works. From hints embedded throughout the novel, I wanted to draw as many parallels as possible with the world we live in – something which forms an integral part of the post-apocalyptic fiction genre. As Curtis continues:

In speaking to our fears, postapocalyptic fiction can serve the didactic purpose of warning us away from particular behaviours. Postapocalyptic fiction, as with critical utopia and dystopia, criticizes where we are now and who we might wish to be. (p.15)

In *After The End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Berger, 1999), James Berger questions the meaning of “after the end”, which he calls an oxymoron. Using the film *Citizen Kane* as an example, Berger says that the character of Bernstein, the accountant, defines a post-apocalyptic story as:

...[T]he set of linked, cohering, shaped events – transpires within those boundaries, and outside of them, before and after, is chaos and insignificance. Everything after the end, in order to gain, or borrow meaning, must point back, lead back to that time; and everything before that beginning reconfigures itself into prologue and premonition. (p.xi)

By that logic, in *Ice Flowers*, the world of the past is the fulcrum on which rests the present post-apocalyptic universe. Without the chain of events leading to the

apocalypse, the details of which are deliberately kept brief and vague, the world and thus the story itself would not have been breathed into life.

However, viewing the post-apocalyptic world through the prism of the present brings with it what I think is the biggest constraint of the genre – if the future depends upon the past, then is it really possible to “start over” again? Curtis poses that most post-apocalyptic works that focus on the opportunity for utopian reimaginations of society have conveniently removed elements of humanity that could threaten the new social order. These so-called “troublemakers” include non-whites and “the positive description of female characters who accept patriarchal gender roles”, which she calls a kind of “secular cleansing” (p.7). Traditionally, Curtis says, the main character is typically a white male survivor who stumbles upon a weaker companion, either a young woman or a child, and starts moving towards rebuilding civilisation. “Inherent in all these accounts is the necessary Other: the groups of people who do not react so well to the cataclysm.”(p.8)

In *Ice Flowers*, I attempted to subvert the genre by having the main ‘I’ protagonist as young, capable and female - of indeterminate race – if she is to be given any ethnic moniker, it would be with that most trenchant of feminist expressions, “a woman of colour”. The novel is set at least 20 years after the apocalypse and the ethnicities of most of the characters are muddled - a choice which I think makes sense if we are to extrapolate from current trends for global multi-culturality. Though the idea of racial separatism and/or of blood purity is something that is not unfamiliar to human history (apartheid in South Africa and the Holocaust springs to mind) I deliberately chose not to include these issues in *Ice Flowers*, as I felt it would take away from the main narrative of the novel as the issue of race is such a loaded one and could conceivably take over the plot, turning it into a different story altogether.

Raina was written as a strong and capable young woman, able to make independent decisions – she makes the choice to accept the role of courtesan to a high-ranking general in the House of Flowers, a mutiny against typical genre constraints, though her ultimate fate as dictated by this decision is not so clear-cut. Raina is no hapless wide-eyed ingénue waiting for rescue by some capable male, and neither are the other secondary female characters in the novel – Lola and Madam, who are also capable of making decisions based on pure logic, choosing life in a post-apocalyptic brothel rather than the certainty of death in the wasteland, decisions which showcased their strength of character. Robin Anne Reid in *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy*

(2009) defines the “other” in these narratives as women – using the Simone de Beauvoir term the “second sex”. By using a woman as the main narrator and offering a strong female viewpoint, I wanted to overthrow the conventions of a genre that is still predominantly male. Reid uses author Jules Verne as an example, citing how his utopian and dystopian worlds are “either entirely without women or with women in strictly prescribed roles such as mother or sister or the middle-aged, useful and obedient wife” (2009, p.171). In *Ice Flowers*, these roles for women have largely been removed – and it is not until much later in the plot that we see how the issue of procreation has been resolved. Together the House of courtesans and Tartarus, a city of men, represent the philosophical concept of yin and yang, the one shrouded in the shadow of night and the other representing aggressive masculinity. As a more humane contrast, the compound is the union of these forces into a sort of egalitarian post-apocalyptic Eden, where the sexes live in harmony, perhaps bringing a sense of inevitability to its final fate.

Reid (2009) coins the phrase “shehero” to describe the evolution of comic book heroines.

Buck Rogers, Tarzan and Flash Gordon introduced Wilma Deering, Jane Porter and Dale Arden: three proto-sheheroes who, though often in captivity, could fight aliens, tame jungle animals and operate futuristic technology. Most subsequent sheheroes are permutations of this initial role of sidekick/love interest who defies traditional gender roles, often by co-opting male ones. (p. 182)

Charting the development of these “sheheroes” through history, Reid argues that it wasn’t until the 1970’s that serious scholarship on women in science fiction began appearing, influenced by authors like Ursula Le Guin and the creation of feminist fanzines and the first female science fiction convention in 1977. Reid notes in particular that sexuality is “typically depicted as the domain of the nubile young” and that “sexuality in older people, particularly older women, may be inscribed as repulsive, decadent or corrupt” (p.211).

I found this argument particularly interesting in relation to *Ice Flowers* because of the youth of most of my characters (with the exception of Madam and a few minor characters seen only in flashback). To a degree, all writers extract emotional truth from personal experiences, which are then translated to the story on the page, and I felt that making my characters older, given my own relative youth, would have lent a certain falsity to the text. Aside from that, the more practical question would be what construes

‘old age’ in a post-apocalyptic world rife with danger, diseases and depression. Without the conveniences of modern science and medicine and reverting back to herbal remedies and expired medication, few would make it to middle age as we know it today.

Ultimately, I don’t think of *Ice Flowers* as a traditional post-apocalyptic narrative. If anything, I think of it as a feminist rewriting of the classic boys’ own adventure story that most mainstream post-apocalyptic fiction becomes by virtue of it falling within the male-dominated sphere of science fiction. *Ice Flowers* interlaces the narrative points of view of its primary female and male protagonists, yet it is Raina who is at the narrative’s epicentre, who makes the principal choices, and whose actions lead to the novel’s climax and denouement.

### **The Sense of an Ending – Sensuality of Prose in *Ice Flowers***

A traditional narrative often has what is referred to as “the sense of an ending”, which is supposed to reveal the truth or meaning of a work of art, says Teresa Heffernan in *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Twentieth-Century Novel* (2008). Heffernan argues that closure is the point of revelation, and that the end allows us to look back on the work as a whole and make sense of it. Berger (1999) argues that every apocalyptic text presents the same paradox – “the end is never the end”.

The writer and reader must be both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world and then paradoxically ‘remembering’ the world as it was, as it is. The “time loop”, as in the Terminator movies, is a perfect apocalypse/post-apocalyptic plot line. (p.6)

In *Ice Flowers*, the memories of the characters form a sort of literary travel machine and through various fragmented flashbacks, a map of the past is formed. The “time loop” of the past and present is mirrored by the parallel timelines of the plot – the reader are given small clues throughout the work that Raina and Toby are operating from different ends of the continuum but that the two timelines will eventually converge, effectively closing the time loop.

The loopback of the ending to the beginning employs some of the techniques of reverse chronology, though the story is not told back-to-front in the traditional sense. By doing so, the reader can then gain a sense of closure but also perhaps feel on a more subconscious level the sensation of recursion, of the end holding up a mirror to the beginning. Quoting several critics including Kermode, de Man and Eliot, Jameson and Eagleton, Heffernan (2008) goes on to argue that “the world and the word are never

divisible” and that the reader can derive meaning from the interconnectedness between the two: “Language both constructs and reflects worlds” (p.20). If so, in a post-apocalyptic novel, the language needs to fulfil that crucial task of constructing the blank canvas upon which a new world order must be constructed.

In *Ice Flowers*, I felt that the characters must have some way of escaping the bleakness of their physical landscape. Raina, for example, as the heroine of the novel, must endure what is essentially hell on earth to learn valuable lessons about the nature of human love. Her only escape was into language – she was able to imagine her way out of the horrors visited upon her person, but it also became a way to give the reader a truly sensuous and sensory experience. Ashley Kunsu comments that scholarly debate over Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* has often focused on the issue of meaning vs meaninglessness. But, she suggests that *The Road* is actually a “linguistic journey toward redemption, a search for pattern and meaning in a seemingly meaningless world” (p.59). As humans, we construct narratives about ourselves, our lives and loves through language – which can evoke a wide range of feelings swinging from despair to joy, desperation to ecstasy. Thus, in *Ice Flowers*, the language shows the emotional state and well-being of the characters but something else – I also wanted the language to redeem and seduce for the reader. As Kunsu says, *The Road* “sings hymns of violence in prose often allusive and baroque to the breaking point, prose frequently likened to that of William Faulkner” (p. 58).

The language in *Ice Flowers* had to double as both a form of literary seduction and disenchantment – used to unsettle and unnerve at crucial points, because the novel is not an easy read, being a journey into some of the darkest parts of the human soul. One of the three main settings is a post-apocalyptic brothel – which the society we live in would view as “immoral” but given a world that has been pared back to basics, becomes a complicated power struggle between not just the genders, but also different strata of society. Due to the gender segregation between Tartarus and the House, the men come to rely on the girls for more than just sex. The General, the leader of Tartarus, is not looking for simple physical fulfilment – if that was the case, he would use a different girl every night. His character is also seeking human connection, someone whom he can bond with emotionally and intellectually, though in a very limited sense.

One of the foremost authors of literary post-apocalyptic fiction, Atwood, uses language to great effect to construct worlds in her novels *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986),

*Oryx & Crake* (Atwood, 2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (Atwood, 2009). In *Oryx & Crake* (2003), Atwood envisions an entire dystopian future with genetic engineering gone mad through the use of creative naming for gene-spliced creatures such as “pigoon”, “wolvogs” and “rakunks”. The kids play an online game called Kwiktime Osama, and society is divided into the “haves” and “have-nots”. The “haves” live in privileged, corporate-sponsored compounds with names such as OrganInc and HelthWyzer, surrounded by all the luxuries science can offer, while the “have-nots” live in the pleeblands, a sort of futuristic ghetto. As a nod to Atwood, in *Ice Flowers*, the place that Raina and Toby come from is also called “the compound” and is set up by a group of scientists hoping to rebuild civilisation.

Both Atwood and Mitchell take great care to future-proof the language of their characters in *Oryx & Crake* and *Cloud Atlas* respectively, taking imaginative leaps into the different rhythms of how characters might speak in the future. Because *Ice Flowers* is not set as far into the future as both those novels, the language used by the characters lie much closer to current English. The challenge I had was in how much to reveal, and what to hold back, particularly when the prose was supposed to reflect sensual pleasure, it was difficult in parts to decide when to drop the proverbial curtain. I hope that the reader does get “the sense of an ending” by the end of *Ice Flowers*, and that this is achieved by the bookending of the narrative with the event of the hanging, thus offering a mirror to close the loop.

### **Speculative Fiction: The Literary Ghetto**

All narratives are speculative in nature, yet not all stories can be classified as speculative fiction. Atwood, one of my greatest sources of inspiration for *Ice Flowers*, defines speculative fiction in “The Road to Ustopia” as fiction extrapolated from current events.

What I mean by ‘science fiction’ are those books that descend from HG Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*, which treats an invasion by tentacled Martians shot to earth in metal canisters – things that could not possibly happen – whereas, for me, ‘speculative fiction’ means plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such – things that could really happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books. (“The Road to Ustopia”, 2011)

*Ice Flowers* was based upon extensive scientific research – my methods of enquiry are discussed in another part of this exegesis, but a couple of key components based on real-world current events form the backbone of the novel’s universe.

The Arctic sea ice is at a record low (“Arctic Sea Ice Sets Record Low”, 2012) since the first measurements were taken in the 1970s – one of the most visible signs of the effects of manmade global warming. The article describes how

...the Arctic is warming at nearly twice the rate of the rest of the globe, largely due to feedback loops. In addition, recent research shows that the loss of sea ice cover may be contributing to extreme weather events throughout the Northern Hemisphere...partly responsible for major cold air outbreaks and paralysing snowstorms (“Arctic Sea Ice Sets Record Low”, 2012)

The prediction made by scientists is that the Arctic Ocean will be completely ice-free for at least part of the summer before 2050 – but the likelihood is that it will happen sooner. The effect of these weather extremes can be seen in *Ice Flowers*, such as during scenes when the men are stuck indoors at Tartarus while snow blizzards rage outside. Weather extremes would also affect agriculture, as plants need predictable seasons to grow – and without agriculture, humanity would find it difficult to scrounge enough food to survive, especially in a post-apocalyptic world where those skills would have been previously lost to urban drift and modernisation.

Thus, I see *Ice Flowers* as a kind of warning for the future, which arguably is one aspect of speculative fiction. Canavan and Wald, quoting Ursula Le Guin in *American Literature: Volume 83* (Canavan & Wald, 2011), says that Atwood refuses the science fiction label because “she doesn’t want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto”.

The 2009 version of the debate reached its apex in a proposed ‘International Science Fiction Reshelving Day’, slotted for Atwood’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday on November 18, on which fans of the science fiction and fantasy genres proposed moving canonical classics such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* out of the Literature section of bookstores into Science Fiction and Fantasy as an ‘act of protest’ against the implication that the mis-shelved genre books are good enough to have escaped the genre sections of the bookstore. (p. 237)

Atwood herself suggests a sort of literary truce or compromise by coining the term “ustopia”, a blend of utopia and dystopia, “the imagined perfect society and its opposite” (“The Road to Ustopia”, 2011). She argues that “ustopia” is a mapped location as well as a state of mind. If one agrees with that definition, then it could offer up a solution to the problem of the literary ghetto – in that if a piece of fiction makes you think beyond the text and grapple with universal human dilemmas, then it should be considered literary fiction – regardless of the genre.



Cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling (Sterling, n.d) devised the term “slipstream” to describe fiction which straddles mainstream literary fiction and science fiction. Writing in the late 1980s, Sterling argues that science fiction had become a victim of marketing, with “role playing tie-ins” and “sequels of sequels”. He uses the term “slipstream” to explain “...writing which has set its face against consensus reality. It is a fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so”. Sterling distinguishes slipstream from science or speculative fiction by its “cavalier attitude toward material which is the polar opposite of the hard-SF writer’s respect for scientific fact”, describing them instead as “novels of postmodern sensibility” (Sterling, n.d).

I would argue that *Ice Flowers* is probably more closely linked to the “novels of postmodern sensibility” defined by Sterling (n.d) rather than straightforward speculative fiction. It is not because as a writer, I’m afraid of being shoved into the “literary ghetto” of genre fiction – but more to prove the point that no matter what shape, setting or form the world we live in takes, human relationships and the mortal coil remains the same and thus it becomes difficult to constrain into any one genre.

Atwood bases much of what happened in *Oryx and Crake* on current events. The title of the book of which is taken from two extinct animals which exist in real life, but are extinct in the world of the novel: the oryx beisa, a gentle East African antelope and the red-necked crane, a secretive waterbird common to New Guinea and Australia. Many of the genetic experiments in the novel is based on real-life scientific findings. The most notable example is the cat’s purr, an important element of the Crakers, a race of genetically-engineered humans designed to live in perfect harmony with nature. The Crakers have the ability to use purring to heal superficial wounds, something which has also come up for debate in the scientific community. In fact, it is theorised that purr frequencies between 25-150 hertz “can improve bone density and promote healing” (Lyons, 2003). Then there is the glow-in-the-dark rabbit in *Oryx and Crake*. Its real-world counterpart is a glow-in-the-dark cat engineered by the Mayo Clinic, the result of an experiment to find the cure for HIV (“Glow-in-the-dark Cats, Jellyfish and Monkeys May Prevent AIDS”, 2011).

If we go further back to Atwood’s first SF novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, parallels can be drawn between the nearly 30-year-old work and the social and political climate in current day US, where attempts have been made by many Republican candidates over recent years (Sarah Palin, Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum and Paul Ryan, to name a few) to overturn *Roe v Wade* (“*Roe v Wade* Still Under Siege, 39 Years

Later”, 2012). While I hope that the brutally gendered world I’ve portrayed in *Ice Flowers* – where girls are bred like hot-house flowers to become instruments of men’s pleasure and are then retired to nurse the next crop – does not come to pass, I think this is where speculative fiction is most effective: as a portent of things to come which, one could argue, is an overly pessimistic view, though given the world we live in, conceivably not.

### **Good vs Evil: Can Humanity survive the Apocalypse?**

Suicide, cannibalism, rape, implied paedophilia – these are the cornerstones of one of the bleakest post-apocalyptic works of fiction in recent times, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006). Set in a future America under siege from a nuclear winter, the line between the good guys who are “carrying the fire” and the savages are very clearly demarcated by the main protagonists, a father and his young son – an innocent being born into a brutal post-apocalyptic world where humans chain each other to basements to harvest for meat. The fire referred to in *The Road* (2006) stands for humanity’s ability to choose between good and evil. Kunsu (2009) says of the novel, “even Chabon, who reads the main characters’ journey as essentially futile, concedes that we are rooting for them, pulling for them from the first – and so, we suspect, is the author” (p.117).

Though the characters in *Ice Flowers* are infinitely more flawed than the innocent son in *The Road* (to be fair, they have lived more decades as well), I hope that their flaws will make the readers “pull” for them in the end, too. In *Critical Dystopia Reconsidered* (Chang, 2011), Chang notes that “what is important about Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* is the fact that it has foreclosed the possibility of hope for a better future; there is virtually no utopian impulse embedded in the text”. Indeed, if comparing *Oryx and Crake* to Atwood’s earlier dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood, 1985), Atwood seems to have moved along the spectrum to a far more jaded view of the possible future in the ensuing couple of decades between the two novels,

At the end of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there is a note of hope that the sexist, chauvinistic Republic of Gilead has been replaced by a gentler, more civilised society. In *Oryx and Crake*, no such optimistic fate lies in wait for the characters. Chang (Chang, 2011) describes the Crakers as “a posthuman dream turned awry” because in trying to erase what Crake saw as all the vices of humanity – monogamy, sexual jealousy, carnivorousness – he also destroyed the essence of humanity itself. Without those

vices, the Crakers also do not have the capacity to love or the instinct to strive for a better future. They are not capable of violence, and thus, lack the drive to survive. As Chang notes, “with *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood has indeed offered a very bleak portrayal of mankind’s future”. (Chang, 2011)

James Kunstler’s *World Made By Hand* (2008), set in a little town called Union Grove in post-apocalyptic upstate New York, offers a vision that is only slightly less bleak than Atwood’s. Kunstler’s characters have reverted back to a sort of pre-modern society where women are once again responsible for domestic chores and men work the land and engage in acts of masculine violence against each other and women. It is a somewhat Puritanical society in many ways, though with less strict sexual mores,

For some time now, Jane Ann had been visiting me one night a week in a connubial way. Usually she came Thursday nights. It was an arrangement. She was my best friend’s wife. My wife was dead. No suitable single women were around. (p.16)

Still, the main character Robert Earle, at the end of the narrative, finds an attractive young widow with a child (proving her fertility) – and thus lives out the patriarchal end-of-the-world fantasy of starting over again in later life with a sweet young thing who will warm his bed and hearth – all out of biological duty, mind you.

This irritating rose-tinted view is propagated largely by male science-fiction authors like George R Stewart, who in *Earth Abides* (1949) posits the post-apocalyptic world as some sort of utopian harem where men can have their pick of nubile young ladies to procreate with in order to repopulate civilisation. In reality, if older women die off, then the chances of men surviving long enough to take on multiple young sister-wives is slim – unless one imagines a scenario where a fatal disease is attached only to the xx-chromosome, in which case there would be no females, youthful or otherwise, left to play house with.

Mitchell’s dystopian view of the future in *Cloud Atlas* (2004) is, in my opinion, much more believable. The two post-apocalyptic stories nested within the narrative, *An Orison of Sonmi-451* and *Sloosha’s Crossin’ an Ev’rythin’ After* paints two very different futures – one where technology has taken over to the extent that humanity has created fabricants or clones to take over the service industry and do all their dirty work, and beyond that, *Sloosha’s Crossin’* – where no technology at all has survived, and people have reverted back to a sort of shambling caveman-like existence.

Can humanity survive the apocalypse? Even after writing *Ice Flowers*, I am not entirely sure, and that mystery is I believe, part of the wonder and beauty, but also the danger of the fickle human heart.

### **The Creative Life: The Writing of *Ice Flowers***

“The post-apocalypse in fiction provides an occasion to go back to basics and to reveal what the writer considers to be truly of value.” (p. 8)

- *After The End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, James Berger

Notions of value are very much an individualistic choice and personal philosophy. This is the point at which the exegesis takes an autoethnographic turn and I introduce myself, albeit briefly. In writing *Ice Flowers*, I was very much influenced by global environmental, political and social issues, particularly news stories that were emerging from America. I did not want, however, to overtly foreground these in *Ice Flowers* in the actual narration because this would risk being overly expository or didactic. I wanted to stay faithful to my original vision of a post-apocalyptic love story between two broken people struggling to make the right decisions against the backdrop of a collapsing world, yet at the same time honour the research I did in some small way. In this section of the exegesis I discuss some expert-witness, experiential, and heuristic research that was undertaken during the period in which I worked on *Ice Flowers*. Of course, the above discussion of genre constraints and my literary influences in general also feeds into this process of hermeneutic inquiry underpinning the construction of narrative, and that has lead some higher degree scholars to argue that “the creative work is always already research”. (Bourke and Neilson, 2004)

In terms of expert-witness based research, one of the authorities I consulted was Dr Tim Stanton, a research professor and oceanologist at the Naval Postgraduate School in California. He inspired the brutal weather patterns in *Ice Flowers* – the harsh, despairing winters and the hot, droughty summers, proof that humanity had lost the battle for a stable future long before the actual apocalypse. Dr Stanton also provided me with invaluable insight into my understanding of the role of rising ocean temperatures as one of the key precursors to the final stages of global warming. He opined that climate change should be depoliticised and brought to the world’s attention as a global humanitarian issue, giving the dire warning that unless governments paid heed and started to make huge changes in policy and investment into scientific research for

alternative, affordable clean energy sources, humanity had at best 10 to 100 years before total environmental collapse. Another piece of more experientially-based, expert-witness informed research that I conducted was to attend a survival course in West Auckland with ex-Royal New Zealand Air Force physical training officer Stu Gilbert, who taught me how to find water, make fire and build a simple shelter from resources available on the land – experiences which all directly fed into the writing of *Ice Flowers*.

Atwood hypothesizes in *Negotiating With The Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2003) that

all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead (p.140)

In an interview with *Granta* magazine, author Zadie Smith theorises that women have an enormous advantage when it comes to the understanding of time and mortality.

I always think of the menopause: what a gift it is to women to have, in their own bodies, this piece of time-keeping which allows them to fully understand, in their own bodies, that death is coming. Men don't have that – you see so many men heading towards their deaths in utter shock and incomprehension because right until the final moments they thought they were going to be given some kind of reprieve. Or all those powerful men who make terrible fools of themselves in old age with girls a quarter of their age...they're not very good managers of time, men. (Hodgkinson, 2012)

If you were to link these seemingly disparate notions – that of timekeeping and mortality, and what is of value to the writer (i.e. in this instance the “me” who writes) – then I think what the writing of *Ice Flowers* has revealed to me is the importance of retaining some sense of optimism and hope for the future. After all, if one thinks of life as nothing more than a relentless march toward the grave, then suicide is the only viable option.

But the bigger philosophical question of “what is the meaning of it all” remains unanswered, and perhaps can never be sufficiently responded to by any one text. The title to this novel came to me during a research trip to Queenstown, which I undertook while writing the winter scenes of my then-untitled novel and wanted to immerse myself in the snow and cold. I stayed at a somewhat isolated lodge on the mountain, overlooking a part of the Shotover River, and would open up my veranda door every morning to be greeted by the sight of fresh white powder. One such

morning, as I sat there with bare feet making footprints in the snow, I noticed that the clumps of snow on top of the yellowing grass formed a kind of strangely beautiful pattern. And that was how I got the title *Ice Flowers*. It was only later that I realised the name must also have been subconsciously linked in my mind to the House of Flowers. The name of the House is based on the ancient Chinese euphemism for high-class brothels – “flower houses” – which have also been referenced to in the works of author Pearl S. Buck (Gao, 2000).

Humans can sometimes get so caught up in huge intellectual and philosophical debates about life that they can forget a crucial element of life, it is largely to be lived and not reflected upon. Though life can be messy, awful, dreadful and complicated – filled with pauses where one journeys through dark tunnels of misery and desolation, it is what happens in the quiet moments of beauty, triumph and joy that counts. That is the true meaning of flowers made of ice. There is a saying that the person who has one foot in the past and one in the future is pissing on the present – a valuable lesson not just for the characters in *Ice Flowers*, but all of us.

### POSTSCRIPT

One fine day, a purely predatory world shall consume itself. In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction. (p. 559)  
– *Cloud Atlas*, David Mitchell

A definitive conclusion to an exegetical exploration around a fictional novel performed as a higher degree thesis does not seem appropriate, if indeed it is possible – the reader must interpret the novel on their own terms so instead, a postscript seems to be the better choice. *Ice Flowers* is a first novel and writing it has been a journey into finding my own voice and a creative niche. Going back to the start of this exegesis, the existential question asked was: can love survive in the cold climate of the post-apocalyptic world? And if so, what hidden form or clandestine pathways will it have to take?

It is here that I will leave the narrative in the hands of the reader, for them to find their own answers within the text. As Mitchell, one of my great literary influences, mentions in *Cloud Atlas*, selfishness “uglifies” the soul in an individual but taken on a grand scale, it can destroy humanity. The research that I undertook on large-scale global environmental issues during the writing of *Ice Flowers* has led me to believe that the universe of the novel – one where unstable weather reigns, where agriculture is failing,

where peak oil has occurred, where the oceans have risen to sink coastlines – is indeed not far into the future.

As a species, we are staring down the barrel of a loaded gun, and it only takes the slightest pressure to pull the trigger. But still, I would like to conclude on a note of hope and with some kind of optimism. With that in mind, I'd like to return to the Atwood quote at the beginning of this exegesis.

It is precisely because we cannot predict everything that is going to happen in advance, cannot possibly know the consequences of our own actions, that we dare to do anything at all. Otherwise we would simply be paralysed by indecision as we run through every single permutation of every single ramification for every single possible course of action in any given situation. Perhaps what we need now is the right kind of leadership and commitment to pull our species back from the brink of extinction, without worrying about the ramifications that could have for the current economic or social order.

As Atwood mentioned, the nature of stone can never change, but ice is infinitely mutable. Ice is the philosopher's stone, holding within its hidden depths multiple forms of being – water, snow, frost, glaciers, hail, sleet, it can transmute and turn into the elixir of life. My hope for *Ice Flowers* is that readers will see it as ice, a living narrative that can grow and change with every reading.

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