

Illustrations by Alexis Jamet

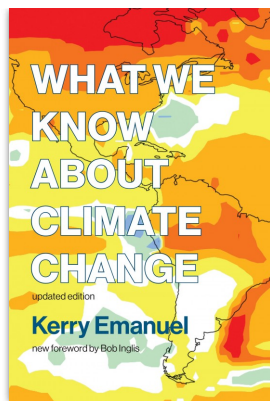
Selected by the editors of the Books and Climate Desks

April 19, 2020

Perhaps you prefer reading to escape reality, not confront it. But if the 50th anniversary of Earth Day has inspired you to decide that now's the time to pick up a book about climate change, we're here to help you find the right one for you.



I don't even know where to start.



What We Know About Climate Change

by Kerry Emanuel

nonfiction

An M.I.T. climatologist and a conservative, Emanuel sounds the alarm in a measured and scientifically sound way, making clear what we know and what we don't know. There is little panic in this slender book, but there is a lot of troubling information.

Emanuel specifically thought of his book as a way of offering ammunition to those trying to convince family members or friends who are skeptical or don't understand the science.

"Young adults who are disputing this problem with their own parents or an uncle or something — they can hand the book to them and say, 'Will you at least read this?'" Emanuel said in a 2013 interview with The Times. "One at a time, you might change minds."

I just want to understand how we got here.



The End of Nature

by Bill McKibben

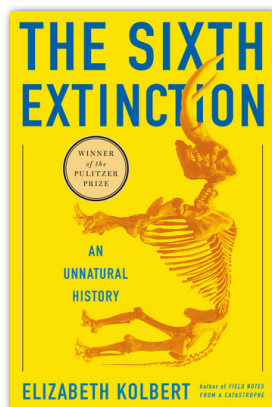
nonfiction

McKibben wrote this book in 1989 when global warming was still referred to with the more innocuous sounding phrase “the greenhouse effect.” It was an abstract worry in the future even for environmentalists, who were still reeling from the fight to save the ozone layer. For McKibben the crises were connected and spoke to a bigger problem: a disregard for nature and how humans were capable of harming it.

His book is a lament that nature has lost its independence. Even if everything could be done to stave off warming, McKibben writes, it would have to come from human ingenuity and depend on our intervention into natural processes. This is another sign that we have encroached too far — that nature itself is over, as McKibben puts it.

His only solution, one we certainly have not heeded in the decades since, is to take a step back, “to go no farther down the path we’ve been following.”

I’m ready for the hard truth. Don’t sugar-coat it.



The Sixth Extinction

by Elizabeth Kolbert

nonfiction

Reporting from the Andes, the Amazon rainforest, the Great Barrier Reef and her own backyard, Kolbert registers the impact of climate change on the life of our planet. What emerges is a picture of the sixth mass extinction, which threatens to eliminate 20 to 50 percent of all species on Earth within this century.

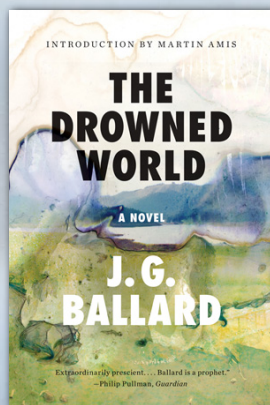
All the warnings are here, in Kolbert's elegant, accessible prose: sea levels rising, deforestation, the dispersion of disease-carrying species. But she also digs deep, offering an intellectual history of "extinction" and placing in context the catastrophes ahead by grappling with how life on Earth ended and was regenerated in the distant past.

"By disrupting these systems," Kolbert writes, "we're putting our own survival in danger."

You might also like: "Field Notes From a Catastrophe" by Elizabeth Kolbert

For the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, The New York Times is bringing you The Greenhouse, a five-part digital event series on climate change. Join us **on our next live video call** this Wednesday at 11:30 a.m. Eastern, where the Times Book Review editor Gal Beckerman and climate journalist Kendra Pierre-Louis will discuss this recommended list. They will also be joined by Amitav Ghosh, the author of "The Great Derangement."

Who saw this coming?



The Drowned World

by J.G. Ballard

fiction

With its vision of a London swamped by the rising Thames River and a warming planet leading to an urban landscape of lush tropical foliage, Ballard's dystopian fantasy — written in 1962 — laid the groundwork for generations of climate-change fiction to come. The book imagines the dawning of a new geologic age like the one environmentalists now call the Anthropocene, with resulting changes to a broad swath of plant and animal species, humans very much among them.

The plot involves a looter who refuses to leave London even as the water grows hotter, and an expedition of scientists trying to determine whether civilization might someday take root again. "But the main action is in the deeper reaches of the mind," Kingsley Amis wrote in a 1963 review of the book for *The Observer*, "the main merit the extraordinary imaginative power with which whatever inhabits these reaches is externalized in concrete form. The book blazes with images, striking in themselves and yet continuously meaningful."

You might also like: Jeff VanderMeer's "Southern Reach" trilogy

I'm fascinated by how people behave when things get bad.



The Wall

by John Lanchester

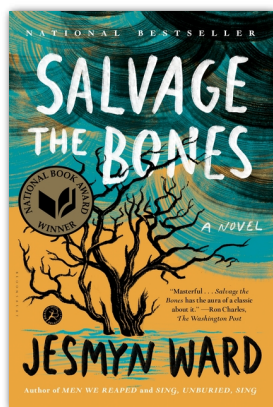
fiction

Lanchester's novel, published in 2019, elegantly and chillingly imagines how current political attitudes might play out as the repercussions of climate change grow more severe. With sea levels rising and extreme weather events increasingly common, an island

nation that closely resembles Britain has built a concrete wall around its entire perimeter to hold back both the water and the desperate tide of refugees from harder-hit areas.

The narrator, Joseph Kavanagh, has embarked on his mandatory two-year service as a “Defender,” guarding a section of the wall against outsiders even as he falls in love and mulls in restrained language about what the future will bring. That includes the threat of invasion, as a government official tells the Defenders at a pivotal moment: “The shelter blew away, the waters rose to the higher ground, the ground baked, the crops died, the ledge crumbled, the well dried up. The safety was an illusion. ... The Others are coming.”

Did we learn anything from Hurricane Katrina?



Salvage the Bones

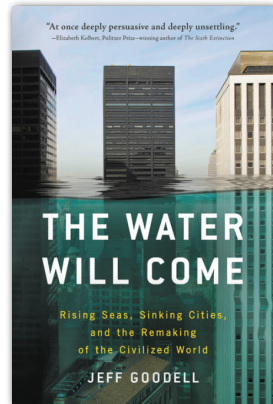
by Jesmyn Ward

fiction

Set in the days leading up to and immediately after Hurricane Katrina, this National Book Award-winning novel follows a black family in Mississippi as it prepares for, and recovers from, disaster. Esch, a pregnant teenager, is at the center of the story. A fierce, mythology-loving young woman, she's quick to connect the events of her own life with those of the Greeks.

For all the devastation at its core, this is an insistent hopeful book. As our reviewer put it: “Like every good myth, at its heart, the book is salvific; it wants to teach you how to wait out the storm and swim to safety.”

I live on the coast. How scared should I be?



The Water Will Come

by Jeff Goodell

nonfiction

“Sea-level rise is one of the central facts of our time, as real as gravity,” Goodell writes at the start of his book, published in 2017. “It will reshape our world in ways most of us can only dimly imagine.” This book takes us there, to a place where we can picture Miami completely underwater.

Goodell, who has written other books about climate change, here travels the world to cities like Lagos, Rotterdam and Venice that are at risk of vanishing if the rise in water levels follows current projections.

Maybe the most interesting element he explores is people’s inability to see the rising tide. Talking to an influential developer in Miami, Goodell asks if he’s worried about the future when the ocean takes over. He isn’t, he says. “Besides,” the developer adds, “by that time, I’ll be dead, so what does it matter?”

New York is the center of my universe.



New York 2140

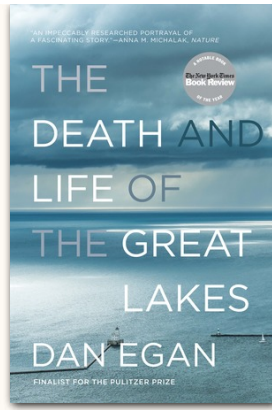
by Kim Stanley Robinson

fiction

It can be easy to forget that the island of Manhattan is just that, an island — but as rising waters encroach on coastal lands everywhere, life in the city has the potential to change dramatically. Robinson's novel, published in 2017, envisions a financial district with canals in place of streets and an uptown crowded with skyscrapers as the wealthy move to higher ground.

A thought experiment with an ensemble cast, the novel is less concerned with a conventional plot than with showing a slice of life across various classes, with particular attention to the workings of the economy and other social systems. Maybe the most remarkable feature of the story is how little it imagines life changing, despite the drastically revised landscape: The building super works on repairing submerged apartments, the police inspector looks for missing squatters and the hedge funder bets on mortgages that are (literally) under water.

What's happening to the Great Lakes?



The Death and Life of the Great Lakes

by Dan Egan

nonfiction

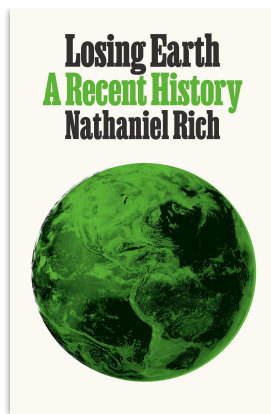
Egan tells the story of the Great Lakes as a series of radical ecological mutations. Ever since the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, and accelerating after the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, the lakes have experienced a parade of ever more villainous invaders, from the vampire-like lamprey to a small bug-eyed fish called the alewife. The attempts to defeat them only led to a series of unintended consequences that made matters worse.

This is a classic case of human meddling. Lake Erie in particular provides water to 11 million people and experiences more debilitating algal blooms than any of the other Great Lakes. It is suffering because of the presence of life-sucking mussels that have made their way around the lakes on the hulls of speedboats.

All this means, Egan writes, that we could soon experience “a natural and public health disaster unlike anything this country has experienced in modern times.”

You might also like: “The Ice at the End of the World” by Jon Gertner

I know it's all politics. So who's to blame?



Losing Earth

by Nathaniel Rich

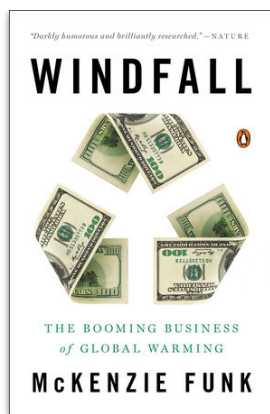
nonfiction

How did we get here, and more importantly, how long have we known it was going to get this bad? Rich's book comes to the shocking conclusion that, as he puts it, "nearly every conversation we have in 2019 about climate change was being held in 1979."

This is a history of what could have been. Rich frames his narrative through a central character, Rafe Pomerance, a Friends of the Earth lobbyist who first came across the issue of global warming in a 1979 E.P.A. report. The problem was met with immediate concern, even by conservatives. But then? The initial clarity and momentum was lost. Rich sees politicians and energy companies as bearing most of the blame.

The sad fact we're left with is that even though the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established in 1988, a hopeful convergence, more carbon has been emitted into the atmosphere since then than in all the preceding years' of history of civilization.

Someone must be profiting from climate change.
Where's the money?



Windfall

by McKenzie Funk

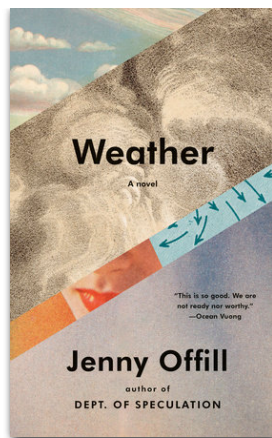
nonfiction

In this deeply reported 2014 book, Funk covers the globe to find the stories of those companies and countries that are responding to global warming in the most craven way imaginable. Rather than search for solutions, they are imagining the best means for making money off the changing contours of the planet.

Shell and Chevron are investing billions in oil fields in the Arctic, where retreating ice has created more exploitable land. China and speculators from Wall Street are setting up huge farms in African countries to take advantage of coming food shortages. Then there is the private security industry, which is gearing up to help prevent the movement of climate refugees with improved walls and surveillance equipment.

It's a sad tale, which Funk tries to mitigate by also profiling those companies pouring their energies into creative responses to these situations.

I'd like a novel that taps into my current, IRL dread.



Weather

by Jenny Offill

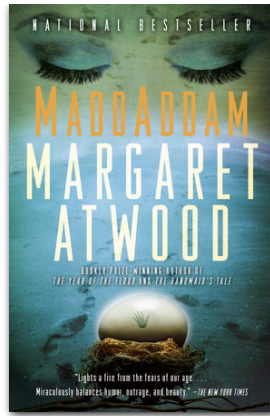
fiction

Lizzie, the narrator of Offill's latest novel, is a mother who's juggling fears on multiple levels: concern for her brother, a recovering addict; financial worries; and general apprehension about the direction of the world. This taxonomy might feel familiar to many readers: How can you reconcile your personal, daily inconveniences with the fear that the world as we know it is ending?

Our reviewer pointed out the book's narrative dilemma, asking: "What happens when the horror of climate change gets lodged so deep under our skin we can't escape it any longer? What happens when an author manages to translate this horror from an abstraction to a gripping tale of immediate particulars?"

Ultimately, this slim book is an "attempt to tell a story about climate change that carries the same visceral force as our private emotional dramas — that is, in fact, inseparable from them."

What are some future scenarios?



The Madaddam Trilogy

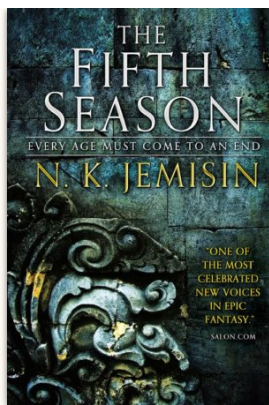
by Margaret Atwood

fiction

Atwood's terrifying, though often very funny, series imagines the societal, economic and biological fallout from an ecological disaster right down to glowing rabbits, labs with names like the RejoovenEsense Compound and pseudo-foods called ChickieNobs.

"Oryx and Crake," the first book, focuses on a character named Snowman, who makes his way as one of the last remaining humans in a post-pandemic world. "The Year of the Flood," the next novel, essentially retells that story from other perspectives, giving Snowman's backstory, set against the backdrop of the arrival of a disaster long feared by a religious cult. And as our reviewer wrote of "MaddAddam," the finale: It "lights a fire from the fears of our age, then douses it with hope for the planet's survival. But that survival may not include us."

I'm a dystopian. Prepare me for the worst.



The Fifth Season

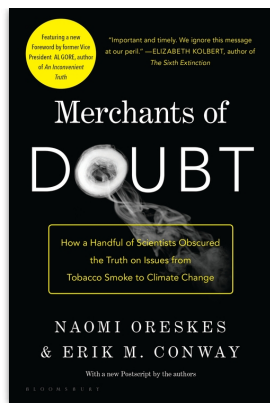
by N.K. Jemisin

fiction

This fantasy novel, the first in Jemisin's astonishing Broken Earth trilogy, imagines social collapse going hand-in-hand with geologic catastrophe on a planet as violent as the people who inhabit it. With the world's single supercontinent in the process of dividing, and climate change wrought by vast clouds of volcanic ash, the ruling elites work to subjugate a minority population that has some ability to influence planetary events.

In *The Times*, the science writer Annalee Newitz praised the book for exploring a science that is “oddly neglected in science fiction: the geophysics of exoplanets. Though we have plenty of stories about the physics of space travel and the biology of alien life, very few authors tackle the actual rocky, gassy, molten stuff that planets are made of. Jemisin does it brilliantly, crafting a tale that is both intensely moving and scientifically complex.” The book was the first by an African-American writer to win the Hugo Award for best novel, but not the last: Each of its sequels also won, making Jemisin the first author ever to win the Hugo for every book in a trilogy.

I need help arguing with my denialist uncle.



Merchants of Doubt

by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway

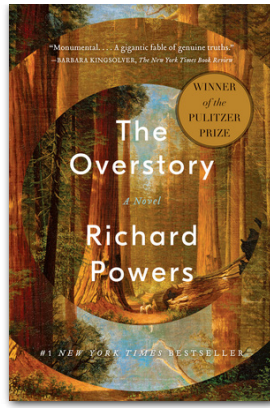
nonfiction

Two historians of science, Oreskes and Conway, take a step back to understand the ways that science itself can be co-opted. They begin by looking at how the tobacco industry got scientists to refute studies that linked smoking and lung cancer, and move on to the pernicious role that right-wing think tanks have played in undermining the scientific data about acid rain and the ozone layer.

The latest and perhaps most dangerous of these campaigns has been waged against climate change. Oreskes and Conway detail how little known but well-funded groups like the Heartland Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute have managed to sow doubt on behalf of industries that don't have an interest in confronting global warming.

The authors also have another warning: In the interest of balance, journalists have sometimes propagated ideas that are false and harmful, inadvertently helping to spread confusion.

I'm just an old-fashioned tree-hugger.



The Overstory

by Richard Powers

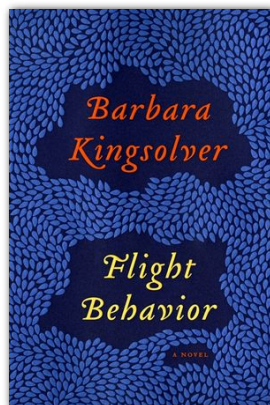
fiction

Trees are the real heroes of this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, a series of interconnected stories that follow characters from 1800s New York to the timber wars of the Pacific Northwest. Whether it's an immigrant family staking its new life on the American chestnut or an 11-year-old coder who has an unfortunate encounter with a Spanish oak, humans' connections to trees make up the emotional core of this book.

As our reviewer, Barbara Kingsolver, wrote of Powers: "Using the tools of story, he pulls readers heart-first into a perspective so much longer-lived and more subtly developed than the human purview that we gain glimpses of a vast, primordial sensibility, while watching our own kind get whittled down to size."

You might also like: "Barkskins" by Annie Proulx

What about the animals?



Flight Behavior

by Barbara Kingsolver

fiction

The sudden, unusual appearance of monarch butterflies rattles a rural Tennessee farm town, and a rift soon opens up in the community: Religious residents see the insect swarms as a sign from God, while others are drawn toward scientific explanations. Dellarobia, a young mother in an unhappy marriage, is one of the latter. When an entomologist comes to town to study the butterflies, he hires Dellarobia to work alongside him, offering her a chance to expand and improve her life.

Kingsolver, who was a scientist before she began writing novels, seamlessly weaves together the story of a biological aberration and a woman's coming of age.

I only have time for one canonical read.

*Parable of the Sower*

by Octavia Butler

fiction

It's 2024 California and the situation is dire: Water is scarce, communities are walled off and a pill called "pyro" gives immense pleasure to people who start fires. As one character puts it: "People have changed the climate of the world. Now they're waiting for the old days to come back."

This 1993 classic is composed of diary entries by an African-American teenager, Lauren, who's determined to make her way in this new world. The daughter of a Baptist minister, she develops her own belief system, Earthseed, and has "hyperempathy," which causes her to experience other people's pain and pleasure as if it were her own. Eventually, she's forced to flee her home and head north, accompanied by a group of survivors who rally behind her vision for a better world.

What will inspire the climate activist of the future?



Our House Is on Fire: Greta Thunberg's Call to Save the Planet

by Jeanette Winter

kids

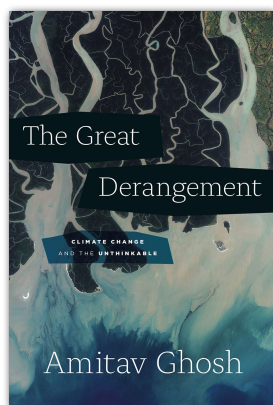
With charming artwork and straightforward language, this picture book, aimed at children aged 3 to 8, uses the inspiring life story of the young climate activist Greta Thunberg to help kids understand climate change — and to give them a sense of what they can do about it.

By following Thunberg's story — of a girl who at 15 decided she wasn't going to be complacent about the crises she kept hearing about — young people can see how powerful an individual can be when they decide to act.

Though it's aimed at informing and motivating, the book, like Thunberg, is also about urgency. Her dramatic words guide the tone: "I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic ... I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is."

You might also like: "Science Comics: Wild Weather: Storms, Meteorology, and Climate" by MK Reed and Jonathan Hill

What will our grandchildren think of us?



The Great Derangement

by Amitav Ghosh

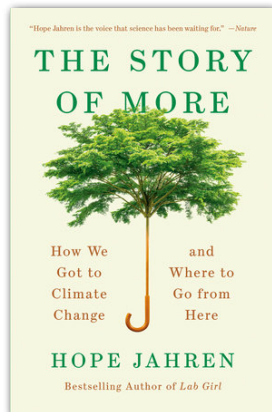
nonfiction

Ghosh gets right to the heart of the matter, imagining how our great grandchildren will view us and offering a disturbing vision: We are deranged. Our inability to deal with a catastrophe we can't see but know is coming indicates a failure of imagination.

The interesting contribution of this book, which comes out of a series of lectures Ghosh delivered at the University of Chicago in 2015, is his indictment of the culture-makers. It has become unfashionable to seem too concerned. To make climate change the theme or setting of a novel, Ghosh writes, is "to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence."

His bigger point is that we need a change of narrative. But to do this means that those who make our narratives need to lead the way, to bring their talents of storytelling to bear on what is, he writes, no less than an "existential danger."

What I can do right now?



The Story of More

by Hope Jahren

nonfiction

Jahren, the author of the acclaimed memoir “Lab Girl,” turns her attention to climate change and specifically the responsibility we each bear for contributing to the problem. It’s not a scolding book — Jahren approaches the problem from the perspective of her own personal life, her youth in the Midwest and her decision to move to Oslo in 2016 because of the state of scientific research in America.

She looks at the way our decisions about what we eat affect the planet as a whole. What concerns her is the divide between those who consume and waste more and those who live on much less. By looking at the global disparities, she comes to stark conclusions about who is the cause of the problem and what could be a solution.

As she puts it, “What was only a faint drumbeat as I began to research this book now rings in my head like a mantra: Use Less and Share More.”

You might also like: “Fashionopolis” by Dana Thomas

Written by Gal Beckerman, Gregory Cowles and Joumana Khatib. Designed and produced by Claire O’Neill.