

Curtis, Abi (2024) Contemporary Women's Fiction: Speculative Fiction and reproductive rights. Foundation, 146 (52.3).

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/8688/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://www.sf-foundation.org/sf-foundation-latest-issue>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repositories Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at
ray@yorks.ac.uk

Contemporary Women's Speculative Fiction and Reproductive Rights

Abi Curtis (York St John University)

In June 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned the 1973 Roe vs Wade verdict. At the time of writing, this effectively means that states can criminalise abortion, with the result that a woman, once she becomes pregnant, loses her bodily autonomy. There is no longer a constitutional right to abortion, and this has triggered many states to enforce stricter laws or near-total bans. Some states, such as Idaho, are also pushing for no prioritisation of the life of the mother over the unborn baby. As Mary Ziegler writes, 'Republican candidates like Matthew DePerno, the Republican running to be Michigan's attorney general, oppose all exceptions to abortion bans, and that includes to save a mother's life' (Ziegler 2022). Whilst a shocking reversal on a ruling which once secured an important right that prevented unnecessary deaths through unregulated abortion, it was hardly surprising in that the Trump administration had worked hard to erode those rights.

The 'heartbeat' rule deems life to begin at six weeks when a foetal 'heartbeat' can be detected. However, at that point, the heart itself does not exist in a formed state and many women do not know they are pregnant. In some US states, doctors will fear legal repercussions for terminating babies dead or dying in the womb, and their reluctance to do so may lead to maternal death. Babies with no chance of quality of life, either for medical or social reasons, will have to be brought to term. The groups most negatively affected are young, black, and poor women (Branigin and Chery 2022). In this context, the following article explores how dystopian and apocalyptic fictions focused on the maternal body can reframe the concept of 'speculative fiction' and demonstrate its political importance.

Although speculative fiction has been variously defined as a subgenre of science fiction, a distinct genre, or a super-category for all non-mimetic genres, I am particularly interested in the notion that it explores the possible, without necessarily relying heavily on technological or scientific details, but rather extrapolates from philosophical or political realities and expands their scope. Judith Merrill gives us a strong and productive definition here: 'a special sort of contemporary writing which makes use of fantastic or inventive elements to comment on, or speculate about, society, humanity, life, the cosmos, reality. And any other topic under the general heading of philosophy' (Merrill 1967: 3). But I would also propose that speculative fiction might be thought of as a *mode* of writing. This would be analogous to the way in which elegy is not a poetic form, but a poetic mode, in which certain kinds of dynamics are played out and explored. In the examples that follow, I argue that this is what takes place.

But I also argue that speculative fictions which explore women's reproductive rights have distinct approaches to speculation, and that they can, on being read closely, help us to further define the mode of speculative fiction.

There are two further elements to the definition of speculative fiction which I would like to propose. One comes from the etymology of the word 'speculate' itself, which can be traced back to the following roots: *speculari* ('to spy out' or 'to examine'); *specularis* ('like a mirror'); and *specula* ('watchtower'). All three of these imply looking at what already exists in reality, but either examining it closely or watching from a distance, as it comes towards us or moves away. I want to bear these dynamics in mind as a way of thinking about speculative fiction. The second set of definitions that are very useful relate to Darko Suvin's notion of the *novum* and his concept of 'cognitive estrangement'. Whilst Suvin's discussion could be considered dated, it remains a seminal set of conceptual frameworks for thinking about science fiction and speculative fiction. Taking his cue from the Russian Formalists, he proposes cognitive estrangement as vital to science fiction: '*SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessity and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment*' (Suvin 1979: 6-7; italics in original). Suvin also proposes the term *novum* or 'strange newness' as an element of any science fiction (4). This estrangement is at least partly about presenting the world in such a way that even elements of it that already exist seem unfamiliar and, thus, draws attention to them. For speculative fiction which explores reproduction, I would like to offer a different slant on these concepts. Maternal dystopias offer the reader a *bodily estrangement* as well as a cognitive one, where the reproductive body becomes a site of estrangement both to the characters and their readers. I would also offer the notion of the *verum* as a slightly different version of the *novum*, not 'new strangeness' but 'true strangeness' of the already known. This is a deliberately political proposal in that it pertains to disempowered groups and refers to a truth that is already obvious, but culturally neglected. Again, this relates very closely to the maternal dystopian texts I will discuss, and signals that they will not contain strong elements of unknown or new science or any great detail in terms of unrealistic world building.

The following speculative texts explore in various ways the implications this loss of bodily autonomy has for its female protagonists. There is, I will argue, a pattern to the ways in which the maternal experience is described in speculative fictions, and which reflects the disembodied and disempowered relationship a hitherto relatively autonomous woman in a democratic society feels once she becomes pregnant. In some examples, such as Sophie Mackintosh's *Blue Ticket* (2020) and Leni Zumas's *The Red Clocks* (2018), the fiction posits an

entire cultural structure borne from the radical reduction of reproductive rights. In others, such as Naomi Booth's *Sealed* and Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (both 2017), the maternal experience is set amid a failing infrastructure which less directly reflects our current predicament, but nevertheless is amplified by the maternal experience itself, which is highly ambivalent, at times threatening and linked to a precarious, uncanny change in the environment.

Near Future Reproductive Dystopias

Leni Zumas's *The Red Clocks* follows the interrelated narratives of four characters in a near-future US where abortion has been outlawed and strict laws have been put in place to prevent most forms of artificial insemination. Ro is a teacher and writer who longs for a baby and is attempting to get pregnant alone. Her chances are low, as regular IVF is unavailable to her. One of her students, Mattie, becomes pregnant and is seeking an illegal abortion. Ro's best friend is a mother of two with an ambivalent attitude towards her children: she both adores them and feels oppressed by them, and her marriage is failing. The fourth character, Gin, is a nurturing presence who is portrayed as a loner on the edge of her community. Each of the narrators has a distinctive voice, the language changing deftly to reflect their personalities. The story unfolds as a terrifying set of portraits of women robbed of their bodily autonomy and right to choose. Despite the increasing familiarity of this alternate world since June 2022, the fictional fertility and abortion laws known as the 'Personhood Amendment' have created a 'Pink Wall', the border of the US and Canada where women seeking abortions desperately try to cross in an atmosphere of secrecy and fear.

Whilst Zumas's book can be read as prophetic in one sense, it also extrapolates from oppressive value systems already inherent in politics and culture, weaving its narrative from a highly plausible 'what if' scenario. Here is its *verum*. If we think about one definition of 'speculative' as being its etymological root, that is to 'watch, examine, observe from a look-out or watchtower', we might read Zumas's fiction as observing the trends in politics and dramatizing a possible future society based on those trends. As Naomi Alderman writes in her review of the novel: 'The possibility that America might return to those repressive days has been rising like a whiff of nightmare, the stench growing stronger and stronger' (Alderman 2018). As it turns out, the novel is less speculative and more predictive, so that we might think, in more general terms, about where that boundary lies. Where does a fiction pick up on possible futures or outcomes and explore the consequences in an apparently realistic or mimetic style, and where does one speculate in a more imaginative way? In this case, we can see this novel as exploring one possible or even likely set of scenarios, 'watching' what is already present in some form, and showing us the narratives that might

engender. If we focus for example on Mattie, she now realistically represents any teenager in one of the states that since June 2022 has outlawed abortion, and her narrative voice explores the ways in which her bodily autonomy is now compromised. Zumas uses a close third-person narrative perspective for each of her characters, giving the reader an insight into their thoughts, but also allowing for the larger political and cultural picture:

Last year one of the seniors threw herself down the gym stairs, but even after she broke a rib she was still pregnant, and Ro/Miss said in class she hoped they understood who was to blame for this rib: the monsters in Congress who passed the Personhood Amendment and the walking lobotomies on the supreme court who reversed *Roe v. Wade*. (Zumas 2018: 49)

When Mattie attempts to cross the border for an abortion and is sent back, the narrative voice shows us her conflicted thoughts. Mattie is an adopted child, and this feeds into her reflections on her choices as well as the opportunities, as a bright student, that she will miss if she has a baby:

Is the failure of this trip a sign? She has tried twice now. Maybe she should just stay pregnant. Skip the Math Academy and push it out and give it to some couple with gray hair and good hearts [...] Finish high school online [...] When the daughter tries to picture herself as a mother, she sees the wall of trees by the soccer field, swaying and faceless.

She doesn't want to skip Math Academy...

Or to push it out.

She doesn't want to wonder; and she would.

The kid too – *why wasn't I kept?*

Was his mother too young? Too old? Too hot? Too cold?

She doesn't want him wondering or herself wondering.

Are you mine?

And she doesn't want to worry she'll be found.

Selfish.

But she has a self. Why not use it? (247)

What is fascinating about this passage in particular, where Mattie's crisis comes to a head, is the tension between autonomy and powerlessness. Mattie weighs up her options and, as an adoptee herself, recognises the complexity of giving up a baby. The poetic line that shows Mattie picturing not herself but a 'faceless' 'wall of trees' is a telling moment in the language of this passage. The lack of bodily autonomy Mattie now experiences as a pregnant woman renders her 'faceless', erases her very identity as a student with prospects, and as a person, reduces her to an anonymous part of the landscape. A perfect example of what

we might term 'bodily estrangement'. But the text, and Mattie's point of view, ultimately resists this: 'But she has a self. Why not use it?'

Her teacher, Ro, we have learned, is desperate for a baby of her own and, with no partner and limited options, is unlikely to have one. Ro, and the text, entertain the 'pro-life' fantasy that Mattie should have her baby and allow Ro to adopt it. A fantasy that is part of the justification for the overturning of abortion rights. But the narrative ultimately chooses a less exploitative resolution. Ro helps Mattie obtain an abortion and supports her, ultimately championing the political argument that abortion is about an individual's choice: she 'would be asking something of her that she doesn't believe should be asked of anyone. Deepest convictions, trampled' (301). The personal and the political are one and the same. Mattie's right to not have her baby is equal to Ro's right to have a baby alone, and these two intimate narratives dramatize the very personal pain that the abortion law causes.

Several other characters play out the speculative elements of this novel, in that their lives are limited or adversely affected by their consequences. Mattie's schoolfriend, Yasmine, at the periphery of the story and referred to in her absence, performed a home abortion, almost leading to her death and causing her to be permanently infertile. This figure amplifies Mattie's own fear of her pregnancy and its consequences. Gin, the outsider who provides natural remedies and safe abortions for the community's women, is arrested. She turns out to be, in an elegant twist, Mattie's birth mother, having chosen sixteen years previously to give her up for adoption. This is only revealed to the reader but models an alternative route that Mattie does not take, and so we see the issue of adoption from all sides: birth mother, potential adoptive parent, and adopted child.

Descriptions of Gin and her worldview contrast with the other characters, often evoking the natural world of animals and plants: 'trees are not nothing. Nor are cats, goats, chickens, owls, foxes, bobcats, black-tailed deer, long-eared bats, red-tailed hawks, dark-eyed juncos [...] and souls fled from their mortal casings' (15). After Mattie has her abortion, and after we have learned Mattie is Gin's birth-daughter, this animal imagery recurs: 'The heart of a Canada goose weighs seven ounces. Of a caribou, seven pounds. The daughter's own heart weighs nothing. Not tonight, at least – no blood in it' (320). Zumas's careful choice of language not only relates Mattie directly to Gin, but also suggests that abortion is as 'natural' a choice or process as the decision to give birth.

Jia Tolentino, in her fascinating article 'Is Abortion Sacred?' (2022), argues that, on the one hand, the catastrophic and uncontrollable effects of climate change on the natural world are partly responsible for the elevation of the womb as a natural space that can, on the other hand, be brought under control. She also explores traditions and cultural histories that understand abortion as

a sacred choice, rather than one which is anti-Christian or anti-religion. She writes: 'There is a loss, I think, entailed in abortion – as there is in miscarriage, whether it occurs at eight or twelve or twenty-nine weeks. I locate this loss in the irreducible complexity of life itself, in the terrible violence and magnificence of reproduction, in the death that shimmered at the edges of my consciousness in the shattering moment that my daughter was born' (Tolentino 2022). *The Red Clocks* also explores this notion that neither abortion nor birth is a morally superior choice, that both are just as shatteringly complex.

As a speculative text, *The Red Clocks* 'watches' the rising political possibility of Roe vs Wade being overturned, and it turns out to have done so with some accuracy. But it is also about personal, individual stories that come as a consequence of that ruling, and as such plays out these narratives in all of their complexity. The reproductive woman is figured here as part of an oppressed but emergent group, and the story demonstrates the consequences of current political thinking around the female body. However, if this book serves as a kind of warning, then so far, its warning has failed.

Maternal Dystopias and the Uncanny Reproductive Body

Sophie Mackintosh's *Blue Ticket* takes a more overtly fantastical approach to the issue of reproductive rights and is a direct successor to Margaret Atwood's classic *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). *Blue Ticket* is a far stranger book than *The Red Clocks*, and its narrative world, whilst still written in a realist mode, feels further from current reality. However, it dramatizes similar political oppressions through its dystopian framework and use of poetic, uncanny language to describe the pregnant body. There are examples throughout of an extreme bodily estrangement. Mackintosh chooses a first-person narrator, in contrast to the multiple focalised third-person viewpoints employed by Zumas. This intensifies the strangeness of the scenario and emphasises the limited perspective of Calla, the protagonist. In this novel there is much that Calla does not know, in particular how power is organised in this society. The premise of *Blue Ticket's* parallel reality is that all women, once they first menstruate, are given a ticket via a lottery system. A white ticket means you are to have children. A blue ticket means you are not allowed to have children but are free to go off into society, work, and use your leisure time as you wish. Those awarded a blue ticket are fitted with an IUD (intro-uterine device) to prevent their pregnancy and are sent into the world to do as they choose. The novel does not elaborate on where the system has come from and why it is necessary, but we assume perhaps, that it is for population control. We are told that girls are assessed for their fitness to be a mother by a doctor, and indeed Calla sees the enigmatic Doctor A, whose role as interlocutor and mentor becomes increasingly sinister

as Calla's story unfolds. Girls who receive a blue ticket are considered fortunate in that they are free from the burden of motherhood. But Mackintosh poses the question: What if a woman can't help but want a child? What if she desires what she is not allowed to have?

While the premise of the novel seems elegant enough, much is unexplained and remains so. The lottery of motherhood is far more violent and oppressive in its effects than it first seems. Not only is Calla forbidden from motherhood, but she also rarely encounters babies directly, or 'white ticket women'. Motherhood becomes exotic and forbidden even at second hand, and therefore all the more desirable. This speculative fiction stretches its premise further than *The Red Clocks* in that it reduces reproductive choice to a stark 'yes' or 'no', and the fictional world does not explain or justify its control. It is never entirely clear what qualifies one woman for motherhood and not another. The question of which ticket is a curse and which is a blessing depends on context, and the reader comes to realise that both alternatives are a curse, because women are deprived of freedom of choice. Because of the extremity of the book's premise, it reads as a metaphor or allegory, but at the same time does not necessarily allow that comforting distance. We could argue that the strangeness with which Calla experiences her illicit pregnancy reflects current reality in terms of the loss of autonomy women experience once they become pregnant, transitioning from ostensibly free citizens (at least in democratic societies) to being controlled and oppressed once in a state of pregnancy. Whilst the novel posits a dystopian and strangely regimented world, it is not so far from our own society as we would like to think, and the descriptions of pregnancy, in particular, dramatize the reality of the pregnant body no longer fully belonging to the woman. Even Calla's growing desire for a child has the feel of something disassociated and strange:

Desires so alien that I could only assume they had been inside me a long time, like splinters or shrapnel waiting to be pushed to the surface. Desires I had never encountered. Like: holding a soft thing with large eyes, or humming a song without words. In the supermarket I cradled a hemp bag of sugar, six pounds in weight, then put it back immediately. I spent a lot of time thinking about the curling hands of infants, about hot milk. (Mackintosh 2020: 16-7)

In a queasily physical scene, Calla manages to remove the device that renders her infertile, and soon becomes pregnant via a partner who has no particular commitment to her. She is encouraged by Dr A to abort the pregnancy, but instead goes on the run to avoid a punishment that is only suggested but seems all the more threatening for that. The pregnancy itself is described in language that becomes more and more estranged:

I was a warm-blooded female animal. I was a doll with another doll inside of me. I was the chicken I opened up one day only to discover that the stomach had been left in by mistake, a pearly bag still full of grain from its final meal. (89)

Sigmund Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* ('uncanny') also provides a useful framework for thinking about *Blue Ticket*. The uncanny consists of a number of affects or associations. Those that are of particular interest to us have to do with the idea that a person can become unfamiliar to themselves. In his attempt at a definition, Freud includes the notion of what is familiar becoming unfamiliar, and of the uncanny as having to do with what is concealed and hidden, but then comes to light. For Nicholas Royle, the uncanny is 'a crisis of the proper [...] a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property [...] It is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was "part of nature": one's own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world' (Royle 2003: 1). For Calla, her own body, estranged from herself, enacts this uncanny crisis.

As Calla's pregnancy progresses, the uncanny nature of the language used to describe her body intensifies: 'Tendrils through my blood. Everything was made of glass. It had been like this always and now it was just that I was noticing it, the shimmering precariousness of life, and the death-filled underbelly just out of sight' (Mackintosh 2020: 112). A key point here is that 'it had been like this always'. This novel 'watches' or 'speculates' on culture now: a woman is only a pregnancy away from not being master of her own body. Not just because the state of pregnancy can be biologically alienating as an unfamiliar experience, but because now her body is also literally and politically not under her jurisdiction. It is notable that *Blue Ticket's* estranging descriptions of the experience of pregnancy echo those in *The Red Clocks*: images of the natural world, doubling, dream-like unfamiliarity, the presence of death.

It is *Blue Ticket's* exploration of the uncanny politics of reproduction that renders it an authentically speculative text. Marek Oziewicz's suggests that speculative fiction is 'a mode of thought-experimenting that embraces an open-ended vision of the real' (Oziewicz 2017). I would argue that *Blue Ticket* and *The Red Clocks* are both thought experiments of this type. *Blue Ticket* is a less realistic depiction, but both ultimately posit women, and in particular the reproductive woman, as an oppressed group whose autonomy is threatened. The skilful and convincing characterisation employed by Zumars allows the reader to empathise with the characters' individual plights and to extrapolate to the wider political context, bringing to life the relatively cold realities of statistics and journalistic articles. *Blue Ticket's* intimate, poetic language and its dream-like atmosphere take this even further, creating a sense of estrangement and

the uncanny which makes the reader look at the potential consequences of totally regulated reproduction in a fresh and startling way. This throws into even greater relief the logical endpoint of the overturning of *Roe vs Wade*. Whilst they are very different texts in many ways, they share these moments of literary estrangement and a concern with a lack of autonomy.

Important for this discussion is the notion of ‘emergent cultures’, a term coined by Raymond Williams, and applied by Oziewicz to speculative fiction:

The dominant fantasy and science fiction culture institutionalized in today’s academia, has shown no need for or interest in the term speculative fiction. The emerging culture, by contrast, has wholeheartedly owned the label of speculative fiction as a way to conceptualize its experience of new types of non-mimetic writing and to position them in a contiguous relation to older, ideologically loaded forms. (Oziewicz 2017)

Women might be classified as an ‘emergent culture’ given their relative oppression and the threat to their bodily rights. As such, the term ‘speculative fiction’ can be appropriately applied to the texts we have so far explored. Speculative fictions are often positioned in relation to genre categories, for example, science fiction, horror, or fantasy. But the form of speculative fiction is also important. For example, we have discussed the use of the third person in conveying the four key female voices in *The Red Clocks* and the way in which that technique differs from the hallucinatory first-person perspective employed in *Blue Ticket*. Neither text can be neatly categorized into a ‘genre’. Both have a political and cultural ‘what if?’ premise driving their fictional narrative worlds. Whilst *Blue Ticket*’s prose style might be considered more poetic and unusual than *The Red Clocks*, both might be considered ‘literary fictions’ in the quality of their prose styles. Perhaps more importantly, the thoroughly political nature of these texts makes them exemplars of speculative fiction. *Blue Ticket*’s denouement ultimately denies Calla her child, despite the suffering she has endured to try to keep her. It is a powerful, shocking, and heart-breaking ending that, like *The Red Clocks*, highlights the abuse inherent in controlling a woman’s right to reproductive choice, her choice to not give birth as well as her choice to do so.

Reproductive Eco-Horror

I now turn to a novel which plays more obviously with genre tropes, whilst at the same time being part of this group of maternal dystopias. Naomi Booth describes her debut novel *Sealed* as an ‘eco-horror’ (Booth 2019). *Sealed* plays with tropes from the horror genre whilst exploring the complexities of the protagonist’s reproductive self against the backdrop of an environmental threat.

Set in the blue mountains in Australia, *Sealed* follows the experiences of Alice pregnant during a strange skin-sealing epidemic. The disease, 'cutis', seals up the orifices of the sufferer and is thought to be caused by pollution. Elements of this speculative world are clearly supported by evidence such as 'protected food' that is free from pollutants, and health services that are overstretched and difficult to access. There is repeated suggestion too that Alice is suffering from some sort of paranoid delusion. *Sealed* is a pre-Covid pandemic novel, but it has some uncannily prophetic moments.

There are a number of ways in which we might read *Sealed*, each co-existing in tension with one another. The first is as a kind of straight horror narrative. Much of the prose style bears this out. The skin-sealing disease is like something from a horror movie: 'The skin has made gristled, solid scars across the face. The texture of them makes Barry think of suet, and then of maggots' (Booth 2017: 35). Gruesome images of sealed skin abound, as do disconcerting images of pregnancy imagined by the protagonist. She appears to be as disassociated from her pregnancy as she is invested in the skin disease: 'I'm in someone else's body. I'm watching a film about a pregnant woman, close third-person' (67). After her ultrasound, Alice struggles to connect with her unborn child and her descriptions of them mirror the language used to describe the cutis deaths:

I can't believe those weird parts we saw on screen add up to a person [...] I imagine giving birth to a bundle of flesh with no shape; to something entirely sealed in, an oily mass of meat with fists and heels and a skull, without a single orifice. I feel a burning rush of nausea. (69)

Again, an example of bodily estrangement that comes, quite literally, from within. The narrative is set amidst a backdrop of sexist men, including her partner Pete, who puts Alice's fears down to her hormones. Whilst there is an increasing sense that this disease is reaching pandemic proportions, the use of the first-person means that the reader is never quite sure if Alice is experiencing a delusion brought on by her pregnancy or something real that others repress and deny.

The novel culminates in a gruesome and graphic birth scene which is juxtaposed against a murder almost, but not quite, as grisly. What is fascinating about this scene of horror is that it depicts a normal birth, albeit in an extreme context, not one that is complicated or ends in death. It is as if the whole novel is an embodiment of Alice's worst fears about impending birth, one which her own society has not prepared her for. Rarely, for example, are birth scenes depicted with graphic authenticity in popular cultural forms. So, in real life, the narrative of birth can be shocking because women lack a cultural frame of reference. Alice doesn't know, for instance, that she will birth a placenta after the baby. Whilst

this is an extreme example of real-world ignorance of the process, it serves to appropriately dramatize it:

It shivers there, bright and red. I can barely look at it, it's so vivid. It's enormous and still palpitating softly at its edges, like a giant, beached blood-jelly. This must be some part of cutis, some new horror. (161)

Her lack of knowledge means that this too falls under the curse of cutis. But this does not mean she is wrong about cutis in general. The reader leaves the text with the sense that there is some sort of ecological breakdown in process: 'The world is on fire behind the mountains. And I know the forest won't protect us [...] The forest knows what we've done to this land: it's watched us steal it and mine it and run poison into its seams' (169).

We can read *Sealed*, therefore, in several ways. It is again about a kind of bodily and emotional estrangement caused by structures of power. Alice is alienated from the experience of pregnancy due to her very reduction to a pregnant being. She is also emotionally and psychologically 'sealed off' in an attempt to protect herself from both love and its counterpart, death. If you love, you must also grieve. The birth of her child 'breaks' this 'seal'. Alice also cannot seal herself off from environmental catastrophe: she must recognise she is a part of it and must fight to survive within it and protect the environment. *Sealed*, then, becomes partly about both class and the levelling effect of environmental collapse. The rich can survive cutis; the poor will be sealed off and silenced. But nobody can be sealed off from the environment. Everyone is part of it and will be poisoned by it if they do not in turn stop filling it with poison. In a metaphoric and very real way, Alice must resist the silencing and sealing off of women, and especially reproductive women, as an oppressed group. Whether cutis is 'real' is not the point. Alice is right anyway because her oppression is real.

The horror genre is used to good effect here to explore reproductive oppression in quite a different way to *The Red Clocks* or *Blue Ticket*. Whilst *Sealed* contains some obvious tropes which categorise it within the horror genre, it is worth also noting the striking use of the present-tense first person perspective technique that is employed. This aspect of the form, rather than the genre, should not be overlooked, as it heightens the atmosphere of intimacy and immediacy, and provides the reader with a kind of real-time experience. Apocalypse is happening right now, not in the past, nor in the future, but in the present of the writing.

Maternity and Climate Change

To conclude, I would like to turn to a related novel, but one which has a very different tone in many respects and might even be thought of as a narrative

poem. Megan Hunter's slim book, *The End We Start From*, is organised in ultra-short paragraphs and has an impressionistic, detached, and precise style that sets it apart from the previous longer narratives. The main character gives birth just as most of the UK is engulfed in floodwater. But this apocalyptic, even biblical trope aligns with her personal and unfolding experience of motherhood, while her sense of what is happening in wider society is, for the most part, beyond the narrative's narrow scope. This novel cleverly explores the isolation of the maternal experience, using the flood metaphor to convey its overwhelming and unsupported challenges. But at the same time, whilst potentially read as highly metaphoric or even allegorical, it also reads as a very convincing depiction of individual experience in the face of environmental catastrophe. It therefore 'speculates' on the very real future possibility of communities dealing with extreme environmental disaster. Political infrastructure breaks down very quickly in *The End We Start From*, with resources spoiled or scarce and lawlessness and violence the norm. We only catch glimpses of this through the protagonist, who is cut off from most people on a rare patch of dry land, but nevertheless this feels authentic to the limited view an individual might have under these circumstances.

Where the other novels we have discussed focus on choice and pregnancy, Hunter's narrative focuses on the isolation of early motherhood. She transposes this experience onto a backdrop of a flooded and makeshift society, but it could be argued that the isolation her character feels is not a depiction of a flooded future, but a depiction of the real isolation of many new mothers in present times (Smith 2018). Again, as in *Sealed*, this is conveyed in the present-tense first-person:

His hands circle in tiny, victorious fists. I feel that I could, all things considered, conquer the world.

The news on the hour, 14th June one o'clock. Tina Murphy reporting. An unprecedented flood. London. Uninhabitable. A list of boroughs, like the shipping forecast, their names suddenly as perfect and tender as the names of children. Ours. (Hunter 2017: 8)

Whilst Hunter's novel is deeply intimate, and this intimacy is partly driven by the narrative voice, it also regularly breaks into a collective first-person voice, drawing into its scope the whole of society. Where *Sealed's* narrator is closed off, Hunter's is conscious of her role within a wider community, despite her relative physical isolation. The implication is that her motherhood connects her to others and hence to the natural environment. The book closes with a tentative hopefulness, but its characters are traumatized by what they have experienced.

It is Z, the narrator's baby, who carries hope for the future. For, if we cannot speculate what the future might hold, we may be condemned to enact it in the real world. This is precisely the point of all of these speculative fictions that focus on the maternal body: they imagine scenarios so that they might be critiqued, potentially avoided, and resisted in the hope of a better future.

Works Cited

- Alderman, Naomi. 2018. 'A Novel that asks, What if abortion were again illegal?' *The New York Times*, 22 January. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/22/books/review/red-clocks-leni-zumas.html> (accessed 29 September 2023).
- Booth, Naomi. 2017. *Sealed*. Liverpool: Dead Ink Books.
- . 2019. 'Sinking, Sealing, Swooning: In Conversation with Naomi Booth.' *READ: Research in English at Durham*. <https://readdurhamenglish.wordpress.com/2019/10/07/sinking-sealing-swooning-in-conversation-naomi-booth/> (accessed 23 September 2023).
- Branigin, Anne and Samantha Chery. 2022. 'Women of color will be most impacted by the end of Roe, experts say' *The Washington Post*, 24 June. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/06/24/women-of-color-end-of-roel/> (accessed 29 September 2023).
- Hunter, Megan. 2017. *The End We Start From*. London: Picador.
- Mackintosh, Sophie. 2020. *Blue Ticket*. London: Penguin.
- Merrill, Judith. 1967. Introduction to *SF: The Best of the Best*. New York: Dell, 1-7.
- Oziewicz, Marek. 2017. 'Speculative Fiction.' In *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Ed. Diedre Shauna Lynch. <https://oxfordre.com/literature/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-78> (accessed 29 September 2023).
- Royle, Nicholas. 2003. *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Smith, Dave. 2018. 'Shocking extent of loneliness faced by young mothers revealed.' *Co-op*, 2 May. <https://www.co-operative.coop/media/news-releases/shocking-extent-of-loneliness-faced-by-young-mothers-revealed> (accessed 29 September 2023).
- Suvin, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tolentino, Jia. 'Is Abortion Sacred?' *The New Yorker*, 16 July. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/essay/is-abortion-sacred> (accessed 29 September 2023).
- Ziegler, Mary. 2022. 'Why Exceptions for Life of the Mother Have Disappeared.' *The Atlantic*, 25 July. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/abortion-ban-life-of-the-mother-exception/670582/> (accessed 29 September 2023).
- Zumas, Leni. 2018. *The Red Clocks*. New York: Little Brown.