Sustainability and humanity: what young readers can learn from Julie Bertagna's Exodus

By Marit Elise Lyngstad

Julie Bertagna's young adult novel *Exodus* (2002), the first instalment of a trilogy,[1] shows readers a postapocalyptic future where the world is irreparably damaged by the effects of climate change. The novel is set in the year 2100, and the fifteen-year-old protagonist Mara must leave her home island Wing in the Atlantic Ocean because of flooding. She travels south and arrives beneath a so-called sky city called New Mungo, which is built on top of the flooded remnants of Glasgow. Most of the narrative takes place in and around New Mungo and contains frightening and thought-provoking parallels to our current-day society. This includes the presence of a technologically advanced, elitist society which only cares for its own inhabitants and horrendous descriptions of boat refugees not being let into one of the few places of refuge. Although the novel describes a chilling, dystopian future which is the inevitable result of climate change, there is hope present in the narrative: both in the new, sustainable technology that allows advanced cities to thrive without exploiting natural resources, and in the main character's return to nature and a more ecological lifestyle when she arrives in Greenland towards the end of the book. This combination of postapocalyptic and hopeful elements makes the novel a typical representative of dystopian fiction written for young adults: *Exodus* is a book that could make readers see parallels with our own world and potentially make them wish to make changes to current society. In this respect, there is great teaching potential in postapocalyptic climate dystopias in general, and *Exodus* in particular.

Both Norway (where I live) and Scotland focus on sustainability and environmental issues in their national frameworks for education. In Norway, sustainability has entered into the national curriculum as a cross-curricular topic that is supposed to permeate all school subjects, and one of the core values that the education system is supposed to foster in all students is 'Respect for nature and environmental awareness'. One must assume that this change in the

curriculum is a reaction to the overwhelming evidence telling us that the world is steering into a climate disaster, as the curriculum states that:

> *…our common future depends on the coming generations and their willingness and ability to protect our world. Global climate changes, pollution and loss of biological diversity are some of the greatest environmental threats in the world. These challenges must be solved together. We need knowledge, ethical awareness and technological innovation to find solutions and make the necessary changes to our lifestyle to protect life on earth.*[2]

There is a similar ambition in Scotland, where the aim is that all students encounter the topic 'Learning for sustainability', which is directly linked to 'Scotland's climate change targets and commitment to become a Net Zero Nation'.[3] Norway and Scotland both, then, *aim* to teach students about this, but what the two countries have in common is that the implementation – *how* this is supposed to be done – is up to individual schools, teachers, and education leaders. UNESCO's 2021 report 'Getting every school climate-ready: how countries are integrating climate change issues in education' points at a survey which showed that although ninety-five per cent of teachers participating in the survey agreed that 'it is important or very important to teach about the severity of climate change and its effects', less than forty per cent felt that they knew about how to teach it.[4] The lack of clear guidelines, lesson plans, and syllabi could be reasons for this.

Based on everything we know about climate change and its causes and effects, the goal of teaching environmental sustainability in schools today must, ultimately, be to encourage *action*. And if teachers are to address sustainability in such a way that it affects students enough to make them act, students need to *feel* the need for change: literature, with its potential for emotional impact, can do just that. According to Martha Nussbaum in her book *Cultivating humanity* (1997),

> *the great contribution literature has to make to the life of the citizen is its ability to wrest from our frequently obtuse and blunted imaginations an acknowledgement of those who are other than ourselves, both in concrete circumstances and even in thought and emotion.*[5]

In this respect, postapocalyptic literature can be a powerful tool, as it turns dry facts into riveting narratives about potential futures that could compel students to act. That is why a book such as *Exodus* can be a powerful teaching resource for sustainability – especially in Scotland. Even though the novel is set in a future society different from the students' own, the setting is at the same time so easily recognisable. Although most of the city is inaccessible due to flooding, Mara camps in Glasgow Cathedral, reads books in the library, and meets people named after places in Glasgow (such as Gorbals, Broomielaw, and Candleriggs). For students reading the novel, finding a place familiar to Glasgow presented in such a way might well inspire them to really consider the possible impact climate change will have on the world, themselves, and their future children and grandchildren.

The link to our present-day society is also made abundantly clear in the novel's introduction, where Bertagna describes how present-day people 'feasted upon their ripe world' and 'grew greedy, ravaging the planet's bounty of miracles'. The consequences are severe: a planet which grows 'hot and fevered, battered by hurricanes and rain' and 'a century of storms'. All because the people Bertagna describes 'saw, too late, their savage desolation of the world'. But at the very end of this introduction, there is a glimmer of hope: what if we, unlike the people in Bertagna's novel, see this possible destruction in time? 'Stand at the fragile moment before the devastation begins, and wonder. Is this where we stand now, right here on the brink?' Getting students to understand that they are the 'we' in the book's preface is at the core of the novel's teaching potential.

Even though postapocalyptic fiction is still seen by some literary critics, academics, and teachers as 'merely' genre fiction, more people are beginning to appreciate its affordances given the current state of the world, both in education and more broadly.[6] An example of the latter is the well-known climate activist and *Guardian* writer George Monbiot, who argued in his article 'The road well travelled' that Cormac McCarthy's postapocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006) is 'the most important environmental book ever written' because it describes in such detail the horrors humanity will face if the world's biosphere disappears. Monbiot claimed that the novel could affect people to a much greater extent than 'dreary' environmental literature because 'it will change the way you see the world' – similar to Nussbaum's notions of literature's impact on readers.[7] *The Road* describes consequences that are a lot more severe than those described in

Exodus, but the sentiment in the two novels is similar: *what if* we get to a stage where we cannot undo the damage we have done on the planet?

Arguably, we are already there: according to the WWF's 2022 'Living planet report', global wildlife populations have plummeted by sixty-nine per cent in the last few decades, and the world has seen more extreme weather, including higher temperatures and drought during the last few years. At this stage, we know that the development cannot be reversed, only halted – and we need to act quickly.[8] This means that in the twenty years that have passed since *Exodus* was published, we are not much nearer to a solution which will help us avoid such a future as is described by Bertagna, although it probably won't happen as quickly: Scotland is not projected to be completely flooded in 2100, although other parts of the world are.[9] This is a scenario that can seem hopeless and overwhelming, especially for young people who rarely have the opportunity to influence policy changes. So: how can literature be helpful in this situation?

I argue that literature in general, and a postapocalyptic work like *Exodus* in particular, has great value by not only addressing the large issues at hand (sustainable living and climate change), but also helping students handle difficult circumstances by emphasising the importance of a moral compass. In *Exodus*, the technologically advanced sky city New Mungo is elitist and exploitative, and arguably serves as a mirror of the Western world's attitudes towards those who will be most seriously harmed by climate change. Through the main character Mara's actions and thoughts, students are reminded that it also matters to preserve their (and others') humanity regardless of the circumstances. Focusing on this when reading *Exodus* would be in line with the recently published book *Teaching literature in times of crisis*, which aims 'to show teachers how they can harness the imagination of students in the classroom for learning about crisis in ways that go beyond doom and gloom scenarios whilst also being realistic in outlook'.[10] Following this train of thought, postapocalyptic fiction matters, not only due to its (often rightfully) depressing takes on our future, but also because of its focus on what can actually be done by each individual in terms of preserving the dignity and humanity of themselves and others when facing the unavoidable climate crisis.Julie Bertagna's young adult novel *Exodus* (2002), the first instalment of a trilogy,[11] shows readers a postapocalyptic future where the world is irreparably damaged by the effects of climate change. The novel is set in the

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