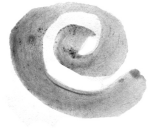


On creative work as a space for new possibilities



Author Allegra Hyde discusses her process for writing on the near future, stories as self-contained worlds, and why artists are becoming endangered.

March 23, 2023 -

As told to Denise S. Robbins, 2983 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Politics](#), [Money](#).

You've written two short story collections and a novel about catastrophes, apocalypses, and doom. So I have to ask, first of all, are you very attracted to doom?

It's funny you say that, because I also often try to write about utopia, or towards utopia, or think about ideas of paradise sought, found, and lost. So if I'm attracted to anything, it's the oscillation between utopia and dystopia, paradise and catastrophe, and the mechanics that move us in one direction or another, as well as the experiences of individuals in one situation or another.

It's true a lot of your stories in the latest collection include passages of unbounded joy—but there always seems to be some dark other side. How do you balance the line between joy and doom? How do you flip between the two, and how do you make those decisions?

The human experience is made up of many different emotional facets. In my writing, I try to capture that multiplicity of experience. So, on one hand, I might be writing about a particular catastrophe and the misery of that catastrophe, but I also try to pay attention to the other emotional realities that go along with it. Even within a natural disaster, like a wildfire—where there's horrific destruction and pain—there's also going to be an uncanny beauty, the rebirth of the forest after the fire. In my writing, I'm trying to bear witness to the worst and the best—or at least brighter-possibilities out there.

I would love to get more craft side of your work, but first, I'd like to know a little more about the context of your focus on climate change and other potentially cynical speculative futures. What sparked your interest in climate change? Was there any one particular event or moment? I think I read somewhere that you like building terrariums, for instance.

When I was seven years old, I went to this children's enrichment activity at a museum. The activity leaders asked us children a simple question about garbage. They said: *Human beings are creating all this garbage. Where do we put it?* They showed us a map of the world and I pointed to New York State. And the person leading the exercise was like, "There's a lot of people there, Allegra, do you really want to put all the garbage there?" I said, "No," and then I pointed to Antarctica. And they asked, "Do you want to put the garbage with the penguins?" I said, "No, I don't want to put it with the penguins."

It really affected me in that moment to realize that there was nowhere to put the garbage. The exercise was simplistic, but it got some wheels turning around the fact that our human system of consumption and waste creation is fundamentally flawed. Since then, I've tried to be involved in environmental causes in different ways—protesting a little bit, trying out alternative ways of living—but ultimately I felt I could be most useful as a

writer by exploring issues relating to climate change in fiction, because that's where my real skill set was.

I would also like to hear about the terrariums.

I grew up out in the woods in New Hampshire and there wasn't a whole lot to do, but one thing I could do was build little terrariums from plants I found in the woods. I'd go out there and collect tiny pine saplings and bits of moss and create these terrariums. I really enjoyed watching the ways the terrariums would evolve and change over time inside enclosed glass capsules. They were self-contained worlds, in other words. And in that sense, one could argue that the terrariums functioned like short stories. In a story, you're creating an enclosed world that functions on its own logic and has its own little weather system. I see a parallel between a terrarium practice and a writing practice in that way.

So how does building the novel fit into that? Is that a bigger enclosed system or is it too big to fit in a system?

In some ways, yeah, a novel is a really big terrarium. Much bigger than a story. But it fundamentally operates in the same way, where you have these foundational elements you're bringing together—your characters and your settings—and you're seeing how they all interact with and impact one another, and how situations unfold over time. I try to write in a way where, as my characters move through a fictional world, they're impacting their environment, and their environment is impacting them. There's a sense of ecological verisimilitude in that way.

When you're writing stories, do the ecosystems and settings come first, or do the characters come first?

Actually, voice comes first. I'm a real sentence-driven, language-driven writer, particularly for short fiction. And so when I'm writing a story, I'm usually listening for a voice, for a first line that I can then follow and almost transcribe. Character and setting emerge alongside that voice.

How do you bring climate change into these stories? How do you translate things like extreme weather events into your stories?

To give an example of my writing process for one story: a while back I read about how rising temperatures in the Northeast were causing the tick population to explode, and how this tick explosion was impacting moose in the region. Because ticks weren't dying off in the winter the way they once had, they attached themselves to moose by the thousands. These tick-covered moose were then dying because they basically had all the blood sucked out of them. That was such a horrific image to me, and so strange also, that I wanted to figure out how to explore that idea in fiction. So that led to the story "The Tough Part," which is about two parents who dress up as a moose to save the remaining moose. It's a story about what it would mean to save a species, what it means to care about a species in relation to your children and their future. I was trying to show a worst-case scenario, a horrific thing, but also bring in elements of humor and brightness.

The moose story, and some of your other stories, don't conclude with a typical ending. Is this the M.O. with climate fiction, where some things are still uncertain? Not the fact that climate change is happening, or that it'll be bad, but just how bad it's going to be, and what the climate-changed future will look like.

Right, I don't offer a definitive answer for what's going to happen. It's important to me to leave readers with a sense of various possibilities with my endings, especially about climate change, because our future is still uncertain—we still have a little time to change course and not face complete catastrophe. We could still redirect the ship, so to speak. In "The Tough Part" and other stories, I try to hint towards a likely ending, but leave the door open for other endings as well.

What is your prediction for humanity? Do you think we're doomed? Are we going to be okay?

I take comfort in the fact that when natural disasters do happen, communities and individuals often come together. I lived in Houston during Hurricane Harvey. It was a disturbing, horrific event, but also one in which

I witnessed the ways people came together to help one another, to help restore flooded buildings and rescue one another. Human beings have a great capacity for compassion and ingenuity. I want to believe that as climate change escalates, people will become more mobilized, that they'll come together as a collective force. Despite everything, I hold on to that possibility.

Do you feel like these stories will help people hold on to hope when it comes to climate change?

If my stories give people a sense of hope, that would be a win. But I don't want to offer only hope or Pollyannaish optimism. I think it's important to balance hope and possibility with a real recognition of the systems of oppression and exploitation and greed that have created the crisis to begin with. I think a reckoning with these systems needs to come alongside hope. So when people engage with my stories, I hope that they feel both.

What do you feel is the role of art in changing politics and policies?

Art has many roles. On the one hand, there's the so-called genre of "climate fiction." By calling a work of literature climate fiction, you're naming an aspect of the subject matter and making it legible. This visibility is useful. It puts the issue of climate change front and center, makes it part of a conversation, keeps it in people's minds. I just read an article that said people who read climate fiction are more likely to talk to friends and family about the issue—which is great. Art, in that way, can make climate change a larger part of the cultural consciousness. But art plays other roles as well. It can be a space to imagine alternative possibilities for our world, and articulate different paths and futures.

In my fiction, for instance, I offer up alternative political systems. In my novel *Eleutheria*, I describe a system called "Generational Representative Democracy," in which representatives are voted on by age groups rather than geographies. And in the story "The Eaters," a survivalist community has a "President of the Month" system in which people are randomly selected for leadership roles. These alternate political systems are kind of silly, but they're an example of an alternative political possibility—and maybe, in some way, that possibility can be integrated into our real world sense of what else we could do and how else we could live.

Do you think the real-life instances of societal experiments—some of which you explore more in your first collection about utopias—are inspired by art, or do they inspire art?

The answer is that it goes both ways. I've always been interested in utopian communities and intentional communities, where a group of people steps away from mainstream society to try to live differently. I'm talking about everything from hippie communes to the Shakers, groups through time all over the world. Sometimes those groups are actually reacting to literary works. They've read utopian fiction and are trying to live out what they've read. And utopian fiction is also inspired by these intentional, real-world communities. It goes both ways because stories emerge from human beings trying to make sense of their lives and the world around them. And stories are what we also use to learn how to be human. So it's cyclical.

Do you have any personal experience on the hippie communes?

I do, yeah. Among other experiences, I spent about six months backpacking around hippie communes in New Zealand. New Zealand has more intentional communities per capita than any other country, so it seemed like the place to be. I went around to various communes because I wanted to see how different groups were trying to live, how they were organizing their housing, their finances, their labor. And because I was trying to become a hippie myself. Long story short: I failed.

Did you go to do research for your writing, thinking you would write stories about them some day?

I was most focused on transforming myself. I'd read about these communities for years and wanted to scratch the itch to experience them in person. But while I was there, I was also writing a lot and taking notes. At the time, I hadn't fully committed to becoming a writer. But the longer I spent in these hippie communes, the more it became clear to me that I was not cut out to be a hippie, that I just wanted to write about hippies.

What did you read that turned you onto these communities?

I first heard about utopian communities in high school, when I learned about Fruitlands—a 19th-century commune in Massachusetts that was founded by Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father. Louisa May Alcott actually wrote a work of fiction—*Transcendental Wild Oats*—about that community that gets at its absurdity and utopian aims, which were very lofty. Fruitland's founding members were proto-vegans who had wanted to live off the land, which is pretty much impossible in Massachusetts in winter if you're not using animal labor or products. Anyway, Fruitlands was my gateway drug into utopian communities. From there, I read books like *Herland*, *which is utopian fiction. And *Walden Two*. Books like that.

If there's one book that you'd recommend for others to get more interested in this, which one would it be?

The Utopia Reader. I love this anthology of utopian writing. It contains many different utopian texts from throughout time. If you want a foundational starting point, that would be my recommendation.

So you sought out utopian communities. Did you also seek out catastrophes? Do you have to do a lot of research or was it in the news or is that something that you're always aware of?

I guess catastrophe feels everywhere all the time. Your question is making me wonder, though, whether I do have a mental filter that scans for catastrophe? Maybe it has something to do with being a New Englander, having some kind of grim outlook? Either way, the news always feels so full of catastrophe.

Your story "Endangered," about the artist preservation program where artists are in zoo-like enclosures, was funny—but also a little nerve-wracking. Do you think that artists are going to become more endangered as the world evolves (or devolves)?

Artists are already a little endangered. I worry about the economics of making art, and the lack of access many people have to creative careers. I'm fortunate that I have a teaching job at a college, and I know how privileged that is, because without that stability, to rely on writing as a sole source of income is incredibly difficult. So I think that "Endangered" comes from a place of real anxiety.

For those artists who are not able to become teachers, but still want a creative life, what is the path forward?

The path forward is always evolving, and teaching may become unsustainable or impossible at some point as well. I know that for some teachers in Florida right now, for instance, making a living off teaching no longer seems viable because of the oppressive governmental forces that are intruding into the classroom. So for those of us who are trying to make our way, being able to adapt is important. Whatever your day job is going to be, finding a source of income that doesn't totally deplete you energy-wise and still aligns with your values—so it doesn't deplete you spiritually—is really important. And when you are able to support yourself and eventually have some disposable income, investing those funds back into the artistic community is important as well. Because one of us can't make it unless all of us make it. The economics of art-making are not just about an individual finding the right day job. It's about a network where there's mutual aid and mutual support, so that the art forms we all love can flourish.

On the scale of doom to hope, how are you feeling today?

The sun was out in Ohio, and even though it was bitterly cold, just glimpsing that blue sky was really uplifting. So I'm going to keep being a believer.

Allegra Hyde Recommends:

The Secret Historian by Justin Spring. I've been reading this biography of the queer radical, professor, and tattoo artist, Samuel Steward as part of my research for an upcoming novel project. The biography describes the

life of a man who insisted on being himself—meaning, gay—despite the many hardships of existing on the margins in the 20 th century. I’m always drawn to people who live by their highest ideals; I found this book to be inspiring, upsetting, and immersive.

Abrupt transformations. For years, I ate veggie burgers for lunch. They were easy to cook, reasonably nutritious, and tasted okay. Then one day, I cooked a veggie burger and discovered I couldn’t stomach the idea of a single bite. I needed to change. Now I eat lox on toast.

Dream dictionaries. It’s important to pay attention to our subconscious, which is often smarter and more knowing than our conscious minds. A dream dictionary—like this one from Theresa Cheung—can help you listen to your subconscious and hear what it has to say. Maybe you keep dreaming of weeping vegetables, for instance, because your subconscious has an important message about imminent transformation. Also with a dictionary, you can decode your friends’ dreams, if they are interested. Or you can decode your future girlfriend’s dreams everyday over the phone, until she falls in love with you, as I did.

Snail mail. The pleasures of a real, tangible envelope arriving at your home from across the country—or the world—cannot be overstated. Snail mail also presents the opportunity to deploy stickers, which is not something you get to do very often as a grown-up. The letter you send someone can even be quite boring—describing, for instance, your shift from eating veggie burgers to lox on toast—and can still be kind of exciting. It will at least be better than an electric bill.

Photons. Lately, I’ve been trying to walk around outside for at least 5 minutes every morning so that I can get photons from sunlight into my eyes. It’s nice to see my neighborhood waking up, and to observe light beaming over treetops, but really the idea is that this early sunlight will help set my circadian rhythm so that, by nighttime, I’ll be able to fall asleep—and, once asleep, I’ll be able to dream.

Name

Allegra Hyde

Vocation

writer

□