



“An exceptionally good collection of new fiction, with stories...about the here and now, mirroring the uncanny, lived reality of an increasingly unfamiliar planet.”

—AMITAV GHOSH

# Fire & Water

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## Teaching Guide for Postsecondary Educators

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<https://www.fireandwaterstories.com/>

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## Introduction

When putting together this teaching guide, we took heart in an observation by English professor Krista Hiser, organizer of The Ultimate Cli Fi Book Club. In a 2021 Medium post, she expands on the Quaker pedagogical idea of the “third thing.” Hiser writes, “The *third thing* lets us have a common focus that is not each other. (I have the best conversations with my teenaged daughter in the car—both looking through the windshield, we can sometimes touch difficult topics more easily.) We are learning to use climate fiction as a third thing—like a windshield that we look through in order to talk about the future.”

Indeed, *Fire & Water*'s stories discuss, directly and indirectly, topics as varied as climate change and crisis combined with refugeeism and immigration (“Wo Bist Du?”); extractive industries and imperialism (“Irene’s Daughters”); military conflict (“Conscription”); tourism (“Reef of Plagues”); mental health (“Morse Code of the Yellow Rail”); employment (“The Places She Journeys”); Native/Western crossroads (“The Places She Journeys”); drought and wildfires (“Smokeland,” “Escape Out the Back Passage,” “Summer on the Brink,” “The Rain Diary,” “A Sea of People”); citizen science (“The Rain Diary,” “The Doorman,” “Irene’s Daughters,” “Morse Code of the Yellow Rail”); among many others.

We hope that instructors from many disciplines will find in this guide rich and evocative material to enhance your students’ understanding of the many complex ways that humans, and other species, must confront the climate crisis. With this first PDF version, our intent is to start a conversation about *Fire & Water*. In time, we hope educators, who are the experts, can contribute your own suggestions and ideas and that we can migrate this guide to an interactive platform where the conversation can continue to grow.

## General Discussion Exercise

Kick-start the discussion by building a word-and-image cloud. This discussion strategy is a low-stakes way to get everyone thinking and talking about the text and provides a way for students to relay their initial insights about *Fire & Water*. You may adapt this exercise to align with the content of your course by guiding the students to respond to a certain feature, facet, or issue.

To begin a discussion of *Fire & Water*, divide the stories among the students so that each story has at least one student thinking about it. Then ask the students to distill their reaction to or understanding of the story (or example of craft or issue, etc., depending on the course focus) into a single word, short phrase, or picture. Suggest they jot down synonyms or secondary responses as well so that, if you share one by one within the group, they can be mindful of their classmates' responses and avoid repetition, growing a wider word cloud with greater diversity of responses.

Consider together the collection of words and pictures. You might start by acknowledging patterns (for example, something like “many of us seem to be thinking about loss when we are thinking about *Fire & Water*” or “migration and displacement come up often”). Then, point to a particular word, phrase, or picture and ask the student who suggested it to tell the class about their choice (saying something like “Who chose the word *loneliness*? Tell us more about that”).

Repeat this process with other words, phrases, and pictures. Then expand the discussion to ask what surprised, inspired, interested, confused, etc., the students. Allow for conversation.

## Creative Writing Courses

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Matthew Salesses pushes against the idea of setting as character in his book *Craft in the Real World*. This is a useful argument to explore when discussing *Fire & Water*, which centers setting (the changing environment). Salesses defines setting not as a character but as “what is noticed.” With that in mind, consider the settings of five of these stories. What are the characters in each story aware of? What do they notice—what is worth noticing, and what does that say about who they are and who the intended audience is?
- Though all of the stories connect to climate change, they approach it in vastly different ways: more narrative, others more lyrical, and still others more surreal; with humor and horror. How do these different approaches seem to function individually and across the anthology?
- Consider Matthew Salesses’s definition of plot, from *Craft in the Real World*: not (just) “a causal string of events rising out of character” but (perhaps more usefully) “as *acceptance or rejection of consequences*,” which allows us to consider characters’—and the writer’s—negotiations with power structures. How do you reveal, navigate, or explore power structures in your own writing? What techniques in this anthology could you draw from?
- In *Craft in the Real World*, Matthew Salesses connects audience with theme: “The author can determine the theme only for the implied reader—the reader whose experiences and interpretations the author anticipates.” Salesses goes on to say that in order to think more mindfully about audience, writers must consider purpose, which is theme added to intended audience. Choose two stories from *Fire & Water* and discuss the purpose of each; now, what if the intended audience were drastically changed—what would be the purpose?
- In her introduction to *Fire & Water*, Nicole Walker says, “What makes these stories so effective and necessary right now is how they recount regular human suffering as part of the climate suffering”—private suffering continues to happen in the midst of planetary suffering. Consider “Conscription,” “Wo Bist Du?,” and “Summer on the Brink.” How do those three stories serve as examples of this point? What craft elements do the authors draw from to evoke a sense of suffering and interconnection?

- “Glacier Bear” and “Nature Morte” both center around a relationship between a human protagonist and a nonhuman character. Compare these stories: how are they similar or different in their technique, voice, structure, and themes?

## PROMPTS

- Write a story that might fit in this collection. Include an issue of climate change in the here and now or, if not set in present-day “reality” at least in a “real” alternate or parallel reality, near future, or allegorical present; in other words, set the story in a time and place that does not require whole-world building.
- In her introduction to *Fire & Water*, Nicole Walker suggests that counting and accounting for, list making, form a useful trope in both fiction and nonfiction about the impact of climate change. Consider “The Doorman,” “The Rain Diary,” and “A Sea of People,” the different ways that accounting for things plays a role in each. Write a short story that relies on counting things, naming things, measuring things, making lists, etc. Play with form—maybe the story itself is a list.
- In “Morse Code of the Yellow Rail,” characters learn about people writing a memorial plaque to a recently dead glacier. The person leading the discussion about this says, “What was interesting was the words on this plaque would have to connect with people of today and, hopefully, assuming it was still standing, with people a couple hundred years from now, when our Earth may be very different. What could they tell people about our feelings now that would still be very relevant to people in the future?” Write a piece of flash fiction in the form of a memorial to an environmental feature at risk now, speaking to both present and future audiences.
- “The Seal’s Story” reminds us that all of Earth’s inhabitants, not just the humans, learn from, observe, and react to climate disruption. Write a story from the point of view of a character that is not a human.

- Write a serious, maybe even dark, story involving climate disruption—and infuse it with humor. “Escape Out the Back Passage,” “Reef of Plagues,” and “Irene’s Daughter” are just some of the *Fire & Water* stories that include flickers of humor within the darkness.

## Literature Courses

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Writers of science-fiction, fantasy, and creative nonfiction have been exploring climate in various ways for years. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh called on literary fiction writers to chronicle the here-and-now of climate change. Talk about the distinctions among these genres and how they approach the topic. What are the unique qualities of literary fiction that help us view the crisis through a different lens than other genres? Why is this lens important?
- Cli-fi, or climate fiction, is sometimes considered a distinct genre of fiction. How is it defined? Which novels or short stories would you call cli-fi, and why?
- The editors of *Fire & Water* are interested in the terms *Anthropocene* and *climate fiction*. How do the stories in this collection address and sometimes push against these terms?
- How do the stories seem to be ordered in the collection? What kind of narrative arc of this book overall might be present because of this arrangement? What feelings does this arrangement evoke for you?
- Who is the intended audience of *Fire & Water*? Do the stories have different audiences? How can you tell?
- How do the stories in *Fire & Water* explore issues of race, class, nationality, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of human identity? How are these aspects juxtaposed with the experiences of non-human species? How are they layered with, or separated from, an awareness of humans' relationship with earth's ecosystems?
- Some characters in these stories try to maintain normalcy. Refer to actions Danielle and Carmen take in “Irene’s Daughter” and “Smokeland,” for example. Both characters are under great stress—fearing at points for their lives—yet they’re also trying to hold steady. What routines do they keep or what “regular life” choices do we see them making? How do those details affect the feelings these stories evoke?

- “The Doorman,” “Conscription,” “On Abyssal Waters,” and “The Ice Child” are examples of stories in this anthology that reach into the future or toward the allegorical or speculative. How do they fit into this anthology as a whole?
- One intent of *Fire & Water* is to speak about climate change in a relatable, believable way. Consider which story in this anthology is most relatable to you. Which character? Which situation? Why? What experiences do you bring to this story that connects you? Which story, character, situation do you least relate to? Are you surprised by what you do and don’t relate to? What specifics does the author include that leads you to these conclusions? Might your answers be different had you read this book five years ago?

## Political Science and Social Science Courses

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Each story connects to climate disruption in different ways—sometimes directly and strongly, sometimes more tangentially; with humor or seriousness; with characters who believe in the science and those who don't, and those who are too busy with other parts of life to consider the climate much at all. How do these different approaches reflect society's attitudes toward the climate crisis? How are these stories connected to, or disconnected from, the politics of climate today?
- Migration and displacement are major themes throughout *Fire & Water*. How are the characters' predicaments a reflection of national and international immigration and migration patterns? In these fictional worlds, what kinds of policies would you imagine would drive those patterns?
- Choose one of the following stories: "Conscription," "Wo Bist Du?," "Reef of Plagues," or "Escape Out the Back Passage." If you were a policy maker, what kinds of legislation or policy would you enact to address the conflicts and issues in these stories? What consequences, unintended and intended, do you think those policies would have? Or if you were one of the characters in power in these stories, for example, the judge in "Conscription," what would you do?
- How much of the conflict in these stories is caused by characters' own actions and how much is dictated by their circumstances or fates? How do political or economic forces impact the characters' decisions? Where are these forces explicit, and where are they implicit?
- How is political activism portrayed in "Irene's Daughters," "On Abyssal Waters," and "A Seal's Song"? How do the characters exercise agency? How do their internal conflicts affect their decisions to take a stand?
- Consider how the theme of racial and social justice is explored in this collection. How do characters address injustices at the interpersonal level? How are larger geo-political injustices portrayed?

- How are women's roles and women's sense of agency portrayed in the stories? How do women at different ages and life stages respond to the conflicts they face due to climate disruption?

## Environmental Science and Sustainability Courses

### COMPETENCIES

Drawing from Arizona State University's School of Sustainability and Evans (2019), we summarize here, in no particular order, the foundational competencies in which students of sustainability, wherever they study, should become proficient. *Fire & Water* stories can provide a jumping-off point for learning within each competency as well as offer examples and support discussion of skill and knowledge points within each competency.

As you read the *Fire & Water* stories, consider the skills and knowledge that Evans lists for each competency (examples are in each of the following). How do a story's characters demonstrate these, or not? How does or doesn't an author? What inspiration does a story offer for the student to continue their learning?

- Creative and strategic competence: This is the ability to envision, develop, implement, and assess transformative interventions for sustainability. Example skills and knowledge: “critical and creative thinking: visioning, backcasting, exploring possibilities, generating ideas, challenging ideas” and “understanding the relevant landscape of global institutions, frameworks, and standards.”
- Critical and normative competence: This is the ability to discover, compare, experience, apply, negotiate, communicate, etc., sustainability-oriented principles and goals. Example skills and knowledge: “openness to changing perspectives,” “recognition of the moral/ethical dimensions of sustainability issues,” and “coping and making decisions within contexts of uncertainty...paradoxes...and divergent norms.”
- Transdisciplinary competence: This is the ability to understand and apply, in critical and integrative ways, multiple disciplinary frameworks to inform sustainability-oriented thinking and action. Example skills and knowledge: “defining sustainability and explaining how it relates to personal and collective values and actions” and “knowledge for historical

background and events (industrial age, rise of environmentalism, rise of social justice movements, sustainable development).”

- Systems competence: Students can analyze issues of sustainability across cultural, economic, political, etc., sectors and at local to global scale. This competence includes anticipatory thinking, imagining how sustainability issues and problem-solving might evolve. Example skills and knowledge: “understanding nature as a holism of which humans are a part and that humans cannot fully control,” “sensitivity to context,” and “systemic, place-centered thinking.”
- Interpersonal, communication, collaboration competence: Students can enable, facilitate, and motivate collaborative and participatory sustainability learning, thinking, and action. Example skills and knowledge: “critical awareness of how communications and media influence perceptions and how these tools can be utilized/ altered through engagement with them,” “presenting, briefly explaining, and distilling research/data,” and “ability to critically reflect upon dominant cultures in relation to other cultures, to accept and respect knowledge of other cultures, and to learn sustainability approaches from other cultures.”

## **PEDAGOGICAL METHODS**

Some of the most effective pedagogical methods for teaching sustainability studies (Evans, 2019) are the following.

- Project- or problem-based learning: studying or helping to address a community or organizational need or by simulating that work in the classroom
  - Project idea: Read the short topic articles in the [Discard Studies Compendium](#) (originally found in An Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators). Working solo, in small groups, or as a class, choose and model an issue, beginning with researching the topic and including a project idea that works toward a solution.
- Integrative learning: using the frameworks of multiple disciplines to understand and address issues

- Project idea: Students will be charged with crafting a companion piece to *Fire & Water*, thinking about what threads might be ripe for further discovery, as well as how the collection suggests such threads be followed. This idea is based on Jennifer Atkinson’s activity Climate Change Survival Kit, which is also included in An Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators: “The final product can take whatever form your group deems appropriate: it could be a website or handbook with suggested resources; a proposal for a retreat or therapy group; a public service video; a letter of apology to future generations, or a plea to be delivered via time-machine to people in the PAST; a collection of poems, images, quotes or other materials that activists turn to for comfort or inspiration when they feel overwhelmed by our reality. Really, this project can take any form you wish, so BE CREATIVE” (see full [project](#), including grading criteria). In addition, students should also include explanatory footnotes that explain the writing choices the students make, citing and analyzing evidence from the text of *Fire & Water* to support those choices.
- Active learning, rather than passive learning; allowing the students to be actively involved in constructing meaning, interpreting, and applying knowledge
  - Project idea: For this assignment, students will consider the narrative arc of *Fire & Water* by creating a playlist of seventeen songs, one for each story in the anthology. Each song should speak to the ideas and tone of the section, not necessarily repeating the concepts described but complementing the section in terms of its vibe and project. Students should purposefully arrange the playlist, matching the narrative and emotional arc of *Fire & Water*. Once students have created their playlists, they will write a reflection that explains the rationale behind their playlist, explaining, through detailed analysis, how the playlist relates to the narrative arc of *Fire & Water*. The playlist and analysis may be evaluated for the extent to which the playlist is complete and thoughtfully arranged; the essay is fully developed and effectively organized and makes a compelling case for the playlist choices, supporting claims with detailed textual analysis; and the playlist and essay demonstrate meaningful insight that goes beyond repetition of themes or action.

- Variation on Playlist as Analysis Project: Rather than asking students to write a formal essay, invite students to give a presentation in which they play clips of song while explaining how these songs in this order complement the original text.
- Collaborative learning: working together (with classmates and/or community members) to generate, explore, analyze, interpret, apply, etc., ideas or practices
  - Project idea: Much like the writers of fanfiction, students will delve deeper into the worlds of the stories of *Fire & Water* by extending it and writing new content. They will demonstrate their in-depth understanding of the text by writing alongside it. This will help them think carefully about how the book works, as well as what strategies they might find useful and meaningful in their own work. As the culmination of their study of *Fire & Water*, students will write a creative extension of the original text. Working together, each student or small group of students will write a new story that will work on its own and together with the others. This might mean exploring a new voice not currently included in the collection, for example, or going into more detail about a supporting character, setting, or issues. Perhaps they could investigate what happens after a current story's end. Likewise, they might write a section of flashbacks or flashforwards for a story. Students should write detailed notes about the rationale they use to make choices as a writer. In this way, they will analyze and explore the text by extending it, and then support their creative work with footnotes. Their notes should position their writing choices as part of a larger conversation with the text. Their work might be evaluated for the extent to which it effectively uses the techniques and craft strategies of the original text; maintains reasonable characterizations and character affects based on the original text; demonstrates strategic use of literary conventions, including conflict, tension, character, image, form, setting, and dialogue; supports choices with extensive and detailed footnotes that provide evidence and reasons; and demonstrates thoughtful analysis and understanding of the original text in the creative portion, as well as in the footnotes, which should refer to specific examples in the original text.

- Service-learning: addressing real-world work in organizations while receiving support in the classroom
  - Project idea: Work with an elementary school classroom or community organization, going through the ideas and practices of the [Emotional Resilience Toolkit for Climate Work](#). Perfect for students of education and psychology.
- Research-based learning, undertaking primary or secondary research to address questions or issues, and critical text/information analysis/interpretation, seeking to reveal and understand the influence of social power constructs and cultural constructs and biases
  - Project idea: Consider race, climate change, and environmentalism. Watch the “[White Supremacist Roots of American Environmentalism](#)” lecture (originally found in An Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators) and supplement with resources found in [here](#).
- Reflexive learning: situating the meaning of what is learned relative to the self and the greater world
  - Project idea: Here are sample questions for a class or small-group discussion. How is the issue of climate denialism addressed in the anthology? What forms does it take? How does the anthology inform your attitude toward acceptance or rejection of climate science?
- Consider “The Rain Diary,” “The Places She Journeys,” and “Morse Code of the Yellow Rail.” What are the different scientific approaches and disciplines, and how do they affect the characters’ understanding of their situation?

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