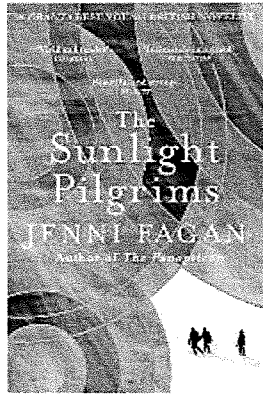


the light of ever-changing political upheaval, inexhaustible.



**Jenni Fagan, *The Sunlight Pilgrims*
(Windmill, 2016, 320pp, £8.99)**

Rose Harris-Birtill (University of St Andrews)

If current events – Brexit, Trump, North Korea – haven't completely ruined your appetite for disaster narratives, Jenni Fagan's latest novel offers a more pocket-sized tale of a very different type of global problem: the planet, a few years from now, facing its most extreme winter for two hundred years.

From the author of *The Panopticon* (2012), a lion-hearted first novel about a girl struggling to grow up in

the foster care system, comes a powerful speculative fiction of the nearly-now, a tale set in a remote corner of Scotland as a twenty-first century ice age creeps in. Set over four months, from November 2020 to March 2021, Fagan's novel takes us to the brink of human endurance as the temperature creeps down from a chilly -6 degrees Celsius to a deathly -56. What follows isn't a global epic on the fate of the human race, or a Hollywood-style mission to save the world. This is a novel that traces the everyday struggle to survive the big freeze through the eyes of three characters: a displaced Londoner, a seasoned survivalist and a twelve-year-old transgender girl.

The tale begins as Dylan MacRae leaves a note for the bailiffs, packs his family's ashes, and locks up his tiny Soho art-house cinema for the final time. He heads north, setting out for a remote Scottish caravan park to find the caravan that he recently inherited from his mother. Arriving in the beautiful, freezing surroundings of Clachan Fells and setting up his 'dilapidated' new home amidst 'shoulder-high thistles' as winter worsens, he meets Stella Fairbairn and her free-spirited mother Constance, who help their ill-prepared new neighbour adapt to the harsh conditions. Yet as the three pull together to create their own unconventional family-unit-of-sorts, the local community's struggles to deal with the cold pale in comparison to the wider global fallout taking place. Fagan's snapshots of the international reaction to the impending ice age feel disturbingly real. As Morocco is buried under twenty feet of snow, protests erupt against the local government for allowing families living on the streets to perish. Chicago declares a city-lockdown after being overwhelmed by riots and widespread looting. As global climate change causes Scotland's northernmost islands to freeze over, incredulous tourists and fisherman alike

hold up camera phones to an iceberg drifting down the Scottish coast, while IKEA is opened as a community centre for desperately-needed medical aid, shelter, food and warmth.

This is a tale with an acute social conscience, as well as an environmental one, and the novel's juxtapositions of domestic and global events are equally chilling. Stella's developing identity as a transgender pre-teen and her anxieties about boys, sex and her strained relationship with her father are countered by the very real possibility that none of the novel's characters may in fact survive the months ahead. The worsening winter is matched by the impending onset of puberty for Stella – which, without access to the right medical treatment, she must face in the wrong body, following a doctor's referral that leaves her facing a wait of over a year for the hormone replacement that she so desperately needs. As her mother struggles to prepare for the coming freeze, scavenging for old furniture to restore and sell for food and fuel, their domestic situations continue to unravel. Dylan will find out the dark family secret that led him to Clachan Fells. Stella's private delight in her secret first kiss with the most popular boy in school is offset by her harrowing experiences of bullying and discrimination from peers and community elders alike.

And yet, as their surroundings become colder, and colder, and colder still, there is a warmth in this novel that refuses to leave. Yes, we are made to witness the possible final weeks, days and hours of the human race – but we also see a small community pulling together to face the unknown together. The landscape almost seems invigorated by human demise, even more beautiful as it becomes more deadly: 'the landscape is brilliantly lit, flawless' in endless snow, while 'somewhere in the cherry blossoms away down the farm lane there are the tiny buds just waiting for a thaw that might never come round.' And yet Fagan's characters never entirely lose hope: 'They can't feel it, but perhaps the thaw is finally on the way somewhere in the world, a tiny shoot of green way down in the soil somewhere, ready to reach its way up toward the light.'

The novel's final section is equally ambiguous: is this the end for Dylan, Constance, Stella and *homo sapiens* itself, or does the possibility of their survival change the novel's focus to a fledgling love story between Dylan and Constance and a coming-of-age tale for Stella? Fagan rightly refuses us the readerly satisfaction of finding out. As with Brexit, Trump and North Korea, for the moment, we can only imagine how it will end.

With her second novel, Fagan has deftly navigated a difficult balance for any author – striking away from the already-trodden subject matter and preoccupations of *The Panopticon* whilst leaving enough thematic and stylistic continuity to create a distinct and powerful narrative voice across the two novels. While there are plenty of differences between *The Sunlight Pilgrims*

more subtle engagement with the natural world and *The Panopticon's* gritty realism and raw narrative style, manifested in the latter's unflinching portrayal of adolescent mental illness and Scottish subalternity, both novels venture into alternative communities, confronting shared issues of survival, exclusion, identity and grief with remarkable warmth and humanity. *The Sunlight Pilgrims* somehow manages to find humour amidst the possible end of the world, and there are many darkly funny moments here. Unable to fit his family's cremation urns in his suitcase before setting out for his journey to Scotland, Dylan's only suitable alternative containers are an ice-cream tub and a Tupperware container, leaving him scratching his head over who should go where: 'Vivienne would be mighty fucking pissed off about travelling anywhere in an ice-cream tub. His grandmother wouldn't give much of a shit.'

Set against the deep-time markers of mountains, glaciers and icebergs, Fagan's impressive novel reinforces that once such global disaster is already underway, human actions can be brave, humbling and even funny – but ultimately, they will be pitifully inadequate. Fagan's portrait of a near-future environmental dystopia joins a growing list of twenty-first century literary fictions that force us to confront just how frighteningly easy it currently is to imagine a global-scale ecological catastrophe within our lifetimes (for example, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy or David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks*).

Read against the current political struggles between environmentalists and climate-change deniers, made all the more real by Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement in July 2017, Fagan's haunting tale offers a warning that we cannot afford to ignore: if we don't take global climate change seriously – and act accordingly – we may face catastrophically unstoppable consequences. In the midst of our real-world crises, then, make room on your bookshelf for this novel-sized intervention: a heartfelt tale of who we are, what we've done, and where we must not go.