In the summer before COVID-19, I read three works of fiction (one after another) that changed my perspective on the world and our place in it. Each has a very different mood, and perhaps I am glad I read them in the order that I did: The Wall (John Lanchester), The World According to Anna (Jostein Gaarder), and The Ministry for the Future (Kim Stanley Robinson).

**The Wall**
John Lanchester
Faber & Faber, 2019, PB, 288pp, £6.29, 978-0571298730

*BRITISH DYSTOPIA*

*The Wall* is a grim near-future British dystopia. The sea levels have risen and become more hostile to marine life. The international upheaval and mass migration have led to a one-party state erecting a wall around mainland Britain. Everyone must do national service on the wall to keep the foreigners out. Failure results in exile. People still have biscuits and smartphones, but there are no beaches.

I read Lanchester's novel in two sittings, with Donald Trump's hateful rhetoric about building a wall echoing in recent news. The novel channels the mood of a variety of British fictional dystopias, and while I can't infer any influences, it made me think of George Orwell's *1984*, and of *The Guardians* by John Christopher.

The plot draws you in with a first-person perspective; you see, hear, and feel the experiences of a new conscript on the wall. You feel his anger at the generation who have broken the world, his anger at his own parents. The threats that he encounters in the narrative are plausible, for him they are no longer existential. This is an England hostile to outsiders at the point of a machine-gun. 'Stop the boats' has become the way of life, there are smartphone games for the masses and (air) travel abroad is only available to the elite. The emotions that the narrative excited in me were anger and fear. It made me want to learn more, to see what might be done. *The Wall* was longlisted for the Booker Prize, and perhaps one day it will be an A-level or University literature text. I read it with future generations looking over my shoulder.

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**The World According to Anna**
Jostein Gaarder

*INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE*

This book is typical Jostein Gaarder in that a cultural or philosophical phenomenon is encountered by a child resulting in a transformative experience for the reader. A teenage girl experiences climate change, mass migration, and animal species extinction in her own time and in the future as she dreams herself to have become a grandmother.

I find it amazing that reading this book was the first time that the term ‘intergenerational justice’ became meaningful for me. This is in many ways a young adult book. It is tinged with sadness as climate change erodes the beauty of winter and the Nordic traditions that come with it in the present. We see a parallel sadness among the climate refugees; for them their traditions have barely survived the obliteration of their homes by the desert. It is philosophical, political, and teaches us through the discussion and questions of its protagonist.

Threaded throughout the story is Anna's concern for the extinction of animal species, and her plan to bring this into public consciousness. Anna and her youth movement co-exist as a literary mirror image of Greta Thunberg and the 'School-strike for Climate' movement. This is a hopeful book. I wonder if the feeling it left me with was a mixture of nostalgic grief and new hope. It was a good antidote to *The Wall*, and triggered a foray into Gaarder's other books.

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"Anna and her youth movement co-exist as a literary mirror image of Greta Thunberg and the 'School-strike for Climate' movement. This is a hopeful book. ’"
The Ministry For The Future
Kim Stanley Robinson
Orbit Books, 2021, PB, 576pp, £15.29, 978-0316300148

NARRATIVES ON CLIMATE CHANGE
The final novel I would like to mention here is The Ministry For The Future. Don’t be put off by the tome-like page count, it is a page-turner. Kim Stanley Robinson is best known for his Mars trilogy of novels on human colonisation and terraforming (deliberately modifying the atmosphere, temperature, surface topography or ecology of a planet, moon, or other body similar to Earth’s environment thus making it habitable for humans) of the red planet.

The story begins with a catastrophic heatwave experienced as a human tragedy leading to a United Nations response, the titular ‘Ministry for the Future’. The book is a collection of threaded narratives on climate change and everything it might take to reverse it.

A Ministry lobbies governments and national banks from Switzerland, climate terrorists kidnap billionaires and shoot down planes, a community accept a deal to abandon their town to rewilding, scientists attempt to re-ice the poles, and a burnt-out humanitarian worker embarks on his own tragic quest to avenge the world.

Interleaved between the chapters are a series of poetic riddles guest-starring the phenomena that have resulted in our current predicament. Sometimes the threads cross. The hopefulness lies in the possibilities.

In the book, the world’s response doesn’t follow one single strategy to fix the problem, they pursue all of them in a typically human way — united and divided, altruistic and self-interested. The conclusion of this story is a world we would wish for. The first chapter left me feeling anxious but this gradually transformed into an urgent need to see what would happen and how we would be saved. I wanted to learn more, about economics, about climate change and its antidotes, and to foster this awareness in others.

I imagine that these three novels won’t suit everyone. I imagine that for some (hopefully very few) these will represent different examples of literature with no message applicable to our times. For me, they sparked new awareness and new interests, and the hope that if we work together (even in our own ways) we can still save life on Earth.

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