

# GOTHIC NATURE



---

## GOTHIC NATURE II

**How to Cite:** Gibson, R. (2021) All You Need Is Love?: Making the Selfish Choice in *The Cabin at the End of the World* and *The Migration*. *Gothic Nature*. 2, pp. 110-130. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

**Published:** March 2021

---

### Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a fully anonymised process.

### Copyright:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**Open Access:** *Gothic Nature* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

**COVER CREDIT:**

*Model IV*, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

**WEB DESIGNER:**

Michael Belcher

**All You Need Is Love?: Making the Selfish Choice in *The Cabin at the End of the World* and *The Migration***

*Rebecca Gibson*

**ABSTRACT**

*The Cabin at the End of the World* (2018) by Paul Tremblay and *The Migration* (2019) by Helen Marshall explore the prospect of choosing a loved one's survival over the preservation of humanity as a whole. These texts are set in worlds defined by two very divergent but fast encroaching Apocalypses, whether this is expressed via the characters' isolation in a North American cabin or in Oxfordshire as they become cut-off from the world by increasingly extreme weather conditions. The small family of *Cabin* are held hostage and forced to make an impossible choice—pick one member to die or the world ends—whereas the family of Marshall's text are faced with a longer battle to protect the family unit against a mysterious and horrifying epidemic targeting teenagers, eventually revealed to be a new stage of evolution, at the cost of preserving human civilisation as they know it.

This article will explore the ramifications of such a choice in the wider context of ecoGothic, arguing that these texts both advocate different forms of selfishness in the face of environmental disaster. Where Marshall's protagonist represents the fear that humanity has already lost the fight against climate catastrophe, Tremblay's novel proffers a symbolic triumph of togetherness in the direst of circumstances. These explorations of two very different family units reflect a turn towards resignation in the cultural response to climate change. Both reflect the apathy that can result from improperly processing the losses of global environmental catastrophe, but they each offer divergent solutions: *The Migration's* protagonist Sophie sees no future for humanity, whereas Eric and Andrew of *Cabin* see no future without it.

Paul Tremblay's novel *The Cabin at the End of the World* (2018) and Helen Marshall's novel *The Migration* (2019) both centre on the prospect of looming environmental collapse kept at a distance, separated from their human protagonists by virtue of sturdy cabin walls, cars, or advances in medical science. What is kept unthinkable and out of reach remains dark and catastrophic, difficult to contemplate at any great length. In *Cabin*, a series of huge environmental disasters spells the end of the Holocene, whereas in *The Migration* the rapid spread of a terminal illness targets the young and transforms them into strangely alien insectile beings. These events are horrifying because their narrators—their witnesses—have ignored the approach of these events for so long, letting them build up until they became impossible to ignore. These narrators are then pushed to sacrifice a loved one in order to preserve humanity, all while their disintegrating environments convey the fear that their choice whether or not to sacrifice is merely a formality and that humanity has already lost the fight against climate catastrophe.

As discussed by Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (2017), contemporary Gothic texts often incorporate commentary on the social and existential consequences of neoliberal ideologies. In this sense, these texts are performing 'the same kind of cultural work that was carried out by the gothic mode in earlier periods of socio-economic turbulence' (p. 1), such as the *fin de siècle*. Blake and Soltysik Monnet argue that the family home has become 'the primary site of everyday life under neoliberalism' (p. 11) with the neoliberal subject 'recast as agent of his or her individual destiny' (p. 4). The fate of the family in *Cabin* in particular is overtly a result of their specific choices, reflecting the individualistic prioritisation at the heart of neoliberal ideology. However, these novels reflect less on their characters' individual financial or socioeconomic choices and more on their distress over the broader world they are losing. *The Migration* was not marketed as a young adult novel—front cover endorsements from Neil Gaiman, M. R. Carey and Paul Tremblay situate it within the adult science fiction/fantasy/horror field—but it often reads like one, adhering to a familiar coming-of-age structure with a parental conflict and a budding romance while also attempting to tell a much darker story about the end of the Holocene. *Cabin* was significantly more commercially and critically successful than *The Migration*; the film rights

were acquired by FilmNation before the book's release and it received the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award for Novel in 2018. It is also rather easier to categorise, with praise from Stephen King, Mariana Enriquez and Caroline Kepnes emphasising the claustrophobic tension of its premise and situating it clearly within the field of contemporary adult horror.

Despite these differences in tone and reception, *Cabin* and *The Migration* share similar concerns. Both texts explore the build-up of emotion surrounding climate catastrophe and its associated losses, indicating the apathetic hopelessness that can result when the necessary process of mourning for those losses is delayed or denied. However, neither text is precisely elegiac in the manner of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) or Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), both of which place an emphasis on mourning for what has already been lost. Instead, Tremblay and Marshall use hallmarks of the horror genre such as high stakes and claustrophobic intensity to convey their characters' worldview narrowing down to the preservation of their own immediate circle of loved ones. While their acts of love are engaging on a personal level, the characters' collective rejection of sacrifice as a valid method of tackling climate catastrophe evokes the harsh and haunting consequences of such inflexibility. They respond with panic when forced into action and are eventually unable to sacrifice anything personal in the hopes of forestalling an apocalyptic outcome, indicating the dire need to engage more directly with the loss provoked by climate catastrophe so that more assertive action can be taken without succumbing to hopelessness. As Rosemary Randall (2009) argues, '[w]hen loss remains unspoken, neither grieved nor worked through, then change and adjustment cannot follow' (p. 119). As part of the horror tradition, these characters are placed within pressurised and traumatic circumstances when asked to make sacrifices for the greater good, but their refusal to do so reflects the limited and panicked way in which people often respond when faced with humanity's responsibility for climate change.

In *Cabin*, the creeping horror of climate change infiltrates the home through news reports on increasingly frequent natural disasters. *The Migration* depicts the effects of extreme weather seeping into the family home over the course of months. Both texts posit nature as the Other which infiltrates, fitting common definitions of the ecoGothic given by prominent academics. For example, Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (2017) define ecoGothic as an ecocritical lens

which ‘orients us [...] to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies’ (p. 1). Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) define it as a genre which fills in uncomfortable gaps, arguing broadly that the intersection of Gothic and ecocriticism seeks to confront the ‘semiotic problem’ that nature poses (p. 3). David Del Principe (2014) is more specific, arguing that ‘[i]n contemporary society, the [e]coGothic serves to give voice to ingrained biases and a mounting ecophobia – fears stemming from humans’ precarious relationship with all that is nonhuman’ (p. 1). This is the definition which I will be proceeding with, as it mostly closely relates to the texts under discussion: the families of *Cabin* and *The Migration* fear nature getting *in*, dissolving the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. They fear the loss of the creature comforts which have come to define that boundary, resulting in a reluctance to engage with ecological destruction and humanity’s collective responsibility for it.

This concern is not limited to ecoGothic. Many scholars of ecocriticism have expounded on this train of thought more broadly, not least Randall in a more sociological capacity and Timothy Morton from a literary perspective. Morton’s *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2018) engages extensively with the prospect of a future too dark to contemplate, as well as the sheer ‘weirdness’ of admitting responsibility for climate change on an individual basis:

‘Every time I start my car or steam engine I don’t mean to harm Earth, let alone cause the Sixth Mass Extinction Event in the four-and-a-half billion-year history of life on this planet. [...] Furthermore, I’m not harming Earth! My key turning is statistically meaningless. In an individual sense this turn isn’t weird at all’ (p. 8).

But admit responsibility we must, as Morton insists. We all form part of the whole: ‘I am responsible as a member of this species for the Anthropocene. Of course I am formally responsible to the extent that I understand global warming. That’s all you actually need to be responsible for something’ (p. 8).

This sense of responsibility seems simple but is profoundly difficult to process and accept, as articulated by George Marshall in *Carbon Detox* (2007) when discussing the slow emotional impact of environmental campaigning: ‘Belief in climate change is not a switch – it exists in

degrees and it takes years to acquire' (p. 88). George Marshall's description of the 'B-roll of visual clichés' which usually accompanies climate change reporting—'sweating penguins, polar bears stranded on icebergs [...] shimmering heat over cracked earth'—reflects the supposition mentioned above that (to Western viewers) 'climate change is caused by something else, happens somewhere else and will affect someone else' (p. 14). Tremblay and Marshall are able to construct their apocalypses from relatively scant material on the actual page simply by gesturing at apocalyptic events that are happening somewhere in the distance, drawing on the anxiety which characterises prominent discourses surrounding climate change. Fear of environmental disaster is just that intense; the concept of climate catastrophe has ballooned in recent years until it has come to encompass most, if not all, visions of the future. *Cabin* and *Migration* are not deliberately inflammatory representations of characters who refuse to engage with this idea out of a sense of malice or lack of care, but expressions of this build-up of climate anxiety, as well as dread of the alterations that must occur if it is to be averted. Pretending that climate change is something that happens somewhere out there, to other people, and probably in the future instead of right now, has the inevitable effect of rendering it the bogeyman: '[t]he present continues to feel safe but at the expense of the future becoming terrifying. On the one hand, nightmare, on the other false comfort' (Randall, 2009: p. 119). This encourages the perspective that the situation is hopeless, leading to the entropy which characterises Sophie's narration in particular.

Both books contain calls to action which sit in tension with the acknowledged struggle of taking that action. Tremblay and Marshall capitalise on the emotional pull of familial relationships to personalise a situation which often seems abstract and too huge to contemplate. In *Cabin*, familial love is characterised as the last outpost of a species which has lost other means of hope—the family in question wins a triumph of personal integrity in being unable to sacrifice what they love for the sake of humanity's survival. In *The Migration*, the representation of family ties is more complicated as the narrator saves her beloved little sister's dead body from the authorities only to watch her evolve into one of the insectile creatures believed to be the next stage of evolution. In both cases, the end of the Holocene becomes abruptly personal and urgent. *The Migration* finds hope in a new evolution and the abandonment of humanity, whereas *Cabin* suggests real hope lies in the preservation of human connection. In true American tradition, Tremblay privileges a triumph of personal integrity over survival, following in the footsteps of *Bartleby's* passive resistance in

‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ (1853) by Herman Melville and John Proctor’s refusal to sign his name to a false confession in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953), even when it costs him his life. This prioritisation of personal integrity at all costs could be interpreted as an approval of individualistic neoliberal ideologies were it not for Tremblay’s subversion of the solitude usually found at the heart of such stories. In the final pages of *Cabin*, it does not come down to just one person—Eric and Andrew make the choice to go on together, eschewing the call to sacrifice and resolving not to hurt each other. ‘We will go on’, they decide, in what seems like a deliberate and powerful reference to the last line of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable* (1953), replacing the individual ‘I’ with the promise of ‘we’.

By contrast, *The Migration* stakes its bet for the future on flight—both literal and figurative. The transformed Sophie follows her sister Kira into the sky to join the hivemind of their new forms, equipped both to fly and to communicate telepathically, rendering the continuation of human existence in a crumbling environment a moot point. Sophie’s last words to the reader—‘it is me, it is all of us’ (p. 377)—share a sense of collective experience with *Cabin*, which slips into the first person plural in its final paragraphs to telegraph a sense of coming together. However, here the similarity ends; Marshall’s novel advocates for the abandonment of current civilisation, to ‘let nature take its course’ (p. 300), a strand of thought which replicates elements of troubling ecofascist ideologies on the necessity of human extinction for the planet to thrive. To the extent that *The Migration* can envision a future at all, it is one in which our current way of life should be cast aside; it lacks faith in humanity to mitigate the impact of its mistakes. The final lines of *Cabin*, in contrast, force the reader to look beyond the boundaries of the text to the future it *knows* will exist, however challenging: ‘We will walk down the road even if it is flooded by raging waters or blocked by falling trees or if greedy fissures open beneath our feet. And we will walk the perilous roads after that one. We will go on’ (p. 315).

## **Climate Dread**

*The Migration* stretches over a longer timeframe than *Cabin*, allowing for a more insidious creep of environmental ruin which is largely accepted by protagonist Sophie. The events of *Cabin* take place within a couple of days as gay couple, Andrew and Eric, and their adopted daughter, Wen,



are held hostage in their remote holiday cabin in New Hampshire. They are told by their captors Leonard, Redmond, Sabrina, and Adriane that in order to prevent the upcoming apocalypse one of them must sacrifice another, putting a claustrophobic and sadistic twist on the home invasion trope. *Migration* engages in a more protracted sense with questions of humanity's place on earth through the lens of a pandemic plot. Protagonist Sophie and her family are Canadian but begin the novel having moved to Oxfordshire in an attempt to treat her younger sister Kira's mysterious and potentially deadly illness, the technical term for which is 'juvenile idiopathic immunodeficiency syndrome' or JI2 for short (p. 13). This is the first of two migrations reflected in the book's title; the second comes when Kira and the rest of the youths infected by the disease, transformed into insectile new forms capable of telepathy and given the nickname 'nymphs', take flight in their new forms and embark somewhere new—somewhere Sophie cannot follow until she transforms too, leaving her humanity behind.

The backdrop to the unfolding tragedy of Kira's initial death and then transformation is that of steadily worsening environmental damage. Sophie, Kira, and her mother live with Sophie's aunt Irene in a small ramshackle house next to the River Cherwell, a location frequently impacted by extreme flooding. Initially mentioned just as local colour sketching in Sophie's immediate environment, this quickly broadens out into evidence of disaster across the country:

'Storms have been worsening everywhere [...] All over England, rivers have been breaking their banks, or trying to, only held in check by levees and diversion canals. Whole villages in the south have vanished and in Wales the flooding has stripped away the peat, leaving behind ancient animal bones – bears, red deer and aurochs, things that have been extinct for hundreds of years' (p. 12-3).

Other signs of environmental breakdown, such as flying ants acting out of season because they are 'confused by the heat' (p. 154), are juxtaposed with practical consequences such as dwindling supplies of fresh food and frequent power outages. Sophie describes a normal morning eating dry toast (no tea) for breakfast standing next to the stove for warmth because the butter and milk in the fridge have soured after the power cut out during the night. Here the apocalypse is not sudden and

theatrical but slow and mundane, domestic; not one dramatic event which can be resisted but the slow creep of irreversible environmental damage.

Sophie's crumbling environment, both local and global, does not permit much of a division between nature and the human. The River Cherwell breaches its bounds not only when it floods but also more surreptitiously; the walls of Irene's house do nothing to stop it infiltrating Sophie's bedroom:

'the air [...] is so chilly I feel sheathed in ice. "It's the river," Aunt Irene told me when we arrived, "that's why it's so cold. I have to wear gloves if I want to get any work done in here. It can get colder in here than it is outside"' (p. 119).

Here, nature is characterised as a pervasive presence, something Other which penetrates civilised spaces and makes the work of human hands falter. This is in keeping with aforementioned definitions of ecoGothic by Keetley and Sivils' (2017) and Smith and Hughes (2013), both of which foreground the terror and wonder of human and nonhuman coalescing. If taken too far, as in *The Migration*, this can imply a separation between nature and culture which tacitly permits the putting-off of responsibility for things like climate change and global warming—again, if it is happening out there, outside, away, then it can be ignored, and can thus build up into a terrifying, unthinkable event which it is impossible to plan for or mediate. A perspective such as Donna Haraway's seems more constructive. Haraway (1992) argues that this common distinction between nature and culture is a convenient fiction, that nature is 'not a physical place to which one can go, nor a treasure to fence in or bank, nor an essence to be saved or violated. Nature is not hidden [...] It is not the "other"' (p. 65). Positioning nature as the 'other' which infiltrates, as *The Migration* does, only contributes to a sense of helplessness, although unlearning this may be easier said than done when most of our cultural work implies or demands a division between the two. Consider the earlier example of milk and butter going sour after an overnight power cut; this is an unrealistic detail as milk and butter were in circulation long before fridges became commonplace and presumably would not have become unusable in the circumstances described, especially considering how cold Irene's house is supposed to be. This demonstrates the cast-iron divide between the human and nature in the novel. Sophie is unable to imagine a world without

refrigeration for dairy products, conceiving herself and all the human trappings around her to be completely detached from nature.

Tremblay's *Cabin* also depicts nature in this fashion, although it portrays a much more violent intrusion. The novel's action is situated largely in a remote picturesque cabin in New Hampshire which is surrounded by staggeringly beautiful views, following the long American horror fascination with such settings. As Bernice M. Murphy (2013) wryly comments about Drew Goddard's popular horror comedy *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), '[t]he audience doesn't need to have it explained to them that the isolated cabin in the midst of the deep, dark forest is a locale in which horrific events will take place: they've seen it all before' (p. 15). However, Tremblay's novel broadens out from home invasion horror into the realm of environmental horror, heightening the stakes of what is usually a very precise threat limited to a small group of people. Leonard, the leader of the home invaders, informs them:

'Your family must choose to willingly sacrifice one of your three in order to prevent the apocalypse. After you make what I know is an impossible choice, you must then kill whoever it is you choose. If you fail [...] the world will end' (p. 99).

That Eric and Andrew initially do not take Leonard's ultimatum seriously is no great surprise. However, as the hours tick down and the family is forced to witness seemingly large-scale environmental destruction occurring on the news, including multiple earthquakes, a tsunami in Hawaii and a freak number of plane crashes, their incredulity begins to seem more pointed. They are held hostage not only to their own fate but to the fate of humanity at large, with the unthinkable prospect of an environmental apocalypse for which they are responsible gradually invading their home, previously seen as an island of safety in the wilderness. *Cabin* thus acts as a cautionary tale demonstrating how unease and grief at the prospect of climate crisis can build up to such an extent that it becomes an unthinkable horror, impossible to deal with or make changes for because it annihilates the moment it becomes visible.

Before the home invasion begins, Tremblay is careful to highlight exactly how isolated this presumed oasis is. Eric and Andrew are lounging on the back deck overlooking the lake while

Leonard's crew approach from the front, with Eric pondering 'the ancient humpbacks of the White Mountains in the south', noting that the 'surrounding landscape is as spectacularly New England as it is alien to their everyday urban lives' (p. 34). Wen later notes that '[h]er dads chose this place because there would be no Wi-Fi or cell reception so they could unplug and it would be just the three of them hanging out, swimming, talking, playing cards or board games without any digital distractions' (p. 47). The family choose the cabin specifically in order to escape from the pressures of work and the city; they *choose* isolation in what they imagine to be a safe section of nature, only for that isolation to turn against them. The threat of environmental ruin begins at a distance, postponed by the more immediate threat of the home invasion, but as the narrative progresses it seeps into the house through the television, an agent of culture they indulgently dismissed previously as a 'digital distraction' (p. 47).

Tremblay never confirms whether or not the apocalypse is actually taking place. The environmental disasters witnessed on the television are too far away and too huge to be witnessed personally by Eric and Andrew, the only survivors at the close of the novel. They initially assume that the home invaders could be faking the disasters and acting with ulterior motives. However, this theory is cast into doubt once it becomes apparent that the home invaders are compelled to sacrifice one of their number every time the family refuses to do so. This ghoulish pattern of ritual murder-suicide, in addition to their sheer ineptness and reluctance to participate, suggests that they are victims of circumstance too. Leonard, at least, truly believes himself to be merely a 'vessel' at the mercy of the higher powers who commanded him (p. 223); the reader is briefly given access to his perspective after Wen's accidental death. This framing distinguishes *Cabin* from other home invasion narratives such as *The Strangers* (2008), *The Purge* (2013), and *Funny Games* (1997) in which a family is held hostage by invaders which seem almost inhuman in their cruelty, trapped in circumstances designed to reveal that the association between home and safety is a fallacy. Leonard and his crew are not cruel or inhuman. They are largely new to criminal enterprise and distressed at the prospect of committing violence upon the family or witnessing them commit violence upon each other, as eager for the nightmare to be over as Eric, Andrew, and Wen. This leaves a vacuum of blame for the family's dire circumstances which unavoidably loops back, over and over, to their refusal to cooperate.

The natural disasters relayed by the television continue to mount and yet Eric and Andrew cannot bring themselves to consider the prospect of sacrifice. In their panic, they focus on short-term solutions, trying to manipulate their captors into making mistakes or playing on their emotional weaknesses. Their short-sighted response acts as an allegory reflecting human failure to respond adequately to the threat of climate catastrophe, keeping the unthinkable in the distance where it cannot cause more pain. Tremblay places his characters in this situation not to attract criticism but to demonstrate how easily this mistake is made. The pressure-cooker atmosphere of the present tense narrative, with its leaping to and from numerous different character's perspectives, impresses upon the reader that the demands of the family's immediate situation feel much more pressing than anything happening outside the cabin. This also has the effect of distinguishing Eric and Andrew's change in perspective at the end of the novel, after they are finally able to engage with the concept of sacrificing each other, demonstrating that their ultimate decision to remain together and not to hurt each other is a deliberate one rather than the default response borne from defensiveness that it has been for the majority of the novel.

### **The Lure of Inaction**

The protagonists of *Cabin* and *Migration* do more than suffer in silence with their climate grief. Where Eric and Andrew struggle to engage with the bigger picture, Sophie succumbs to the apathy which Timothy Morton (2018) insists is never far away: 'Nihilism is always number one in the charts these days. We usually don't get past the first darkness, and that's if we even care' (p. 5). Morton refers to 'the first darkness' of ecological awareness as 'dark-depressing', difficult and time-consuming to push past into later stages which signify emotional processing of climate catastrophe. In comparison to the compressed timeframe of *Cabin*, Sophie's character arc in *The Migration* has more time to move from speculative hopelessness to directly advocating for inaction. One of her defining features as a protagonist is her steadily growing determination to 'let nature take its course' (p. 300) with regard to the accelerating disease wiping out the younger generation. Part of this attitude stems from political despair; Sophie loses her belief in figures of authority to control the crisis, undergoing a protracted breakdown of trust as she witnesses hospitals becoming quickly overwhelmed by JI2 patients. Neither is she soothed by the news that the local hospital has opened a new set of wards: 'It just means they haven't found a solution yet

and more kids are getting sick' (p. 22). A later scene in the same hospital after Kira's 'death' conveys the mounting chaos:

'There are more scattered cars than I would have thought outside the trauma ward [...] The patient bays are mostly full and more people are trickling in, clutching snotty kids complaining of bad stomach aches. One father grabs an orderly by the arm. "For Christ's sake, my daughter won't stop bleeding," he's shouting' (p. 90).

Sophie's entropy is exacerbated once she contracts JI2 herself, lapsing into hopelessness: 'There's no end to it. No escape' (p. 176). Her aunt Irene is a history scholar specialising in researching the Black Death who advocates for governmental precautions such as cremating the bodies of those infected with JI2, representing the opposite perspective: 'I don't trust despair. It's selfish. It frees you of your responsibilities' (p. 182). In an odd reversal of the usual older/younger generational dynamic, Sophie insists the outlook is bleak, viewing failure to contain the disease and its ramifications as inevitable, but Irene chastises her inertia and challenges her to remain hopeful. She assures Sophie that it is possible to 'grow stronger' (p. 182) as a result of adversity, representing Randall's (2009) perspective that there is still 'much to hope for and much to play for' (p. 121) in response to climate change. Their arguments demonstrate that both sides view the other as ethically irresponsible, but the reader is privy to Sophie's internal narration and not Irene's, meaning that Marshall bolsters her perspective while leaving Irene's unrepresented outside of her conversations with Sophie.

Irene's research leads to the revelation that JI2 is not actually a pathogen at all, instead having been environmentally triggered. JI2 can only be identified through the presence of a specific hormone in the bloodstream, a juvenile hormone which 'seems to trigger a reaction that results in the host's death, followed by the beginning of some sort of new biological processes' (p. 180). These processes being the hardening of the individual's skin and something called the 'jitters' (p. 180) involving the body continuing to move after 'death'. Irene draws a connection between her research into the spread of the Black Death and the environmental circumstances in which JI2 came into being: she points out that at the time of the plague 'the warmer temperatures were spreading diseases such as malaria and dengue [...] as the climate changed, so did the

transmission of all those diseases’ (p. 40). This leads naturally to the theory that JI2 developed in response to ‘environmental triggers [...] The amount of carbon dioxide in the air [...] the melting glaciers. Something in the water [...] Or the storm conditions’ (p. 180). The later revelation that JI2 ‘hit earliest in places where there was massive flooding’ (p. 179) confirms the theory that the planet is self-regulating, and that JI2 should not be designated a disease at all but a new biological process which transforms the body of the host into something fit to withstand the conditions of environmental disaster in a way that humans cannot. This revelation confirms Sophie’s desire to ‘let nature take its course’ (p. 300) as she beseeches her aunt to stop trying to stop the spread of JI2, insisting that ‘[n]ature finds a way when it’s threatened, doesn’t it? It changes itself so the next generation will survive and have a better chance’ (p. 300). In the end, JI2 spreads so fast that the opportunity to stop it simply never arises; Kira and eventually Sophie complete their transformations and flock to a sort of hive-mind in the sky, reunited with each other but separated from their mother and aunt.

Critics largely appear to have viewed the mass transformation of global youth and subsequent flight as a hopeful ending, with Tremblay himself offering an endorsement deeming the novel to be ‘full of heart and difficult, defiant hope’ (back cover quotation). However, I take a more sceptical view. Marshall’s portrayal of a teenager pleading for the authorities to do nothing about the transformations combines uneasily with Sophie’s assertions that ‘[t]he planet was in a tailspin before [...] There isn’t any safety in the way things were. So what if there’s an answer here, something radical and new?’ (p. 304) On the surface this *is* a hopeful message, until it is unpicked to reveal the same hopelessness which characterises much current public discourse surrounding climate catastrophe: that doing nothing is the safer option because it represents nothing lost, nothing gained. No hope ventured and so no disappointment possible. Some of Sophie’s pleas to let the transformation run its course bear similarities to ecofascist schools of thought calling for what Michael E. Zimmerman and Teresa A. Toulouse (2016) term ‘draconian cuts in human population, or even human *extinction*’ (p. 65, original emphasis) as a viable method of tackling encroaching environmental disaster. *The Migration* does not problematise these trains of thought as much as it should; the slow creep of environmental destruction infiltrating Sophie’s everyday life convinces her that there is nothing to do but give up, even if this is at the expense of the future of human life on earth.



It would be easier to read Sophie's pleas to inaction as a result of her desire to preserve herself and Kira in their new forms were it not that her response to her physical surroundings earlier in the novel is characterised as similarly entropic. Sophie is receptive to the slow dissolution of the environment around her even before the scale of the disaster becomes clear, finding comfort in the thought of environmental entropy as she contemplates the ruined castles dotting the English landscape: 'I love the smell of damp stones and moss [...] Ivy crawls over every surface [...] For some reason it feels good to me, being in a place so close to being forgotten' (p. 15). That the castle is a humanmade structure overtaken by flourishing ivy, an emblem of invading nature, seems no accident. Sophie's attitude towards her aunt's ramshackle house in Oxford mirrors this. The house is half-falling down, '[s]o many things are broken [...] I like how this place seems to say, "There are more important things to be worrying about"' (p. 18). The earlier quoted description of extreme flooding included details of the ancient animal bones revealed once the peat was stripped away from Welsh riverbanks, the implication being that the flooding plays a part in stripping away pretences of civilisation and progress and returning the planet to a preferred state of pre-civilisation authenticity. The revelation of wonders such as these extinct animal remains simultaneously renders the environment uninhabitable for all its displaced human occupants, reflecting the troubling thread of ecofascist sensibility which characterises Sophie's perspective and which Marshall leaves largely unchallenged.

Similar sentiments have reared their heads during the current COVID-19 crisis, with a viral tweet claiming that swans and dolphins had 'returned' to the Venice canals eventually being debunked as false, with a fact-check by *National Geographic* revealing that the swans in the video were native to the canals of Burano, not Venice, and the dolphins were filmed at a port in Sardinia (Natasha Daly, 2020). Such stories, while usually not intended to be malicious, are nevertheless emblematic of discourses which treat humanity as a plague upon the earth and promote the ability of nature to 'hit the reset button' without concerted effort from any of us. 'Sandbags line the river but why we're still fighting the water I don't understand. We should abandon the city and move to higher ground: Cumbria, Northumberland, the Scottish islands', Sophie thinks. 'Except there won't be enough room, will there? Not for everyone' (p. 79). Sophie's realistic assessments of the impact of climate catastrophe nevertheless carry an ominous ring which echoes the central thesis



of these discourses; that there is simply not enough room for everyone, and that means difficult choices have to be made.

### **Future Loss**

Tremblay subverts this entropic attitude in *Cabin*. Eric and Andrew are primarily invested in the survival of their child Wen as an emblem of the future while they are held hostage, only for this to be abruptly cut short Wen is shot in a scuffle midway through the novel. The gun was in Andrew's hands, which were in turn encased in Leonard's while Andrew attempted to escape, leaving both parties somewhat responsible for her death. The shock and grief of losing Wen has the immediate effect of actually increasing Eric and Andrew's desire to get away from the cabin so that the three of them can be together: 'She's coming with us', Andrew says. 'Wherever we go' (p. 236). The structure of the home invasion falls apart with Wen's death because the most crucial element which might have been used to persuade her parents has been lost: there is no longer any future for their daughter whether or not they decide to sacrifice a member of their family. Leonard's initial promise that if they fail to make the choice they will 'only live long enough to witness the horror of the end of everything and be left to wander the devastated planet alone' (p. 99) still holds true, but now for an audience of two rather than three. In both *Cabin* and *The Migration*, children are the future, but as a result of widespread inability to engage with climate catastrophe and possible mitigating action, that future is dead.

That Eric and Andrew's relationship does not suffer overmuch for Andrew's role in Wen's death makes a statement about the endurance of queer love in dire circumstances—Eric refuses to let Andrew blame himself, telling him: 'It's not your fault. I will never allow you to say it is' (p. 239). It is made clear from the opening of the novel that Eric and Andrew are not just a parental unit but are in a genuinely loving relationship, a characterisation which influences their reluctance to even confront the possibility of sacrificing each other. Their loving parenthood and good relationship with their daughter initially seems to reject the idea of queerness linking to a genetic dead end—a concept explored in more detail in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Edelman deconstructs the idea of the Child at the heart of political discourse, rejecting the sheer scope of 'a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that

of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense’ (p. 2). Edelman argues that ‘the figure of this Child seems to shimmer with the iridescent promise of Noah’s rainbow, serving like the rainbow as the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now— or later’ (p. 18).

Wen’s shocking and abrupt death could be read as a cruel about-turn from the idea of queer family to an agreement with Edelman that putting hope in the figure of the Child is fruitless. However, I am more inclined to read it as an articulation of the sheer chaos of their situation—her death is accidental and in itself forces no major change in how Eric and Andrew view their circumstances. The deterioration of the environment outside the cabin continues much the same after Wen’s death, with television reports of an ‘avian flu strain in Suffolk, England, Germany, and at a Grayson chicken farm in Tennessee [...] increasing fears of a possible pandemic’ (p. 245). At this point Eric expresses serious doubts for the first time, protesting to Andrew that Leonard promised a plague and appears to be delivering one; by the end of the novel, on the road back to town with Wen’s body carried between them, he argues with Andrew that one of them should sacrifice themselves. But ultimately, overwhelmed by the thought of committing such an unthinkable deed, they are unable to follow through. With the gun held to Andrew’s sternum:

‘Eric implores, repeating his question. “What if it’s all real?”

Andrew inhales, and his defiant answer is in the exhale. “If it is. Then it is.

We’re still not going to hurt each other.”

“What will we do? We can’t go on.”

“We’ll go on”” (p. 314).

As previously mentioned, this intertextual reference to the final line of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable* (2010)—‘You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on’ (p. 175)—with an alteration from ‘I’ to ‘we’ makes a firm statement of togetherness even after the apparent loss of agency and hope. Eric and Andrew’s desire to consolidate their family unit is so strong that even death cannot alter it, even as the evidence of their senses begins to overwhelm them. Storm clouds threaten on the horizon: ‘[t]he sky is a depthless black, impossible to not attribute malignancy and malice to it as strobing flashes of lighting split it open. Wind and thunder rattle through the forest, sounding like

the earth dying screaming' (p. 314). But it is too late for Eric and Andrew to make any other decision; they are determined to remain together at all costs, even if that means extinction.

With this in mind, it is tempting to read the family's individualistic prioritisation of their needs and desires as a comment on encroaching conservatism as a result of neoliberal ideology. However, I would argue that if *Cabin* is commenting on the conservation of the nuclear family archetype in neoliberal ideologies, then it is doing so with a clear view of the consequences—Tremblay's portrayal of the crumbling happy family trapped in a house that becomes deadly is comparable to that of the Harmon family in season one of *American Horror Story* (2011). Karen E. Macfarlane (2017) argues that this season acts as 'a commentary on the anxieties generated by the unravelling of the narrative of the American Dream' (p. 146). In the penultimate episode of the series:

'the Harmon family [...] stand around a beautifully decorated Christmas tree in the picture window of the house. This moment consolidates the ideals of the American Dream: family, prosperity, a stable home. But the fact is that the series is clear that this ideal is only attainable in death' (Macfarlane, p. 155).

Like the Harmons, the family of *Cabin* act as a death knell for the neoliberal ideal of the American family unit. By the end of the novel they have been stripped of all material wealth and socioeconomic status, reduced down to only their relationships with each other. Tremblay suggests that the idealised existence of the Child has no place in the future; whether or not Wen survived the initial home invasion, she would be left in a world either robbed of one parent or keeping both but watching the world around her slide into apocalyptic chaos. In these circumstances, the decision against sacrifice seems like a bolder one than ever, imparting a symbolic message about the principle of maintaining hope even after the archetypal symbol of hope has died.

## **Conclusion**

*Cabin's* apocalyptic resolution makes it an odd vehicle for hope, but what it proffers is undeniably a triumph of principle more than any practical suggestions. Its conclusion is deliberately vague,

leaving it up to the reader to envision a future for Andrew and Eric which sadly cannot include their daughter but in which they remain devoted to each other. *Cabin* attempts to assure the reader that—at least on an individual basis—it *is* possible for love to endure, and for that love to prevent people from turning on each other even when the circumstances appear to warrant such a turn. In contrast, the politics of *The Migration* offers the kind of false nihilistic comfort which plagues common discourses surrounding global action and climate change, urging inaction and entropy and consequently offering up no real solution at all. The final chapter is told from the perspective of Sophie and Kira's mother Charlotte, left behind as both her children literally fly the nest. Charlotte even helps Sophie on her way, driving her comatose body out to the country so that Sophie can join the rest of the new species in the sky when she finishes her transformation. Charlotte holds Sophie in her arms, a mirror image of Eric and Andrew carrying Wen's body down the road into an uncertain future. But here the resemblance ends. Charlotte's final message is one of inward-turning denial, a refusal to face the future, rather than an acknowledgment of the hard road ahead: '*Shhh, baby girl, the storm is passing. It's going to be alright*' (p. 385; emphasis in original).

The nature of our current circumstances is prompting more urgent exploration into concepts of sacrifice and global action than has been seen for years. It would be remiss of me here not to acknowledge the ways in which the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated both humanity's capacity for widespread community action and, in some cases, the state's ruthless prioritisation of the economy over the survival of its most vulnerable citizens. Those who disappear first, in these circumstances, will always be those who already struggle with resource scarcity: those living in poverty or incarceration; those in minority groups. Those who are repeatedly failed by the political systems that are charged with their safety will always be those who lack the means to travel to higher ground. In such circumstances, a message advocating the refusal to do harm seems preferable to one urging that humanity abandon hope for change, even if on the surface they can both be characterised as selfish. The selfishness to try and save each other, then, is offered up as the best chance humanity has.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Rebecca Gibson** is a final year PhD student at Lancaster University. She researches representations of plastic surgery in Gothic texts from the nineteenth century to the present day. She has delivered academic papers on the representation of werewolves in witch pop music, Gothic disfigurement and textual gaps in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1910), comic Gothic in *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-19), simulation of the ‘freak’ body in *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014), and the disintegration of identity in *Annihilation* (2018). She was Executive Editor at LUX: Undergraduate Journal of Literature and Culture from 2017-19. Her research interests include body Gothic, ecoGothic, feminism and gender studies, the medical humanities, queerness, and trauma writing.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beckett, S. (2010) *The Unnameable*. London, Faber and Faber.

Blake, L. and Soltysik Monnet, A. (2017) Introduction: neoliberal gothic. In: Blake, L. and Soltysik Monnet, A. (eds.) *Neoliberal Gothic: International Gothic in the Neoliberal Age*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, pp. 1-18.

Daly, N. (2020) *Fake animal news abounds on social media as coronavirus upends life*. Available from: <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/animals/2020/03/fake-animal-news-abounds-social-media-coronavirus-upends-life> [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

Del Principe, D. (2014) Introduction: The Ecogothic in the Long Nineteenth Century. *Gothic Studies*. 16 (1), pp. 1-9.

Edelman, L. (2004) *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, Duke University Press.

- Haraway, D. (1992) The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others. In: Haraway, D. (eds.) *The Haraway Reader*. New York, Routledge, pp. 63-124.
- Keetley, D. and Wynn Sivils, M. (2017) Introduction: Approaches to the Ecogothic. In: Keetley, D. and Wynn Sivils, M. (eds.) *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York, Routledge, pp. 1-20.
- Marshall, G. (2007) *Carbon Detox: Your step-by-step guide to getting real about climate change*. London, Gaia.
- Marshall, H. (2019) *The Migration*. London, Titan Books.
- Macfarlane, K. E. (2017) Market value: American Horror Story's housing crisis. In: Blake, L. and Soltysik Monnet, A. (eds.) *Neoliberal Gothic: International Gothic in the Neoliberal Age*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, pp. 145-160.
- Morton, T. (2018) *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Murphy, B. M. (2013) *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smith, A. and Hughes, W. (2015) Introduction: defining the ecoGothic. In: Smith, A. and Hughes, W. (eds.) *Ecogothic*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, pp. 1-14.
- Tremblay, P. (2018) *The Cabin at the End of the World*. London, Titan Books.
- Randall, R. (2009) Loss and Climate Change: The Cost of Parallel Narratives. *Ecopsychology*. 3 (1), pp. 118-129. Available from: [https://climateaccess.org/system/files/Randall\\_Loss%20and%20Climate%20Change](https://climateaccess.org/system/files/Randall_Loss%20and%20Climate%20Change).

df [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> April 2020].

Zimmerman, M. E. and Toulouse, T. A. (2016) Ecofascism. In: Adamson, J., Gleason, W. A., and Pellow, D. N. (eds.) *Keywords for Environmental Studies*. New York, NYU Press, pp. 64-68.