Liz Jensen has become a significant voice in British literary fiction in recent years, so reading Our Silver City 2094 comes with the pleasure of rediscovery. Her eight full-length novels, published between 1995 and 2012, ended with The Rapture and The Uninvited, both of which have found their way into the CliFi canon. The Rapture is a flood narrative, in which, against a background of an already-damaged climate, deep-sea drilling leads to a huge tidal wave which engulfs much of Britain and destroys its civilisation, while The Uninvited deploys a time-travel motif, with children from the future returning to the past—the present in which the novel is set—to try to sabotage the businesses which are driving climate change. Our Silver City 2094, a novella which was commissioned for an exhibition of the same title which took place in Nottingham, England, in 2021, and is available online (https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/whats-on/our-silver-city-2094/), continues the climate-change theme. One hundred and thirty-three pages long, it is bound by a prologue and an epilogue, which set humanity in the context of deep time, charting the passage of the species from “the planet’s most successful predatory mammal” (p. 8) to a “new frailty” (p. 130), in which capitalism and the machinery of the industrial world have been stripped away. In between are six “phases”, each preceded by an epigraph from the disaster-management advice given by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These epigraphs take the reader from disasters that come out of the blue, through the heroic phase, to, finally, reconstruction, in a seeming echo of the Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief, and hung on this temporal arc are a number of short chapters, set between the years 2033 and 2094 and running in chronological order.

This is a network narrative: it focuses on various different characters and groups, with several first-person narrators telling their own stories. Other parts are narrated, strikingly, in the first-person plural, with the “we”, evoking the collective experience through which society as a whole moves in the wake of the catastrophe that changes the world. Two devices bind the individual stories together: firstly, the stories are told to the Nottingham Memory Club, whose raison d’être seems to be to help people come to terms with their trauma (the desperate attempt to “maintain spirits” and eschew nostalgia and regret recalls Jimmy at the beginning of Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake) and secondly, as the stories accumulate and time moves on, so the characters come together, arriving from Africa, or from Hull in the northeast of England, to form a family unit that lives together in Nottingham. But having first been bound together, the stories are finally scattered, when Gwen, the anthropologist who elicits, collates and organises the testimonies, puts each of them in a glass bottle with a stopper and casts them into the Trent, to flow down to the sea. Thus the stories perdure, and return to the ocean, which at once elevates the human experience to something worth recording and saving, and sets it loose in the unimaginably vast marine space, where it stands a good chance of being reduced only to sand, a telling metaphor for the place of humankind in the universe.

But what of the disaster that triggers the enormous changes this society undergoes? Consistent with most successful CliFi, including Liz Jensen’s own, this novella is not concerned with the slow-moving background of climate change alone. Novels require
event and action, and in *Our Silver City* 2094, the year 2033 is the year the plastic pandemic, the triggering disaster, occurs. To readers of CliFi who are beginning to feel jaded by a certain sameness in the genre, the “plastic bacteria” comes as a welcome surprise. What happens is that all items made of plastic first develop a mouldy appearance, then begin to break down, and finally disintegrate completely. In practice, this means that everything from mobile phones to The Shard, the highest skyscraper in London, turns to dust—a very clever and original device for taking human civilisation back to pre-industrial conditions. In time, “the bact”, as it comes to be known, mutates, and also comes to destroy oil, meaning that no more plastic can be manufactured. However, in spite of the enforced return to simpler ways of living, the effects of climate change continue to be felt, because the changes to human civilisation have come too late for it to be mitigated. Human life is very much affected: the reason Nottingham has been renamed the Silver City, we discover, is that owing to the failure of the Gulf Stream, it is subject to polar vortex conditions in the winter, so the inhabitants are imprisoned by ice, and normal life is completely suspended. While excessive heat is more often associated with climate change (*Jensen’s* *The Rapture* begins with a description of the uncomfortable and disturbing heat in normally temperate England), Jensen is confident enough here—and has sufficient confidence in the reader—to go for the other half of the temperature gestalt. Climate change means more extreme cold, as well as more extreme heat, as inhabitants of much of the United States have discovered during a series of polar vortexes in recent years.

Climate change is then a given, a part of the background, but one of the most interesting and disturbing aspects of Jensen’s novella (Jensen is often disturbing) is that while governments have finally taken this on board, it does not make for a better world. Ostensibly, this is an eco-warrior’s dream. An explanatory chapter entitled “A Brief History, 2033–70” runs through the forced degrowth the world has seen now that economic progress is no longer a viable goal, the widespread implementation of carbon capture systems, the trial and imprisonment of eco-criminals, the signing of an Earth Treaty, and the adoption of an Earth Constitution. Finally, a policy known as Earthism replaces capitalism. However, in a piece of satire which echoes the equally misleadingly named Libertycare in Jensen’s most haunting novel, *The Paper Eater*, in which a purportedly benign and open government uses artificial intelligence to keep its citizens under mass surveillance and manipulate elections, all this is carried out by an algorithmic system known as The Project. This one-world government operates through shady contractors such as Threshold, which invoke “the spirit of Gaia” but act atrociously, with no respect for freedom or human dignity.

It turns out that The Project is not the only problem. Jensen is a seasoned writer of dystopias, and these steps towards living with climate change do not make for any sort of return to Eden. Flooding is rife in many parts of the world, as are epidemics such as “waterpox”, and while there has been an effort to allocate resources fairly, waves of refugees are still a fact of life, although they now arrive in Britain by airship. In Britain, people are dispatched to “mega-farms” or sent to work on a repurposed cruise ship (readers of *The Paper Eater*, which centres on a cruise ship repurposed as a prison, will be fascinated by this). While one of the farms is called “Victory”, calling to mind the camaraderie and hope of the Digging for Victory campaign in the Second World War (a period in which Jensen set her 2002 novel *War Crimes for the Home*), and the ship is called the Lady Gaia, family members are separated. Worse, there are hints at the kind of forced labour, coercion, control, deprivation of liberty and mistreatment that occur in Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, where workers in company towns find themselves in a system of bonded labour, and some later become slaves.

However, even more striking than any of this is the extraordinary chapter that centres on the young Maxwell, who will be rediscovered in middle age as part of the central family unit living in Nottingham. As a young boy, Maxwell loses his mother to suicide—a suicide which turns out to have been engineered by a therapist named Mother Moon, who is paid by the government to operate through the Orwellian TV “Truth Channel”, with the express aim of persuading undesirables to take their own lives rather than continue to be a burden.
on society. In another echo of *The Paper Eater*, it will prove that much of the therapy is carried out by machine, and that Mother Moon is partly a front. Here, however, the terrible spectre of pursuing a depopulation strategy for the good of the planet is raised. On learning what happened to his mother, the young Maxwell assassinates Mother Moon in revenge—but this feeds into another dystopian thread, in that it is later revealed that following this incident, when the culprit could not be identified, large numbers of people were sent to work on the Lady Gaia, and so, Maxwell’s act results in more widespread suffering.

All this is a long way from climate change *per se*. In recent years, it has become accepted that CliFi discusses multiple challenges—Nathaniel Rich’s *Odds Against Tomorrow*, in which Mitchell Zukor is almost petrified with terror at the spectrum of things to worry about, is perhaps the best-known exemplar of this. However, CliFi and the usual attendant horsemen of the apocalypse—terrorism, financial meltdown and the still-relevant nuclear threat—is now arguably at a pivotal moment, in that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the dangers of gain-of-function research into the public domain. Viral research which makes pathogens more deadly more contagious, or both, is suspected of causing the current pandemic, and it must also be considered as a future risk to the survival of humanity. In the words of neurobiologist André Goffinet, “Climate change and risky virological experiments are different aspects of the same issue”, with both requiring “action to protect human civilization.” However, literature and other art forms are likely to take a certain amount of time to react overtly to COVID—if they react at all. Elizabeth Outkar argues that the Spanish Flu pandemic is most evident in the gaps and silences of modernist literature. The gaps and silences today are perhaps there for different reasons: COVID origins is a politically sensitive area, and the same sections of society which militate against climate change also worry about causing offence by putting gain-of-function research on the table as a clear and present danger to humankind, and thus casting doubt on the zoonotic origin story of COVID-19.

Be that as it may, COVID-19 can be read as a troubling presence in Liz Jensen’s novella. The epigraphs to each of the six “phases” are particularly disconcerting in that they seem to read less as a prediction of a future disaster than as a summary of our collective experience as normal life was upended in the first year of the pandemic: “community bonding”, “the honeymoon phase” and “taking responsibility for rebuilding our lives” now feel all too familiar. While superficially practical and straightforward, these extracts from the US Department of Health and Human Services become imbued with an eerie quality post-COVID, similar in some ways to the British government’s 1980s series of survival leaflets for nuclear war, *Protect and Survive*—which, in later years, proved to be surprisingly popular with the public, although in that case the predicted disaster was averted following the end of the Cold War. The epigraphs to the six phases in *Our Silver City 2094* can be read—whatever the authorial intention, or lack of it—as conferring on the novella a framework which readers will recognise: they seem to tell the story of COVID-19 back to us, from the first terrible surprise to the final coming to terms with the new normal. Similarly, the reader may see references to COVID in the references to Emergency Rooms being at full capacity, to the various theories which are put forward concerning the origin of “the bact”—and in the workshops that the Nottingham Memory Club runs for its members (“Living with Grief, Embracing Change, Telling the Kids, etc.”).

As the novella works towards the end of the 21st century, the inhabitants of Nottingham, by now rechristened The Silver City, have settled into a liveable new normal, living mostly in small “pods” or communities. There is still a recognisable local economy. Industry is thriving—there is a dye factory, known as the Colourworks, and predicting weather (by means of a natural, almost animistic, approach, in the absence of the old scientific instruments), has become another means of making a profit. The Temple is a locus of community life and the place where the archives of the Nottingham Memory Club are kept, but organised religion has transformed into a widespread but non-prescriptive belief in the Oversoul. All in all, Gracie, the last narrating character, seems both content and optimistic. Nonetheless, *Our Silver City 2094* gives a nuanced vision: while people turn to
cultivating their own gardens, at macro-level all is not well, and the plastic pandemic, while it has brought an end to capitalism and an oil-driven economy, has not ended exploitation or authoritarianism.

However, the epilogue moves away from the local to the general, functioning as a poetic restatement of the changes that have taken place, not only in humankind’s existence on Earth, but in its relationship with the planet. The “predatory” humans of the prologue have metamorphosed into something more humble, more subject to outside forces, more in tune with nature. Individualism has been damped down, community is more important: “Nobody has a plan for life any more. Life has a plan for them. We are dealt a hand”. At the micro-level, this is an optimistic vision of future change. This novella is also admirable in its economy, achieving a global sweep and an overview of the greater part of a century in less than 150 pages (in contrast to Kim Stanley Robinson’s 600-plus in The Ministry for the Future, a novel which is comparable in terms of its structure and global vision). Perhaps most importantly, as in all Jensen’s work, the writing is extraordinary, with moments of such felicity that you have to stop reading, and take a moment to admire and contemplate.

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