

# Writing about climate change: my professional detachment has finally turned to panic

Michael Slezak

I've maintained a wall between my job and my emotional response to it, but this month I've felt dread rising about looming disaster, and it's an awakening



'The new emotional reaction I've developed to climate change, while obviously unpleasant, also comes as a kind of relief.'

Photograph: Hamish Blair/Getty Images

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Until recently, like a sociopath might have little feelings when witnessing violence, I've managed to have relatively mild emotional responses to climate change.

For five years I've been covering climate change - the science that underpins it, the things that are driving it, the devastation it is wreaking, and the desperate measures we need to urgently put in place to mitigate it. (Not to mention the reporting I've done on the pathetic politics surrounding it.)

But for most of that time I've been able to maintain a wall between the objective facts I report, and my emotional response to those facts.

Intellectually I've understood the things I've been reporting and the inevitable disaster that is looming for much of the world's population. But somehow, I didn't feel the deep sense of panic

or dread that is obviously appropriate when facing such a serious crisis.

But in 2016, something changed.

I'm not sure if it was a shift in my focus in reporting as I moved from reporting mostly just the hard science of climate change for New Scientist, to reporting the depressing politics as well at the Guardian.

Or perhaps it was the sheer scale of the climate-related disasters I reported on in 2016 that shook me.

Or maybe it was the very personal experience of impending fatherhood, with my partner and I preparing to bring a little girl into the world early this year. Suddenly the period of time that seems directly relevant to me is extended several decades into the future. The experience of becoming completely responsible for a person who will see first-hand the major changes wrought by climate change towards the end of the 21st century made consideration of what would happen in those decades impossible to ignore.

Actually, my emotional awakening was probably caused partly by each of them.

But there was one moment this month that made me feel this stronger than ever. I experienced a type of panic, but one that brought me another kind of relief.

I was half way through James Bradley's brilliant novel *Clade*, which is part of a growing movement of fiction that is conscious of the vast ecological changes - climate and otherwise - being caused by humans. It is set in the later decades of the 21st century, and follows a few generations of people as they navigate a world in which climate change is an ongoing all-encompassing crisis.

Early in the book, one of the main characters - a climate scientist - struggles with the decision he and his partner had made to have a baby.

After describing the hastening melting of permafrost, the loss of Arctic ice and the destabilisation of Antarctica, Bradley writes:

*One day in his office, he reviewed a new study about the release of methane from the ocean floor and saw, more starkly than ever before, the conundrum the world faced. It wasn't simply that they needed to consume less, to bring humanity's impact on the biosphere under control, it was that there were just too many people, and even allowing for technological change and economic restructuring, the planet was on a collision course with disaster. In the United States and India floods covered millions of square kilometres, in Africa and Europe the heat was growing ever more intense and in Indonesia and Brazil and Malaysia the forests were burning, yet he and Ellie were trying to have a baby. What sort of world would that child inherit? Were they really doing the right thing by bringing another life into it?*

As I read the way that child dealt with the world it inherited, the Bureau of Meteorology released its annual climate statement, describing what happened in 2016. It was so clearly an early warning signal for the impacts that *Clade* was exploring.

In my news report I wrote:

*Australia's weather was extreme in 2016, driven by humankind's burning of fossil fuels as well as a strong El Niño, according to the Bureau of Meteorology's annual climate statement.*

That extreme weather led to devastated ecosystems both on land and in the sea, with unprecedented bushfires in regions that don't usually burn, the worst coral bleaching on record, and has been attributed as the cause of damage to vast tracts of crucial kelp forests, oyster farms and salmon stocks across southern Australia.

The similarity between what I was reporting of what happened in 2016, and the futurism in Bradley's work left me with something close to a panic.

But the new emotional reaction I've developed to climate change, while obviously unpleasant, also comes as a kind of relief.

Feeling numb to something that deserves an emotional response is disconcerting. I used to nod along as people expressed their pain at watching the world drown itself in CO2. But I harboured a guilt at the lack of appropriate emotional response I had to something I knew was objectively a disaster.

Indeed, that ability for humans to not react emotionally to climate change is undoubtedly one of the things that is making this collective form of species-level suicide possible.

While I can't say with confidence that bringing a child into the world we are creating is the right thing to do, I maintain a hope that those children will find a way to undo what we have imposed on them. And if nothing else, it has given me a renewed passion for to do my part in fighting for a just world for future generations.

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