

“A story to match any fiction”

Environmental Sincerity in Contemporary US
Fiction

By

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

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Ashleigh McIntyre

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So, in the spirit of what one of my nannas said the first time I explained my thesis to her, "here's to the art of bullshit!"

Abstract

This thesis argues that the rise of “sincerity” as a dominant style in contemporary American (US) fiction is tied to an ecological consciousness that accords literature a transformative role amid environmental crisis. Climate upheaval is a quintessential characteristic of the present moment, and as such, the pursuit of sincerity has fostered a clear environmental voice in fiction as authors seek to engage with the lived human experience in the Anthropocene. As such, I trace a historical arc in US fiction that is driven by the pursuit of sincerity, and the subsequent, inevitable engagement with environmental crisis. American literature, therefore, transitions from the sterile intellectualism and self-reflexivity of postmodernism to an engaged post-postmodernism that is characterised by ecological crisis and its impacts on the social, cultural and political reality of individuals and communities.

For this study, I undertake close readings of five US novels and examine the various narrative techniques and plot devices used to address environmental crisis. Instead of hypothesising a genre of environmental fiction, I argue that environmental consciousness is unavoidable as contemporary US fiction turns towards sincerity and the lived experience for its content; after all, climate crisis is an unavoidable characteristic in understanding our contemporary moment. The first four chapters examine a canonical text taken from a different decade, beginning with Don DeLillo’s postmodern classic *White Noise* (1985), David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996),

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000), and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). Through this historical progression, I demonstrate the ways in which sincerity has manifested in canonical fictions over time, and how environmental consciousness is increasingly evident in the American literary voice. The final chapter examines Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), a recent, explicitly environmental fiction that pushes beyond human perspectives, beyond humanism, in search of a post-human perspective that positions the planet itself at the centre.

Together, these five case studies demonstrate how fiction identifies and begins to deconstruct the traditional, anthropocentric cultural narrative of human dominion over nature. More broadly, they represent a historical arc in contemporary US fiction that spans from postmodernism to an environmentally conscious post-postmodernism, that ultimately pushes literature into the sphere of commentary and activism.

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