



# Orphans of the Earth

## *Climate Refugees in Young Adult Science Fiction*

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### Abstract

The climate crisis is emerging as a major driver of migration. Climate refugees — those displaced by climate disasters or gradual ecological degradation — are likely to play a significant role in global migration patterns as climate impacts intensify. This evolving crisis presents challenges for educators and remains underexplored in critical scholarship, yet it is already influencing literary narratives. In contemporary young adult (YA) fiction, climate refugees take on the archetypal role of the orphan, a destabilizing figure that disrupts social structures. This essay examines *War Girls* (2019) by Tochi Onyebuchi and *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) by Cherie Dimaline to highlight how these novels depict climate refugees as both vulnerable and transformative figures.

### Keywords

[climate crisis](#), [environmental destruction](#), migration, orphans, climate refugee

Climate change has always played a crucial role in shaping patterns of human migration. Early human migrations out of Africa, beginning around 100,000 years ago, were closely linked to climatic shifts driven by Earth's orbital changes (Timmermann et al., 2022). These shifts created "green corridors" of vegetation between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, enabling *Homo sapiens* to move slowly into Eurasia and beyond in waves roughly every 20,000 years (ibid.). Ice Age climate fluctuations, including warming and cooling periods, also influenced population expansions, contractions, and movements in prehistoric Europe and northern Asia (Saltr , 2024). In the past millennium, climatic stress, particularly drought, likely prompted migrations in the twelfth and thirteen centuries among the Anasazi people from their settlements in Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde (Benson, 2007).

Despite the longstanding relationship between human mobility and climate, the effect of climate change on displacement and migration in the twenty-first century is of an entirely different order (Cattaneo, 2019). Ominous potential for systemic instability in global migration is emerging due to the rapid rate of the climate crisis. This change is occurring over decades, not centuries. Likewise, its scale is unprecedented. Estimates vary widely, but many scholars agree that global impacts of rapidly changing climate will play an increasingly dominant role in shaping migration patterns in the coming decades (Nawyn, 2024).

The term "climate refugees" refers to people driven from their homes by the violent disasters fueled by climate change or through persistent "slow violence" of environmental degradation such as desertification, toxic pollution, or flooding from rising seas. The complex relationship between migration and the climate crisis, two topics of intense political sensitivity, can make it pedagogically difficult for teachers to address the ways in which climate and environmental factors are rapidly becoming drivers of involuntary migrations (Daoust, 2024). While scholarship is still developing, the emerging phenomenon of climate refugees is already influencing literary narratives, particularly in science fiction cli-fi for young audiences. In some works of contemporary young adult (YA) fiction, climate refugees inherit the archetypal cultural role of the juvenile orphan as a destabilizing figure who disrupts fixed identities and social structures. This essay examines two such texts by showing how young climate refugees are depicted in Tochi Onyebuchi's *War Girls* (2019) and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow*

*Thieves* (2017). Both novels reimagine the role of orphaned protagonists in a world in which adolescent experience is defined by ecocide, climate-induced displacement, and migration.

These novels are valuable resources for educators looking to teach students about the influence of the climate crisis on migration. Three aspects distinguish these texts. First, they focus on indigenous populations doubly displaced by ethnic persecution and environmental collapse, whose histories of displacement from ancestral lands are projected in these novels onto climate-altered futures. Second, they portray orphan characters whose loss of family and home has a destabilizing effect on social structures, galvanizing the potential for broader transformations. Third, the novels demonstrate how traditional literary archetypes, and narrative tropes can be recycled to imagine the speculative landscape of a world devastated by the climate catastrophe. The explicit connections in *War Girls* and *The Marrow Thieves* between indigenous peoples, orphan narratives, and the predicament of climate refugees makes these works especially useful for helping students understand the complex relationships between the climate crisis, migration, and histories of ethnic persecution.

Although these novels depict young people displaced by climate events, the term “climate refugee” remains politically and legally contested (Tubi and Israeli, 2024). Unlike refugees fleeing war or political persecution, people displaced by weather-related disasters or incremental environmental degradation do not satisfy legal criteria for asylum or protection. While international law has yet to recognize climate refugees, the movement of such people is already reshaping patterns of mobility, particularly in countries most vulnerable to climate impacts. Most climate-induced migration takes place domestically, the scenario portrayed in both novels (Ferris, 2024). Even as scholars and policymakers struggle to determine how to address the needs of such populations, youth literature has already begun to imagine this scenario. In particular, YA cli-fi novels demonstrate how education augmented by climate literacy can open up creative possibilities for engaging the complex topic of climate-induced global migration in ways that contemporary academic discourse struggles to articulate. The following analysis can help teachers grasp how the climate crisis informs debates about migration and displacement while broadening pedagogical approaches to these related yet politically disputed fields.

In particular, we propose a conceptual model for understanding the figure of the climate refugee as a modern reframing of the traditional orphan archetype in contemporary context. In English fiction—where the influence of Charles Dickens has been significant—the orphan figure has served as a symbol of disruption and reinvention (Peters, 2000; Sanders, 2011). Stripped of familial ties and social belonging, orphans in narratives from *Oliver Twist* to *Harry Potter* challenge existing power structures while navigating their own uncertain futures. In the context of climate fiction, the orphan figure takes on new yet familiar dimensions, representing not only the loss of family but also the loss of homeland. While classic literary orphans are separated from family and social belonging, YA cli-fi reimagines the orphan as a climate refugee, severed from ancestral geography and ecological heritage as they are plunged into precarious survival and perilous search for home. This transformation of “functional orphans” (Nikolajeva, 2002, p. 172) is particularly vivid in Onyebuchi’s *War Girls* and Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*, in which young orphan protagonists navigate a world shaped by both ecocide and displacement (see Curtis, 2015, p. 356).

### **Case Study 1: War Girls**

*War Girls* is an Africanfuturist novel by an American author of Nigerian heritage. Set in Nigeria in the late twenty-second century, it imagines a future that seems to repeat the past. In the novel’s post-apocalyptic world ravaged by nuclear radiation and global warming, a brutal war of attrition rages between groups that resemble the belligerent parties from the historical 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War. Also known as the Biafran War, it was waged by the newly independent Nigerian government against the Igbo-separatist Republic of Biafra, a short-lived entity whose failed bid to secede challenged the Yoruba, Hausa, and Fulani majorities that dominated the early government of Nigeria. The novel depicts a future caught between technological sophistication and environmental devastation. More affluent populations, such as the states of Europe and America, have abandoned Earth in order to reestablish their societies in massive space colonies orbiting the blasted planet. Those too poor to flee the planet are displaced from their homes. Among those who remain on Earth are armies of the displaced, who engage in fierce battle for terrestrial control of the scant parts of the world still fit for human habitation. Further reflecting history projected onto the imagined future, battle

lines are drawn according to ethnic differences. In Nigeria, the Igbo once again suffer at the hands of their rivals, but they all contend with the toxic consequences of a ruined natural world.

The protagonists of *War Girls* are two orphaned Igbo sisters, Onyii and Ify. They serve as girl warriors—part cyborg, part adolescent superhero—and upset the balance of power in the military stalemate. Displaced from their ancestral home, they fight for a safe haven free from the aggression of the Nigerian majority or the fallout of environmental collapse. They confront a bleak scenario in which wanton natural destruction dovetails with violent racial persecution as two sides of the same coin of alienation, estrangement, and displacement:

For so long, they have visited violence upon us. It never starts with machetes. It starts with shutting the Igbo out of government. Then it becomes giving all the good jobs to the Hausa and the Fulani and the Yoruba. Then we are accused of crimes we do not commit. Called animals. They say we infest this country. Then we become the reason the Sahara grows larger and more and more of Nigeria turns to desert. We are blamed for the drought. We are blamed for the radiation. Then we are thrown in jail. Then we are murdered. (Onyebuchi, 2019, p. 19)

Where does environmental destruction end and racial persecution begin? The answer lies in a chain of violence that begins with exclusion and progresses to political and economic disenfranchisement, scapegoating and, ultimately, violent persecution. Forced migration and loss of land are overdetermined: a steady assault on the environment results in an assault on the persecuted minority, reinforcing how loss of identity goes hand in hand with loss of home.

The novel extends the human dynamic of displacement and persecution to the climate crisis, as the Igbo are not only dispossessed of political and social agency but also falsely blamed for environmental degradation. Accusations that they are responsible for drought, radiation, and desertification highlight how the climate crisis becomes weaponized for ethnic oppression. This intersection of ecocide and genocide

reflects how climate refugees are not merely displaced by environmental catastrophe but are also stripped of their cultural identity and collective history.

### **Case Study 2: *The Marrow Thieves***

The *Marrow Thieves*, another cli-fi dystopia, adopts a similar line of reasoning in representing Frenchie, an orphan climate refugee on the run from genocidal enemies in the ecocidal future. Written by a Canadian indigenous author of the Métis people, the novel is set at a time when climate disaster altered the geographies of civilization by engendering the collapse of coastal cities into the sea. In the wake of war, social upheaval, and constant rains, disease and toxic ruin ravage humanity such that people lose the ability to dream. Without the capacity to dream, the surviving remnant of humanity has no future. If humans are to have a future, they must be able to imagine it in dreams, a capacity retained only by indigenous peoples like Frenchie. For this they are hunted and abducted as a means of harvesting a serum out of their blood and the marrow of their bones, hardly idle metaphors in the history of North American indigenous people, in light of a history of discrimination based on allegations of native blood quotient.

Evoking the fate of the majority of climate migrants displaced within domestic borders, Frenchie and his fellow First Nations survivors flee into the wilds of the Canadian hinterland to avoid capture by government agents seeking indigenous bone marrow. Their band of orphans cling together in a dystopian reversion to their nomadic heritage. They take to the road, learning to survive in search of their uncontaminated ancestral lands beyond the sway of the government marrow thieves and toxic ruin. Their migration is doubly resonant as it is motivated by a desire to survive but also to maintain their cultural heritage in a world hostile to their existence. Frenchie relates the erosion of the environment to the erasure of his ethnic ancestry:

I came from a long line of hunters, trappers, and voyageurs. But now, with most of the rivers cut into pieces and lakes left as grey sludge puckers on the landscape, my own history seemed like a myth along the lines of dragons.  
(Dimaline, 2017, p. 41)

This destruction of the natural world imperils indigenous identity. Loyal to their past, these orphans of the land retain a unique ability to dream of a future.

## **Conclusion**

Both *War Girls* and *The Marrow Thieves* depict young climate refugees as orphans whose displacement accompanies ethnic persecution. The texts share a crucial connection in imagining how environmental destruction can cause displacement, leading to cultural erasure. The orphan figure embodies personal and collective loss — of family, homeland, and identity. This reimagining of the traditional literary orphan for the climate crisis era allows YA cli-fi to engage with complex themes of environmental justice and cultural survival while contributing to broader discourses about climate-related migration. Other texts, especially Nicky Singer's *The Survival Game* (2018), similarly imagine a near-future world ravaged by climate disasters and mass migration, although Singer does not foreground indigenous histories.

Our analysis suggests that YA cli-fi can reinvigorate orphan narratives for an age of climate crisis. Protagonists who are both literal orphans and climate refugees anchor bleak portrayals of the human impact of environmental collapse. By illustrating how climate-induced displacement can affect identity, these works provide opportunities for educators to help students envision the human dimensions of the climate crisis.

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