


REVIEW

A Review of “Juice”

Review Reference

Winton, T. (2024). *Juice*. Hamish Hamilton (Penguin).

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While it may be unusual for AJEE to countenance a review of a work of fiction, I found this book to be a compelling and insightful account of the political framing and consequences of anthropogenic climate change, that I think will be likewise informative and potentially useful to stimulate discussion in the environmental education community. Tim Winton, as a leading Australian writer and increasingly an environmental advocate, is well placed to speak to possible futures for society and the environment in Australia.

Tim Winton’s novels often have a dark underbelly — an exploration of tussles with a landscape or seascape that is challenging but ultimately rewarding to those who know it and how to adapt. I think here of the fierce country of the Shepherd’s Hut and the resourceful, independent nature of the youthful protagonist, or the wild but exhilarating nature of the giant waves in the coming-of-age story in *Breath*. So it is not a surprise that in *Juice*, Winton has extended his theme of a dangerous and formidable landscape confronted by resourceful but haunted heroes to embrace a post-apocalyptic climate decimated world some decades into the future. Here again we have a self-reliant, troubled central figure grappling with the savagery of a climate that continues to erode.

Every CliFi narrative work reflects underlying decisions about what aspect of change is in frame, about how much is explained in what level of detail, and about what themes are foregrounded. In *Juice* we have some very big and challenging themes; a world set some considerable time into the future that is physically decimated in very specific ways, that features a future human society much altered and disrupted, and an accusation of responsibility for the climate catastrophe that is impossible to miss and that informs a strong moral, if not vengeful theme running through the book.

The story is told in the first person, with the protagonist offering a narrative of his growth from youth, through learning and mastering the survival arts, to his enlistment in the secretive and commando-like “Service,” and the multiple tragedies that have befallen him related not only to climate but to the perfidies of human nature exposed by climate breakdown. The context of the story-telling in the book seems somewhat artificial, forced as a narrative to argue trustworthiness, but in the end allows an ending that is intense, ambiguous, and raises questions about a future premised on human character, and trust.

The setting is mainly on a remote peninsular in north-western Western Australia, where the inhabitants form into a largely self-reliant Association forced by climate breakdown and the associated societal collapse. Families are forced to live in insulated shelters because of the heat,

which becomes impossible to withstand in the summer forcing a retreat to underground. Turbines and solar cells provide power for the batteries that are central to survival, and our protagonist's family becomes adept at turning out drip-irrigated food, including chickens, which are traded locally for technical supplies. Foraging trips further south to old mining camps replenish materials for building and engineering maintenance. The technology, as with many futuristic accounts, is a mix of sophisticated engineering and makeshift systems put together from reclaimed materials.

This is a barren landscape, with deep covering of ash presumably resulting from the burning of ancient forests, that in the dry can quickly swirl and cause a choking death, and in the wet forms impassible quagmires. The harder ground is baked hot, and excursions are only possible in the relative cool of the early morning. To stay out too long in the burning sun is to court blisters, heat stroke, and worse for bodies in insulating suits that suffer punctures. Storms that bring dry lightning and dust/ash, and cyclones that threaten flooding of underground retreats, are intense and increasing in frequency. The maintenance of safety procedures, such as levees, and the tying down of materials, is part of survival. This is an uncomfortable novel that does not hold back on the consequences of climate collapse. When our protagonist describes the earth as an orange to his home-schooling mother, she proceeds to peel the orange in a belt around the centre, inviting the sudden realisation that the equatorial region has become uninhabitable.

The history that led to this point is sketched in general terms, with reference to a "Terror" period when governance fell apart and warring factions were manipulated by cartels intent on preserving their opulent and power-fuelled lifestyles to the detriment of the planet. It was presumably this period during which the planet burned and extreme weather broke down the possibility of orderly governance. Following this, there was a long period of stability as people reformed to develop ways of adjusting to the deteriorated climate. *Juice* is set at the end of this period. Indeed, over the course of the single generation represented by the narrative, further climate collapse is uprooting and pushing people further south, presaging further societal collapse and the rule of roving bandits. This is not an easy read, and Winton gives little hope for an easy solution beyond the possibility of resourceful individuals organising their technological resources. Even that hangs as a question in the final, unresolved ending.

A strong theme running through the book is the question of blame for this planetary collapse. While not being totally explicit, Winton sheets this home to ruthless fossil fuel and other extractive cartels. An important part of the narrative is the rooting out of cartel oligarchs who still maintain power and influence exercised by bunkered centres protected by extended, hidden systems, technological innovation to deal with climate ravages, and mercenaries. While the operation of the underground "System" dedicated to destroying these is ostensibly to eradicate their influence, there is a strong undercurrent of revenge implied in their operation, and Winton does not hold back in his barely concealed attack on the manipulations of the extractive industries and their collusion to proceed with planetary decimation despite full knowledge of the consequences. A large part of what makes this possible is the ignorance of people generally to the very specific, self-interested choices being made.

As a CliFi work, *Juice* is a sobering, dystopian wake up call to both the implications and causes of climate collapse. It is a strong and frightening vision of a planet in crisis, and a humanity that, while resourceful and community minded at the local scale, has turned on itself at the larger, planetary-moulding scale. The nature of the climate follows the warning vision of the IPCC, and the societal collapse premised on runaway, cynical industrial interests is plausible; a strong statement that we can take as due warning. A minor theme is the emergence near the end of the book of simulacra, AI beings created by the cartels who have a well-developed sense of justice and commitment to a higher cause. While this seemed in many ways redundant to the central message, it did give Winton the chance to offer the thought that perhaps humans, given their complicity in climate collapse, are ready to be superseded by life forms with higher ideals.

A relatively silent theme in the book is that of the role of and effects on Australia's Indigenous population. History has largely been lost in the great terror, but there are references to people who

came before and have since been lost to history. Near the end, our protagonist meets a band of “dark strangers” appearing out of the desert, telling him to move on. Their survival, away from mainstream communities, is thus held as a possible future.

All in all, this is a challenging but rewarding read by one of Australia’s best-known writers at the top of their game. It is an absorbing narrative that has all the features of a great tragedy, and an insightful analysis of the human condition. As *CliFi*, it raised for me fresh insights into potential climate futures and the consequences and causes we would do well to hold in our imagination if we are to take critical action. Perhaps, above all, it’s a call for us all to be more vigilant and critical about those vested interests that are operating across the globe. Winton has given us in this story a protest at the politics of climate, and a call for action.

Environmental educators have long been aware that personal and communal action to protect our environment involves critical knowledges of causes and consequences, and attitudes and values of eco-social justice and deep feelings for our natural environment. Works such as *Juice*, by a key Australian writer, paints a picture that touches on all these, and as such is a potentially valuable addition to climate literacy texts. It speaks to the consequences of ignorance and inaction.

Author Biography

Russell Tytler is Deakin Distinguished Professor of Science Education at Deakin University. He researches student reasoning and learning through the multimodal languages of science, socio scientific issues and reasoning, school-community partnerships, and STEM curriculum policy and practice. He has led a range of research projects, including investigating a guided inquiry pedagogy for interdisciplinary mathematics and science, and currently representing contemporary science R&D in schools to support an informed Climate Change Education. He is a member of the Science Expert Group for PISA, and of the Deakin Centre for Regenerating Futures.