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## Flight Due to Climate Change in Jostein Gaarder's Novel *2084: Nora's World*

**Abstract:** This article deals with the topic of flight due to climate change using the example of the utopian youth novel *2084: Nora's World*. Unlike previous novels about flight, in this utopian book for young people, flight due to climate change is not conceptualized as leaving the old home and attempting to cross borders. Instead, the flight is told retrospectively. The focus is not on the experiences during the flight, but on the reasons for the flight: climate change. Climate change as the cause of the flight is told in two different time levels: In the narrated present and in the narrated future. But only in the narrated future the refugees flee due to climate change. Due to the logic of time, climate change as the cause of flight is presented as a changeable natural event. The article discusses how the novel is told about flight due to climate change and what significance the concept of time has for the young adult novel *2084: Nora's World*. So the article addresses an existing gap and, with reference to current theories of time, shows how flight due to climate change is narrated in the utopian young adult novel *2084: Nora's World*.

**Keywords:** flight, climate change, young adult literature, time concepts

### FLIGHT AS A MOTIF IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

In the (history of) children's and young adult literature, or rather since the twentieth century (Jagdschian, 2021: 3–13), the motif of flight has exhibited a long-lasting and differentiating spectrum of forms on a narrative and symbolic level (Jagdschian, 2024). In children's and young adult novels flight is usually conceptualized as leaving the old homeland after the people concerned have been violently persecuted due to their political, social, or religious beliefs, or sexual orientations. During their flight, they try to cross borders and are in search of new homes. In addition to persecution, the causes of flight can also be wars (see Hopp, 2021: 26–34; Wanzek, 2021: 14–25; Bernhardt, 2022: 155–180; Vach, 2023: 131–154). Recently more and more novels have been published that tell of flight due to climate catastrophes (Mikota, Pecher, 2020:

8–18), such as *2084: Nora's World* by Jostein Gaarder (2013) or *Before and After: Survival is not enough* (2019) by Nicky Singer. Both young adult novels tell the story of flight because of climate catastrophes (Stemmann, 2022: 25–36). Gudrun Pausewang's *Die Wolke* can be seen as a precursor to these novels, which tell of an escape due to climate catastrophes (see Conrad, 2020: 213–226). This article will deal with this previously unexamined representation of flight due to climate change using the example of *2084: Nora's World*. The first step is to define what is meant by the term climate refugee. Building on this, the young adult novel *2084: Nora's World* will be categorized in a second step. It is striking that the depiction of flight due to climate change is mostly embedded in a utopian setting. The utopian narrative concept indicates that the depiction of flight is based on a special concept of time. The concept of time that characterizes the depiction of flight due to climate change will be worked out in a third step, in order to put into perspective how flight due to climate change is depicted. Intertextually, the title refers to the novel *1984* by George Orwell, who warns of the dangers of totalitarianism in his novel. Although *2084: Nora's World* also warns of the consequences of climate change, it emphasizes more the responsibility of the individual to deal with the consequences of climate change. Here, too, there is implicit criticism of states that do little or nothing to protect the climate.

### CLIMATE REFUGEE

Typologically, novels about flight due to climate catastrophes can be categorized as the newly emerging genre of climate fiction (Trexler, 2015) or climate change fiction (Mehnert, 2016). Both are genres that focus on the effects and social and psychological consequences of global warming. The double designation of the genre – climate fiction or climate change fiction – already indicates that there is disagreement as to whether the novels are about flight due to the climate or due to climate change. Even the terms climate and climate change are problematic. Horn and Heidenreich emphasize that there is no such thing as climate or climate change. Climate and climate change are fictitious constructions (Heidenreich, 2022: 96; Horn, 2024: 301). Accordingly, the associated concept of the climate refugee, which is often used to thematically describe the novels, cannot be used without reservation. Biermann and Boas define the climate refugee as

people who have to leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: rise in sea level, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity [...]. This definition covers climate refugees in both industrialized and developing countries. However, in practical terms only climate refugees in poorer developing countries will be an issue

of international concern, cooperation, and assistance. It is people in developing countries who are most likely to be compelled to leave their homes and communities, owing to low adaptive capacities, their often vulnerable location vis-à-vis climate change events, often high population densities, existing hunger and health problems, low level of GDP per capita, often weak structures of governance, political instability, and other factors. (Biermann, Boas, 2012: 292)

In Biermann and Boas' definition, various climatic changes are listed as reasons for leaving the old homeland: sea level rise, extreme weather events, drought or water scarcity. Carsten Felgentreff objects to these simple cause-and-effect models, arguing that only push factors are taken into consideration (Felgentreff, 2015: 143). Her studies – *Aesthetic proper times. Time and representation in polychronic modernity. The time of the climate. On the temporalization of nature in literary modernism* – show that novels about climate change actually reveal transformation processes of nature. Literature about climate change not only explains the consequences of human intervention on nature, but also reflects on these in the narrative world. In these novels the climate is linked to specific periods of time, the characters become projection figures for dealing with nature, and the narrative becomes a technique for shaping nature (Hamel, Horn, Nitzke, 2019: 301–324).

#### CLIMATE REFUGEES IN UTOPIAN LITERATURE

Specific time periods or concepts of time can also be identified in young adult literature about flight due to climate disasters. Gabriele von Glasenapp categorizes specific children's and young adult novels about climate change as utopian literature rather than climate (change) fiction. Utopia is a term coined by Thomas More in 1516. Based on his study of early modern novels, he has developed a formal and content-related model. According to him, utopias are characterized by the fact that they present an ideal design of a future community (Innerhofer, 2007a: 795). Closely linked to the utopia is the anti-utopia, better known as dystopia. Stauffer and Dziudzia interpret dystopia not only as a counter-image, but also as a failed utopia (Stauffer, Dziudzia, 2022: 13). Dystopia is usually understood as an anti-utopia, which does not conceptualize ideals, but rather shows the social consequences (Innerhofer, 2007b: 795). Dystopias reverse the characteristics of utopias. In utopian novels for children and young adults an apocalyptic scenario is often developed as a potentized version of the environmental equilibrium (von Glasenapp, 2013: 78). The diegetic future of a changed nature is always traced back to the conditions in the narrated present by continuing the foreseeable consequences of climate change in the narrated present. Utopian narratives about climate change fall back on patterns of behavior that Martin Seel has recorded as three rules for utopians, among others: "Let all utopias make distant possibilities foreseeable in order to make

tangible possibilities visible here and now” (Seel, 2001: 753). Utopias conceptualize what a future could look like if climatic conditions and causes such as CO<sub>2</sub> exchange do not decrease. This is the reason why Wilhelm Voßkamp assigns utopian novels a future-orientated, fictional rehearsal (Voßkamp, 2013: 23). The characters become examples that reflect and show what it looks like in the fictional world in which species and animals that are currently dying out no longer exist. Above all, utopias construct specific temporal logics. They do not have a linear time sequence that reconstructs the past either from the future version in the present or from the present. According to Voßkamp, the future designs fundamentally (implicitly or explicitly) refer critically to the past present (Voßkamp, 2016: 11). Utopias exhibit self-reflexive temporal logics. With reference to the previous thesis, that the representation of the climate is bound to specific time periods, that the characters become projection figures of the possibilities of dealing with nature and that narration becomes a technique of shaping nature (Hamel, Horn, Nitzke, 2019: 301–324), the question arises as to what extent the self-reflexive temporal logics of utopian novels characterize narrative techniques about climate and escape. The following section examines the self-reflexive temporal logics of dystopian young adult novels and the extent to which these characterize the poetological representation of climate flight. This will be illustrated using the example of the young adult novel 2084: *Nora’s World*.

### 2084: NORA’S WORLD

Jostein Gaarder’s young adult novel 2084: *Nora’s World* was first published in Norway and was translated into German in 2013. It was nominated for the German Youth Literature Prize in 2014. The theme of the novel is the future consequences of climate change, which 16-year-old Nora reflects on with her friend Jonas and her therapist Benjamin. It is clear from the peritext that the young adult novel does not solely address the topic of climate change. The novel has a special time structure:

In her dreams, 16-year-old Nora experiences what things will look like on Earth in 2084 if we carry on as before: the sea level has risen, climate refugees are moving around, camels are grazing in the north and countless species have become extinct. [...] But can the insights from Nora’s dreams prevent the nightmare of an ecological catastrophe? (Gaarder, 2013: n.p.; own translation)

Based on the temporal information, it can be concluded that the novel has two time levels: The year 2084 as the narrated future, and a temporally unspecified narrated present in which the protagonist Nora dreams of the future consequences of climate change. The dream alluded to in the peritext establishes the connection between the narrated present and the narrated future.

Taking up Rüdiger Steinlein's typology of children's literary dream narrative aesthetics, the dream in Gaarder's young adult novel cannot to be interpreted as a literary motif (Roeder, 2020; Schäfer, 2023), but rather as a narrative model (Steinlein, 2008: 72). Based on the peritext, the dream can be seen as a narrative model which has two diegetically staged time levels and connects them with each other.

The change of time levels from the narrated present to the narrated future is not only introduced by passages such as "Nora was curious to see what she would dream" (Gaarders, 2013: 29; own translation), but also through the change in typography. Hartmut Hombrecher interprets the change in typography as an indication of a change in the narrative situation, time, or space (Hombrecher, 2024: 15). In the novel, the change in typography can be interpreted as an indication of a change in the time level: from the narrated present to the narrated future. The dream tells of catastrophes that begin in the narrated present and lead to a scenario in the (narrated) future in which the consequences of climate change feared in the narrated present have come to pass: the extinction of plant and animal species (Gaarder, 2013: 31) or flight due to climatic conditions. In the dream, temporal contingency is thus staged in the form of the "not-yet-being" (Voßkamp, 2013: 13). Wilhelm Voßkamp identifies the depiction of the potentially possible as a characteristic of utopian literature (Voßkamp, 2013: 13). Therefore, Gaarder's young adult novel *2084: Nora's World* can be categorized as utopian literature. The novel focuses on a young protagonist whose dreams make her concerns about the future narratable. Maren Conrad identifies concern about the future as a catastrophe as a characteristic of the warning utopia in children's and young adult literature in the 21st century (Conrad, 2020: 217). This warning also characterizes the present novel, as Nora's great-granddaughter recognizes the future in the narrative: "There was no lack of warnings back then" (Gaarder, 2013: 37; own translation).

However, the novel cannot be reduced to the fact that enough warnings have been issued during the narrated present. In both time levels, subjective experiences in dealing with nature are reflected, which show the individual concern about global warming not as situational, but as having serious consequences for the collective. The two time levels become a means of organizing and presenting perceptual perspectives on the climate and climate change. For example in the future an acoustic noise is always heard when an animal species such as the iguana has finally become extinct (Gaarder, 2013: 31). The experience of the extinction of animal species is also made in the narrated present and recognized as the first signs of climate change (Gaarder, 2013: 10). Nova – the character in the narrated future – and Nora – the character in the narrated present – are both protagonists who are concerned with climate change, but also recognize that their political immaturity is the

cause of their fear. Therefore, the contents of the dreams about the (narrated) future are not told in a linear fashion, but are explicitly taken up in the narrated present and shown as an incentive for action, as this quote demonstrates: "She had to return to her dream and fix something there" (Gaarder, 2013: 40; own translation).

Thus the narrated present and future exhibit a circular time structure (Marsden, 2004: 96), as Nora takes what Nova experiences in the future as the starting point for her commitment to climate protection. Nora is no longer just in the tradition of those characters who become climate activists in the ecological children's and young adult literature of the 21st century, as Anna Stemmann emphasizes with numerous examples (Stemmann, 2022: 25). In the utopian novel, climate change is also not staged solely as an "ecological crisis," as is constitutive of the genre for ecological children's and young adult media (Lindenpütz, 2000: 728). Instead, the present and future ecosystems are placed in correlation with each other as the character Nora attempts to mitigate the consequences of climate change in the narrated present with her project to save animal and plant species (Gaarder, 2013: 143). In the narrated future, Nova also mitigates the consequences of climate change by helping climate refugees to recover (Gaarder, 2013: 78). In other words, Nora transfers the experiences she gathers in her dream with her great-granddaughter Nova into the narrated present in order to change the distant future. Due to the circular narrative form, the possibility thinking inscribed in utopian literature (Voßkamp, 2013: 13) is no longer merely a projection into the future, but the narrated future is changed in the narrated present. Thus the narrated future implicitly influences the actions and reflections in the narrated present, as Nora reflects the experiences in her dreams in the narrated present. The temporal sequence is reversed in this utopian novel. The past present is shaped on the basis of the narrated future. Therefore, the narrated future becomes a reservoir of ideas about nature and climate change in the narrated present. The connecting element remains the dream. Nature remains an object of discourse in order to show the consequences of climate change (in the narrated future) or to act (in the narrated present). However, nature is neither a space for exploration nor for action, as we know it from contemporary ecological media for children and young people. With the change of time levels, the dystopian scenario inscribed in utopian literature is recognized as an expectation of the future that is already potentially valid now.

Climate refugees occupy a prominent position in this context. This is because the climate refugees are the link between the narrated present and the narrated future. While Nora sees climate refugees as a potential consequence of climate change at the beginning of the novel, which then occurs in the narrated future, she has to recognize this at the end of the novel:

Many symptoms of global warming have become apparent much earlier than the pessimistic calculations of climate researchers would have led us to expect. Millions of people are already suffering the consequences of a development that we only warned about a few years ago. We are seeing more and more examples of destructive climate disasters such as floods, heatwaves and forest fires, and people are having to flee their homes... (Gaarder, 2013: 210; own translation)

The climate refugee becomes an imaginary figure who not only appears in the future, but also makes us aware of the consequences of climate change in the present. Thus the fictions of the future that were initially created in the dream are fed into the narrated present, so that the initially potentially possible consequences of climate change do not become an unspecific modelling mass, but are shown as an actual effect in the narrated world. What is possible in the future is not depicted as a fraying vacuum that manifests itself in a multitude of possible futures. The climate refugee becomes an actual effect of global warming.

This distinguishes the utopian novel about climate refugees from contemporary escape novels, which explicitly tell of leaving the old homeland, of attempts to cross territorial borders without valid visas and in search of new homelands. This genre-typological pattern, which can be found in historical and contemporary novels (Jagdschian, 2024), is not present in the utopian novel. Utopian novels about flight and climate also differ from current migration novels, which report on arriving in society and present the experiences of flight as retrospective memories in order to explain, for example, the traumatic behavior of refugee children (Rösch, 2017; Rösch, 2018: 2–23; Rösch, 2019: 338–358). Utopian novels about flight due to climate change are, as in the present novel, versions of the future, not fiction, as the narrated future is not presented as an alternative, potential world, but as a world that already exists. Since the focus is no longer on space, but on the time levels, it can be concluded that the narrative concepts have changed. How and what characterizes utopian novels about fleeing climate change and to what extent the genre-typological understanding of escape literature for children and young people (Jagdschian, 2021: 3–13) should be expanded will be discussed in the following conclusion.

## CONCLUSION: TIME SKETCHES IN CLIMATE FLIGHT NOVELS

In the introduction, the genre of escape literature for children and young people was understood to mean leaving one's old home, crossing borders, and searching for new home(s) (Jagdschian, 2021: 3–13). This structural spatial model cannot be found in this young adult novel about flight due to climate change. The novel *2084: Nora's World* does not tell of escape routes. The refugees either appear as secondary characters or there are reports about

refugees due to climate change in Africa. The refugee character does not appear in the novel with her feelings, thoughts, and worries, as is otherwise familiar from escape novels (Jagdschian, 2024) or migration novels (Rösch, 2018). The causes, such as floods or heatwaves, are not experienced, but only mentioned as reasons.

As Felgenhoff critically notes with reference to the concept of the climate refugee, the novel thus avoids presenting a simple cause-and-effect model. The refugee is portrayed as an effect or consequence of climate change. However, to reduce the function of the depiction of the climate refugee to this one-sided role would not take sufficient account of the special concept of time on which the novel is based. This was emphasized in the study. The refugee due to climate change becomes an object of discourse at the level of the *histoire*, in which ideas about the potential effects of climate change are spelled out: the loss of home. On the level of discourse, the figure of the refugee due to climate change is used as an example to connect two time levels: The narrated present and the narrated future. Due to the circular time structure (Mardsden, 2004: 96), the narrated present becomes a place of negotiation (Koschorke, 2017: 114) as to what extent the conditions that favor climate change can still be stopped or not. The diegetic time levels in the young adult novel not only are a constitutive element of the narrated world (Martinez, Scheffel, 2012: 215), but also serve as a critical reflection on the flight due to climate change. In the narrated world, the future does not become a variable bargaining chip in the present that can be considered at will. The diegetically staged future is static and any efforts to reduce the causes of climate change (such as the greenhouse effect) are portrayed as hopeless. Due to the circular time structure, the protagonist and her friend Jonas realize that simply thinking and talking about measures to combat climate change is not enough. Only if everyone were to stand up for climate change would it be possible to turn away from it. This utopian possibility is not presented in the novel. The novel ends – as is typical of the anti-utopia – with an apocalyptic outlook that the extinction of species can no longer be stopped. Using the example of the climate refugee, the novel *2084: Nora's World* presents a subjective view of the individual confrontation with climate change without radicalizing it. Instead, time as an element of the narrated world is used as a means of organizing and staging subjective perception and reflection on climate change. This was already recognized by Gamper and Hühn, who understood the concept of time as “a fundamental phenomenon of human understanding of the world and self-understanding” (2020: 9). With reference to this, Bernhardt and Tönsing (2021: 9) concluded that human perception can be structured along the category of time, as the present study has also shown. In the novel, the refugee serves as a projection figure as one of many possible effects of climate change and not as an identification figure to illustrate what it means to flee due to climate change.

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