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The End of the World as We Know It: Climate Catastrophe in Nalini Singh's Paranormal Romance Fiction

Kecia Ali

“The work of fiction is a smaller and more coherent world alongside the great world. We may inquire of the world within the work of art all that we inquire of the great world: what, pray, is going on here? What sort of world is this? ... In other words, we can examine an artistic world not only formally, but also culturally, morally, and metaphysically, to gain insight about the great world—the great world that is the truest object of our most urgent inquiries and deepest hopes.”

Annie Dillard

“Genre fiction reflects the world as it is, or it should.”

Nalini Singh

At a certain point in the pandemic, lists of climate fiction were suddenly everywhere, with genre novels front and center. Yes, there was some appropriately bleak and meditative literary fiction. But speculative fiction was ubiquitous, from Octavia Butler's prescient *Parable of the Sower* (1993) to sci-fi novels set in an inundated New York City, alongside climate thrillers in which competition for scarce resources turns deadly. Although I haven't seen it on any of those lists, the increasingly worrisome fate of the planet is also key to works in what Pamela Regis (2003, xi) called “the most popular, least respected literary genre”: romance.

Romances are books with ideas (Regis 1997). They respond quickly to changing social mores and norms (Kamblé 2014). In their now-common serialized form (Goris 2013), especially when hybridized with paranormal or fantasy fiction (Ramos-García 2021), the courtship plot of the romantic leads often accompanies a larger series arc with “an ever-expanding group of connected individuals who are combatting some type of common enemy or problem” (Hobson 2015, 24). In two long-running series by best-selling New Zealand genre author Nalini Singh, the shared problem is climate catastrophe—or rather, fictionalized analogues for it.

These ongoing series by the prolific Singh, who initially built her reputation as an author of category romance, give us distinct lenses on the increasingly high-stakes threat facing the planet. In both her Psy-Changeling universe, with twenty-one novels published between 2006 and 2022, and her Guild Hunter series, with fifteen books published between 2009 and 2022, a world with familiar geographies and broadly recognizable political and economic structures is inhabited by three distinct groups she calls “races.” In the Psy-Changeling novels, these groups have distant shared ancestry. Humans exist alongside animal shifters and the Psy, who possess variably powerful, often useful, and occasionally debilitating psychic gifts—and a secret vulnerability: they cannot live without biofeedback from a global psychic network. In the Guild Hunter series, humans exist alongside vampires and angels, these latter ruling the supernatural world, mostly leaving token human power structures in place. In the first installment, the titular Guild Hunter, a human, is changed into an angel by her archangelic lover, an act unprecedented in the annals of angelic history. The couple and those around them must navigate not only intrigue and threats from immortal villains but also peril from the so-called Cascade, which brings unpredictable and unstoppable calamities across the planet.

Both series begin with individuals negotiating romance across difference, with power relations between and among individuals and races a primary preoccupation. As each series progresses, however, Singh ratchets up the stakes. She grapples with the possibility of large-scale Psy death with the fragmentation of the PsyNet in the Psy-Changeling novels, and the impacts of massive storms, agricultural devastation, and unchecked contagions in the Guild Hunter novels. Both the PsyNet deterioration and the Cascade have intensified dramatically in Singh’s books as our real-life planet’s dire situation has become increasingly clear. These fictional threats present roundabout means of both confronting climate change’s spectacularly destructive potential and imagining responses to the threat it poses.

On the surface, the environment seems to be doing fine in the Psy-Changeling universe. The preservation and appreciation of nature is an explicit theme from the first book, *Slave to Sensation*, in the priorities of the leopard changeling alpha who is its romantic lead. Changelings’ eco-friendly technology is used by the other races too. For instance, in *Last Guard*, the Psy protagonist who lives in Delhi reflects on the smog-removal technology the local tiger pack designed and the results of which her race also values. Ecologically sound solutions to air quality and the like are a consistent but very minor thread through the novels, which grapple more centrally with a world-altering shift as the Silence protocol, which demanded Psy

emotionlessness, is revealed to be fundamentally flawed and ultimately disastrous to the psychic network which sustains all Psy.

While early novels show protagonists having to navigate harmful dynamics and individual dangers—if a Psy protagonist mates with a changeling, how will she get her life-sustaining biofeedback? —the background storyline becomes increasingly pronounced as the series proceeds. The romantic leads' courtship narrative in each novel, which in the case of Psy characters includes an embrace of emotion and connection, proceeds alongside and intertwined with collective action to craft “a survivable future” (Hamilton 2022 n.p) as the PsyNet's disintegration and collapse becomes ever more severe and the consequences of past decisions are revealed to be worse than anticipated. It does not strain the imagination to see that while environmentally friendly technology allows Singh's fictional Earth to be getting along just fine, the PsyNet stands as a clear analogue for our real-world planetary ecosystem.

Of course, her characters don't just let things unravel. As localized disasters result in scores, sometimes hundreds, of instantaneous deaths, newly established Psy rapid response teams prevent worse tolls. Meanwhile, broader acceptance of emotion, and the sub-group (“designation”) of Psy who wield it, begins to lay groundwork for healthier Net. Despite some opposition, the Psy change their leadership structure, begin—or rather resume—cooperation with other races, and struggle to make decisions that won't immediately benefit them. For instance, given the history of Psy rapaciousness, humans, whose presence as friends or partners turn out to be fundamental to the Net's health, are understandably loath to trust Psy's leaders' promises and insist on the Psy developing a means to protect humans from psychic theft.

Even as these mitigating measures go forward, a pervasive sense of staving off impending doom saturates the novels. In the *Last Guard*, the romantic protagonists are both Psy Anchors, a designation charged with holding together the PsyNet's substrate, yet their work goes largely unrecognized and their expertise unappreciated. The more one learns about the complexities of the Net, the more one realizes how much isn't known, and how complex the problems to be solved. More than some previous books, which focus on serial killers or political intrigue, *Last Guard* also reflects the sheer exhaustion of those charged with holding a badly frayed environment together until long-term healing and transformation can take effect.

The Guild Hunter novels also portray a world in which crisis after crisis demands decisive action. Structures and institutions that have served for

countless millennia no longer suffice. A uniquely, increasingly powerful bad actor threatens: an archangel, who believes herself entirely beyond the constraints of her fellow members of the Cadre, the council of archangels who allot territory and govern immortals, generally not bothering with mortal affairs. She recognizes no limits to her power, utterly delusional and willing to poison the earth as well as the mortals peopling her territory with a virus that mimics life but deals death, turning the so-called "reborn" into an infectious, insatiable plague.

This series addresses traditional environmental concerns less directly than in the Psy-Changeling novels. While there are examples of, say, solar technology used in one character's secret aerie in the angelic stronghold known as the Refuge, constraints on resource use aren't a meaningful theme. Rather, the books consider individuals' wildly disparate power to affect lives and the natural world. Uncaring or malicious acts by powerful beings, some of them many hundreds or thousands of years old, threaten ordinary individuals. Yet the Cascade changes things, accelerating and distorting some natural processes and disrupting stability, requiring split-second responses to disasters to prevent apocalyptic outcomes.

Like PsyNet rot, the Cascade puts the world under threat, continually erupting into crisis, upended at any moment by the unforeseen eruption of a volcano or of large-scale madness. The first book's plot featured a diseased archangel whose violent madness, brought on by his own actions, threatened New York. Subsequent installments steadily ratcheted up the stakes until the world was convulsing in archangelic war. Unnatural disasters occur without warning: rivers running with blood, birds falling from the sky, and massive sinkholes appearing. Unlike in the Psy-Changeling series, where the collapsing PsyNet threatens the existence of the entire race no matter where they live on the planet, in the Guild Hunter novels, the impacts fall disproportionately on some territories rather than others. As Singh's characters acknowledge, the brunt of the burden is borne by those with less power. The pitiless angelic time scale is effectively geological rather than human. The world, and its most powerful players, will survive; the same cannot be said for vulnerable humans.

In both series, there is a commitment to working together in the face of (im)mortal threats—and also a persistent worry that it may all be too little, too late. The disintegrating PsyNet can be contained with heroic effort by powerful individuals working in concert but if it is to be stopped or reversed in any meaningful way, it will take fundamental shifts in the world's balance of power. In the Guild Hunter books, angelic and especially archangelic

actions are orders of magnitude beyond those of individual mortals, or even large groups of humans and vampires working together. But even the most powerful immortals are at the mercy of the Cascade, a supernatural disruption in the way of things. Once certain things are set in motion, no one, no matter how wealthy or powerful, can stop them, only adapt to the fearsome changes they bring.

Singh's novels do not, of course, provide readers with precise directives for saving humanity or the planet on which we still reside. Popular romance, whatever its merits, is not a guide to action and paranormal and fantasy novels involve, by definition, a world that differs radically from our own. But speculative fiction, as Butler (2000) pointed out decades ago, still attends to topics and themes relevant to authors and readers who live in *this* world. Given the immediacy of anthropogenic climate change, it's to be expected that novels of all genres increasingly reflect, directly or slant, the urgent and extreme realities we confront. It is not the job of genre authors to tell us how to fix the mess we're in. It is, though, our job as readers to take seriously the possibilities fiction provides to think through the crucial issues of our time, including climate catastrophe and all it portends.

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