What on Earth Can Atlantis Teach Us: Cli-fi and the inconvenient truth behind our pre-history

Sarah Holding

Correspondence: sarah@sarah-holding.com
Twitter: @seaholding

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Abstract

This article presents and contextualises my recently completed cli-fi novel, Chameleon, which is set during the fall of Atlantis and presents a scenario of extreme climate change some 12,000 years ago. I argue that by referring back to our pre-history we have much to learn and uncover about our earlier experiences of surviving climate change, and of coming to terms with its devastating impact, which has caused us to couch flood stories as myth and legend. Cli-fi has the potential to go beyond narratives of fear and humiliation to show us hope that our planet can survive a climate catastrophe as did our predecessors and live to tell the tale, just as the Atlanteans did.

Keywords: cli-fi; Atlantis; Younger Dryas; catastrophism; antediluvian; demythologisation; pre-historical climate change

Shortly after the final instalment of my climate fiction debut, *The SeaBEAN Trilogy,* came out in 2014, I was commissioned by The Guardian to write a piece entitled 'What is Cli-fi and Why I Write It'. Cli-fi was still regarded as an obscure emergent genre, so the Guardian's brief was to articulate not only my own motivation for writing climate fiction for younger readers, but also to scope the genre as a whole. This led me to realise the need for climate fiction above all to instil among readers a sense of hope as well as urgency in relation to the plight of our planet, a precept which came up in an article published earlier this year on *Literary Hub,* entitled 'Can Climate Fiction Be Hopeful?' (**DiFrancesco & Shelby, 2019**).

Six years on and everything has changed: cli-fi has burst into the mainstream with articles about its ambiguous relation to 'climate fact' popping up everywhere from the *BBC* ('The Cultural Frontline, What is Cli-Fi?') (**2019**) to *Phys.org* ('Scarier than fiction: climate worry driving 'cli-fi' boom') (**Marhic, 2019**) to *CNN* ('Cli-fi on the big screen changes minds about real climate change') (**Christensen, 2019**). This rise in popularity is attributable to the undeniable rise of climate change activism among young people, inspired by teenage activists like Greta Thunberg, who have not only irrevocably changed the debate about climate change, they've taken ownership of it. At the same time, cli-fi has been driven further into the limelight by the fact that world leaders have drawn back from their commitment to a greener future and further enraged an already disenfranchised young demographic all around the world.

While cli-fi is now a hotbed of creativity, spawning novels, films and TV shows, very little real political progress is being been made, and the kind of progressive intergovernmental climate action that is sorely needed is not being implemented. Even now, the United Nation's IPCC website claims that its role is merely to 'provide regular assessments of the scientific basis of climate change, its impacts and future risks, and options for adaptation and mitigation' rather than propose strategy and oversee its implementation. [i] This hands-off approach means that it is still up to individual countries to formulate their climate policies in light of the IPCC's findings in the form of 'Nationally Determined Contributions' (NDCs), and there is as yet no global entity providing a more executive role where climate action is concerned.

To my mind, these circumstances give cli-fi a renewed imperative: back in the 1950s during the cold war, science fiction speculatively led the way in terms of imagining ground-breaking technologies and mind-boggling future scenarios, showing us fascinating glimpses of a possible future world and spurring inventors and engineers to try and realise some of it. As time went on, Hollywood blockbusters favoured the dystopian end of the science fiction spectrum for delivering maximum impact. This 'fear

programming' is what we've all grown up with and is what enables influential organisations like McKinsey to implore their clients to shore up their operations against the onset of climate change, as in their September 2019 article 'Earth to CEO: Your company is already at risk from climate change' (**McKinsey, 2019**).

Rather than play into this theatre of 'climate fear', to my mind cli-fi authors now need to double down and, rather than offer *more* fear-mongering and reactive 'what-if' stories involving climate change, write in such a way as to assert the need for a more ethical and equitable approach to technology, environmentalism and social engineering where climate action is concerned. In other words, cli-fi needs to foster a change in the way we approach problem-solving. Contrary to what Katy Waldman asserted in her November 2019 piece for *The New Yorker* entitled 'How "Cli-Fi," Forces Us to Confront the Incipient Death of the Planet' (**Waldman, 2018**), cli-fi needs to demonstrate that with significant and ingenious acts of intervention, species and habitat decimation is not a given.

The academic community has now accepted that the dinosaurs were most likely wiped out by an asteroid making landfall at Chicxulub in Mexico some 66 million years ago, and new evidence reveals that this colossal impact came after a long build-up of CO^2 in the atmosphere, acidification of the oceans etc, according to recent studies involving calcium isotopes in clamshells from that period, which has lead scientists to concur that 'understanding how our planet responded to past extreme warming and CO^2 can help us prepare for changes due to human-caused climate change' (**Cockburn, 2019**). However, rather than look back as far as the cretaceous period, there was a much more recent mass extinction event after the last glacial maximum (LGM) at the end of the Younger Dryas (YD) period, when not only were most of the Earth's megafauna wiped out, but the human race almost entirely perished too, around 12,000 years ago.

The Younger Dryas Impact Hypothesis, first proposed in 2007 by Firestone (**et al., 2007**), is now widely regarded as the reason for the near total loss of megafauna and also led to 'peak concentrations of platinum, high-temperature spherules, meltglass and nanodiamonds, forming an isochronous datum at more than 50 sites across 50 million km² of Earth's surface' according to a March 2019 article in Nature (**Pino, et al, 2019**). It is this more recent period of abrupt climate change in our pre-history that has been throwing up some new inconvenient truths in the last few years: huge impact craters have been discovered under the Hiawatha Glacier in Greenland and at the archaeological site Pilauco Bajo in Chile, both large enough to explain why almost every culture in the world has a flood myth and a residue of megalithic sites built by our antediluvian ancestors. These

recent discoveries are so stunning that the summary of the research findings from southern Chile, published in Science Daily in March 2019, even sounds like the blurb for a cli-fi novel: 'When geologists set out years ago to examine signs of a major cosmic impact that occurred toward the end of the Pleistocene epoch, little did they know just how far-reaching the projected climatic effect would be.' (**Science News, 2019**).

Until very recently, geological and tectonic theories have steered a uniformitarian course set by Charles Lyell [ii] and Charles Darwin, away from notions of catastrophism, by insisting that any shifts in our bedrock and even in our evolution must have taken place very slowly over millions of years. Their narrative has been so successfully implanted that for the last 200 years we have not only failed to question the lack of crucial evidence to support it, we have also overlooked the abundance of hard evidence that would lead us to draw the opposite conclusion: change can take place on Earth so fast and so suddenly, that as noted by several peer-reviewed articles (**Ghose, 2014; Robinette, 2013**), mammoths were frozen solid within seconds in the permafrost with fresh buttercups still in their mouths, preserved until now at latitudes far from their original habitat.

A much more calamitous version of our geological past was explained and evidenced in meticulous detail back in the 1950s by writers like Charles Hapgood (**1999**) and Immanuel Velikovsky (**1950, 1955**), but despite even Albert Einstein's words of support, their work was seen by the scientific community as worryingly heretical; it was simply too challenging and controversial to accept that momentous and unstoppable events like crustal displacement or celestial bombardment could threaten our sense of security when we had other more pressing global issues to deal with. When I came across these ideas for the first time, my mind started racing with new questions about our pre-history and how little we really know about what earlier generations might have lived through many millennia ago. I began looking in earnest for alternative answers and uncovering more inconvenient truths than I had previously thought possible.

The result of this voyage of discovery is my new novel, a YA title set during the fall of Atlantis entitled *Chameleon*, which comes out later this year. I am curious to see whether, like the work of Hapgood and Velikovsky, it too will be regarded as controversial or heretical in the sense that it 'holds an opinion at odds with what is generally accepted', because in this story I have worked on the assumption that Atlantis was lost during a previous episode of extreme climate change some 12,000 years ago, precipitated by extra-terrestrial impact which humanity almost didn't survive. As far as I am concerned, this is not fanciful supposition on my part, but stems from a disparate but compelling weight of evidence which supports Plato's

detailed descriptions of the location, orientation, layout and life of Atlantis that taken together, indicate that it really did exist. [iii]

In constructing *Chameleon* as an antediluvian cli-fi narrative, I used a familiar framing device whereby an archaeologist, Dr Camille Warden, unearths at different sites three ancient documents, each written in the same pre-cuneiform script and describing a climate catastrophe that brought about the destruction of Atlantis. Dr Warden, confounded by her discovery, appeals to a prominent climate change scientist, Professor Ian Clyffe, who is well known for challenging the consensus view of the Anthropocene era and is prepared to consider alternative theories about the underlying causes of climate change, and as a result an unlikely research collaboration is initiated.

This epistolary structure gave me the opportunity to present *Chameleon* as a series of recently translated archaeological artefacts, 'the Dogon Scrolls', 'the Sphinx Codex' and **'**the Sirian Disks', which when juxtaposed corroborate startling insights about how Atlantis disappeared and how its citizens struggled for their survival. I then ended *Chameleon* with a fictional journal article from the year 2024 entitled 'What On Earth Can Atlantis Teach Us?', in which a journalist interviews Warden and Clyffe about their joint research, on the eve of an important climate summit in Cairo. This fictional interview functions as a coda to the novel and allowed me to imagine and characterise the contemporary reaction to the fact that Atlantis was destroyed by the last bout of extreme climate change. By locating this interview in the near future, I was able to present the two fictional researchers reflecting on the upset in scientific thinking brought on by the realisation that, as recently as 12,000 years ago, our planet was thrown into unimaginable turmoil.

By turning to our pre-history as a useful precedent rich in narrative potential, cli-fi can in some small way impel the science community to review the inconvenient truth of our ancestral survival at the end of the Younger Dryas period, bringing fresh insights that allow us to extend the scope of the causes and consequences of climate change. Then we might see the kind of breakthroughs that climate activists like Thunberg so desire. As a cli-fi author, I am trying to push the boundaries of our understanding by adopting a greatly expanded perspective on cause and effect, which allows for extra-terrestrial impact and intervention by races from other solar systems, but I account for this by way of ancient Dogon tribal knowledge that is well-documented within the anthropological community [iv] and recent ideas about the true purpose and age of the pyramids at Giza [v] which are now being put forward.

This is the fictional interview from the end of *Chameleon*, where the interviewer, Kitty Carruthers (KC) is speaking to my characters Camille Warden (CW) and Ian Clyffe (IC):

> *It's abundantly clear that we are struggling to cope with the effects of climate change on our planet, not least because we are still arguing about its root cause. We urgently need to focus instead on how we are going to cope with the devastating impact of climate change. To do this, we need to open our minds to what has been staring us in the face for a very long time.*
>
> *Two brave researchers, archaeologist Dr Camille Warden and climate scientist Professor Ian Clyffe, whose controversial work earned them a Nobel Prize in December, have done just that. Apart from The Book of Revelation, their 'Atlantean Climate Change Hypothesis' is probably the best roadmap we've got, in terms of showing us what we're in for.*
>
> *I caught up with them last week at the Climate Summit in Cairo to ask them what's to be done if we're living through the same extreme climate change that led to the fall of Atlantis.*
>
> *KC: Dr Warden, what's the context for your discoveries, and why are people finally taking notice of the idea of Atlantis, long considered merely a myth?*
>
> *CW: Yes, it's true, for centuries people have written about the myth, the meaning, the location, and the fate of Atlantis, beginning with Plato's Timaeus, which inspired many others after him to propose alternative theories about Earth's mishaps. For example, books like Earth in Upheaval by Immanuel Velikovsky, which was seen as heresy in the 1950s, and the work of Ignatius Donnelly, Atlantis and the Antediluvian World, which was regarded as historical fantasy long after it was published in 1882. Many researchers have tried to link flood myths with the fossil record, and we're still in the process of piecing together the evidence provided by geological strata, ice cores and impact craters. We now know for sure how and when the dinosaurs were wiped out, and the public is well aware there have been other mass extinction events, but so far experts have been reluctant to say that humans were virtually wiped out too. I believe that's the real reason we've ignored Atlantis for so long: we have been in denial about what took place 12,000 years ago, but we're finally waking up to the fact that, back then, we almost became extinct too.*
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> *KC: So, is this the conclusion that your work has led you to, Professor Clyffe?*

IC: Well, it's not all doom and gloom. The Atlanteans were smart people, they saw it coming and made a plan to not only survive the calamity but miraculously also save much of their culture and technological know-how in the process. We have long known there were sudden advances in human civilisation, when we went from being primitive hunter-gatherers to having the kind of highly developed systems of writing, engineering, medicine, mathematics, et cetera that you see in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, but this massive shift has never been properly accounted for. The truth is, the Atlanteans probably seeded many new survival colonies; 'New Atlantis' was really a legacy project, not a place, and we now think it led to the emergence not only of Egyptian culture, but also the Guanches, the Basque people, the Mayans, and possibly many others.

KC: Professor Clyffe, I understand you were initially sceptical of the extra-terrestrial aspects of Dr Warden's findings. Have you come to a new understanding of other forms of intelligence as a result of your collaboration?

IC: I have to admit, the 'aliens and outer space' factor challenged my credulity for a long time, given that we had no visible evidence, but the moment Camille's intern showed me how the Sirian Disks had been encoded, I knew this was no terrestrial technology. I had to expand my thinking to realise that the Dogon people were not making it up: their ancestral stories about having contact with beings from Sirius had always struck me as possible from a mathematical probability point of view, but, seeing those disks for the first time, I knew it had to be true.

KC: Camille, your research team, led by Major Jonathan Edwards, now includes many other disciplines, including astronomers and paleo-linguists, quantum physicists, even shamans and spiritual mediums. To what extent has your willingness to overcome the boundaries of academic disciplines been the secret of your success?

CW: It's all about putting our heads together and being open-minded. That should be the approach of all scientific enquiry if we are to discover something we didn't know before, something that only our combined knowledge and perspective can shed light on. It's been very exciting and at times challenging to work across our various disciplines, since we all have our own ways of doing things, but it's taken us somewhere new, for sure. The work we are presenting here at the Climate Summit, for instance, has meant that even the most stubborn Egyptologists are changing their minds about pre-Pharaonic culture, and are finally coming to accept the antiquity of the Sphinx, the proof that it was eroded by water, and the real reason for building the Great Pyramids. By holding the summit here in Cairo, we have been able to open up the

Hall of Records and various other chambers beneath the Giza Plateau for the first time, so that delegates can see for themselves what is described in the accounts of Kam, Mel and Leon.

KC: Ian, your work is now the subject of a major touring exhibition entitled 'The New Atlantis', and soon people all around the world will be able to see the Dogon Scrolls, the Sphinx Codex and the Sirian Disks first-hand. What impact would you like these ancient documents to have on modern human consciousness?

IC: They have already had considerable impact. I thought at first their main impact would be to silence the people who accused us of conducting pseudoscience. But now that we have unearthed the documents, translated the words and shed light on their meaning, the real impact will be measured by how quickly we as a species act. We know we're in the midst of a global catastrophe, but our findings show it is not unprecedented. We have faced climate change on this scale before. It is now up to the Intergovernmental Committee on Climate Change, as well as lobbyists and activists, to re-orientate their agendas to take into account our Atlantean Climate Change Hypothesis, and secure enough funding to make 'The New Atlantis' a living, breathing legacy project for today.

KC: And what would that entail, exactly?

CW: Like the Atlanteans, we need to evacuate our people permanently away from vulnerable coastal locations; we need to build hundreds of new cities in safe locations and find novel ways to ensure our survival. There is already a seed vault in Svalbard, north of Norway, containing the means to grow food again should all our plant species be wiped out, and many museums have created watertight, impact-proof vaults to store important artworks and artefacts, but without our survival this is all somewhat pointless. As individuals, we are not as resilient as we would like to think we are. We do not have the practical life skills that our predecessors had. Many of those who survived climate change back then did so by virtue of being at high altitude with access to fresh water and natural shelter. We can do better than this. We have the insight and the intelligence to secure an even better outcome than the Atlanteans. Our survival doesn't have to be a case of being lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time.

KC: Lastly, what do your findings have to teach us about the future of renewable energy?

IC: We can all do our bit individually, sure, but really, it's down to the big energy companies doing more than simply committing to becoming carbon neutral in the next quarter-century. It's going to take something

> *a lot more visionary and joined up. First and foremost, what the Atlanteans can teach us is not their strategic level of foresight, but their mastery and understanding of renewable energy. They were far more advanced at this than we are. The pyramids are not just extraordinary feats of construction, they were skilfully designed and built to harness, attenuate, balance and distribute energy entering Earth's atmosphere. We don't need to burn fossil fuels to obtain energy. According to our most radical scientists and engineers who believe we're living in an 'electric universe', we don't even need solar panels or wind turbines. We just need to tap into the flow of plasma and electrons in our upper atmosphere. If we do this, we can also boost Earth's magnetic field – much like boosting our own immune system – and protect ourselves from solar flares, mass coronal ejections and EMPs. We might even reduce the likelihood of anything impacting Earth and causing the sort of worldwide climate mayhem the Atlanteans had to contend with. The maths and the science has all been done. It's all up for grabs; we just need to implement it. I say 'us', but really, it's the next generation; they're the ones who are really fired up and angry about our governments' and industries' inaction. They've got the right idea – we just need to step aside now and let them get on with it.* (**Holding, 2020**) [vi]

By ending *Chameleon* with this final message about the need to step aside and let the next generation 'get on with it', I wanted to sow the seed in the minds of my readers that a better future, a rejuvenated biomass, a resilient, tolerant and conscious global community, and an ethical and equitable scientific and technological agenda are not out of reach. The tipping point of our times will come not when we reach peak carbon, but when we achieve peak open-mindedness and realise we need to relate to climate change in a different way, with more hope and proactivity and less doom and gloom, as Professor Clyffe suggests.

In *Chameleon*, a group of Atlantean refugees are trying to reach Giza, but it could just as easily have been a tale about a group of survivors heading for Guanches (the Canary Islands), the Basque country or Mexico. Atlantis may still be a mystery, but the tantalising megalithic evidence all around us should inspire a sense of wonder and respect that in an earlier antediluvian epoch, people could construct things we would still struggle to reproduce with today's machinery and computational knowhow. In all likelihood, their cosmological understanding was also much more sophisticated than ours. It that too much for our teleological mindset to entertain? We like to think we are at the forefront of progress, that nothing we have created in our current era has ever been surpassed by the output or knowledge base of a previous one. Would it be so terrible if we were to admit that we know less than our forebears did? Are we still so

traumatised by the deep collective memory of this experience that we can only relate to the Great Flood through myth?

In writing a cli-fi story set during our pre-history, I researched many troubling artefacts that are, like climate change, inconvenient truths which have given rise to denial, deprecation and dismissal, which may be regarded as human coping strategies. This lead me to surmise that the events which took place 12,000 years ago must have affected humankind so badly, they were only able to relate to them afterwards as myths. As such, it is my belief that cli-fi also has an important role to play in the demythologisation of our past, in order to prepare us mentally and emotionally for the likelihood of similar events occurring in our future. By re-presenting aspects of our current understanding of cosmology, our historical timeline and our physical reality, cli-fi can help readers to expand their thinking and allow other explanations to come forward and be considered, a practice which is no different to the healthy scepticism embodied in the modern scientific method. I believe that the modern science community is doing itself and us a disservice, in clinging obstinately to earlier so-called 'settled' theories, which scientists like Darwin himself advised should be abandoned should the fossil record not bear them out. We have been encouraged to let our thinking develop in response to the empirical evidence that stands before us, but it seems to me that we have tied ourselves in knots trying to explain away – or turn a blind eye to – empirical evidence that did not concur with prevailing hypotheses.

History, they say, is written by the victors. What happens when cli-fi rewrites history from the other point of view is a deep questioning of the received wisdom of our current understanding, raising the possibility of new 'a priori' thinking. Deduced through the speculative literary lens of cli-fi, we might as a society arrive at fresh conclusions and thereby precipitate more radical solutions to the very real scenario of extreme climate change in which we find ourselves today.

Formerly an architect and academic, Sarah Holding is now a full-time author. Her debut climate fiction title 'SeaBEAN', published in 2013, was a middlegrade time travel adventure set on St Kilda. Sarah has since given workshops and author events at over 150 schools, festivals and libraries and has featured on BBC Radio Scotland. In 2015 she was commissioned to write an article about 'cli-fi' for Guardian Children's Books and in 2016 gave a TEDx talk about 'cli-fi'. Her latest book, 'CHAMELEON' (2020), is set during the fall of Atlantis, which was likely a previous climate change catastrophe.

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Endnotes

[i] https://www.ipcc.ch/about/

[ii] https://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/history_12

[iii] Plato, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/critias.html

[iv] The primary account of Dogon culture was captured in 'The Pale Fox', by French anthropologists M Griale and G. Dieterlen, in 1945

[v] Questions are being raised about the true age of the pyramids and the Sphinx by researchers such as Robert Bauval, Graham Hancock, Robert Schoch et al.

[vi] Extracted with permission from the author's book *Chameleon: Does it have to cost the Earth to find out who we really are?* Further details here: https://www.troubador.co.uk/bookshop/young-adult/chameleon/