

The Guardian

Literature

Fiction vending machines deserve more than just a minute of our attention

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But such sensations remain the exception to an unforgiving rule. Research by Arts Council England has shown that, while the publishing sector remains in decent health overall, fiction sales have collapsed. Far fewer authors are able to make a living from writing, even if this is not obvious to readers because many good books continue to come out.

In the UK, and despite the best efforts of their many supporters, short stories have always been the less-favoured siblings of the fiction family. Their status in the US is higher, in part because of the slots they have long commanded in prestigious magazines; perhaps, too, because of the source material they provide for the film industry (*Brokeback Mountain* and *Memento*, for example, started life as short stories).

But whether long or short, fiction can offer a respite from the chaos and rancour of the present. This can feel like escapism, but is not necessarily. As well as shutting the world out, stories can be a different way of letting it in. If vending machines can help to prise open, even for brief moments, some windows on to other worlds, and stimulate people's curiosity and interest in different lives, times and experiences, they will be providing a valuable public service.

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The natural world can help save us from climate chaos

George Monbiot

← Continued from front

in protecting and restoring natural forests and allowing native trees to repopulate deforested land. The greatest drawdown potential per hectare (though the total area is smaller) is the restoration of coastal habitats such as mangroves, salt marsh and seagrass beds. They stash carbon 40 times faster than tropical forests can. Peaty soils are also vital carbon stores. They are currently being oxidised by deforestation, drainage, drying, burning, farming and mining for gardening and fuel. Restoring peat, by blocking drainage channels and allowing natural vegetation to recover, can suck back much of what has been lost.

These are the best-studied natural climate solutions. They could help to solve two existential problems at once: climate breakdown and ecological breakdown. Their likely contribution is enormous – bigger than almost anyone guessed a few years ago – and other possibilities have scarcely been explored. For example, we currently have little idea of what the impact of industrial fishing may be on the seabed's vast carbon store. By disturbing the sediments and lifting the carbon they contain into the water column, trawlers and dredgers are likely to expose it to oxygen, turning it into carbon dioxide. One study suggests that repeated trawling in the north-west Mediterranean has caused a reduction in carbon storage in the top 10 centimetres of sediments of up to 52%. Given the vast area trawled (most of the seabed on the world's continental shelves), the climate impact could be enormous. Closing large parts of the seas to trawling could turn out to be a crucial climate strategy.

Scientists have only begun to explore how the recovery of certain animal populations could radically change the carbon balance. For instance, forest elephants and rhinos in Africa and Asia and tapirs in Brazil are natural foresters, maintaining and extending their habitats as they swallow the seeds of trees and spread them, sometimes across many miles, in their dung. White rhinos can play a major role in preventing runaway wildfires in African savannahs: their grazing prevents dry grass building up. If wolves were allowed to reach their natural populations in North America, one paper suggests, their suppression of herbivore populations would stop as much carbon being released every year as that produced by 30-70 million cars. Healthy populations of predatory crabs and fish protect the carbon in salt marshes, as they prevent herbivorous crabs and snails wiping out the plants that hold the marshes together.

What I love about natural climate solutions is that we should be doing all these things anyway. Instead of making painful choices and deploying miserable means to a desirable end, we can defend ourselves from disaster by enhancing our world of wonders. However, nothing should be done without the involvement and consent of local communities. Nor should damaging projects, such as monocultural plantations, be passed off as natural climate solutions. As a paper published this week in *Nature* shows, several governments are attempting this deception.

Today, a small group of us is launching a campaign for natural climate solutions to receive the commitment and funding they deserve. At the moment, though their potential is huge, they have been marginalised in favour of projects that may be worse than useless, but which are profitable for corporations. Governments discuss the climate crisis and the ecological crisis in separate meetings when both disasters could be addressed together. We have set up a dedicated website, produced an animation and written a letter to governments and international bodies signed by prominent activists, scientists and artists.

We don't want natural climate solutions to be used as a substitute for the rapid and comprehensive decarbonisation of our economies. The science tells us both are needed. But what this thrilling field of study shows is that protecting and rewilding the world's living systems is not just an aesthetically pleasing thing to do. It is an essential survival strategy.

The Guardian

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'Comment is free... but facts are sacred' CP Scott

Brexit

May's offer to Labour comes years too late and when her back is to the wall

Theresa May's decision to reach out to the opposition over Brexit comes years too late. She has only done so because she has run out of road. Her speech from Downing Street shows a prime minister shrunken by defeat. It stood in stark contrast to last month's defiant rabble-raising statement delivered from the same lectern. All this sours the idea that Mrs May is approaching discussions with Jeremy Corbyn in good faith. It speaks volumes that it is only with her back to the wall that the prime minister has bowed to sense and accepted that the longstanding arguments of her opponents must be taken on board. The question remains whether her mind is as open as the door to No 10.

Mr Corbyn says he is "happy" to meet Mrs May. He would be right to also be wary. Despite Mrs May's talk of "national unity to deliver the national interest", her offer is rooted in Tory partisan politics. There is no indication of any compromise that Mrs May is willing to make. The basis of the proposed negotiation is her Brexit withdrawal agreement, which has already been rejected three times by the Commons. The Labour leader has whipped his party to vote against Mrs May's deal. He would have to agree to back it now. The suspicion is that Mrs May does not want to share the glory, just the blame.

The prime minister's bid to resolve the crisis also seeks to cut the ground from beneath the feet of backbench MPs who had aimed to take control of a process when Mrs May could not. A cross-party group, led by Yvette Cooper and backed by Oliver Letwin, had been prepared to place a bill before the Commons to force the prime minister to seek an extension of article 50. They were right to do so. Crashing out of the EU without a deal would be extremely damaging to Britain. In contrast to the trite "clean break" scenarios, there are warnings of

food prices spiking upwards, businesses collapsing and peace in Northern Ireland being put at risk. Hard Brexiters, who revel in their classical training, seem to be living up to the ancient idea that whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.

In exchange for Mr Corbyn's support, Mrs May offers Labour a chance to shape the future end state of Brexit. If the leaders were unable to agree "a single unified approach", the prime minister appears willing to agree a number of post-Brexit options and then allow MPs to vote for them. It is unclear whether these would be free votes or whipped, but Mrs May says she will abide by them – if Labour does. This is responsibility without power for Mr Corbyn. It raises the question of why he would accept such a bargain. Mrs May has already promised her MPs she will resign once this process is complete. There is no guarantee that her successor would be bound by deals she had done with Labour. A truly collegiate process would require something more substantial to negotiate a broad and deep future partnership with the EU once Britain had left. But that would not fly with the hard Brexiters.

What is true is that Brexit remains an idea in search of an adequate mode of expression. Like a soul without a body, its wraith-like form hangs over the Commons, freezing the blood of the body politic. Because it remains intangible, Brexit can bore and terrify the public at the same time. To give it meaning and substance, much more time is needed for Brexit to be reimagined. Yet Mrs May leads a party in which a substantial minority view such a practical move as so inimical to their identity that it borders on treason. She faces a mutiny for suggesting talks with Labour.

The EU has said it would only accept an extension if Mrs May presented a way out of the current mess. As she leads a minority government, it ought to have been obvious that she needed cross-party support. In leaving it so late and in setting these terms, Mrs May is playing with fire. If there is no prospect of agreeing a form of Brexit and if there is no extension forthcoming, the UK will either have to revoke article 50 or depart with no deal a week on Friday. Should the country face that predicament, it will be Mrs May's fault.

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