Sue Isle, *Nightsiders* (Twelfth Planet Press, 2011)

Sue Isle’s *Nightsiders* is the first novella in the ‘Twelve Planets’ series, the Twelfth Planet Press showcase of Australian female speculative fiction writers. *Nightsiders* explores the uncertainties of climate change in a believable setting, and is a noteworthy example of recent Young Adult fiction with dystopian elements.

Three stories are set in Perth, and a fourth in Melbourne. Isle explores a pessimistic version of the speculative enquiry ‘what if...?’ She proposes that the West would become inhospitably hot and dry. Perth is abandoned and its residents evacuated to the eastern states. Not everyone has left, though. Isle depicts life for the survivors. The Nightsiders sleep during the hot days and live by night.

Isle’s setting is mainly plausible and compelling. The first story, ‘The Painted Girl’, immerses readers in a post-crisis world. In sun-protective robes and head scarves, Kyra and Nerina move across a dusty landscape where water and food are scarce, and strangers are unfriendly. In ‘Nation of the Night’, Isle explores subtly how Australia’s ‘tyranny of distance’ might persist under a climate change scenario. Ash travels from Perth to Melbourne for gender reassignment surgery. Melbourne is bone-chillingly cold, gloomy, with an ultra-regulatory government. It is also over-crowded; inundated with climate refugees. Ash meets Maoris Mike and Nella, who survived a flu pandemic in New Zealand and escaped to Australia. In this chapter, Isle depicts a painful, moving struggle for belonging and stability.

The third and fourth stories explore how residents of an abandoned city survive a crisis. In ‘Paper Dragons’, teenage scroungers scour suburban houses for useful items and living spaces. In ‘The Schoolteacher’s Tale’, people physically and psychologically move beyond their comfort zones to the ‘Edge’ of the city. Isle uses details of her setting to achieve coherence and consistency across the four stories. She describes vegetables grown under shade-cloths, desalinated water, and journeys by donkey-cart. Not all assumptions are convincing, though. For instance, non-essential surgery is still available and supply trucks travel to an abandoned city in ‘Nation of the Night’.

Isle’s themes will appeal to young adult readers. She raises the question of how generational responses to a crisis may differ, thus exploring the classic theme of ‘generation gap’ between older and younger people. Isle depicts pre-Evacuation adults poignantly: many ‘Elders’ are frightened to venture into sunlight and the new world. Some are consequently immobile, have unusually pale skin, and are heat-intolerant. Conversely, young people can see in the dark, and are better adapted to water scarcity. The powerful story ‘Paper Dragons’ investigates young people’s development in a post-crisis world. The teenagers find a script for a pre-Evacuation television serial in an abandoned property, and want to perform it as a play. The adults try to avoid the pain of remembering their previous lives, while the young people don’t relate to the characters:

I became Brittany ... a girl who thought about clothes and boys as though they were everything ... To her, there was never an Evacuation ... She lived in a cooler, richer world and she never even noticed. (108)

Isle uses a dystopian juxtaposition of hope and fear. The climate crisis represents fear. In ‘The Schoolteacher’s Tale’ Shani and Ichiro’s marriage symbolises hope for the future, as does their child, who signifies fertility and survival. Shani and Ichiro move to a new suburb
beyond the city, demonstrating a willingness to re-define established boundaries. The marriage also provokes negotiations for reconciliation between the indigenous ‘tribal’ people and the city-dwellers. Hope for human survival depends on sharing skills and knowledge.

Isle does not use the dystopian concept of warning. She makes no obvious causal links between human behaviour and her setting. The plot events occur after the weather has changed, but Isle does not explain whether this could have been prevented. Should climate change writers provoke a paradigm change towards more environmentally responsible behaviour? *Nightsiders* does not provoke a paradigm change and makes no statements about environmentally responsible behaviour. Is *Nightsiders* climate-change dystopia, then? Arguably not.

*Nightsiders* is a strong contribution to the recent wave of speculative narratives surging through the young adult reader market. Sue Isle packs her plot with adventure and the trials of survival in a post-crisis world. She explores provocative issues for young readers, including relationships and social structures, and coming-of-age themes. She raises concerns and hopes for the future. Isle portrays climate change as a pessimistic setting rather than as a consequence of human behaviour. While *Nightsiders* is probably not a dystopian text, it is bold because it speculates on climate change, a scenario that has not yet been represented with certainty in any form of discursive enquiry.

‘Nation of the Night’ won Young Adult Story of the Year in the 2012 Aurealis Awards. Other texts in the Twelve Planets series so far include:

- Deborah Biancotti, *Bad Power*
- Margo Lanagan, *Cracklescape*
- Tansy Rayner Roberts, *Love and Romanpunk*
- Narelle M. Harris, *Showtime*
- Lucy Sussex, *Thief of Lives*
- Kaaron Warren, *Through Splintered Walls*
- Thoraiya Dyer, *Assymetry*

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