


# Poor Prose Muddles the Urgent Questions Posed in *The History of Bees*



The History of Bees asks readers to imagine futures as they might be, and to reflect upon the possibilities of change.

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by IAN MALLOV /// EAC Volunteer

Literature as social commentary is as old as storytelling itself. But literature dealing with the subject of environmental destruction – like the nuclear-apocalypse-themed fiction of the 1950s and ‘60s – has intensified as the threats have grown more dire. Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Ian McEwan’s *Solar* are examples by prominent western writers of such speculative fiction from the early 21st century, precursors to the increasingly common climate fiction, or “cli-fi” genre of the last 10-15 years. Much of this literature is set in future, post-apocalyptic worlds where environmental catastrophe has decimated human civilization as we know it. These days, you can find cli-fi everywhere from the best-sellers section at drug stores and airports to small university literary journals.

Maja Lunde’s *The History of Bees* is the first of the Oslo-based writer’s planned “Climate Quartet” and fits much more within the best-seller group, having sold hundreds of thousands of copies since its publication in 2015. Since then, Lunde has released *The End of the Ocean* and *The Last Wild Horses*.

*The History of Bees* is closer to general environmental speculative fiction than cli-fi. It focuses on a specific problem – the decline of bees – that is close enough to the popular consciousness to be easily relatable, and yet specific enough to have the appeal of a niche body of knowledge. This is what drew me to the novel. I found myself fascinated by the specific, almost dystopian hierarchy of a bee colony, and by the miracles of enzymatic chemistry by which bees turn the sucrose of nectar into the concentrated glucose and fructose of honey. And more importantly, I found myself relating to a sharp anxiety that the proliferation of parasites and pesticides, habitat destruction from poor land use and climate change might destroy these crucial pollinators.

Lunde’s novel weaves together three stories, set in different places and times. William Savage is a British shopkeeper and amateur naturalist in the early 1850s, depressed when his research is scorned by his mentor, Professor Rahm. George is an Ohio apiarist in 2007, trying to convince his academic-minded son to take over the farm, until his bees suddenly die from the colony collapse disorder first noted in 2007. Tao is a labourer, a “manual pollinator” in 2098 Sichuan who is doing the work that bees once did, and whose young son experiences a sudden, mysterious affliction. The novel’s chapters alternate between the three stories and often end on a cliffhanger. The elegant past, present, future design and the simplicity of the plots recall Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.

The novel is at its best when describing the particularities of beekeeping and the history of bee science. Lunde’s prose here is simple and descriptive:

**“Tom lifted the box while I changed the board. Removed the old one, which was full of debris and dead bees from the winter, and put in a new, clean one. We had invested in modern bottom boards with screens and removable ventilated pollen trays last year...The air circulation improved and the cleaning was simpler.”**

These interwoven plots are compelling, and to the best of my knowledge, the scientific parts are accurate. However, the complexities of the issues – of pesticides and monocrops and the trade-off between efficient land use and feeding a global population of eight billion – are not addressed. Organic farming is suggested as an answer, but not thoroughly explored.

Nonetheless, the quality of the book is often diminished by the one-dimensional characters and the quality of the prose on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph level.

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William, George and Tao rarely rise above the single-use roles defined by the architecture of the plot. William and his family are what Lunde imagines citizens of the 1850's must be: simple, limited in their geography, pious. His seven daughters constantly refer to him deferentially as "Father," and are often present in scenes as unspeaking props. One wants to refer Lunde to Alice Munro's *A Wilderness Station*, for example, to see how a modern writer can wonderfully animate realistic voices from the past. George is a caricature of a midwestern farmer, caring for his bees, occasionally ungrammatical, with few ambitions beyond passing the farm to his only son. Tao is the only character with hints of subtlety – she deserved more education than she got, has complicated feelings towards her husband and her duties as a pollinator.

I was also hoping for more fully imagined worlds. In Tao's China of 2098, while the environment and working conditions are radically different, the post-apocalyptic Beijing still has subways, restaurants and hospitals which, other than being largely abandoned, seem to be as they are today. Tao even calls her husband on an implausibly semi-functioning landline she comes across in an abandoned building.

Descriptions of non-bee-aspects are often clunky or redundant. George observes:

**"We were like Martians in white suits with hats and veils, in and out of the beams of light from the vehicles, as if we had come from a foreign planet..."**

Dialogue is also often shaky, and overly reliant on clichés - whether this is the fault of Lunde's original manuscript, or the English translation by Diane Oakley, I am not sure. Tao wandering Beijing:

**"Every station I caught sight of awakened hope. But every attempt to open a door, to come out onto the platform was the same slap in the face. Because they weren't in operation. I was still in no-man's land."**

Reading fiction should be challenging, pleasurable, immersive; the value of literature cannot simply be measured by its adherence to the correct side of important causes. Speculative fiction in particular is a powerful experience to induce readers to imagine futures as they might be, and to reflect upon the possibilities of change. Speculative fiction on the topic of environmental destruction is a powerful corollary to the dry language often used in science and policy; a good piece of fiction can access a broader range of ideas than a position paper. The History of Bees, though ambitious in its subject matter, sometimes fails to achieve this.



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Questions? Contact [brandy.rivers@ecologyaction.ca](mailto:brandy.rivers@ecologyaction.ca).

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