

# Book Review

Friederici, Peter. 2020. *Beyond Climate Breakdown: Envisioning New Stories of Radical Hope*. With a foreword by Kathleen Dean Moor. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

*Reviewed by Peter J. Jacques\**

Peter Friederici, a journalist and professor of communication at Northern Arizona University, draws useful insight about stories “that we use to make sense of the world” (3) and that interfere with combating climate change. The book is part of the One Planet series edited by Sikina Jinna and Simon Nicholson, designed to let academics “speak from the heart.” Friederici argues that the dominant Western narratives are not conducive to understanding climate “disruption,” and since he assumes that we need appropriate collective stories to appropriately respond to climate change, this explains climate inaction. We learn from the environmental humanities to be reflexive about our language, and he believes that the “greenhouse effect, global warming, and climate change carry with them enough defusing power that they themselves constitute potent barriers to action” (50). For example, the greenhouse effect sounds like a technical problem someone else will manage. Friederici believes that climate “breakdown” better conveys a sense that climate change will “unleash numerous corollary breakdowns in politics, economic systems, and societal relations” (56).

Friederici argues that several dominant Western narratives provide tools for climate denial. He is not referring to the organized denial by conservative think tanks but to a cultural blindfold that inhibits our ability to conceive what is happening and what it means. One example is the idea that neoliberal economic growth is inevitable and should never be questioned, as in Margaret Thatcher’s invocation that “there is no alternative.” Another is that the future is not as valuable as the present and that future generations will have more wealth and resources, justifying the absurd logic of economic discounting, which is especially absurd under a broken climate.

The first four chapters explain traps we must escape in prediction, metaphor, narrative, and tragedy. For example, Friederici argues that climate predictions are both too big and too small to make sense. The planetary impacts of climate disruption are so large that we cannot fully imagine what they mean, but at the same time, we hear that the sea level rises three millimeters per year. Beachgoers cannot see those three millimeters, but at the same time, coastal

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infrastructure is in imminent danger. To make matters worse, scientists and climate officials are often overly specific in statements like “Earth has 11 years to cut emissions to avoid dire climate scenarios” (Neuman 2021). This is a problem if addressing climate disruption is “always and never” (Robert Jay Lifton, as quoted on 11) too late.

Friederici also makes the compelling case that the actual *structure* of Western narrative is also an obstacle. The standard Western narrative slowly builds and then relieves tension across the story, with the overall tension rising until the cathartic end. We expect our stories to have endings that lend purpose and meaning to the rest of the story. Climate disruption has no end, so we need different, perhaps circular, narrative structures. One suggestion he makes use of comes from Ursula K. Le Guin in the “carrier-bag theory of fiction,” which she gets from anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher, who thought the first human tool was a container to carry things, not a weapon. Le Guin argued that our narratives favor male-dominated tales of triumph in which a spear-wielding hunter overcomes the mammoth and the story comes to a heroic end. Instead, Le Guin and Friederici think we need to pay more attention to the gatherers, who “aim neither toward ‘resolution nor stasis but continuing process’” (134). Arming ourselves with more of these stories improves our imagination and adds more voices to help us escape *tragedy*. By tragedy, Friederici means stories that are bound by fate, like Oedipus. There is no variation or choice—Oedipus *must* marry his mother and kill his father, and Western narratives favor tragedy, disabling our collective agency.

Instead, Friederici calls for comedy. He does not mean that climate disruption is a joke but rather that we should embrace the liberatory, democratic power of the comedic tradition. Comedy is subversive, innovative, and anarchic, so it creates openings and chances. I am reminded of the sacred role of the Hopi clown, who entertains crowds but also can also mock egotistical leaders while providing counsel through humor. The main point is that, unlike tragedy, comedy is not locked in. Since part of our predicament is from “undue adherence to preset and readily understandable narratives ... a sure path to ruin” (130), comedy and “radical hope” are remedies. Radical hope is the process of moving forward and changing course when you cannot even imagine what lies ahead but there is confidence that “goodness of the world transcends one’s limited and vulnerable attempts to understand it” (Lear, as quoted on 130). This confidence is an antidote to the violent, willful climate denial acting as a demonstration of freedom and power, primarily in the United States. This willful denial is compared to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* character Raskolnikov, who murders at least in part because he can. And as we “step out of the yoke of the narratives whose comfortable weight we have allowed to settle on us over centuries” (138), Friederici warns that we should not worry about finding coherent stories as much as we should open the space for more and different kinds of stories that, in turn, open opportunities and meaning to build a livable future.

## Reference

Neuman, Scott. 2021. Earth has 11 Years to Cut Emissions to Avoid Dire Climate Scenarios, a Report Says. National Public Radio, November 4. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/04/1052267118/climate-change-carbon-dioxide-emissions-global-carbon-budget>, last accessed June 22, 2023.