

The Beautiful Future Is Coming:

An Interview with Flora Wilson Brown

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Abstract

I was lucky enough to be granted an interview with British playwright Flora Wilson Brown after seeing her climate change-themed play *The Beautiful Future Is Coming* at the Bristol Old Vic (UK) in Spring 2025. The conversation explores Flora's thoughts on the role of drama in deepening climate literacy and the challenge of living happily in an uncertain age.

Keywords

drama, narrative, uncertainty, agency, crisis, *The Beautiful Future Is Coming*

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Introduction

Climate change presents educators with a paradox. It is both impossible to ignore and increasingly difficult to teach. The scale of the crisis resists comprehension; its timelines stretch beyond individual lifespans; and its emotional weight can overwhelm students and teachers alike. In many classrooms, climate education oscillates between data-heavy urgency and emotional paralysis, between calls to action and quiet despair.

In this context, narrative—and particularly theatre—offers a powerful but underused tool for climate literacy. Unlike informational texts, drama does not ask audiences simply to understand climate change. It asks them to inhabit it: to feel its presence in daily life, relationships, ethical decisions, and visions of the future. Flora Wilson Brown's play *The Beautiful Future Is Coming* provides a striking example of how this might work. Moving between nineteenth-century America, the contemporary world, and a speculative Arctic future, the play does not attempt to explain climate science or predict specific outcomes. Instead, it asks a more intimate and pedagogically resonant question: how do people live with climate knowledge? How do they love, grieve, and joke with this Sword of Damocles hovering above them? I spoke with Wilson Brown about writing climate drama, the role of affect in learning, and why she believes stories are essential resources to prompt meaningful climate literacy.

History, Missed Opportunities, and the Origins of The Crisis

The play begins in the mid-nineteenth century, with the American scientist Eunice Foote, whose early experiments brought her close to identifying the greenhouse effect. Foote's work was largely ignored, and industrialisation accelerated without serious consideration of its atmospheric consequences.

"I was struck by the irony," Wilson Brown says. "This was the moment when the modern world was being built—when people genuinely felt the future was opening up. And if those ideas had been taken seriously, we might have ended up with a completely different model of industrialisation."

For climate literacy, this historical framing is significant. Rather than presenting climate change as an abstract or inevitable outcome of progress, the play situates it as the result of specific human choices made within particular cultural, political, and economic contexts. The audience is invited to consider not only what happened, but what *might* have happened instead.

There is also, Wilson Brown notes, a gendered dimension to this history. Women's scientific contributions were routinely marginalised, and Foote's story reflects broader patterns of whose knowledge has been valued and whose has been ignored. "That

parallel felt important,” she says. “Women’s scientific work was sidelined, and today women and girls are statistically the most affected by climate instability.”

In educational settings, this strand opens opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching. Climate science can be taught alongside history, gender studies, and ethics, encouraging students to see the climate crisis not simply as a technical problem but as a social one. The play models how climate literacy might include critical questions about power, recognition, and responsibility—questions that remain deeply relevant today.

The Present as a Narrowing Window

The play’s middle section is set in contemporary London. These scenes are deliberately recognisable: characters argue about work, relationships, travel, and moral responsibility. Climate change is present but rarely named directly, appearing instead as a background pressure shaping decisions and anxieties.

“I wanted those characters to feel like people the audience knows,” Wilson Brown says. “Climate change can feel like something that happens somewhere else. But London is a coastal city. The Thames is dangerous in a warming world.”

This emphasis on proximity is pedagogically important. Students frequently struggle to engage when climate change feels distant—geographically, socially, or temporally. By embedding the crisis in familiar urban environments, the play disrupts the idea that climate impacts are remote or abstract.

The present, in Wilson Brown’s structure, is also the only time period in which meaningful choice still exists. “The past and the future are worlds with limited agency,” she explains. “The present is where decisions are still possible—not perfect decisions, but decisions nonetheless.”

This framing offers a nuanced way of discussing agency in the classroom. It resists the binary of total responsibility versus total helplessness, instead acknowledging constraints while maintaining ethical urgency. For climate literacy educators, this can help students grapple with the complexity of action without slipping into either denial or despair.

Imagining the Future Without Spectacle

The final section of the play takes place in a future Arctic setting. Notably, it avoids apocalyptic imagery. There is no sudden collapse or dramatic extinction event. Life continues, but in reduced form.

“It’s not dramatically different,” Wilson Brown says. “Just smaller. More constrained. Less choice. Less freedom. More irritation.” This refusal of spectacle is

deliberate. Many climate narratives rely on disaster to provoke attention, but Wilson Brown is more interested in the slow erosion of possibility. For students, this vision of the future can be more unsettling—and more instructive—than catastrophic scenarios.

It encourages reflective questions: What would daily life feel like? What would be lost, and what would remain? What kinds of relationships would matter most? These questions bridge scientific understanding and ethical reflection, positioning climate literacy as preparation for living well under conditions of uncertainty rather than simply avoiding worst-case outcomes.

Affect, Humour, and the Ethics of Care

Despite its themes, the play is frequently funny. Characters joke, tease one another, and fall in love. For Wilson Brown, humour is not a contradiction of climate seriousness but a necessary condition for engagement.

“On a practical level, audiences don’t connect with characters who just suffer relentlessly,” she says. “You have to make people laugh so that they care.” This insight has clear implications for teaching. Students, like theatre audiences, disengage when material feels relentlessly grim. Humour and warmth allow difficult ideas to be held rather than avoided. They create emotional space in which learning can take place.

More deeply, Wilson Brown frames joy itself as ethically significant. “The only people who benefit from us giving up are the people who want us to give up,” she says. “Life is short and extraordinary. What’s the point of saving the world if we’re all miserable?”

This emphasis on care—for oneself and for others—runs throughout the play, culminating in its final moments. The closing monologue affirms small, everyday acts: cooking, hospitality, companionship. “The world can be frightening and cruel,” Wilson Brown says, “but we can still make dinner for each other. We can still open the door and let someone in.” For climate educators, this offers a powerful counter-narrative to despair. It suggests that climate literacy is not only about understanding systems and projections, but about sustaining meaning, relationships, and moral imagination in the face of disruption.

Despair, Responsibility, and the Limits of Endurance

One storyline in the play follows Dan, a character who is unable to live with his climate knowledge and its implications. His fate is not shown directly on stage; instead, it is communicated through those who loved him.

“Anyone who’s seriously engaged with climate research has had moments where they’ve had to step away for self-preservation,” Wilson Brown says. “Dan is what happens when you can’t.”

This storyline resonates strongly with concerns about eco-anxiety among students and educators. By treating despair not as a moral failure but as a human limit, the play creates space for conversations about mental health, responsibility, and care within climate education.

Importantly, Wilson Brown resists romanticising sacrifice. “It wouldn’t be ethical,” she says, “to ask an actor to inhabit that level of distress night after night.” The same ethical question applies in classrooms: how much emotional burden can—or should—students be asked to carry?

Theatre in the Climate Literacy Classroom

Although the play was not written specifically for young audiences, Wilson Brown is acutely aware of its relevance to education. “Teenagers are already incredibly anxious about climate change,” she says. “There’s something cathartic about being in a room where everyone is feeling a version of what you’re feeling.”

Unlike textbooks or policy documents, theatre creates a shared emotional experience. It allows students to process climate knowledge collectively rather than in isolation. It also models complexity: conflicting values, imperfect choices, and unresolved tensions. For climate literacy educators, this suggests a role for drama not as illustration but as inquiry—a way of exploring what climate knowledge *does* to people, not just what it means.

Conclusion: Learning to Live with the Future

Wilson Brown did not expect the play to be produced. “I genuinely thought no one would ever put it on,” she says. “But I had to write it.” Since its first performance, it has prompted conversations about climate anxiety, responsibility, and hope—conversations that increasingly belong in educational spaces.

As climate education continues to evolve, this work offers an important reminder: facts alone are not enough. Climate literacy must also address how people live with what they know.

“We can’t live entirely in fear of the future,” Wilson Brown says. “But we also can’t pretend it isn’t coming. The challenge is learning how to live—fully and generously—in the space between those two things.” That challenge, increasingly, is one our classrooms must help students meet.