

Panic Fiction: Mapping a Genre in Times of Crisis

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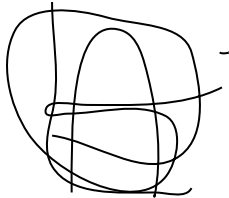
Panic Fiction: Mapping a Genre in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

Deze scriptie streeft ernaar een definitie te geven van het literaire genre van Panic Fiction. Om een definitie te kunnen geven, is een ‘close reading’ op het bestaande onderzoek toegepast. De volgende onderzoeken zijn hiervoor doorgenomen, het onderzoek van Mary Templin en David Zimmerman met betrekking tot economische Panic Fiction en het onderzoek van Nicholas Gaskill met betrekking tot Trump Panic Fiction. Hieruit blijkt dat Panic Fiction een literair genre is dat wordt gekenmerkt door de onmiddellijke reactie op crises. Het genre functioneert als een vorm van sociaal commentaar en biedt een waardevol inzicht in hoe literatuur reflecteert en reageert op de geschiedenis. Om de definitie verder te onderzoeken en uit te breiden, is een verdere ‘close reading’ toegepast op twee romans: *Weather* van Jenny Offill en *Trust Exercise* van Susan Choi. Deze casestudies tonen aan dat Panic Fiction de crises niet per se openlijk hoeft uit te beelden; de gevolgen van de crises zullen echter altijd voelbaar zijn in de roman. Bovendien zet Panic Fiction lezers aan om na te denken over de huidige stand van zaken en om een gevoel van verantwoordelijkheid te ontwikkelen door het navigeren door de complexe dynamiek van een snel veranderende wereld.

Trefwoorden: panic fiction, crisis, reactie, literatuur, verklaring, autofictie, microgenre

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Introduction

On the 5th of November 2024, my perspective of the world shifted dramatically. What began as an evening of anticipation quickly turned into disbelief as my expected political outcome failed to materialize. This sense of uncertainty has only intensified in the face of global crises, from the restructuring of the United States to ongoing conflicts such as the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In a period of uncertainty, literature provides a means of both escapism and comprehending reality. This thesis explores the manner in which fiction navigates and reflects contemporary anxieties, thereby providing insight into the ways in which individuals process and interpret an uncertain world.

The utilization of diverse genres can facilitate the articulation of these insights in varied ways. In this thesis I will be researching a genre that addresses contemporary issues directly: namely Panic Fiction. Panic Fiction is a literary genre that emerged as a response to economic, political, and environmental instability. This genre can be utilized to examine how individuals and societies navigate these sudden disruptions. Although Panic Fiction has not yet been recognized as a formally established genre, the term had emerged over time in relation to economic crashes and sudden political upheavals. A more thorough investigation of the term is anticipated to reveal a lens through which the cultural and political impact of crises can be comprehended. The central objective of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive definition and analysis of Panic Fiction as a genre within 21st-century literature. To this end, case studies will be utilized to illustrate the characteristics that define this genre. This thesis will examine Panic Fiction's position as a literary category and its function as a cultural and literary response to significant social and political events.

To be able to conduct this research, I will be applying the common features of Panic Fiction to two case studies. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of Panic Fiction, I have selected

two novels that engage with different significant events in American history. The first case study will be *Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi, which came out in 2019. The publisher, Macmillan, states that the novel “will incite heated conversations about fiction and truth, and friendships and loyalties, and will leave readers with wiser understandings of the true capacities of adolescents and the powers and responsibilities of adults” (*Trust Exercise*). The novel deals with power dynamics, manipulation, and the uncertainty of knowing if someone is telling you the truth. Choi started writing the novel around the time Donald Trump was first elected. She finished the novel but it did not feel complete. It was not until the #MeToo-movement autumn of 2017 that she was able to find the right ending for the novel (Hillary). As the novel was written during such turbulent times and deals with important subjects that are not limited to those specific years, I believe it will be a useful case study.

The second case study is *Weather* by Jenny Offill, which came out in 2020. Offill wrote the novel after years of conversations about the slow extinction humanity is forcing upon earth, in combination with climate change. The process of writing this novel was a way for Offill to try to “move from thinking about what is happening to feeling the immensity and sadness of it” (Offill, “Interview”). The novel can be seen as a reaction to climate change, climate anxiety, political instability, and the internet’s role in shaping paranoia. I believe this will be a useful case study, as it deals with an event that is not contained to one specific time frame and therefore deals with a different area of panic.

My theoretical framework will consist of mapping out the existing research on Panic Fiction. The most significant contributions to this field, at this point in time, include Mary Templin’s journal article “Panic Fiction: Women’s responses to Antebellum Economic Crisis” (2004), her book *Panic Fiction: Women and Antebellum Economic Crisis* (2014), David

Zimmerman's book *Panic!: Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (2006), and Nicholas Gaskill's journal article "Reality in America, Redux: on Trump Panic Fiction" (2024). These works provide key insights into the ways literature engages with economic and political crises, therefore forming the foundation for understanding Panic Fiction as a genre.

It is my belief that the study of Panic Fiction, using these aforementioned sources, can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of fictional genres by emphasizing how authors respond to moments of crisis and uncertainty through their literature. The genre's emergence from periods of economic, political, and social upheaval is characterized by a blending of elements from various genres. By exploring the themes, structures, and stylistic choices of Panic Fiction, I aspire to reveal how genres can evolve in response to contemporary anxieties. Moreover, Panic Fiction's emphasis on immediacy and societal disruption provides a lens through which to examine how fiction shapes and reflects collective fears, thereby illustrating the fluidity and adaptability of literary genres over time.

The thesis is structured to first establish a foundational understanding of Panic Fiction before applying this framework to case studies through close reading analysis. The first chapter defines Panic Fiction, outlining its characteristics, historical context, and theoretical positioning within literary studies. Chapter Two presents a close reading analysis of the first case study, examining how the novel engages with Panic Fiction's themes and narrative techniques. Chapter Three follows with a close reading of the second case study, allowing for comparison and further refinement of the genre's definition. In conclusion, the findings from the analyses are summarized, and a redefinition of Panic Fiction is proposed.

Chapter 1 - Defining Panic Fiction

In his essay “What Are Genres?” (2017) Ralph Cohen revises his definition of the concept of genre in various ways, though its essence is this: “a genre is a group (or class) of texts distinguished from other groups by their internal interaction and shared social purpose and by their intertextual relation to other genres” (174). He goes on to emphasize the fluid nature of genres, noting that they are continuously innovated, developed, and sometimes disappear, to possibly be revived later (Cohen 175). Even though this could make a genre harder to define, it does allow for a broader understanding of a topic. Panic, for example, is not experienced the same way by everyone; nor does it remain constant across different time periods. As the world evolves and crises change, so too does the genre that engages with them. In this chapter, I intend to identify and analyze the key characteristics that define Panic Fiction based on the primary sources. Therefore laying the groundwork for its further exploration in the case studies. Furthermore, I will situate the genre within the concept of microgenre, to deepen the understanding and importance of Panic Fiction as a genre. I will then propose a provisional definition of the genre of Panic Fiction based on these findings.

In her journal article, “Panic Fiction: Women’s responses to Antebellum Economic Crisis” (2004) Mary Templin discusses how American female authors responded to the ‘Panic of 1837’. She states that “between 1836 and 1840, an outpouring of dozens of novels and stories – nearly all written by white, middle-class, Northern women – responded to the national threat of financial failure”. This reaction to a major event through fiction Templin then termed “panic fiction” (“Women’s Responses” 2). The novels were enormously popular at that time and all contained “remarkably similar responses to panic and economic failure”, and depicted the “effects of

financial loss on the home and model appropriate responses” (Templin, “Women’s Responses” 2). Templin’s decision to focus on solely female-authored Panic Fiction offers a demonstration of the value of women’s (panic) fiction as a vehicle for social commentary. Furthermore, the specific event of panic, which is even rarely studied by historians, provides a valuable way to explore the changing dynamics of gender, class, and race. Like the phenomenon of panic itself, the genre of Panic Fiction amplifies the pre-existing fears surrounding social status and gender roles, thereby highlighting the issues to be examined (Templin, “Women’s Responses” 2).

According to Templin, Panic Fiction highlights topics that already exist in fiction. Portrayals of financial failure were not new in American women’s writing at that time. So, what Panic Fiction does, according to Templin is, it “crystalizes the economic anxiety that lurks in the background of earlier novels, signaling a new level of engagement with actual and specific economic events.” (3). Panic Fiction does not necessarily engage with a new topic, but it uses the event that causes panic and examines it as a subject in itself. Templin then goes on to add a further definition of the genre:

...panic novels dramatize failure in plots that revolve around the irresponsible behavior and decisions that lead to the brink of loss and/or the appropriate attitudes and actions to be taken once that loss has occurred. In addition, panic novels offer wide-ranging analyses of systemic economic issues, exploring the causes of failure and advocating market reforms that would ensure continuous and reliable economic growth. (“Women’s Responses” 3)

Through this it can be concluded that Panic Fiction examines systemic instability. The genre dramatizes moments of crisis while at the same time examining their causes and potential resolutions. The genre does not only engage with collective anxieties, but also with individual anxieties. These individual anxieties can reflect those of the author, or of a marginalized group that

the author may have decided to write about. As Templin states that the specific critiques varied “from author to author, and text to text”, yet public welfare consistently took precedence over “individual self-interest” (“Women’s Responses” 4). Furthermore, the idea that these panic novels outline ‘appropriate attitudes and actions’ in the aftermath of failure suggests that they could also function as cautionary tales or even frameworks for navigating these types of crises. Furthermore, Templin states that because the genre engages with broader cultural issues such as, class, gender identity, and national development, it is placed in an optimal position to shape societal discourse. Rather than being solely focused on the economy, Panic Fiction can serve as a lens through which readers can navigate anxieties about identity, social structure, and the uncertainty of the future (Templin, “Women’s Responses” 13).

In her book *Panic Fiction: Women and Antebellum Economic Crisis* (2014) Templin further emphasizes why she feels the genre deserves more attention. Templin states the genre’s focus on economic anxiety closely mirrors our current concerns about job loss, bankruptcy, and other aspects of a prolonged economic downturn. Although the terminology has changed over the years and the financial practices have grown more complex, the underlying concerns have remained much the same (Templin, *Panic Fiction* 3). Its resonance with today, however, is not the only facet that makes this genre important. Templin also notes that “their potential to enhance our understanding of both American literary history and America’s economic development in the decades preceding the Civil War” as a possible claim to our attention (Templin, *Panic Fiction* 3). According to Templin it is crucial to see women’s antebellum Panic Fiction as a distinct genre. Its “explicit intersection between economics and domesticity manifested in the plots, themes, perspectives, and narrative styles of these texts” is what distinguishes this genre from male-authored Panic Fiction or domestic fiction (Templin, *Panic Fiction* 3). Finally, while most novels

of the early republic and antebellum era use failure as a device to establish a plot line, panic fiction highlights it. In other words, according to Templin, “panic fiction is truly *about*¹ failure” (Panic Fiction 14). It explores the roots of economic crises and looks for potential solutions, providing more economic insights and commentary compared to other types of fiction (Templin, Panic Fiction 14). Templin shows in her works how her version of Panic Fiction can both be seen as a vehicle for social commentary, as well as a useful field of research for contemporary scholars.

When defining the term “panic fiction” in her works, Mary Templin mentions David Zimmerman as another scholar who has used the term. In his book *Panic!: Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (2006) he studies how American writers and their audiences envisioned, and in one instance even triggered, market crashes and financial panics. At the turn of the twentieth century, financial panics, alongside natural disasters, military conflicts, and labor strikes, were among the most widely discussed and shocking events experienced by Americans of all social classes. These events were characterized by their dramatic nature, chaotic developments, and disastrous consequences, often giving rise to unpredictable behavior in individuals, financial markets, and the broader economy. Zimmerman states that the American population “literally read their fate in panics” (1). These so-called *panics*, a term used by Zimmerman to describe the range of texts that sought to interpret and narrate this moment of crisis, appeared in the form of pamphlets, financial primers, magazine and journal articles, and fictional works that were quickly published to fulfill the American people’s desire to understand. In his study Zimmerman focused on “panic novels” which he described as “novels overtly preoccupied with financial panic and economic crisis” (Zimmerman 1). In *Panic!* Zimmerman examined how writers interpreted financial panics, from major crises like those of 1893 and 1907 to smaller market crashes. He explores how American writers used emerging theories – mob psychology, psychic research,

¹ Italics are used here as they appear in the original source material

sympathy, and conspiracy – to understand economic mass behavior. And lastly, he analyses how financial panics, as both events and metaphors of chaos, provided fiction writers with a means to test the limits of writers form and narrative representation (Zimmerman 1-2). According to Zimmerman writers were drawn to market panics as both the focus and backdrop to their stories, because the panic revealed cultural and economic forces that were typically hidden under normal circumstances. Like Templin, Zimmerman acknowledges that the inherent panic of a situation can highlight new and important insights regarding existing topics. Panic novels illustrate how writers from diverse backgrounds understood the growing influence of financial markets and individuals' entanglement in economic crises. These crises not only exposed hidden social forces but also served as a literary tool to examine broader cultural and psychological issues. Writers used financial panics to address concerns ranging from economic instability to gender anxiety, moral uncertainty, and class conflict. Unlike other finance novels, *Panic Fiction*, according to Zimmerman, frames market crises as metaphors for modern excess and disorder, using diverse genres – melodrama, romance, naturalism – to interpret the transformations of American capitalism (3). This shows that *Panic Fiction* is not confined to a single literary style but instead adapts to various modes of storytelling to capture instability and crisis. According to Zimmerman, *Panic Fiction* presents market crowds both as social phenomena and historical processes in which individuals become entangled. By dramatizing these processes, *Panic Fiction* makes the often invisible forces of market structures and economic dependence more comprehensible. Financial subjugation thus serves as a metaphor for broader forms of ideological and social influence (Zimmerman 6).

In his 2024 journal article “Reality in America, Redux: On Trump Panic Fiction” Nicholas Gaskill introduces a subset of *Panic Fiction*, namely “Trump panic fiction” (1049). He explains

how the 2016 election of Donald Trump can be seen as a literary historical event due to its effect on the literary world. He describes the novels that he classifies as Trump panic fiction as “novels that dramatize Trump’s election in the key of ontological alarm” (Gaskill 1049). Essentially, he states that these works of fiction portray Trump’s election as a fundamental threat to reality and the understanding of our existence (Moon & Blackman 1170)). According to Gaskill, these works engage with both the artistic and factual aspects of representation – balancing the ability to evoke emotion with the capacity to convey understanding (Gaskill 1049). In delineating his research, Gaskill excludes satire, cartoons, and science fiction, arguing that these genres inherently trust imaginative fiction as a means of revealing the truth in a chaotic world. Instead, Gaskill focuses on the loss of this trust and how that loss paradoxically manifests in fiction. More precisely, he selects the genre of literary fiction as it had already explored the relationship between reality and fiction before Trump’s candidacy. Two distinct features of this field make the genre particularly relevant to Trump-related moral panic. First, most literary novels are written by a privileged, left-leaning group. It is therefore unsurprising that a disruption within this field would influence the writing of these authors (Gaskill 1052). Second, the rise of autofiction around 2010 had already blurred the lines between art and life, between what an author invents and what actually happened (Gaskill 1052). According to prof. Dr. Claudia Gronemann, a professor for romance literature and media studies at the university of Mannheim, autofiction combines both fictional and autobiographical elements, which creates a paradox in the traditional understanding of genre (241). Coined by Serge Doubrovksy, the term refers to a mode of writing in which real-life events and the author’s own experiences are recounted under the label of fiction (Gronemann 241). In the delineation of his research Gaskill chose five case studies, even though they may not all carry the label of autofiction they did draw upon its central concerns and have often been interpreted through

the lens of autofiction (1052). He goes on to state that the novels he chose “each engage in deep, often ambivalent ways with a pervasive liberal discourse that sought to stabilize American reality by countering fiction with facts, stories with explanations” (Gaskill 1052). In this passage, Gaskill proposes that authors possess a civic duty to promote clarity during these periods of crisis. This suggests a role for authors to provide explanations and factual information in an era where trust in truth and factual evidence is questionable.

As previously stated, Gaskill’s research into Trump panic fiction entailed the analysis of five novels. The first is *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar, of which Gaskill states that the novel “explores the essential tension between art and explanation that predominates in Trump panic fiction” (1058). He notes that the narrator feels the need to explain how Trump’s presidency could come to be, however, in the process of finding an explanation he is forced to reflect on the issues at hand instead (Gaskill 1059). This introspective journey is subsequently shared with the reader, resulting in a shared contemplation of the crisis. Within this process of explanation and reflection the reader becomes engaged in identifying and ultimately fine-tuning “the meaning of fictions in an era of post-truth” (Gaskill 1059). This novel subsequently illustrates how the reflection and introspection of the characters can influence the reader.. The central narrative in the second novel, *Red Pill* by Hari Kunzru, serves as an explanation for contemporary politics, according to Gaskill. The story follows various characters who each encounter scenarios that disrupt their perception of reality. However, the plot ultimately converges on election night. While the narrator’s wife may be taken aback by the outcome of the election, the reader and the narrator are not. In this revelation, Gaskill focuses on an aspect of Panic Fiction and its use for readers. He cites Alexander Manshel, an English professor at McGill University, who asserts that “part of the pleasure of recent historical fiction” is that it offers “something akin to posttraumatic exposure therapy” (1060). The reader is

offered the opportunity to relive the trauma “without the surprise” (Manshel qtd. in Gaskill 1060). Gaskill further observes that in this novel, Kunzru offers the readers a chance to gain an imaginative perspective on Trump-induced reality panic, to reverse panic’s immobilizing effects (1060-1061). It is important to note that Panic Fiction serves a dual purpose: it enables the reader to process the crisis at hand and provides the necessary tools and clarity to attempt to alter the outcome or, at the very least, ensure that the crisis never occurs again. The third novel attempts to provide an explanation as to how the election of Trump came to be as well. *The Topeka School* by Ben Lerner employs a narrative style that leaves the reader with questions regarding the hows and the whys of the election. According to Gaskill, the narrative perspective “invites the readers to view the story as an explanation for contemporary politics”, with the plot unfolding as the explanation (1061). Lerner incorporates thought exercises into his narrative technique, wherein he delineates a scene and then asks: “What is happening in this moment? What are the characters thinking and feeling? Tell me what led up to this scene?” (275). These questions and exercises are pertinent to the reader of the novel as well, prompting them to consider not only the fictional situations depicted but also their real-life counterparts. While the initial three novels endeavor to build narrative tension out of the urge to explain Trump voters, the fourth novel employs an alternative approach. Lauren Oyler’s *Fake Accounts* is a metafiction novel that follows a narrator who “strives to position herself apart from the frenzied feel of the Trump panic moment” (Gaskill 1064). She endeavors to maintain composure while being acutely aware of the persona she is performing. Oyler shows a different perspective from the people outraged by the results of the election and instead focuses on the need to feel accepted and part of a whole, despite the evident dissonance between their own views and those of others. The fifth and final novel examined in this study is *No One Is Talking about This* by Patricia Lockwood. He asserts that Lockwood “leans into

the reality-making powers of art” and seems to be one of the only authors who will not attempt to give a fictionalized explanation of “Trumpism” (1065). She discusses the real fears that Trump’s success on social media and his “funny” utterances could have “paved his path to the White House” (Gaskill 1065). According to Gaskill, Lockwood’s writing style asks the reader “how a novel, as a particular kind of fiction, can distinguish itself from the glut of online performance” and even attune readers to reality (1066). The plot of the novel switches between various political and online worlds with the objective of providing readers with guidance as they navigate the “ontologically unstable waters of life led increasingly online”, as stated by Gaskill (1066). A returning theme within *Panic Fiction*, as articulated by Gaskill, is its function as a guide for readers to comprehend and address the prevailing crisis. Stating that writers, such as Lockwood, employ literature to “intensify an awareness of the present moment” (1067). Gaskill shows how different narratological strategies are employed to make sense of the same crisis. In the style of a memoir like Akhtar, embedded narratives like Kunzru, asking questions like Lerner, or leaning into the absurd like Oyler and Lockwood. *Panic Fiction* can manifest in various forms to engage the reader and offer guidance in comprehending the situation.

Gaskill states that the novels he analyzed only represent a “micromoment in US literary history, one marked primarily by a shared set of questions and moods: the ‘panic’ part of Trump panic fiction” (1071). These works respond to the specific fears that defined the years following Trump’s election participating in, depicting, critiquing, or combining these responses (Gaskill 1071). In doing so, the writers Gaskill discusses separate literary fiction from autofiction, instead prioritizing an urgent reexamination of the role and function of artistic invention (1072). He concludes that the narratives he studied reaffirm the connection between art and the irrational. These writers recognize that the threats to twenty-first century liberalism stem from the deliberate

manipulation of people's sense of reality. This type of manipulation does not oppose art and aesthetic mystery but rather weaponizes them for harmful purposes, underscoring the importance of understanding fiction's power (Gaskill 1072).

To better understand Panic Fiction through the lens of genre study, and to explore how its study might contribute to a broader understanding of fictional genres, I turned to the concept of microgenres. Since Panic Fiction is both focused and relatively small-scale, this framework proved especially relevant. The introduction of *The Microgenre: A Quick Look at Small Culture* (2020), edited by Molly C. O'Donnell and Anne H. Stevens, provides insight into the term microgenre. As O'Donnell and Stevens define it, microgenre "refers to the classification of increasingly niche-marketed worlds" within popular music, television, and, as will be demonstrated in this thesis, fiction (1). This notion aligns with Nicholas Gaskill's characterization of Panic Fiction as a "micromoment in US literary history", reinforcing its status as a distinct but time- and theme-bound literary category (1071). Understanding Panic Fiction as a microgenre allows for a more precise exploration of its defining characteristics, rhetorical strategies, and cultural significance. There are varying types of microgenres, however, I have highlighted this definition by O'Donnell and Stevens: "Microgenres are sometimes means of coping with the present by learning from the past" (5). This type of microgenre is described as being "less fluid" and "tethered to particular moments of cultural anxiety or technological innovation" (O'Donnell & Stevens 5). O'Donnell and Stevens go on to state that events are written about shortly after discovery and call it an "of the moment microgenre" (5). All of these defining characteristics resonate strongly with the genre of Panic Fiction. As previously discussed in the primary sources, this genre responds to major events shortly after they occur, translating them into literary form. Its authors seek to impose a sense of order within the chaos, offering the readers a means of coping with collective uncertainty.

The conceptualization of Panic Fiction as a microgenre offers a valuable framework for understanding the events to which it responds. Microgenres are characterized by an acute focus on the particulars of a given situation. For this reason, microgenres provide distinctive frameworks for conceptualizing the structuring of historical events and the organization of information (O'Donnell & Stevens 2). In her work, Mary Templin advocates for an examination of the specific event of the panic, emphasizing that these details are frequently overlooked by historians ("Women's Responses 2). Building on this approach, O'Donnell and Stevens contend that by focusing on the details, the importance of complexity becomes evident (3). By oversimplifying genre classifications, however, the broader influences at play are overlooked, and the potential for surprising and insightful interpretations that could challenge readers' expectations is dismissed (O'Donnell & Stevens 3). O'Donnell and Stevens further state that the "explorations of microgenres can help fill out the picture of a particular historical moment" (4). This assertion underscores Panic Fiction's capacity to offer clarity during times of crisis, a notion that has been previously documented in this thesis. By underscoring Panic Fiction as a microgenre, as opposed to categorizing the novels within a more expansive and generic genre, readers are enabled to perceive the existing knowledge from a different perspective. Consequently, the study of Panic Fiction can be instrumental in investigating the events to which it responds. By directing the focus to specific details, it becomes possible to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the events in question and the varied responses they evoked. The personal experience of the author and the manner in which they elected to portray the crisis can offer significant insights into the predominant social atmosphere of that era.

When examining the existing research, the most prominent pattern I observed is Panic Fiction's ability to highlight existing issues in a new light. Panic Fiction is a microgenre that

emerges in response to moments of cultural, political, economic, or environmental crisis. It is characterized by its immediacy, engaging directly with the current anxieties of that particular time. Using dramatization of the systemic instability, it highlights current issues. While it shares features with broader genres, it distinguishes itself through its explicit engagement with crisis as both a narrative structure and a thematic concern. The story does not necessarily have to directly mention the current crisis, though its effects are palpable throughout the novels. Panic Fiction often serves as a form of social commentary, reflecting on collective fears while also exploring individual anxieties and potential responses to uncertainty. As Panic Fiction is based in reality it makes it a key site for examining how literature functions as both a reflection of and an intervention in historical events. Furthermore, Panic Fiction authors seek to impose a sense of order within the chaos, offering the readers a means of coping with collective uncertainty. In short, and as Jenny Offill put it in her interview with Rebecca Godfrey; Panic Fiction is “about trying to move from thinking about what is happening to feeling the immensity and sadness of it” (“Interview” par. 5). This does not only apply to the author but to the reader as well.

Chapter 2 - Case Study: Weather by Jenny Offill

In this chapter, I will apply the provisional definition of Panic Fiction, as established in the previous chapter, to the first case study. As established previously Panic Fiction is a microgenre that emerges in response to moments of crisis. The genre is characterized by its immediacy, with authors engaging directly with the current anxieties. The crisis in question need not be explicitly named, but its effects are palpable throughout the novel. Panic Fiction's basis in reality allows for a reflection of the collective fears of that time. Furthermore, it can be employed in examining how literature can function as a reflection of historical events, and in some cases even an intervention in these events. I will analyze the novel *Weather* by Jenny Offill (2020) on the different types of panic it discusses and on how the genre Panic Fiction manifests itself in the novel. This chapter will include a narratological analysis to explore how the author employed and shaped the various themes. The analysis of this first case study will not only add to the definition of Panic Fiction that has been established but will also provide an example of the genre. Additionally, I will examine in what ways the case study might deviate from the established definition of Panic Fiction to further explore the definition of the genre.

Jenny Offill wrote *Weather* in an attempt to make something out of the endless swirls of thoughts and ideas in her head regarding climate change and the first election of Donald Trump ("Interview" par. 31). In an interview with Rebecca Godfrey she talks about the unease she felt after the election and how it has never really left her. The election and the ticking clock that is climate change forced her to start exploring "collective action as an antidote to this pervasive fear and dread" ("Interview" par. 21). This novel underscores the need for collective action. The themes are of relevance to a broad audience and this novel can open the discourse surrounding it. Offill

also speaks on joining Extinction Rebellion, a nonviolent direct action group, and one of their main demands which is: “tell the truth, which means admit that it is an emergency and act from that place” (“Interview par. 21). This may be regarded as the base principle upon which Panic Fiction is built. In writing a Panic Fiction novel, the author admits to and acknowledges the crisis and articulates their truth in relation to it. This allows for the reader to potentially recognize the crisis and the emotions surrounding it and act accordingly. Alternatively, it can offer readers an opportunity to engage with the author’s perspective on the crisis, aiding in personal reflection.

The novel follows the life of Lizzie Benson, a part-time librarian. According to Offill, “people who work in libraries are constantly thinking about the world around them and their patrons as well as about what is going on in their own heads” (“Interview” par. 15). By writing her main character as a librarian, she opened her novel to a wider field of concern, as opposed to merely one issue. She further solidifies her choice in making Lizzie a librarian by noting the plethora of knowledge and skills these workers have. She describes librarians as “emergency social workers for our threadbare social systems” and notes how they contribute to the community (“Interview” par. 16). Furthermore, the setting of the library itself is described as one of the last noncommercial spaces where everyone is welcome. Offill notes that she feels they give a glimpse of how society could live if it chose to be generous instead of fearful (“Interview” par. 19). These narrative choices made by the author ensures that the foundation of the novel is sound. Offill depicts a protagonist who is constantly engaged with both personal struggles and pressing global concerns and situates her in a workplace that is entirely dedicated to helping others and inclusivity. In doing so she constructs an ideal environment through which the central themes of the novel can be explored in a nuanced and in-depth manner.

As mentioned previously, the novel follows the life of Lizzie Benson. Lizzie works in a library, despite never having finished a degree. She lives with her husband, Ben and her young son, Eli in an apartment in Brooklyn. When her old grad school mentor Sylvia comes into town, Lizzie agrees to serve as an assistant for her podcast about climate change called 'Hell or High Water'. As Sylvia's assistant, Lizzie is tasked with answering the emails the podcast received. Throughout the novel Lizzie is described as an amateur psychologist, frequently posing and responding to questions directed at her family, friends, and the regular visitors at her job in the library. While juggling two jobs and managing a family life in which husband and wife seem to live alongside instead of with each other, Lizzie also maintains a close relationship with her brother, Henry. Henry is a recovering addict who starts off as a background character, but as his new relationship with Catherine develops, he takes on a more prominent role in the narrative. Through Henry, the reader gains insight into the complexities of forming a relationship during difficult times. Furthermore, the reader learns the impact sudden changes in these relationships can have on an already damaged psyche. This entire novel takes place during the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, more specifically the first campaign and election of Donald Trump. While the climate change queries seem less urgent to Lizzie in the beginning of the novel, the election of Trump changes this feeling. The previously abstract ideas turn to concrete plans, and Lizzie and her husband have serious discussions about different places to live for when their current state would become uninhabitable. As the prospect of a doomsday becomes more likely than ever before and global events unfold rapidly in the novel, Lizzie slowly becomes overwhelmed with the challenges before her. She is forced to consider who she is and what needs to be done to help: as a mother, as a wife, as a sister, and as a citizen of a doomed planet (Offill blurb).

This summary captures several of the novel's main themes. These themes will be further expanded upon within the narratological analysis, though they will be briefly introduced here. The main and overarching theme of the novel is climate change. Lizzie takes up a job for her old mentor Sylvia where she answers the email for Sylvia's apocalyptic podcast 'Hell and High Water'. She answers questions from "left-wingers worried about climate change and civilization and right-wingers worried about the decline of Western civilization." (Offill blurb). Through this job the reader learns about the topic through the questions Lizzie fields and the talks Sylvia gives. Throughout the novel, the topic of climate change becomes a more pressing issue as it combines with Lizzie's other worries. In the context of climate change discourse, a recurring theme that has emerged is that of doomsday prepping or preppers. The issue has gained particular prominence in the aftermath of the Trump election. Lizzie engages in many conversations with various people regarding prepping for the worst case scenarios and how they would survive them. Throughout the novel, the author also makes mention of the most suitable locations for the doomsteads. It is evident that these themes are of significant importance in the novel's narrative and the manifestation of diverse forms of panic. The panic of climate change and the need for doomsday prepping is exacerbated in the novel by the election of Donald Trump. While there is no immediate or noticeable panic when the election is mentioned early in the novel, it becomes more present as the story goes on. Further mentions of politics are present but cause less panic in the characters. However, the current political situation of the world is mentioned in various instances throughout the novel. Politics and varying political situations are therefore a prevalent theme in the novel. Another central and recurring element that shapes the novel are the questions that are posed in the narrative. These are questions that either Lizzie answers as a part of the job for Sylvia or the questions that Lizzie asks herself, asks others, or

others ask her. Because of these questions Offill involves the readers of the novel in speculating about the answers to these questions. Even though most of the questions are directly answered in the novel, not all of them are. This allows the reader to create their own answers and think more about the novel and its themes as opposed to a surface level reading would do.

Narratological analysis

In this section, I will employ a narratological analysis to further examine the main themes of the novel, and how they relate to and convey the genre of Panic Fiction.

Climate change

The main theme throughout the novel is climate change and the social panic that surrounds it. In a similar manner to the novels that Mary Templin discusses in her research, the topics that are discussed in this novel are not new to fiction, especially given that climate change has been an ongoing issue. What Panic Fiction, and therefore this novel, contributes is a concrete articulation of the anxieties that, up until that point, had remained latent. Lizzie repeatedly encounters instances of climate change panic when answering emails for Sylvia's podcast. It is not solely the panic about the current state of the earth but panic about what people should do to prevent it from getting even worse as well. The listeners of the podcast battle with having to think about "living lightly on the earth while thinking ahead for seven generations" (Offill 51). In the novel, the state of the earth is often mentioned in passing. Offill employs a fragmented narrative structure often characterized by the use of short sentences, such as "there are fewer and fewer birds these days" and "no more apples soon; apples need frost" (Offill 95, 106). In these moments Lizzie comments briefly on the changes she sees happening around her. This narrative style could lead to the reader passing over

these observations at a glance. However, the reiteration of the observations throughout the novel reinforce their message. Offill employs this technique to convey that the Earth is in a state of distress, a reality that may elude societal awareness. The author states that the changes to our planet may not always be big and noticeable, as the fragmented writing style indicates. Nevertheless, their repercussions will be experienced.

Lizzie's initial exposure to climate change is facilitated by her former grad school mentor, Sylvia. Sylvia's podcast "Hell or High Water," engages in discourse on a myriad of subjects pertaining to climate change. The reader becomes acquainted with Sylvia through brief instances in which Lizzie is employed by her or converses with her about the issues that are plaguing the world. She is portrayed as the more pessimistic counterpart to Lizzie's initial optimism and trust in finding a solution. In her podcast, Sylvia "talks only of the invisible horsemen galloping toward us," signaling her feelings toward the inevitability of climate change (Offill 10). Throughout the novel, the gradual loss of hope in humanity and a solution for halting or decelerating climate change is evident in Sylvia's character. Her perpetual pessimism regarding human nature is evident in her critique of potential donor's pursuit of immortality, as they cannot even wait ten minutes for a cup of coffee (Offill 39). Additionally, in a lecture she remarks on the notion that humans are nothing particularly special, asserting that the sole reason humans think they are the height of evolution is because society has chosen to privilege certain aspects over others (Offill 46-47). As the novel progresses, Lizzie observes that Sylvia is losing heart for the foundation, the podcast, and the fight against climate change in general (Offill 84). As she reviews the questions Sylvia previously answered for the podcast, Lizzie notices a stark decline in Sylvia's opinion of humanity. Initially, Sylvia had expressed the conviction that humans would unite to assist and protect one another (Offill 84). However, she progressively adopted the perspective that humans

would “ransack the whole globe [...] to increase our knowledge or even to please our eye and fancy²” (Offill 84). As the novel progresses, the loss of hope is perpetuated, as illustrated by a conversation between Lizzie and Sylvia. On a particular day, Lizzie contacts Sylvia, who suggests that Lizzie reaches out to her a bit later as she still has to “come up with the obligatory note of hope” for the article she is writing (Offill 67). Sylvia’s word choice here indicates that finding hope has become challenging. The phrase ‘come up with’ implies that it takes effort for her to foster hope at that time. Furthermore, in stating that the note of hope is obligatory she indicates that she might feel pressured to provide hope when she might not feel any herself. Sylvia’s loss of hope is further substantiated through the depiction of the “going, going, gone trips” she takes with Lizzie, which are characterized by them visiting something that is disappearing faster than expected (Offill 85). As stated previously, Sylvia had been losing hope in the cause for a prolonged period, but Trump’s election appeared to be her final straw. Despite the fact that she anticipated his election, this did not mitigate the worsening of her panic (Offill 115). She resigned from the foundation, declaring, “there’s no hope anymore, only witness” (Offill 133). She no longer felt compelled to engage in campaigning, fundraising, or composing obligatory notes of hope. She merely sought solitude in a quiet and dark place (Offill 140). In this novel, Offill offers a potential response to the mounting panic surrounding the global crisis of climate change, as depicted through the character of Sylvia. Additionally, it illustrates how even the most dedicated, resilient, and educated people can lose hope when confronted with multiple crises. This depiction contributes to the portrayal of panic in the novel by demonstrating an alternative means of experiencing the aforementioned panic. Consequently, it provides a more comprehensive perspective, offering a more profound understanding of the situation by considering the reactions of various individuals.

² Italics are used here as they appear in the original source material

This approach enables a more profound examination of the panic surrounding climate change and the exacerbating pressure of political instability.

The panic associated with climate change is evident in the discourse surrounding doomsday prepping in *Weather*. Lizzie and Ben have recurring talks concerning establishing a doomstead, a homestead that is set up in preparation in the event of an imminent collapse of modern civilization. They speak on the location of the doomstead and about the specific criteria for its population. Initially, it is solely Lizzie who discusses the concept of the doomstead. She references an article that mentions how the “superrich” are purchasing doomsteads in New Zealand, a decision influenced by the country’s moderate climate and political stability (Offill 97-98). In this instance, the article serves as a diversion for Henry, who is experiencing panic regarding the imminent birth of his daughter. Following the Trump election, Lizzie’s discourse on doomsteads takes a more serious tone. Formulating definitive requirements for a doomstead with her husband Ben, such as “arable land, a water source, access to a train line, high on a hill” (Offill 194). This suggests that the introduction of an additional source of panic can serve to exacerbate the preexisting panic. A situation that initially appeared to be a diversion can, under the appropriate conditions, evolve into a tangible possibility. She engages in further discourse on the matter with Sylvia. During a dinner conversation Lizzie notes that she has been thinking about moving somewhere colder with her family in anticipation of the predicted climate departure. This revelation prompts Sylvia to interject, posing the question, “Do you really think you can protect them? In 2047?” [...] “Then become rich, very very rich,” she says in a tight voice.” (Offill 127). By having Sylvia react to Lizzie’s plan in this particular manner, Offill examines the nuances of panic. On the one hand, she underscores the inevitability of climate change and the potential repercussions, thereby emphasizing the need for proactive planning. On the other hand, she acknowledges the inherent

injustice in society, particularly in regard to the impact of financial constraints on the extent of change an individual is able to effect. By employing Sylvia, Offill effectively illustrates a range of realistic reactions to a given situation. In doing so, she highlights the complexity of human behavior in dynamic social contexts.

The aforementioned climate departure refers to a moment in time where average temperatures become so impacted by climate change that the old climate is left behind (Fisher par. 1). The characters in the novel harbor the expectation that by relocating to colder climates, they can adequately prepare for the worst. However, a climatologist who Lizzie sees on TV notes that there are no true safe places to settle down and that the key is to be as flexible as possible to adapt to whatever is coming (Offill 178). The novel makes it clear that there is no single correct response to the questions regarding what actions to take to help prevent or even slow down climate change. This phenomenon serves to exacerbate the sense of panic experienced by the majority of the characters in the novel. While there is an abundance of discourse and guidance regarding preparation for and the process of acquiring the skills necessary to survive in the wild, the characters remain realistic in their expectations. Lizzie's realization that she lacks the physical capacity to survive an apocalypse is evident when she experiences difficulty running to catch the bus without getting out of breath (Offill 187). An alternative approach to doomsday prepping is mentioned in the form of extreme couponing. This practice entails the accumulation of a substantial quantity of coupons, which are then utilized to purchase various items in large quantities. The objective of the extreme couponers is to get the total payable amount as close to zero as possible by strategically redeeming those coupons. This could be regarded as another strategy for preparing for worst-case scenarios while maximizing financial savings.

The most unsettling aspect of climate change lies in its silent progression. Unlike immediate disasters that provoke visible panic and chaos, the impact of climate change unfolds slowly and incrementally, often escaping immediate attention. By the time the severity of the situation becomes apparent, it is often already too late to prevent significant damage. This phenomenon is also mentioned in the novel through the reference to a different historical tragedy. As the election is drawing nearer, Lizzie notices that she is receiving more emails for the podcast. She states that she hopes that all the people who follow Sylvia are crazy and not depressed, which is then followed by the subsequent paragraph:

Some Jews saw walls being built around the ghetto and thought they still had time. Don't be fooled by everyone else's calm. Get out even when nobody is even considering it yet. When you look at 2060, southern Argentina might be a good place for your children since it's close to the Antarctic peninsula, the place where the survivor colonies will be built³.

(Offill 88)

By inserting this italicized paragraph Offill notes that the absence of overt and immediate displays of panic does not imply that the panic itself is absent.

Politics

The first instance of mentions of political panic in *Weather* is the recurring references to an American economy that is failing its people. Although the novel was written before the COVID crisis in which people had to start being creative in generating an income, this does not mean that before this the American people could get by with ease. Offill mentions the struggling economy in various ways. One example is Mr. Jimmy, the car service operator whom Lizzie occasionally utilizes. In the novel Lizzie states: "I don't know what to do about this car service man. He told

³ Italics are used here as they appear in the original source material

me business is down; no one is calling anymore. He had to let all of his drivers go and is down to one car. He sleeps at work now so as to never miss a call. His wife said she is going to leave him.” (Offill 20). Even though the car service is not the most efficient way to get somewhere on time anymore, Lizzie is afraid that she is his last customer. Mr. Jimmy and his car service are referenced throughout the novel and his struggling business is a symbol of the challenges faced by the American people in contemporary society, where the availability of transportation services such as Uber is a testament to the difficulties of maintaining a viable business. This phenomenon is further exemplified by the individuals Lizzie encounters in passing. For instance, her building's adjunct serves as a prime example. At a certain point in the novel Lizzie mentions seeing him looking pale and she worries that he is selling his plasma again (Offill 43). Once again, this phenomenon mirrors the present state of the American economy, in which individuals find themselves unable to adequately support themselves.

Contemporary politics are a recurring theme, not solely in regards to the election of Trump. There are numerous mentions of progressive versus conservative politics, refugees, and the situations in Russia, Syria, and Israel. Occasionally, these contemporary political issues are mentioned in passing in relation to the discussions between Lizzie and Ben regarding their search for a ‘better’ place to live like; “Ben looks into the Israel thing; I look into the idea of true north.” (Offill 120). These issues are also mentioned in regard to Lizzie’s brother Henry’s inability to take care of himself. Lizzie states that “the problem is when he’s left to his own devices, he just watches those scenes of refugees trying to make their way to safety over and over again.” (Offill 79). While these references do not delve into the subjects in great detail, they do offer insight into the issues that are currently being discussed by the author and the characters. The references to contemporary issues are crucial for the readers as well. Despite the novel’s publication in 2020, many of the

political issues that were prevalent at the time, continue to be relevant in 2025. Consequently, the novel holds significance as *Panic Fiction* as it was released, allowing readers to comprehend their current developing issues. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the contemporary significance of this novel as *Panic Fiction* as well, as it underscores the persistent nature of the issues and the accompanying panic, even five years after its release. Because of this, *Weather* serves as a vehicle for a renewed discourse surrounding the panic depicted in the novel. Furthermore, as mentioned in the section on microgenres, while a genre like *Panic Fiction* is considered an “of the moment genre”, it also facilitates learning from the past looking at the present (O’Donnell & Stevens 5).

The last global issue mentioned is when Sylvia resigns from the foundation she worked for because she lost hope as mentioned previously. After the resignation she started forwarding Lizzie jokes:

The leaders of Russia, Syria, and America are arguing about who is the best at catching criminals. The secretary-general of the UN decides to give them a test. He releases a rabbit into a forest and tells them they must catch it.

The American team goes in. They place animal informants throughout the forest. They question all plant and mineral witnesses. After three months of extensive investigations, they conclude that rabbits do not exist.

The Syrian team goes in. After two weeks with no leads, they burn down the forest, killing everything in it, including the rabbit. The rabbit was a dangerous rebel, they report.

The Russian team goes in last. They come out two hours later with a badly beaten bear.

The bear is yelling, “Okay! Okay! I’m a rabbit! I’m a rabbit!”⁴ (Offill 133-134)

⁴ Italics are used here as they appear in the original source material

The casual allusion to these significant global issues does not diminish their gravity; rather, it serves to accentuate their importance. The employment of this particular narrative strategy, characterized by the utilizing a more accessible writing style, as opposed to bringing up these points in a more pedantic manner. Through the integration of political statements within the fabric of jokes and inquiries throughout the novel, Offill effectively utilizes this narrative strategy thereby signifying her work as a conduit for social commentary. This represents a fundamental element of Panic Fiction as a genre, as delineated by Mary Templin (“Women’s Responses” 2).

While global politics are an important topic of discussion in the novel, domestic politics is an even larger theme and one of the first explicit causes of panic. As mentioned before, the novel takes place during and after the election of Donald Trump. While the president is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, the time of release, small details about Trump's plans, and the repercussions of the election clarify that it alludes to his election. At first, there was no overt panic surrounding the election. It is mentioned a few times, for instance, when Henry’s girlfriend comments on how closely Lizzie’s husband follows the political news, she says “You should pace yourself [...] We’re only about twenty minutes into this.” (Offill 101). The election is further mentioned by the owner of a bodega Lizzie frequents. During one of her visits she notices that there is a miniature American flag by the register, which had not been there previously. Despite this apparent shift, Mohan, the owner of the bodega, does not appear to be concerned about the potential outcome of the election. He asserts, “‘even if this man wins, he will not stay,’ he tells me. ‘Now he has money, planes, beautiful things. He is a bird. Why be a bird in a cage?’” (Offill 108). These instances when the election is mentioned exude a sense of calm before the storm. The people are not worried about the outcome because they believe it will all be alright. After the election, the tone shifts. While there are people like Sylvia who predicted Trump would be elected, because “‘in

chaotic times, people long for a strongman', there were very few who agreed" (Offill 115). In the novel, the panic becomes more overt. The aftermath of the election is likened to the aftermath of 9/11 by Lizzie in the following paragraph.

It was the same after 9/11, there was that hum in the air. Everyone everywhere talking about the same thing. In stores, in restaurants, on the subway. My friend met me at the diner for coffee. His family fled Iran one week before the Shah fell. He didn't want to talk about the hum. I pressed him though. Your people have finally fallen into history, he said. The rest of us are already here. (Offill 113)

The prevailing sentiment in the aftermath of the election is likened to a hum of uncertainty in the air. The hum feels almost inescapable and permeates all aspects of life. This depiction of the prevailing sentiment as a 'hum' serves to provide a vivid image for the reader, illustrating a state of collective apprehension and preoccupation with the panic. The continuous discourse and concern surrounding the subject dissipates gradually and the constant noise it created slowly fades into the background. The sense of panic is no longer overt, yet it persists as a lingering hum, a constant reminder of its existence. Lizzie talks to Sylvia often in the aftermath trying to obtain an explanation for the election and the chaos it has left in its wake. Sylvia attempts to clarify people's reactions to the panic event using the term "milling":

There is a period after every disaster in which people wander around trying to figure out if it is truly a disaster. Disaster psychologists use the term "milling" to describe most people's default actions when they find themselves in a frightening new situation. That's the name for what we're doing, Sylvia says. (Offill 118)

By employing a term used by disaster psychologists to describe the aftermath of the election, Sylvia and through her, Offill addresses the severity of the situation. The election provoked a

widespread panic, resulting in an environment characterized by considerable uncertainty and unresolved inquiries. The novel attempts to provide insight into how the people of America felt after that particular election. With the election being compared to one of the biggest American disasters and even fleeing from a war torn country. Through this comparison the author conveys the impact it had on the American people. The outcome of the election, characterized by the uncertainty it left in its wake, is further amplified in Lizzie's home life, with Ben worrying about both of them losing their jobs (Offill 118). Furthermore, Lizzie observes that the whole nation is in a state of disarray in the aftermath of the election. She states that:

There is advice everywhere, some grand, some practical. The practical advice spreads quickly and creates consequences.

Women of reproductive age are being urged to get IUDs. They can last six to twelve years and so might outlast the shuttering of the clinics. But it's suddenly hard to get in to see a doctor; the appointments are all booked for months and the waiting rooms at the walk-in clinics are full of nervous white women⁵. (Offill 112)

The panic after the election is therefore not only visible in the lives of the main characters of the novel but also in their surroundings and beyond.

Parental panic

Another form of panic in the novel is showcased through Henry, Lizzie's brother. He struggles with the responsibility that is bestowed upon him with the birth of his daughter, Iris. While it is known that Henry has struggled with substance abuse and depressive thoughts in the past, his relationship with Catherine seems to work well. However, soon after the birth of his daughter,

⁵ Lay-out of the quote is in compliance with the source material

Henry's mental health declines. He has dark thoughts about accidentally hurting his daughter which leads to him being scared to take care of her at all and falling back into drinking, which ends up breaking up his marriage. As part of a therapy exercise devised by Margot, a shrink who teaches the meditation classes Lizzie attends, Henry is instructed to record the worst of his visions emphasizing the use of clear details. The following is the content that he records:

I leave the baby in the car while I go into the store. It is so much bigger than I expected. I keep wandering up and down the aisles, putting more and more things into my cart. It is so full! I even fill up the seat part where the kid is supposed to sit. Suddenly, I remember Iris and run outside. It is a sweltering day and all the windows are closed. There are people standing around the car, trying to break in. A man is hitting the window with a hammer, but it won't break. A woman is screaming. The police come and they smash it open. They give her CPR, but she is already dead. I am standing in the crowd. Then they realize I am the father⁶. (Offill 155-156)

This form of parental panic might not be recognizable to all. However, it showcases how, in this ever changing world, something so (supposedly) simple as caring for your own child could feel like the scariest thing in the world to some.

Medical panic

Medical issues and their associated panic are dispersed throughout the narrative. For instance, Lizzie frequently alludes to her brother's struggles with addiction, emphasizing its profound impact on not only him but the rest of the family as well. For example, Lizzie notes how "the last time Henry was drowning, I dove right in after him. I left school and never went back again" (Offill 149). This illustrates how Henry's addiction and Lizzie's need to care for him have impacted her

⁶ Italics are used here as they appear in the original source material

life. Another example of her brother's impact on her life is illustrated when Lizzie mentions that she has been responsible for his well being from a young age. Late at night when she is worrying about him she notes that she grew up learning to recognize signs of self-harm and suicide (Offill 168). Additionally, she describes how she would keep on talking just to keep him on the phone:

“I'd claim that I had one more thing to say, something I'd forgotten, something important. I need to talk to you in the morning, I'd say. You have to call me back, so I can remember. A simple trick, but it worked. Get them to commit to the next day, the next hour, the next minute even.” (Offill 169).

In the novel, Lizzie and Henry exhibit a relationship characterized by mutual dependence. Despite her numerous responsibilities, Lizzie exerts additional effort to ensure Henry's well-being. Through this depiction, Offill directs attention to the individual anxieties associated with Panic Fiction. As Mary Templin previously asserted, the genre of Panic Fiction encompasses not only collective anxieties but individual ones as well. According to Templin, these anxieties can reflect the author's own worries or those of a marginalized group the author has chosen to depict. In the case of *Weather*, for instance, Offill portrays the anxieties experienced by a marginalized group of individuals grappling with these issues.

Various instances of medical panic are noted throughout the novel. The first example of this is the importance of oral hygiene and the necessity of proper dental care. Lizzie mentions various people telling her to visit the dentist and to take care of her teeth. However, she has consistently postponed this action due to her aversion to the dentist as she fears he will only have bad news for her (Offill 118). She also notes that the sole advice Lorraine, a patron of the library, has ever given Lizzie is to: “*Take care of your teeth*” (Offill 116). In the novel's concluding section, Lizzie acknowledges her long-standing reluctance to visit the dentist, but asserts that she

⁷ Italics are used here as they appear in the original source material

has finally taken the step (Offill 193). When contextualized within the broader themes of this novel, namely climate change, Lizzie's reluctance to prioritize oral health care can be interpreted as a reflection of general hesitancy to confront the pressing challenges posed by environmental concerns. It is common knowledge that climate change is a significant issue that demands urgent attention. However, implementing concrete measures to address this issue can often be challenging. In an interview with Rebecca Godfrey, Offill revealed that she has begun doing her part in helping combat climate change by eating less meat and limiting her air travel ("Interview" par. 23). Therefore, by having Lizzie take these steps to improve her own health and cease to ignore the issues at hand, Offill might be alluding to more people gradually contributing to the collective action that is required to address climate change ("Interview" par. 23).

Another persistent medical issue that plagues Lizzie is her knee. Early in the novel she is diagnosed with "Osteoarthritis" with "minor degeneration", it is said that the condition "develops slowly and the pain it causes worsens over time" (Offill 42). As such, references to Lizzie's knee discomfort and the difficulties it brings are recurrent throughout the text. Additionally, she mentions walking with a limp which goes unnoticed by others (Offill 43). Upon consideration of the definition of the condition, it can be interpreted as a reference to climate change as well. Climate change has been an ongoing phenomenon for an extended period of time, and the adverse consequences it causes are projected to intensify. Consequently, Offill again utilizes a narrative approach in addressing the predominant concern of the novel in a nuanced manner. This approach aligns with the initial definition of Panic Fiction, which stipulates that the crisis need not be explicitly depicted, but its repercussions must be palpable throughout.

Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge that the conclusions drawn concerning the correlation between medical panic and climate change represent my personal interpretations of the

novel. Consequently, these interpretations do not claim to be the sole explanations for the recurring elements observed in this novel.

Questions

Various questions are dispersed throughout the novel. Some seemingly inconsequential like, “*Is what you’re doing right now making money?*” or “Do you ever wish you were thirty again?” (Offill 3-4). However, when viewed as distinct entities, independent of the narrative, and regarded as inquiries in their own right, they possess the capacity to serve as stepping stones in thought provoking discussions. Other questions carry more impact upon first glance. Questions such as “*How will the last generation know it's the last generation?*”, “Does this feel like a country at peace or at war?” and “*When will humans go extinct?*” (Offill 27, 165, 170)⁸. These questions are inherently thought provoking, both in their formulation and in their implications. Questions of this nature often linger with the reader long after they have finished the novel.

The most noticeable questions are the ones Lizzie answers as part of her side job for Sylvia. These questions are highlighted within the novel and are put in special framed question boxes. Examples of these questions are:

Q: What is the philosophy of late capitalism?

A: Two hikers see a hungry bear on the trail ahead of them. One of them takes out his running shoes and puts them on. “You can’t outrun a bear,” the other whispers. “I just have to outrun you,” he says (Offill 44).

Q: What are the best ways to prepare my children for the coming chaos?

⁸ Italics are used here as they appear in the original source material

A: You can teach them to sew, to farm, to build. Techniques for calming a fearful mind might be the most useful though (Offill 93).

Q: What is the difference between a disaster and an emergency?

A: A disaster is a sudden event that causes great damage or loss. An emergency is a situation in which normal operations cannot continue and immediate action is required so as to prevent a disaster (Offill 196).

While the novel provides answers to these questions, it is important to note that these may not be the sole correct answers to the problems posed. The responses to these inquiries are provided by Lizzie, thereby introducing a potential bias in the form of her personal views and standpoints. The reader is encouraged to engage with the text in a way that aligns with their personal perspective, whether that means finding resonance with Lizzie's responses or identifying a different viewpoint that more accurately reflects their own. These inquiries offer the reader a range of subjects for contemplation, should they wish to engage with them. In employing this narrative strategy, Offill utilizes techniques similar to those observed in Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School*. While Lerner used thought exercises to stimulate reader reflection, Offill's employment of questions throughout her novel achieves a comparable effect. The application of this narrative technique by both authors in distinctly different works exemplifies the transfer of recurring elements within the Panic Fiction genre, thereby highlighting its thematic and stylistic significance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Weather* by Jenny Offill offers a realistic and varied illustration of Panic Fiction. Although climate change, in combination with the election of Donald Trump, were the instigating crises for the creation of the novel, Offill employed these topics to explore both collective and individual anxieties. By doing so, she adds to the definition of Panic Fiction set forth by Mary Templin, who states that each author will discuss a crisis in a different manner due to these individual anxieties. In this way, Offill shows how Panic Fiction can become a sounding board for the reader and how the genre can offer reflection. The novel's fragmented narrative, recurring themes, and persistent questioning, contribute to an ambiance of uncertainty and quiet dread, characteristics that are typical of the genre. The subtle yet pervasive sense of crisis, both overt and lingering in the background, demonstrates how Panic Fiction engages with contemporary anxieties, inviting readers not just to observe panic but to participate in it through reflection and speculation. Furthermore, *Weather's* similarities to *The Topeka School* by Ben Lerner in the employment of narrative strategies showcases the transfer of recurring elements within the genre. This case study serves to reinforce and expand upon the provisional definition of Panic Fiction that was established earlier.

Chapter 3 - Case Study: Trust Exercise by Susan Choi

In this chapter, I will further examine the definition of Panic Fiction through a second case study. In the first chapter of this thesis it was determined that Panic Fiction distinguishes itself as a genre by directly engaging with crisis in its narrative structures and in the theme of the novel. While the crisis does not have to be mentioned directly, the effects of the crisis will be noticeable throughout the text. An important aspect of Panic Fiction is its use as a vehicle for social commentary, reflecting on the collective fears the crisis instigated. Furthermore, the first case study showed how certain narratological and stylistic choices can influence the impact of the novel. In this case, a fragmented narrative and persistent questioning did not only convey the feeling of panic but it also allowed the reader to participate in the panic portrayed in the novel through contemplation and speculation. By analyzing the second case study, *Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi, I aim to substantiate and further refine the definition of Panic Fiction.

Susan Choi wrote the novel in the height of the #MeToo allegations and the uncovering of the *Access Hollywood* tapes. While the novel was initially inspired by abuse scandals in elite schools; the urgency of the #MeToo movement and the 2016 election intensified Choi's focus on sexual assault (Kelly par. 29). Drawing on her own experience with inappropriate attention from older men, Choi reevaluated how sexual trauma is portrayed in fiction, questioning the inevitability of victimization narratives (Kelly par. 31-33). The novel deliberately avoids simple moral judgements, instead exploring the complexity of memory, truth, and perception. The sexual misconduct hearings surrounding Brett Kavanaugh crystallized Choi's view that differing personal realities shape how events are remembered and interpreted, raising the central question of *Trust Exercise*: "Whom can we trust? Can we even trust ourselves?" (Kelly par. 35). Yet, as Choi

reflects, all of this preceded the Harvey Weinstein revelations and Trump's rise. She explains, "I wanted *Trust Exercise* to somehow be about how radically differently we're seeing this stuff. But then again, how many of us are seeing it differently, and is it making a difference?" (Kelly par. 13).

The story of *Trust Exercise* consists of three parts. The First Part is the story of Sarah and David's teenage romance at a performing arts school in the 1980s. Their relationship begins during a bizarre trust exercise led by their teacher Mr. Kingsley. This First Part is told mostly from Sarah's perspective and the narrative explores the relationship between her and David, its eventual collapse, and the unsettling attention Sarah receives from Kingsley afterward. His behavior towards the students blurs boundaries under the guise of theatrical instruction, hinting at impropriety without fully confronting it. The narrative surrounding the school and its patrons complicates with the arrival of "the English People" during their tour (Choi 87). The troupe includes 24-year-old Liam, a distinguished alumnus of the English school, and Martin, a 40-year-old teacher, playwright, and director. Martin becomes romantically entangled with Karen, a classmate of Sarah's, and Liam forms a hesitant connection with Sarah. Following an unsettling party at Mr. Kingsley's house, marked by ambiguous and unwanted experiences, the First Part concludes. The Second Part radically reconfigures the narrative. The story is no longer told from Sarah's perspective but shifts to that of "Karen", revealing that the first section was, in fact, a fictionalized account written by Sarah. The use of quotation marks around "Karen" signals that this is not the character's real name. Karen identifies herself refracted throughout multiple characters in Sarah's novel: Pammie embodies how her Christianity was mocked; Julietta reflects how it was admired; and Joelle represents the genuine intimacy and friendship once shared between Karen and Sarah (Choi 134). Karen responds to Sarah's fictionalized portrayal with

suppressed anger, choosing not to confront her directly but instead maintaining a civil front. Upon learning that David, now a theater director and close associate of Mr. Kingsley, intends to stage a play written by Martin, Karen involves herself in the play. The former teacher had been fired for sexual misconduct which left David in disbelief. She secures a role in the production, recruits Sarah to handle the wardrobe under the guise of nostalgia, and takes care of organizing the show and the props. However, on opening night, it becomes clear that Karen's involvement was motivated by a desire for retribution. The play becomes a vehicle for avenging the manipulation and sexual abuse she endured at age sixteen at Martin's hands. In a climactic moment, Karen fires a gun, supposedly loaded with blanks, into Martin's crotch. Ending the part by assuring him he will survive, but he "won't be the same" (Choi 234). The third and final part introduces Claire. She is searching for her birth mother, who was presumed to be a former student at a performing arts highschool in the 1980s. The reader understands that Claire is unknowingly searching for Karen, as Part Two revealed that her relationship with Martin resulted in a pregnancy. Karen's father, seeking to manage the situation discreetly, arranged for her to be taken into a "God-centered institution" where she carried the pregnancy to term and placed the baby up for adoption (Choi 216). Claire's investigation leads her to the school's drama teacher, Mr. Lord, who is assumed to be Mr. Kingsley. He initially withholds information but later invites her to his home under false pretenses, culminating in an attempted assault.

This summary captures several of the novel's main themes. Contrary to the first case study, this analysis does not pertain to panic surrounding warfare or ecological panic. Rather, it focuses on the human condition and our relationship with the world. These themes will be further expanded upon within the narratological analysis, though they will be briefly introduced here. The main and overarching theme of the novel is the truth. This theme is not only central to the narrative and the

characters, but the manner in which the story unfolds renders the questions of truth equally significant for the reader. Each different part of the novel adds a new layer of information and uncovers earlier deceit. Whether it does so knowingly or unknowingly, it manipulates the reader's understanding of the situations. The theme of power dynamics and manipulation is central to the novel's exploration of truth. The female characters share experiences of betrayal by men they once trusted and revered. Though not all the instances of assault or abuse of power are noted literally in the novel, their presence is palpable. As the story is presented from multiple perspectives, it allows the reader to engage with complex and often conflicting viewpoints. Additionally, the novel features explicit sexual content, with detailed depictions that foreground characters' emotions and thoughts rather than sanitizing events. This writing style underscores the ambiguous and problematic nature of many of the situations, reinforcing the novel's interrogation of trust and power.

Narratological analysis

In this section, I will employ a narratological analysis to further examine the main themes of the novel, and how they relate to and convey the genre of Panic Fiction.

Truth

As stated previously truth, and specifically the balance between fact and fiction and uncovering this, is the main theme of the novel. The blending of fact and fiction recalls Nicholas Gaskill's statements regarding Panic Fiction. He stated that in an age where the line between fact and fiction is blurred, the role of the author in shaping public opinion is challenged. In this novel this happens both within the narrative as well as outside of it. As the first part of the novel turns out to be an

excerpt of the novel written by Sarah about her own life, the reader quickly learns that what they have been reading so far might not have been solely facts. The most prevalent example of that is when Karen, the narrator of Part Two, tells the reader that none of the names of the previously mentioned characters are correct. Indeed, most of the characters do not even exist. Karen remembers Sarah, David, and Mr. Kingsley. However, the other classmates seem to be mostly fabricated. As stated before, the “real” Karen turns out to be Pammie, Julietta, Joelle, and of course Karen in the first part of the novel. Another example of the fabrication of characters is the storyline of Manuel. In Part One, Sarah introduces Manuel as the probably token Hispanic character brought to the school in order to get funding (Choi 5). Manuel is initially characterized as a loner, and when he freezes during an audition, Mr. Kingsley takes an interest in him. Subsequently, Manuel appears at the next audition dressed in noticeably different and expensive clothing, and his performance markedly improves. Sarah observes both Manuel’s changing attire and the evolving dynamic between him and Mr. Kingsley. For instance, during the second audition, Mr Kingsley encourages him by saying, “Manny, I know you can do it.” (Choi 42). Sarah notes that Mr. Kingsley never uses pet names or even nicknames to refer to his students. The language he will use to refer to someone will always establish a sense of distance; however, the use of “Manny” observes no such distance.” (Choi 43). This implication is subtle, expressed through Sarah’s almost whispered observations. Later, at a party at Mr. Kingsley’s house, Sarah discovers Manuel changing his shirt in an attic room converted into a makeshift bedroom. In the closet, she notices multiple shirts identical to the ones Manuel wears at school. When Sarah questions Manuel about the shirts and his apparent residence there, he responds defensively and dismisses her inquiries. The situation culminates after a performance attended by Manuel’s mother, when Sarah gives the shirts Manuel has been leaving backstage to her, ostensibly for Manuel to take home. When his mother expresses

confusion, Sarah clarifies, “They’re a gift, from Mr. Kingsley, for Manuel. [...] Because Manuel is his boyfriend.” (Choi 83). Following this confrontation, Manuel ceases attending the school, citing family issues. Now, this storyline is important as the reader discovers in Part Two, through Karen, that there was not just one Manuel in their class. Reflecting on her past Karen searches through old yearbooks and recounts at least three distinct sources for the figure of Manuel: one, an untalented theatre student who left no mark; another, a gifted vocal student who rose to fame; and a third, a fictional construct representing Sarah’s anger and projection. The character of Manuel becomes a narrative device shaped by memory, perception, and emotional projection. He is not a real person but more an embodiment of relationships, suspicions, and buried grievances. The ambiguity surrounding Manuel’s identity underscores the novel’s broader themes of unreliable narration and the blurred boundaries between truth and fiction.

Sexuality and language

What makes *Trust Exercise* so striking is the descriptive language that is used in the writing of the sexual encounters. Choi does not beat around the bush in her description of situations, feelings, and body parts. Therefore rendering difficult sexual scenes all the more challenging and impactful. She wrote the novel trying to find a radically different viewpoint to the way society had viewed sexual assault allegations up until that point. In the age when the president of the United States could utter the words “grab ‘m by the pussy” and suffer no consequences, she felt the discussions not only grow more urgent but also more angry (Kelly par. 29). The most prominent sexual encounters will be analyzed in this section.

The first sexual encounter happens between David and Sarah in class. As part of an exercise Mr. Kingsley turns off all of the lights in the room and tells the students to “venture themselves

through the darkness and see what they found” (Choi 4). David and Sarah find each other, with David recognizing the bedazzlement of her jeans, and she by the mole on his face. They come together touching and discovering each other, until the exercise is over and they flee away from each other. Their budding relationship is noted in the language used to describe the experience. Before David and Sarah find each other, someone else finds Sarah and grabs her breast and squeezes hard as if they had been “hoping for juice” (Choi 5). A few sentences later she references this person as “the titgrabber” (Choi 6). While in her encounter with David she talks about him weighing and measuring her breasts, marveling at her physique (Choi 7). She clearly makes a distinction between the contact from someone she does not like and the boy she does like. As their relationship progresses, the language changes again. At the start she first spoke about their sexual encounters in a poetic form, for example; “Her nipples rained down in his mind in the form of hard glittering gems, diamonds and quartzes...” (Choi 7). The language later becomes more crude and direct. She talks about his “cock” and calls it a “hot, slippery fit” where David's pleasure seems to take precedence (Choi 30-31). Sarah's first truly negative experience comes after her relationship with David has ended. She is at another party at Mr. Kingsley's house with the 24-year old Englishman Liam, at a point in time where Sarah must have been fifteen or sixteen. Sarah ends up with Liam in one of the bedrooms, tentatively flirting with him. However, when he suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere “jammed his tongue into her ear she gasped with repulsion as much as surprise” (Choi 114). Liam's actions are invasive and inconsiderate, completely overwhelming Sarah. He pulls her close without consent and speaks in infantilizing and grotesquely sexualized babytalk. He refers to his penis as a “willy” and Sarah's vagina as “*squashy wet tight squashy hot*”⁹, and aggressively imposes himself on her body with what is described as jabbing, poking, and squeezing (Choi 115). Sarah exposes the physical awkwardness and emotional repulsion of the

⁹ Italics are used here as they appear in the original source material

encounter in graphic detail, describing a struggle not for mutual intimacy but for bodily autonomy. Sarah's sensations are described in visceral terms. Sarah is described to be gasping for air while Liam yanks, flails, and grasps (Choi 115). Furthermore, she describes Liam as having "dead white hairy limbs" and a "wrinkly erection" which he squirted "redly at her" (Choi 115). None of these terms demonstrate that she was enjoying herself. The scene finishes with Sarah feeling humiliated by her own "unwanted pleasure" and lying in a cold and wet "puddle of slime" (Choi 116). When Sarah notices afterwards that the door had been open, she manages to push him off. When this makes him respond with "Didn't you like it?" it crystallizes the disconnect between their experiences (Choi 116). For Liam, the encounter is self-congratulatory while for Sarah it is traumatic and revolting. The passage captures the psychological and physical violence of a sexual interaction that, while not legally classified as assault, is deeply violating. Its crude language and unflinching physicality emphasize the novel's commitment to portraying the murky, painful territory of consent, shame, and bodily betrayal.

In Part Two the narrative shortly delves deeper into the relationship between Karen and Martin. It details how Karen initially felt special due to the attention of an older, witty man, who, by treating her as his equal, made her feel witty as well (Choi 204). In her retrospective account, she speaks of him with a degree of admiration, recalling the time they spent together and referring to the relationship as her first love. She describes how, beneath his body, hers came alive in a way it never had before (Choi 205). However, this idealization is complicated by her later awareness that those memories are fundamentally compromised. She goes on to explain:

Martin, retrospection shows us, was scrawny, smelled and tasted like an ashtray, and had yellow nails, yellow teeth, and yellowish whites-of-the-eyes. Inside his underpants, where Karen's hand was urged, a single clammy mushroom thrived. Even in the nearly

total darkness of the topiary shadows, Martin's penis seemed unwholesomely pale and wet. But this was love, a crazy clamor to receive recognition. Did it matter that the person who unleashed Karen's floodgates was much older—even older than she knew? Did it matter that he was a liar? Did it matter that he had practice, and she had none? (Choi 205).

Years later, she comes to recognize that her experiences with Martin were not positive, but rather the result of manipulation by a significantly older man who occupied a position of authority and trust, particularly given his role as a teacher. Once again, the crude and direct language used to describe Martin and his body underscores the deeply negative impact the person, relationship, and situation had on Karen. Choi employs this language effectively to convey the emotional dissonance that can emerge from experiences once perceived as positive. However, she offers no ambiguity in her portrayal of the relationship: through these explicit and unsettling descriptions, she makes clear that the relationship was harmful and that Martin, in essence, is depicted as a repulsive and exploitative figure.

The final pivotal sexual scene in the novel takes place in Part Three. In the search for her birth mother Claire finds Mr. Lord, the school's drama teacher. He invites her over for dinner stating that "such matters can't be discussed on school grounds" (Choi 251). He further gains her trust by saying that "Sofie and I can treat you to a much better meal here at home than we'd get at Butera's", leaving Claire to believe he is referring to his wife (Choi 251). When she arrives at his home later that evening it turns out that Sofie is not his wife but rather his housekeeper that has gone home for the evening. During dinner Claire begins to feel unwell, and Mr. Lord offers to take her to his private roof terrace. There, the encounter turns explicitly coercive. He suddenly forces her against the door and shoves her hand down his pants, making her touch his flaccid penis. Despite her fear and discomfort, Claire initially believes that allowing the situation to continue

might prevent something worse, demonstrating how deeply confused and trapped she feels (Choi 254-255). Choi uses disturbing, graphic language, such as describing Mr. Lord's genitals as a "damp noodle of flesh which secreted warm goo", to make the scene viscerally uncomfortable, emphasizing the grotesque imbalance of power and the violation of trust (255). Claire leaves the apartment disheveled and panicking while attempting to clean her hand on the elevator walls. This, coupled with her physical reaction to the assault. Namely, fighting nausea and gagging at the taste of his mouth, further illustrate the traumatic impact of the encounter. Mr. Lord's final remark, "You've embarrassed me," underscores his manipulative entitlement and utter lack of accountability (Choi 255). Whereas Claire's reaction of "I'm sorry" illustrates the instinctual reaction to the male authority in front of her. Claire feels as if she is somehow to blame for the situation due to Mr. Lord's wording.

#MeToo

The final draft of *Trust Exercise* was completed in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, with the resulting sense of panic being palpable throughout the novel (Kelly par. 34). Choi's discourse on the subject is predicated on an analysis of the character of Martin. In the first part of the novel, the reader becomes acquainted with the relationship between the then sixteen year old Karen and the visiting English teacher Martin, through the perspective of Sarah. Despite the evident disparity in age between Liam and Martin, and Karen and Sarah, their conduct suggests otherwise. When the four of them proceed to dinner prior to attending a party hosted at Mr. Kingsley's house, the two men exhibit behaviors that are in stark contrast to their actual age. The men are constantly shouting back and forth "as if for the peanut gallery" and attempting to one up each other to make the girls laugh (Choi 102). In Sarah's version of the story, the men are depicted in such a youthful

manner that the reader may be deceived into perceiving them as being of an appropriate age. Subsequently, in the second part of the novel, Karen provides her perspective on the relationship. It is revealed to the reader that her relationship with Martin constituted her first genuine sexual experience, with the sole exception of the previous year when a boy gave her “‘carpet burn’ in the wrong place” (Choi 203).

In the second part of the novel, the reader is reintroduced to the character of Martin when David encounters a newspaper article about him that was left behind by Mr. Kingsley. The article details Martin’s subsequent dismissal from his employment due to allegations made against him. In the light of the article, David recollects receiving a letter from Martin some time ago, in which the former teacher asserted that he had encountered “some troubles with the morality crowd” and he was subjected to a “witch hunt” in which regrettably he was the witch (Choi 158-159). Martin is meticulous in emphasizing that the allegations made are wholly fabricated, as he casually notes in the letter that “...’if they can’t find immorality to scold they make it up and it works just as well’” (Choi 158-159). In the ensuing conversation between Karen and David, Karen is quick to note that David seems more shaken up by the thought of women making up these allegations as opposed to the thought of Martin being a predator, as he had always viewed the man as a role model (Choi 161). Choi skillfully depicts the diverse responses to the news concerning Martin. While David aligns himself with Martin’s supporters, branding the allegations as a witch hunt, others adopt a different course of action. Mr Kingsley, for instance, appears to seek to disregard the situation altogether. Although he does provide David with the newspaper article, he declines to discuss the allegations, instead a facial expression that Karen describes as “the sort of face a nun makes when the doings of the wicked are too regrettable to even discuss” (Choi 159). Karen attempts to maintain an impassive demeanor, opting to ask questions while simultaneously

refraining from divulging her true feelings on the matter. Taking the article into account, it is evident that Karen does not perceive David's conviction in Martin's innocence as unusual, given Martin's characterization as an exemplary individual and educator. The subsequent passage provides a detailed description of Martin's character as presented in the aforementioned article:

In the fourteen years since David and Karen had seen him, Martin had remained teaching at the same school. He'd remained that irreverent, exemplary teacher, always winning the awards and always almost getting fired. He'd remained the guy students called "the biggest influence on my life" or "the only person at that school who connected with kids" or other such hyperbole. He'd taken his students not just to CAPA that long-ago time, but all over the world offered them opportunities they'd never imagined, broadened their horizons, taught them to believe in themselves, and so on. (Choi 161)

Following her reading of the article, Karen was able to comprehend David's perspective that the world had seemingly become unhinged, and that they resided in an era where "the vengefully lying were rewarded and the truth-telling teacher and artist destroyed" (Choi 161). In these passages, Choi addresses the primary catalyst of the panic in the novel: the truth, and the ease with which it can be distorted. By maintaining an open perspective and presenting multiple viewpoints on a single event, she illustrates how the concept of truth can vary significantly depending on perspective. Additionally, the portrayal of Martin in the article lends credibility to its positive portrayal, despite the reader's familiarity with his relationship with Karen, who was only sixteen at the time.

Conclusion

This novel demonstrates that the panic in *Panic Fiction* does not always have to be overt. While the genre is defined by its response to major socio-political events, the expression of that response can take subtle or complex narrative forms. In the case of this novel, the panic is rooted in the presidency of Donald Trump, particularly his sexually explicit and derogatory comments, and the subsequent rise of the #MeToo movement, both among celebrities and in everyday life. Although sexual assault allegations are tragically not new, these events reignited public outrage and discussion in a profound way. The novel can be seen as both an outlet for this renewed urgency and an attempt to imagine alternative ways of thinking about a situation that has persisted for far too long. As such, it aligns with *Panic Fiction*'s function as a literary reaction, but one that channels its panic through introspection, ambiguity, and narrative fragmentation rather than overt alarmism, as was more the case in the first case study. In an interview with Susan Choi, Hillary Kelly notes that "Choi expresses no sympathy for sexual abusers, but she does see something to be gained from breaking free of the tyranny of one single truth to examine how individuals distort and magnify their own memories" (par. 34). This suggests that the novel's mode of panic is not just reactive, but also epistemological: it interrogates how trauma, power, and memory are constructed, manipulated, and experienced across personal and collective registers (Moon & Blackman 1170). Crucially, this case study reinforces the idea that *Panic Fiction* is not defined by genre conventions like plot or setting, but by affect and function. It is a form of literature that breaks with conventional storytelling, ethics, and emotional expression. Rather than addressing crises directly, it approaches them indirectly, drawing readers into the confusion and uncertainty of unresolved trauma. *Trust Exercise* therefore helps to substantiate *Panic Fiction* as a genre that captures the emotional tenor

of contemporary life, where truth is contested, institutions fail, and panic becomes a dominant mode of experiencing and interpreting reality.

Conclusion

In this thesis, an attempt has been made to define Panic Fiction as a literary genre. In order to conduct this research, a thorough examination of the existing literature on Panic Fiction was conducted. This examination resulted in the formulation of a provisional definition of Panic Fiction as a genre. To further examine the genre and adjust the definition, the findings were applied to two case studies: *Weather* by Jenny Offill and *Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi.

A thorough examination of the primary sources reveals that Panic Fiction is a genre that responds promptly to significant events and crises. The recurring pattern established in the first chapter is the genre's capacity to present familiar issues from a new perspective. Mary Templin has asserted the significance of Panic Fiction as a medium for social commentary, highlighting contemporary issues and emphasizing the panic and potential solutions. She has also observed that Panic Fiction does not inherently focus on previously unaddressed issues, but rather utilizes the phenomenon of panic to accentuate and expand upon subjects that are already present in fiction. The dramatization of these plots offers a new perspective on existing issues, thereby facilitating a re-examination of these subjects. In the research conducted in the initial chapter, it was ascertained that Templin derived the term "panic fiction" from David Zimmerman. Zimmerman employed the term while investigating the response of the American public to financial crises. He asserted that the American population engages with Panic Fiction to gain insight into their current circumstances and potential actions. This introduction underscores the notion of Panic Fiction as a means to provide readers with a framework to understand and reflect on their situations. Further research on the topic revealed the perspective of Nicholas Gaskill, who proposed a more stringent classification system for what is considered Panic Fiction. Contrary to Zimmerman's assertion that Panic Fiction is not confined to a specific literary style, Gaskill excluded satire and science fiction,

emphasizing the significance of the loss of faith in reality as a defining characteristic of Panic Fiction. Gaskill's research concentrated on autofiction and novels with autofictional elements. In this regard, he concurred with Templin's assertion that an author's personal feelings and experiences exert a significant influence on the content of the text. Gaskill's research also provided this thesis with examples of contemporary Panic Fiction novels, in which author's frequently sought to offer explanations for the crises at hand. These novels further exemplified narrative strategies employed in Panic Fiction, such as the direct posing of questions to the reader. As a microgenre, Panic Fiction underscores the intricacies of the prevailing crisis and establishes a framework for both authors and readers to navigate the ambiguity of the circumstances. In this manner, Panic Fiction works as a form of social commentary, capturing collective fears and personal anxieties. As the genre is rooted in real-world events, it offers valuable insight into how literature reflects and responds to history.

The close reading of the case studies expanded the understanding of Panic Fiction as a genre. It is evident that Panic Fiction is not confined to a single narrative style or thematic focus, but rather it adapts its form to reflect the specific anxieties and crises of its time. *Weather* exemplifies a more overt approach to Panic Fiction, directly engaging with contemporary issues such as climate change and political instability. The novel's utilization of a fragmented narrative structure and its persistent questioning align with the contemporary experience of living in a rapidly changing world, characterized by an incessant stream of information and a persistent sense of uncertainty. The novel's use of constant questioning, as exemplified in Ben Lerner's Panic Fiction novel, not only engages the reader but also serves as a testament to the genre's recurring elements. The novel lends further credibility to the argument that the immediacy of Panic Fiction is a subjective matter. The genre's provisional definition stipulated that it is a genre that reacts to

a crisis immediately; however, this cannot be the case with a Panic Fiction novel concerning climate change. The prevailing theme of climate change is not a matter that has emerged in recent years; rather it is a matter of prolonged concern. Therefore, the definition must be adjusted to take account of the panic that occurs in the wake of specific crises that do not happen suddenly and overtly. Rather, the type of panic that builds over time must be considered. Consequently, the creation of a Panic Fiction novel that regards such crises has become a reality due to either another event that reawakened the urgency surrounding the matter, or the gradual accumulation of issues over time. Conversely, *Trust Exercise*, exemplifies a more nuanced and intricate manifestation of Panic Fiction. Although firmly embedded in the socio-political context of the Trump presidency and the #MeToo movement, the panic is not explicitly referenced as frequently as in the initial case study. The panic that served as the catalyst for the novel's creation is palpable throughout the narrative, manifesting through introspection, ambiguity, and the utilization of unreliable narrators. The novel's emphasis on the nature of truth, memory, and power dynamics reflects a profound and existential form of panic that is characteristic of our current era. In this sense, the novel aligns with the provisional definition of Panic Fiction, as it elicits an immediate reaction to a crisis and perpetuates a pervasive sense of panic throughout the narrative. This thematic element is manifested through various literary devices, such as the portrayal of characters experiencing panic, the depiction of panic-inducing situations, and the utilization of panic-related metaphors.

A close examination of both case studies reveals the fundamental characteristics of Panic Fiction, including immediacy, social commentary, narrative innovation, and reader engagement. These case studies demonstrate that the concept of Panic Fiction is not defined by specific plot conventions or settings, but rather by its affective impact and functional purpose. This genre has been characterized as one that captures the emotional tenor of contemporary life, where truth is

subjective, institutions fail, and panic becomes a dominant mode of experiencing and interpreting reality. In summary, this thesis serves to both reinforce and expand our understanding of Panic Fiction as a dynamic and evolving genre. This literary form deviates from traditional storytelling and emotional expression, seeking to capture the essence of contemporary crises. By engaging with Panic Fiction, readers are able to reflect on the current state of affairs and gain a sense of agency in navigating the intricate dynamics of a rapidly evolving world.

In the context of further research on the subject of Panic Fiction, this thesis could be expanded upon by investigating various moments of crisis in America or globally. The objective would be to determine whether there is a spike in literature during these periods. These novels can then be examined in terms of their topics, narrative strategies, and the presence or absence of the recent crisis in the novel. This research could yield a more comprehensive definition of Panic Fiction as a genre, focusing on a specific crisis and its potential consequences. In relation to this topic, the present research could be expanded upon by examining crises in other regions of the world in addition to America. In this thesis, the focus has been on American literature that addresses American (and global) crises. For instance, literature involving Brexit or other pertinent issues can be investigated. By incorporating global literature research, a more comprehensive understanding of the genre can be obtained, and the question of whether the genre has a global reach can be addressed.

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