

"Clean Air" by Sarah Blake Is a Cli-Fi Novel for Our Times

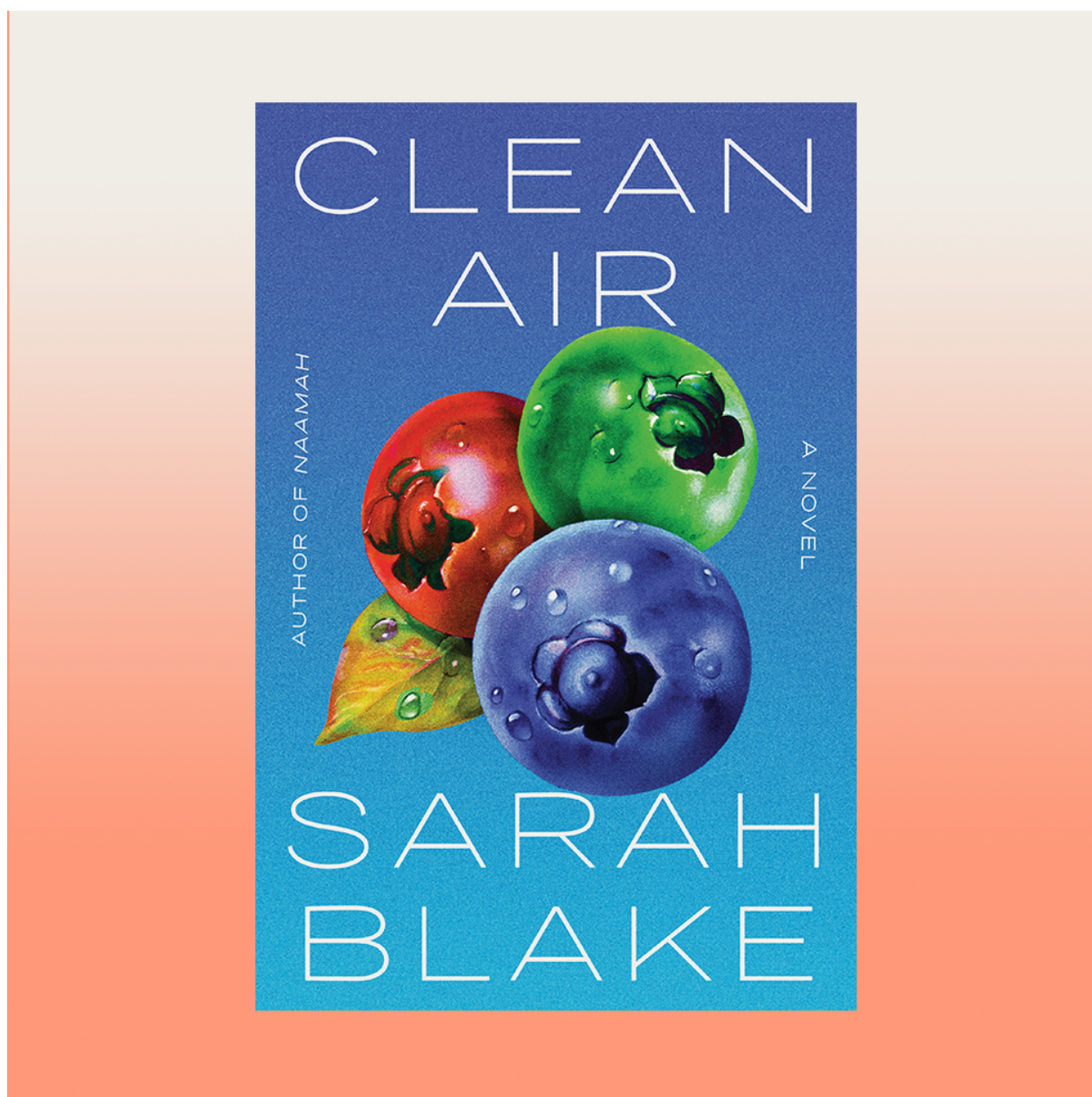
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Sarah Blake's *Clean Air* Is a Cli-Fi Novel for Our Times

A new book asks whether humanity can survive a climate catastrophe, and if so, what will be lost in the process.

By Arianna ReboliniPublished: Mar 24, 2022



Author photo: Maximiliano Schell

There's no shortage of theories about what, ultimately, may make our planet uninhabitable. On our current trajectory, scientists predict increased flooding, storms, and wildfires, as well as drought and rising sea levels, among other grim scenarios. Alongside these dire warnings come a slew of preventative actions that might shift our otherwise doomed course—provided we act now. However, in Sarah Blake's thought-provoking new novel, *Clean Air*, the cause of our annihilation is an element of nature no one even thought to fear: trees.

It's 2042, a decade past the Turning—the year the trees released so much pollen, the air became unbreathable and killed all but a tiny fraction of the world's population—and the survivors have, remarkably, built a thriving society out of what remains. Whereas other climate cataclysm novels have famously portrayed dark and violent times—decimated populations divided into warring sects—Blake's post-apocalypse imagines a society built on an implicit, shared sense of gratitude and respect, evidenced by a wealth of common resources and the eradication of violent crime—until now. When an entire family is murdered one night by a killer who pierces the protective plastic surrounding their home, the panic that spreads through the town is two-pronged: Why would a person sabotage utopia? And will there be more victims? This is the lens through which Blake explores profound questions of human nature and free will.

We meet our protagonist, Izabel, in the midst of her daily routine on the morning before that first murder since the Turning. She's packing juice and snacks in the elephant lunchbox her 4-year-old daughter, Cami, will bring to school. She waits for her husband, Kaito, to finish his shower, then wakes Cami and helps her brush her teeth and use the toilet. It's familiar and mundane, which we soon find much of the new world is, however profoundly changed. Blake gradually reveals its differences: Cami masks up before entering the airlock and then running from her house to the self-driving car that awaits. We learn this town is one of many built on a concrete slab by robots, dotted with plastic dome houses and a main street with a school, a mall, a community center, and a spiritual center. Crops are robust and sown by robots on the outskirts of town; a functioning government, healthcare system, and even journalism have emerged from the rubble; everyone receives a basic income, so no one wants for anything.

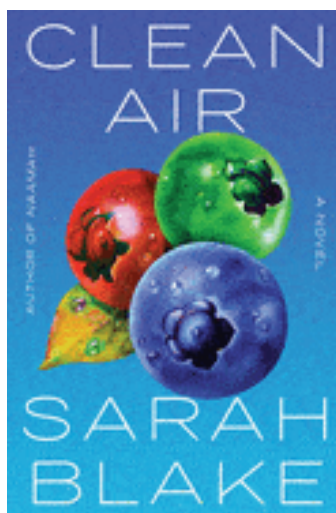
And yet Izabel spends her days scrolling through an app that allows her to revisit the internet as it existed in any given year. She's fixated on 2017, which she's identified as a pivotal point, the moment things really started to go wrong. Smartly, Blake times her novel so that Izabel, born in 2012, can ostensibly act as a stand-in for today's children—likely around the age of many of the readers' children. If they experience their own Turning, what will they remember from before? Izabel watches reruns of *America's Got Talent*; she listens to Childish Gambino. These references force a recognition of our proximity to this possible future, but also Izabel's deep longing for before—the pre-Turning society's vibrant and complex spectrum of human experience. What seems at first like an obsession founded in regret for what humanity might have done differently reveals itself to be something much more interesting: disillusionment over a seemingly universal sense of complacency and

safety, falsely earned. Just because humans didn't directly cause the apocalypse doesn't mean they couldn't have, and just because civilization survived it doesn't mean they didn't lose a fundamental part of the human experience along the way.

When it becomes clear that the murderer is on a killing spree, Izabel grapples with an ambivalence she doesn't quite understand. She's terrified and angry, but plagued by a suspicion that she and the killer might not be so different. Why can't she appreciate this clean new world? Why does she seem to be the only one bothered by its superficiality? What would she do to make them understand? And why does she feel such constant *guilt*? Individual agency and the tension between the self and selflessness permeate the novel. Izabel's preoccupation with "what if" prompts her to pore over air quality updates from 2017, and to attribute the public's surprise over emergency warnings immediately preceding the Turning to "the idiocy of human nature." And her survivor's guilt is ever-present: She blames herself for failing to save her late mother right before the Turning, as well as for her inability to protect her daughter from encroaching danger.

Izabel comes up against multiple opportunities to act in her own best interest versus the good of the community and struggles every time. When Cami starts talking in her sleep and Izabel and Kaito realize she might be predicting the murders, should they hand her over to authorities to help prevent the crimes? When Izabel embarks on a dangerous pursuit of the killer, should she risk her life to stop him? Here the novel speaks to a general anxiety about free will and sacrifice.

Clean Air



What to do with this existential crisis? At quick glance, *Clean Air* could be read as nihilist—ultimately we're powerless, so what does any decision (or life!) matter?—but Blake uses Izabel's internal conflict around what to do about this new danger as a way to wrestle with the very concept. She's haunted by futility in the face of danger—"the nonsolution solutions, everything always impossible and continuing anyway"—and the randomness of it all, yet

she's propelled into action. When she proposes a plan to use herself as bait to catch the killer, her therapist warns her against "actions that give you a perceived sense of control" before telling her she thinks it's a good idea anyway. Regardless of the outcome (I'll avoid spoilers), her belief in the possibility of seizing power is empowering on its own.

Izabel's search for greater meaning in the universe is a little clunkier, relying on an uneven albeit compelling side plot around the supernatural. It begins with Cami's aforementioned strange behavior in the very first chapter, which Izabel and Kaito suspect might be a spiritual possession. (Blake doesn't leave this open-ended, and your appreciation of its resolution will depend on your relationship to spirituality; I found it to be a poignant coda.) It continues as Izabel turns to psychics and mediums for help in finding the killer and in making decisions about her family's future, as well as in ongoing references to Japanese mysticism inspired by the stories Kaito tells Cami. We learn that the new world has largely abandoned organized religion—"too many people found their beliefs broken"—but in its place is a hodgepodge of spiritual practices divorced from a specific faith and based more in a belief in a unifying energy. More than anything, what the survivors yearn for is connection—to each other, the environment, the universe. These gesture at the significance of cultural tradition and the importance of preserving it, as well as a reverence for the great mysteries of life.

Of course, it's impossible not to draw connections to our own crises, both the pandemic and climate change. Blake infuses the story with a subtle urgency, a criticism of complacency whether in current comfort or in a belief that we're too far gone. But her depiction of Izabel's clashing loyalties—to herself, to her family, to her community, to the world—invites a profound consideration of the decisions we're making in this very moment, and raises an uncomfortable question: If humanity perseveres after a cataclysm like the Turning, what kind of life will survive?