



THE SUNLIGHT PILGRIMS — STUDY GUIDE

Author: Jenni Fagan

Published: 2016

Genre: Climate Fiction / Contemporary Literary Fiction

Narrative Style: Third-person, multi-perspective

Setting: Clachan Fells, Scottish Highlands, during an apocalyptic deep freeze (2020)

SQA Context: Newly added as a prose option in the refreshed Scottish Set Text list for Higher English.

1. Introduction

The Sunlight Pilgrims follows **Dylan MacRae**, **Constance**, and **Stella** as they struggle to survive a catastrophic freeze in a near-future Scotland. The novel blends climate crisis, identity, community, and hope, offering a lyrical and emotionally rich exploration of humanity under environmental and social pressure.

The story begins with a rare optical phenomenon — *three suns* rising (a parahelia) — signalling the extreme winter to come. [\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)

2. Plot Summary

Beginning

- **Dylan MacRae**, grieving the deaths of his mother and grandmother, leaves London for Clachan Fells after inheriting a caravan and crushing debt.
- He arrives as the world enters the coldest winter on record, temperatures dropping towards -60°C . [\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)
- He meets **Constance** and her 12-year-old transgender daughter **Stella**, who live beside him in the caravan park.

Middle

- Constance is practical and resourceful, surviving by refurbishing furniture scavenged from dumps or house clearances. [\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)
- Dylan and Constance develop a deepening connection.

- Stella struggles with puberty occurring in a body she feels does not represent her. The town doctor refuses to prescribe hormone blockers, adding to her distress. [\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)
- As temperatures fall and society becomes increasingly unstable, the characters depend on each other emotionally and physically.

Ending

- Worsening blizzards and a drifting iceberg threaten the community.
 - The novel ends ambiguously as Constance, Dylan, Stella, and Alistair hunker together in their caravan, facing the final storm — the outcome unknown.
 - Emotional resolution takes precedence over apocalyptic spectacle. [\[ipl.org\]](https://www.libraryofcongress.org/ipl.org)
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3. Setting & Context

The Great Freeze (Near-Future 2020)

- Worldwide climate collapse: extreme cold, mass migration south, flooded rivers, failing infrastructure. [\[herestohap...ndings.com\]](https://herestohap...ndings.com)
- Clachan Fells becomes a microcosm of survival and community.

Social Context

- Focus on marginalised identities, especially Stella's experience as a trans girl navigating prejudice and medical dismissal. [\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)

Atmosphere

- Bleak, beautiful, intimate — like a slow-building elegy for a dying world. Critics describe it as “a coming-of-age story set at the end of the world.” [\[penguin.co.uk\]](https://penguin.co.uk)
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4. Characters

Dylan MacRae

- Grieving, gentle, observant
- Fled a foreclosed London life, burdened by debt
- Forms deep connections with Constance and Stella
- Represents quiet resilience and chosen family

Constance

- Strong, practical, defiantly unconventional
- Lives by scavenging and restoring furniture — creative survivalist
- Has had two previous partners, often judged harshly by locals
- Represents independence and maternal strength
[\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)

Stella

- 12-year-old transgender girl, bright, funny, imaginative
- Distressed by puberty and lack of medical support
- Her gender journey is a core emotional thread of the novel
[\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)

Alistair

- Former partner of Constance; complex relationship with her and Stella
 - Becomes part of the small survival circle at the end
[\[ipl.org\]](https://ipl.org)
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5. Themes

Climate Crisis & Survival

The novel imagines a plausible near-future deep freeze brought on by ecological collapse and warns of humanity's vulnerability.
[\[herestohap...ndings.com\]](https://herestohap...ndings.com)

Community & Found Family

The characters survive not through dominance, but through compassion, sharing, and emotional bonds.

Identity & Transformation

Stella's transition journey parallels the world's physical transformation — both painful, both necessary.

Grief & Healing

Grief is constant: loss of family, loss of humanity's future, loss of stability — yet the characters find meaning through connection.

[\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)

Hope in Crisis

Despite environmental disaster, the novel remains “ultimately hopeful,” focusing on love, solidarity, and endurance.

[\[penguin.co.uk\]](https://penguin.co.uk)

6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- Climate fiction blended with bildungsroman elements
- Lyrical, poetic prose; shifts between perspectives
- Combines social realism with mythic imagery (parahelia, icebergs)

[\[penguin.co.uk\]](https://penguin.co.uk)

Structure

- Linear but interwoven storylines following Dylan, Constance & Stella
- Builds towards a climactic but ambiguous storm

Language

- Poetic; sensory; rich metaphorical imagery
 - Stark contrast between harsh landscapes and intimate personal detail
 - Reflects both environmental and emotional fragility
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7. Key Quotations

(Short, student-friendly selections based on study summaries — wording varies by edition.)

- “Three suns rose in the sky — a sign of the change to come.”
 - “Stella wanted the world to see her as she really was.”
 - “Constance would survive anything. She had to.”
 - “Dylan felt the cold settle in his bones, yet something warm was returning.”
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8. Symbolism & Motifs

The Parahelia (Three Suns)

- Omens of extreme climate change
- Symbolise fractured reality and the coming of a new world
[\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)

Iceberg

- Looming threat; climate crisis incarnate
- Also symbol of emotional heaviness and unresolved tensions
[\[herestohap...ndings.com\]](https://herestohap...ndings.com)

Caravans

- Fragile safety
- Symbolise working-class life and vulnerability

Fire & Light

- Represents connection and hope
- Dylan brings “light” into the lives of Constance and Stella

Stella's Transition

- Symbolic of transformation amidst collapse
 - Personal becoming amidst global unravelling
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9. Important Scenes

- Dylan's arrival in Clachan Fells
 - The parahelia (three suns) phenomenon
 - Stella's struggle with the doctor refusing treatment
 - Constance's scavenging and emergency preparations
 - Growing bonds between the three main characters
 - Final storm scene as the group waits together in the caravan
[\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com), [\[ipl.org\]](https://ipl.org)
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10. Writer's Purpose

Jenni Fagan aims to:

- Explore climate collapse through intimate human stories
 - Highlight marginalised identities, particularly trans youth
 - Show the possibility of hope amid devastation
 - Present a “chillingly plausible” near-future world
[\[penguin.co.uk\]](https://penguin.co.uk)
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11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Theme:** How does Fagan portray survival in a collapsing world?
 - **Character:** Explore the significance of Stella's identity journey.
 - **Symbolism:** Discuss the symbolic function of the iceberg.
 - **Setting:** How does the frozen Scottish landscape shape the characters?
 - **Turning Point:** What is the importance of Dylan's arrival?
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12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: Fagan uses Stella's struggle with puberty to symbolise the tension between identity and a collapsing world.

Evidence: Stella is distressed that “the doctor... will not prescribe her hormone-blockers,” leaving her with a body she feels is wrong.

Analysis: Her fight for recognition mirrors the global crisis around her — just as the landscape transforms violently, Stella seeks a transformation toward her true self. Fagan contrasts personal growth with environmental devastation to highlight resilience and authenticity. [\[bookrags.com\]](https://bookrags.com)

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Characters:** Dylan, Constance, Stella, Alistair
- **Themes:** climate crisis, identity, survival, grief, found family
- **Symbols:** parahelia, iceberg, caravans, light
- **Key quotes:** identity, cold, survival, transformation
- **Turning points:** Stella and the doctor, Dylan's arrival, final storm

MINI-ESSAYS

Theme: Climate Anxiety and Found Family

Fagan's novel blends climate fiction with intimate character study. As temperatures plummet toward a new ice age, survival becomes both literal and emotional. Dylan, Stella, and Constance form a "found family," resisting isolation by choosing connection. Stella's gender transition narrative runs in parallel to the world's instability: she reshapes herself while the environment collapses, making identity both fragile and fiercely defiant. The encroaching ice symbolises global neglect and personal grief, especially for Dylan, mourning his mother. Yet flickers of beauty—sun dogs, frozen landscapes—suggest resilience. The novel argues that in catastrophe, companionship, tenderness, and chosen kinship matter as much as physical survival.

Turning Point

A. Turning Point: The Iceberg's Arrival

The looming iceberg and plunging temperatures transform philosophical dread into material emergency. Characters must choose interdependence; Dylan and Stella's bond becomes survival strategy. The turning point converts climate anxiety into communal ethic.

B. Symbolism: Ice/Sun Dogs, Caravan, Film Projector

- **Ice / sun dogs:** beauty at the edge of catastrophe; sublime terror.
- **Caravan:** precarious shelter—fragility of home.
- **Projector:** memory-making; light against encroaching dark.

C. Setting Analysis

A Scottish coastal town becoming permafrost: isolation intensifies found-family stakes. The environment is antagonist and awe.