

The First Two Pages: “The Skies Are Red” by Richie Narvaez
From *On Fire and Under Water: A Climate Change Crime Fiction Anthology*,
edited by Curtis Ippolito (Rock and a Hard Place Press)

An essay by Richie Narvaez

When I first read the call for this anthology—for crime fiction about climate change—I was under what felt like a mountain of a To Do List. But for years I had been telling every crime fiction writer friend I knew that crime fiction could be more than escapist, that in the current incendiary moment, it in fact should be a weapon for social justice because it could shine a light into darkness better than any other genre. No doubt I annoyed every one of those friends. But here was a chance to put my conviction into action. How could I not submit a story?

Luckily enough, an idea came to me fairly quickly and lingered: *What if there were a climate change cop show?*

Consider this: There is a lot of pop culture about the police—a gazillion TV shows, movies, and streaming content—but almost nothing about climate change. But what if climate change were as embedded in pop culture as police dramas? Then the public perception of climate issues might shift from it being a liberal, dubious, or distant issue to a more immediate, personal reality. Constant exposure, à la the hundreds of cop dramas, could inspire collective action by normalizing climate awareness, shaping behavior, and building social, political/corporate will

that could make for real change. But would a show like that ever make it on the air?

With that premise, I wrote “The Skies Are Red.” The title came from several social media posts I read about the California wildfires. It works as a description of the sky above the fires but also has visceral and political connotations.

Being a great fan of Swift (Jonathan, not Taylor), I wanted to write something with a satirical edge. I decided the story would be an oral history of a show written for a fictional magazine. Having reread Jon Dos Passos recently, I had been itching to write a piece of documentary fiction—the narrative form using documents, such as memos, email, and news articles.

So, per the conceit of documentary fiction, the story had to start with a second title. I knew this might be confusing, but it I felt it would immediately alert readers to the setup.

Criminal Takedown: Climate Change Cops: An Oral History
Exclusive to *Hollywood Variety Magazine*

I considered making this the main title, by the way, but I didn’t think it would be as much of a grabber in the TOC as “The Skies Are Red.”

Following from there, the first few paragraphs had to solidify the setup while also doing the usual work of a short story opening: set tone, seed exposition, and add in the expected crime element—in this case a mysterious death.

Although *Criminal Takedown* went ballistic in the ratings from the start, not even an Internal Affairs investigation could have foreseen the show becoming such a behemoth, a hit that would be on the air for four decades and launch twenty-seven spinoffs.

The original show and all of its spinoffs became wildly successful—and many have had their own spinoffs (including the current number one TV show, *Criminal Takedown: White Heat*)—with one glaring exception: *Criminal Takedown: Climate Change Cops*.

The logline for the show read, “Each episode features gripping climate crime cases and cutting-edge science. At the heart of every story is a tenant of the planet seeking justice.” The show followed an elite group of detectives who battle climate change crimes all over America. Three episodes were filmed. None were ever aired.

Rumors circled that there were tempestuous on-set arguments and that the studio was not happy with dailies. Then, on July 12, 2019, the show’s star, longtime TV veteran Sal Cassady died under bizarre circumstances. That was it. The axe fell.

What really killed *CT: CCC*? Was it a victim of internal storms, a dark cloud of tragedy, or changing political winds? In recent months, *Hollywood Variety Magazine* has spoken with many of the people involved—producers, writers, and cast members—in separate interviews, for an in-depth look at the never-seen series.

The writing here imitates the breezy style of celebrity journalism, including an assortment of cheeky puns—a style I learned back in my career as an entertainment journalist for such vaunted publications as *Cable Guide* and *TV Guide*. I also take some broad swipes at the fecundity of TV’s cop shows, with some exaggeration for effect, but just a little. Six shows were spun off from the original *Law & Order* and fifteen from the original *CSI*.

After this introduction comes the oral history, taken from interviews with the characters. As in many articles of this type, the personalities aren't in the same room together, and their quotes are edited together into a semi-linear narrative. Since there is no description or action, the character voices had to be distinct, and each had to have their own interests, to help readers follow their arcs. It also helped to give them names that are distinct and evocative: "Melker" the producer sounds like "milker"; Cassady the ex-hippie, an allusion to Neal Cassady of the Beats (Beats are not the same as hippies, but in our current culture, they are often conflated); "Volpe," the Italian word for "fox"; and so on.

Jerry Melker (owner, Melker Entertainment, exec producer):

Listen, *Criminal Takedown* is a juggernaut. A juggernaut! We could do *Criminal Takedown: Clown Car* and it would make ducats. Hold on, that's not bad. Let me make a note. Just kidding. Or am I? Anyway, so Sal comes to me with this idea. My father worked with him in the Sixties, so I figure I owe him a listen. For me, it wasn't about the politics of it. I mean, can you really believe scientists? But we'd just had another show cancelled, *Criminal Takedown: Fed Reserve*, and I wanted to fill that slot before the network dumped another eighties reboot in there. So I said, "Yeah, why not?" And to this day I think we could've had another hit if not for what happened to my dear friend Sal.

Rollo Ansen (co-producer/head writer): I used to hang at Sal's house in the Palisades. Huge, rambling place, bought it when he was starring in hippy movies back in the day. Half the place was banged out of recycled material and everything he ate was organic and grown in his yard. We were always pitching his eco ideas, but nothing anyone wanted to buy. So I said to him, "What if we take our idea and tie it to a known franchise?" I mentioned *Criminal Takedown*, which to be clear he was no fan of. "Fuckin' fascist copaganda," he called it.

Melker: Sal's house is nice, really nice. But to eat—everything has fucking bean sprouts on it.

Edith Cassady (Sal Cassady's widow): Sal was a big man with big ideas. Sweetheart, when he talked people paid attention because what he said was smart, was eloquent. He loved this planet, loved all the creatures who live and breathe here. He went to every protest, testified before Congress. When he talked, people listened. And it didn't hurt that my darling was as tall as a redwood and had biceps like boulders.

Sophia Volpe (co-star, "Gina O'Hara"): I loved the concept of the show. It's so timely. I mean, there was something on the news today, I think. What I really loved about *Climate Cops* was that I'd get to save the planet—and shoot people! What could be more fun than that?

I played the half-Italian, half-Irish second in command. I was the love interest for Sal's character. It wasn't in the script, but that's how I saw it, that's how I played it. Sal loved it, and he said he was going to have it written into the show. I said I hoped his wife wouldn't mind!

Dave Diaz (co-star "Federico"): So, the show bible said I was a newbie detective and that I was ethnic. And that was it—that was all they had for the character. I didn't even have a last name because they wanted me to cover a bunch of groups, I guess. But I didn't care—it was my first TV job!

These quotes work almost like a script, but any sense of a conversation is an illusion. They are only interacting elliptically, in whatever way the fictional editor decided to group what they said. But in that elliptical interaction, there is, I hope, enough energy or questions raised in the readers' minds for this story to drive the narrative.

At this point as well, clever mystery readers are starting to sniff for suspects. Staying in each character's head briefly like this allows their personalities to be highlighted, and drives and motives begin to appear.

Also, to keep with the satirical tone, I seeded in some commentary, such as the producer's perception of climate change, *e.g.*, as something to make money from, or how diversity is treated in the TV industry, *e.g.*, Dave Diaz's ethnically vague TV character.

After this, at the end of the first two pages, we meet more characters/suspects.

Hanna Goode (co-star "Ariel Jade"): Well, I played Ariel, the geeky misfit technician. I had, like, four lines in each episode, and it was the same four lines, "Guys, check this out," "And then I found this!" "You're right, chief. How did I miss that?" and, last but not least, "Anyone up for a coffee run?"

Thing is, I truly believed in the idea of the show. I knew it was going to be filtered through all these cop drama tropes, but there had to be some way to crack the zeitgeist. When you think about what people watch all the time—besides fake news and reality TV—it's crime dramas. So it was kind of a brilliant idea. That was, of course, before everything went south—in more ways than one.

Could we have made a difference? I don't know. I mean, there's a wildfire headed for my area right now. That's the third time this year.

Mel Norris (co-star "Steve Remington"): It was a job. I'd played cops before. I've played them since. I'm an ex-linebacker. I got that look.

Cassady: I want to say, what happened to my sweet Sal is still hard to talk about, and I'll never believe what the coroner concluded. Never.

Ansen: Sal basically had a board covered with hundreds of environmental issues, and he would tell me, “Pick one and write an episode,” and he’d add in research later. That’s all the direction I got. There were a ridiculous amount of choices on that board. Illegal deforestation. Illegal mining. Illegal dumping. Overfishing. Greenwashing. Methane leaks. On and on and on.

I came back with some pitches, and basically he said, “So each week it’s some exec or his assistant who gets the blame?” I said, “Yeah.” He goes, “Isn’t that a bit repetitive?” I said, “Have you not seen the other *CT* shows?” He goes, “Don’t you think wildfires, food insecurity, and superstorms can make the point for us?” I told him it hasn’t yet.

I had some fun with the names here, *e.g.*, Mel Norris as a play on actor Mel Gibson, a climate change denier, and Chuck Norris, who once called global warming a “con game.”

We meet Hannah Goode, the closest thing to a protagonist in the story, the one who questions throughout. Here, she brings up seemingly ever-present threat of wildfires, which will be taken up again dramatically in a later part of the story.

Edith Cassady restates the murder mystery touched on in the introduction, to continue to whet readers’ curiosity.

Then Ansen, the co-producer/head writer, expresses the cynicism I think many of us feel around this issue: the climate is obviously changing—more intense storms, worsening wildfires, record-breaking temperatures, coastal flooding, on and on—why aren’t people waking up and wanting to do something?

Almost every story in *On Fire and Under Water* is concerned with two crimes: the plot-driving crime and then the crimes against our planet and its

inhabitants. This is, as one reviewer put it, “Crime fiction that matters.” Our purpose as crime fiction writers is, yes, to entertain, to take readers on a ride, but in such dangerous times it can also be our responsibility to point out some important things along the way.

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Richie Narvaez is the author of more than eighty published short stories, which have appeared in journals, magazines, and anthologies, including *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Mississippi Review*, *Storyglossia*, and *Tiny Crimes*. His YA whodunit *Holly Hernandez and the Death of Disco* received an Agatha Award and an Anthony Award. He has two short story collections, *Roachkiller & Other Stories* and *Noir Yorican*, which was nominated for an Anthony Award for Best Anthology. He is an adjunct professor of English at Sarah Lawrence and an adjunct assistant professor of English at the Fashion Institute of Technology. He received the SUNY Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Adjunct Teaching and a Letras Boricuas Fellowship.