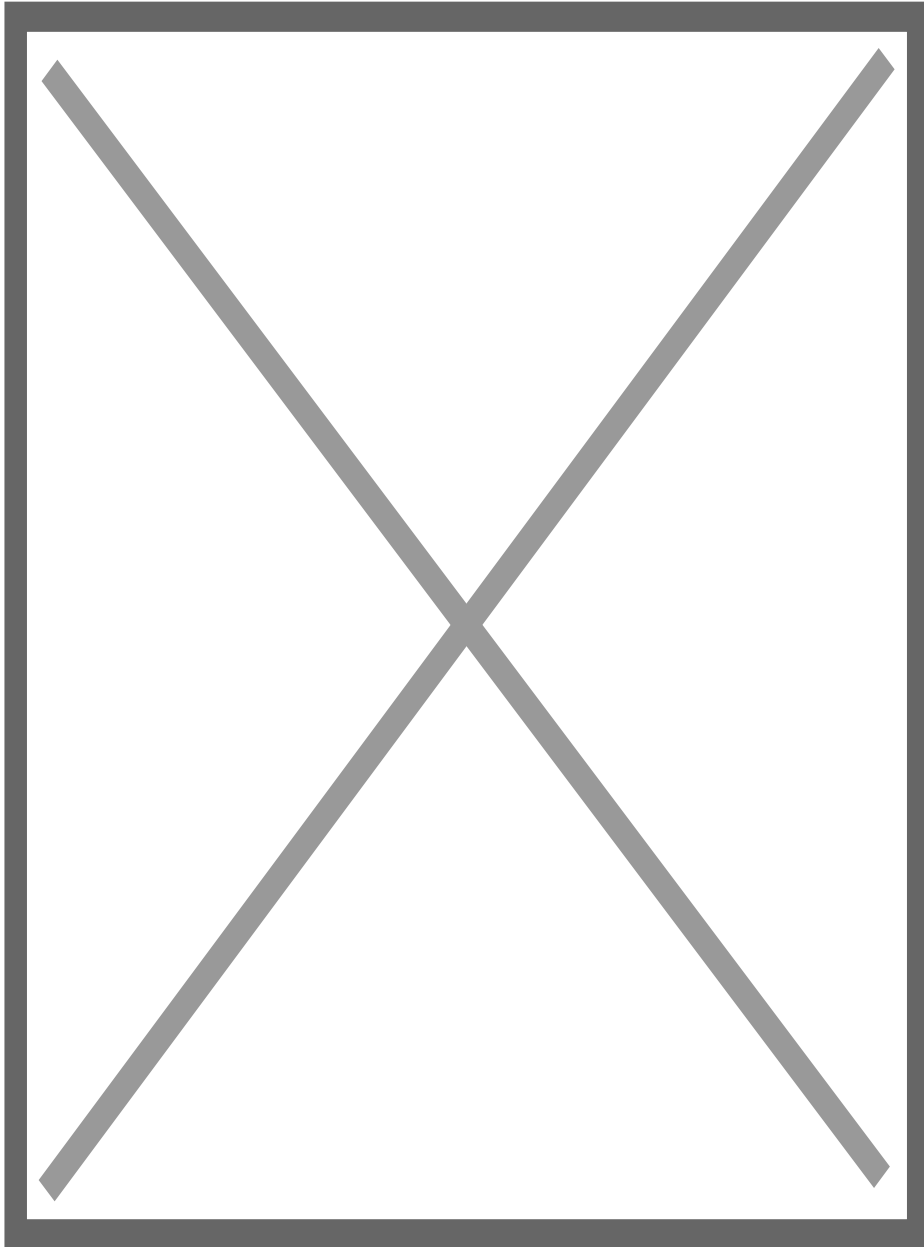


What kind of man will I be when the world burns?

Tim Winton's novel *Juice* tackles climate change, masculinity, and violence.

by [John Flack](#) in the [May 2026](#) issue

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When I was a much younger man, my girlfriend brought me to some workshops sponsored by her summer internship program. Those classes were my introduction to gender theory, the concept of systemic inequality,

and many other ways of thinking that I didn't previously know existed. But the moment that I remember most was a time I didn't learn something new but rather felt something very old. The director of the program said something like, "I'm a feminist all day long. But at night, when there's a sound or something goes bump, I tell my husband to go check it out."

I still remember the thrill I felt when I heard that—it was the thrill of feeling that being a man was necessary. She had affirmed the risk of protecting a partner. I remember thinking, *Yes, that's what men have to do.*

Years later, after I married my girlfriend, we worked in Tanzania for the Lutheran church. She was there as a teacher, and I was a pastoral intern. Our neighbor, a Tanzanian, woke us one night and asked me to kill a poisonous snake in her room. She was almost certainly more equipped to kill snakes than I was, but she lived alone and seemed scared.

I hate snakes. Even garter snakes make me weak in the knees. But I picked up a shovel and a machete and did what I thought I had to do. If I were a more imaginative man, perhaps I would have figured out a way to move the snake without killing it. But as it is, I'm still here, the snake is long gone, and when things go bump in the night, I'm the one who gets out of bed and goes on patrol.

Sometimes people roll their eyes when I tell that story, and other times there's a glint of recognition and approval reflected back to me. There are aspects of American masculinity that adhere to the creed of risk-taking and toughness. To be an American man under these rubrics is to be capable of and willing to use violence. Many of our stories involve violence used to solve problems, and many of those stories center on men. The alternatives to this have grown fewer, and the desperate geopolitical situation of climate change and oligarchy have made violence attractive again. But there are other voices, indeed even Christian voices, pressing the question: What kind of man do you want to be? One such voice is Tim Winton, an Australian writer whose latest novel, *Juice*, is his response.

Violence is at the center of an old answer to this question. Even as far back as the Genesis flood story (a climate change story in itself), the earth has been corrupted by violence. "I have determined to make an end to all flesh," God says, "for the earth is filled with violence because of them." Biblical scholar Jerome Creach says that in this story violence seems to break out like a disease. Men seem most susceptible to it. That Noah finds favor with God probably indicates that he was not a violent man. As Noah and his family floated on the ark, I wonder how they chose to pass the time. In the first few weeks following the flood, did they go out on deck, look out at the water, and see death—the floating bodies, the remnants and consequences of violence—surrounding them? Perhaps they spent their time, as we do now, telling stories, stories of the world as it was, as they lived it, and as it could be: human beings in the dark, sharing stories of their past and hoping things could be different.

Winton says that *Juice* is "about a bloke in a hole telling stories while he still can," just as I imagine Noah and his family did in the ark. Winton's main character spends a good deal of the book in holes, beset by the effects of the climate crisis. Set in a dystopian future in Western Australia, the unnamed narrator attempts to eke out a life when the world has warmed by 3 degrees Celsius (5.4 degrees Fahrenheit). He lives like a desert frog, crepuscular and retreating underground to escape the summers' heat and floods. In time, even the winters become too warm to survive, and it forces the people who remain to migrate.

After he strikes out from his underground home, he rescues an orphaned girl and finds himself deep in a different hole. When another man captures them and points a weapon at them, he begins telling stories in an attempt to save their lives. To buy time and to appeal to the better angels of their captor's conscience, he tells the type of stories Noah's family may have told on the ark—how things went wrong, and all the things done and left undone that led them to this hole. He tells stories marked by an earth filled with violence, until he finally turns his back on the weapon, hoping that something other than violence can prevail.

Winton is perhaps his home country's most famous author. He is a four-time winner of the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's yearly award for an outstanding novel. He has also been short-listed for the Booker Prize twice. Winton writes in the vernacular of Western Australia's desert coast and is also an environmental crusader for that rim of the world, working to save and preserve the Ningaloo Reef and other parts of the region. His critics think his work is too "blokey": too masculine, low class, and difficult, essentially because it's literary fiction about the remote edges of his country and their working-class inhabitants (often their men), written in their language. He is also a Christian writer, although he claims to be a heterodox one, and you'll find, often enough, that his books are built on the framework of grace, justice, and faith.

Winton crafted his 1986 novel *That Eye, the Sky* from an event in his own life that inspired his faith. His father was a motorcycle cop. One night, when Winton was still a small boy, his father did not come home because he had broken most of his body in an accident. His father survived but became an invalid. One day a man showed up "out of the blue" and took Winton's father to the bathtub and performed the private and tender act of bathing and caring for him—the physical labor of lifting and carrying that Winton's mother could not do. That man was a part of a local church, and soon Winton's family was as well. It was an austere denomination, and Winton is no longer part of it, but that act of sacrifice and service left a mark on him. Now we can all benefit from the story of how one boy, growing up barefoot in the red dirt, learned what it meant to be a man, one wash at a time.

*Juice*, however, is not such a story, and the vision of an Australia ravaged by climate crisis is not the Australia of the early 1970s. *Juice*'s unnamed narrator is older, scarred, and must pass much of the year underground, hiding from the blazing heat of the sun. His is a story of human descent and a great desperate struggle for survival. The novel poses a question: What if future generations know about people in the present and the way we live?

What if you were to grow up and spend half your life underground, scavenging and raising your food in greenhouses, scratching out subsistence morning and evening during the winter, and hiding from the heat all summer? What if you were to learn, as the protagonist does, that this restricted scope of life isn't natural but the result of human choices, that his "trials were not random accidents but deliberate acts undertaken with the knowledge of their consequences." What kind of people would bequeath their descendants such a life, when theirs was so full of luxury and leisure? And what would justice look like for their heirs? What would people deserve, those who were so greedy and nihilistic that they burned the atmosphere for their comfort and left behind a boiling ball where there once was a green and fertile planet? The premise ought to infuriate us, if we had properly ordered thinking. But I think I can say, along with the writer of Genesis, that we are corrupted, and a pandemic of violence has risen around us.

In the Genesis flood, violent people are swept away by the waters. In *Juice*, the Service—a group of anonymous citizens functioning as trained assassins—hunt down the descendants of those most responsible for climate change. They also identify potential soldiers to join them and indoctrinate them with the idea that the Exxon heirs, the descendants of Sunoco, and all who live off the profits of the world's destruction deserve to die. Winton's narrator is a member of the Service, and for much of the book he stokes his righteous anger by pursuing and eliminating those he deems guilty. He ekes out subsistence from the drying, sweltering earth until the Service summons him to bring justice to the perpetrators and profiteers of climate change.

But Winton's book is not a revenge fantasy. *Juice* makes clear that violence and revenge cannot solve the climate crisis, nor soothe its consequences. This is a bloke in a hole telling stories to survive—he has a weapon hidden in his caravan, but he tells the child not to touch it, no matter what happens. The revenge planned by the Service fails: the heirs of empire evolve, consolidate power, and repay violence with violence. In the end, the survivors on planet Earth find communities however they can—as indentured workers, bandits, or worse—but when the man in *Juice* finds someone to care for, it gives him hope. I think the character and I might recognize the same desire: that under the guise of protection, men want to care for someone, to see them grow and thrive.

If this story were a revenge fantasy, he would outwit and outdraw his captor, but instead, as he tells his stories, he calls his captor brother. It is the difference between bearing suffering and inflicting it. He does not deny how good it felt to bring justice to the people who ruined the world. “Maybe it was a mistake . . . trying to purify the world one dead body at a time,” the bloke tells his captor. “You want to purify it one good deed at a time,” the captor says. “It beats hiding,” the bloke says.

It beats killing. It beats violence. Winton’s 2004 short story collection *The Turning* includes a story of metanoia set in a coastal trailer park. The main character, Raelene, lives with her abusive husband. She meets a couple, struggling in the aftermath of alcoholism, who talk to her about Jesus. To mock their piety, she buys a snow globe of Jesus walking on water, robe pulled back, hair in the wind. She looks at the snow globe Jesus and thinks, “He was all man.” It’s a funny thing, a joke, pure kitsch. But eventually, as her husband sinks deeper into drugs, drink, and loathing, snow globe Jesus becomes her secret love. Her husband will not face his failings; he will not repent of them. He cannot bear suffering, especially not on another’s behalf. He can only inflict it. In the story’s shockingly violent final scene, Raelene calls out the name of Jesus, the one who bears all things. Especially for male readers, a choice becomes clear. Only one of these characters is all man. What kind of man do you want to be?

This is the question *Juice* asks. It is a cruciform book, a book of turning and metanoia. Theologian John Behr says God’s project of creation is only finished at the cross, confirmed unwittingly by Pilate, who says, “Behold the human being.” Look at the bearer of suffering, the reconciler. To become human, we become like Jesus, the snow globe one, the crucified one.

These days I find myself wondering: What will the world look like when it’s three or four degrees warmer where I live? What threats will awaken me in the night, and what will I do when I pick up my shovel? What kind of person will I have to be to survive? I wonder especially how men will meet the challenge. We could find ourselves brothers and comrades, turning away from violence and individualism and instead turning toward the needs of our communities, offering protection to each other and the most vulnerable among us.