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AQUEOUS NARRATION IN MAJA LUNDE'S *BLÅ*



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Climate fiction has become an increasingly visible strand of contemporary Nordic literature, with Norwegian author Maja Lunde among its best-known representatives.¹ *Blå* is the second title in her quartet of speculative novels and has established itself as a frequently read and taught climate novel.² It circulates widely in Nordic educational settings, where it is often used to address topics such as climate anxiety and ecological responsibility.³ Lunde's novel has also generated a small body of ecocritical scholarship. Juliane Egerer reads it as an "ecological elegy," while Matthew Whittle situates it in discussions of climate migration.⁴ Like several recent Nordic novels concerned with environmental crisis, *Blå* centers on water and ecological instability.⁵ In Lunde's case, the novel combines a speculative future with contemporary ecological concerns. It follows two intertwined stories presented in alternating chapters: that of a retired Norwegian climate activist, Signe, who is sailing across the Atlantic Ocean in 2017, and that of a father and daughter, David and Lou, who flee wildfire in a drought-stricken France in 2041 and end up in a refugee camp. The two storylines gradually draw together and link personal grief and loss to climate change and water scarcity.

Water plays a central role in Lunde's novel and existing criticism has largely approached this topic in symbolic or thematic terms. I instead approach water as a narrative principle. The most sustained engagement with water as a nonhuman force in *Blå* to date comes from Călina-Maria Moldovan, whose new materialist and posthumanist reading of Lunde's novel ascribes affective force to water-scapes.⁶ Building on Moldovan's observation that water in Lunde's novel exceeds a purely symbolic function, I shift the focus toward the

ways in which various hydrological conditions shape narrative form.⁷ To examine how water informs the novel's structure, I draw on what I describe as a 'blue' narratology, a narratological approach informed by blue humanities thinking.⁸ Without suggesting that water is a 'storyteller' in any literal sense, I seek to trace how hydrology helps organize narrative progression in ways conventionally attributed to characters.⁹ Various forms of water in *Blå* influence the movement of characters and shape the conditions under which they act, particularly through tides, currents, drought and other hydrological processes.

In what follows, I outline the theoretical framework through which I examine the narratological role of water, then turn to close readings of the novel's two timelines as shaped by different hydrological conditions, before considering how water ultimately brings the two narratives into contact.

Blue Narratology

Contemporary blue humanities scholars have described oceans and other waterscapes as environments that unsettle land-bound perspectives, which have traditionally shaped how stories and worlds are conceived.¹⁰ For human geographers Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, the ocean is not a passive backdrop to human life but an active environment that generates spatial and social possibilities.¹¹ In line with, among others, Steve Mentz and Serpil Oppermann, I extend blue humanities' preoccupation with the ocean to other waterscapes and hydrological forms, such as rivers, glaciers and fog, as well as to water scarcity and drought.¹² Together, these perspectives support a reading that entails "thinking with water," to borrow a term from Oppermann.¹³ Such thinking foregrounds how environmental conditions influence both narrative action and narrative form.

Approaching water from a narratological perspective makes it possible to examine how various hydrological conditions shape storytelling itself. Water, I suggest, informs the novel's themes and narrative organization by influencing both events and their presentation. To clarify this claim, I draw primarily on Gérard Genette's distinction between story, understood as the chronological sequence of events,

and narrative discourse, understood as their organization and presentation in the text.¹⁴ Lunde's narrative discourse produces tension and meaning through variations in narrative duration that alter the pacing. As Genette observes, the representation of events can speed up, slow down, pause or compress.¹⁵ These shifts, often associated with human agency, can also be influenced by nonhuman forces. In *Blå*, varying water conditions influence both narrative duration and the progression of events.

As Peter Brooks argues, narratives are propelled by desire for an anticipated ending, with characters acting as agents moving toward an imagined endpoint.¹⁶ Lunde complicates this notion, as her characters move through conditions influenced by water. Storms and tides influence the present-day storyline, while water scarcity governs events set in the future. In both cases, narrative movement follows water's presence or absence, its flow or withdrawal, in interaction with the protagonists' intentions. In this sense, *Blå* exemplifies what I refer to as an aqueous narrativity. I use this term for a narrative in which water provides much of the momentum and direction conventionally associated with characters' actions.

Read through this lens, water can be seen to operate at three narratological levels. At the level of story, hydrological conditions function as causal forces that set events in motion or bring them to a halt. At the level of narrative discourse, changes in water's presence or absence shape narrative duration, altering the pace at which events are narrated. Finally, at the level of macro-structure, hydrological circulation brings into contact the novel's two timelines. The connection between these timelines depends on the circulation of water across time and space, mirroring the cyclical processes that structure the novel as a whole. In the following section, I turn to the first of the two storylines to show how water's mobility and volatility shape both narrative progression and duration.

Following the Water

From the outset, *Blå* establishes water as the force that sets events in motion. Signe's storyline is organized around water's movement and the hydrological conditions it produces. The opening page declares

that “ingenting stoppet vannet” and traces water from mountain snow to fjord and cloud, foregrounding water as a circulating system that both precedes and outlasts human intention.¹⁷ This circulation is echoed at the level of narrative discourse, as the narrative repeatedly returns to the Norwegian village Ringfjorden through Signe’s memories. A similar pattern appears at the level of story. Signe’s return to Ringfjorden resembles the cyclical motion of water. Years earlier, she left after failing to prevent the diversion of two local waterfalls to hydropower. Now she comes back because those same waters are again being commodified. Her former partner Magnus is cutting ice from the shrinking Blåfonna glacier and exporting it abroad, prompting her to act. Water provides both the rationale and the direction for her journey; she travels because water is being redirected and altered by human interventions.

In an act of defiance, Signe steals twelve containers filled with glacier ice from Magnus’s installation and the ocean becomes her only means of escape. Her decision to disappear by boat is dictated by what water makes possible. The ocean allows her to leave the fjord unnoticed and renders her effectively untraceable. It also provides the route by which she hopes to confront Magnus, now retired in Bordeaux. The ocean, however, is not a passive environment. As soon as Signe leaves the harbor, she relinquishes control to the wind and the current, and her progress toward France is repeatedly diverted by the weather and the sea conditions. Each deflection carries narrative consequences. During a severe storm, her immediate goal is temporarily abandoned as the boat pitches and threatens to sink. To save herself and the boat, her attention collapses to what can be done minute by minute: “Hele verden ruller, det finnes ingenting som ikke beveger seg, ingenting som står stille, jeg må rulle med, kan ikke kjempe imot.”¹⁸ The novel’s pacing tightens accordingly. Long, reflective passages over several chapters give way to rapid descriptions within a single chapter, as the storm alters both Signe’s actions and the narrative tempo. For Steve Mentz, maritime environments are defined by “radical instability,” a condition that resists fixity and control.¹⁹ Here, that instability registers formally as Signe’s attention narrows to the immediate demands of survival amid shifting hydrological forces.

Periods of calmer sea create a different narrative effect. When

the storm subsides and the sea flattens, forward motion becomes smoother and more expansive. The novel uses these moments to open up space for reminiscence. Signe finds time to reflect on her past relationship with Magnus and the environmental activism that once united them. These recollections do not appear arbitrarily but emerge when water withdraws its pressure on her and allows introspection. More narrative space is devoted to reflection, allowing single days to unfold across multiple pages as the narration shifts from external action to memory. Water sets the temporal terms under which Signe's reflection and action unfold. Hydrological rhythms in the form of stillness and storm shape whether attention turns inward toward memory or outward toward immediate action. From a blue humanities perspective, this alternation between stillness and storm exemplifies how maritime environments generate nonlinear and contingent temporalities.²⁰

The direction of Signe's journey is likewise shaped by hydrological processes. Signe's intention remains stable throughout her chapters; she wants to deliver the ice to Magnus in Bordeaux as an indictment of what she sees as his complicity in a crime, yet she travels only where water permits. When wind and current push her off course, she adjusts to the direction they allow. When fog obscures her view of the British coastline, she waits rather than risks grounding. When waves batter her sail, she reefs canvas and slows her speed. Over time, a pattern emerges. Signe's intention directs the journey, but not its course. Brooks's account of narratives as propelled by desire, with characters acting as engines of forward motion, is complicated in this storyline. Signe's journey reveals the limits of a model in which character desire alone drives narrative progression. While that desire gives her journey its direction, the movement of water shapes when and how it can be acted upon.

Water also shapes space and scale in the novel, which aligns with the idea that oceanic environments demand modes of perception different from those shaped on land. Signe's encounter with a finback whale surfacing beside the boat interrupts the novel's forward movement and repositions her within a larger ecological system, while simultaneously reminding her of her smallness within the planetary hydrosphere: "Jeg er et kryss på et kart, en prick på en overflate,

ubetydelig, nesten usynlig, slik vi alle er, for på avstand, ovenfra, forsvinner hver og en av oss, fra verdensrommet er det vannet man ser, havet, skyene, dråpene som gir jorda liv.”²¹ The encounter with the whale changes the narrative’s frame of perception. The whale demands nothing from Signe, yet its presence suspends action and opens a space in which the nonhuman world briefly becomes the point of orientation. At this moment, water and the world it supports shape what comes into view. They redirect narrative attention, shifting the frame of reference from Signe’s immediate concerns to the larger ecological systems in which she is embedded.²²

Signe’s arrival in Bordeaux makes visible the tension between water’s mobility and human efforts to control it. Until the tide turns, she cannot dock her boat. As she waits for the incoming tide, she remarks that “månen styrer oss,” acknowledging that human movement remains dependent on environmental forces beyond individual control.²³ Once she enters the canal that will lead her to Magnus, she finds the stillness around her suffocating. Magnus, meanwhile, has built his career on the assumption that water can be captured and turned into economic value, first through hydropower development, later through glacier export. Signe’s sailing, by contrast, depends on water’s openness and movement. Even the stolen ice she transports is unstable; by the time she reaches her destination it has melted.

The reunion with Magnus that follows, though emotionally charged, does not function as the narrative endpoint toward which Signe’s journey has seemed to move. There is no confrontation between them that alters the course of events. The journey has brought Signe to the point where the ice returns to land-based circulation, completing the trajectory that has guided her storyline from the outset. The significance of that movement, however, emerges fully only in relation to the novel’s parallel narrative.

Waiting for Water

Where Signe’s chapters develop through moving water, the novel’s other storyline unfolds under conditions of drought. Set in a future southern France where water scarcity and heat have resulted in infrastructural collapse, the second storyline in *Blå* follows David and

his young daughter, Lou, as they attempt to survive in a landscape shaped by a lack of water. Before a wildfire destroys their hometown, David's work at a desalination plant buys him and his family time. As long as fresh water can still be produced, they can remain where they are. Once drought renders the infrastructure fragile and fire overwhelms the plant, however, the family must flee. In the chaos that follows, David and Lou become separated from David's wife and their son. When water stops arriving in the refugee camp where David and Lou end up, they are forced to move again. In both instances, the availability of water determines when characters can remain in place and when displacement becomes necessary.

David and Lou's first displacement forms part of a broader reorganization of movement across Europe, where access to water increasingly determines who may remain in place and who is forced to move. In the refugee camp to which David and Lou arrive, access to water is the organizing principle of everyday life. Upon arrival, they discover that the water they had imagined would be freely available there is tightly rationed. Laundry and bathing are permitted only once a week. Drinking water, too, is limited. David captures the extent to which water dominates daily life when he reflects that: "Jeg våkna og tenkte på vann. Drakk noen få lunkne dråper. Sparte til Lou. Jeg sovna og tenkte på vann."²⁴ Water shapes both what the characters do and where they can go. With insufficient resources to travel far beyond the camp, movement becomes constrained and directionless. When David and Lou venture outside the camp, David observes that "det var ingenting å gå mot, ingenting å feste blikket på."²⁵ In the absence of water, space ceases to function as navigable territory. Rather than connecting places, water scarcity constrains physical mobility and narrows the range of possible actions that David can take.

Water scarcity also shapes narrative tempo. As in Signe's storyline, changing water conditions regulate the pace at which events unfold. Camp life is characterized by repetitive acts of waiting that create an iterative routine, returning the narrative to the same activities day after day. Daily life condenses to queuing for food, checking for news of missing family members and waiting. The resulting rhythm slows narrative progression and produces a cyclical temporality. As

elsewhere in the storyline, this rhythm is periodically interrupted by hydrological crises. After Lou accidentally drinks contaminated water, her worsening dehydration accelerates the narrative as waiting gives way to emergency. Like the earlier flight from their hometown, Lou's dehydration interrupts the routine of camp life and accelerates the narrative. Once she recovers and can drink again, the storyline returns to the slower rhythm that characterizes life in the camp.

The temporary stasis of camp life proves short-lived. As water supplies fail, waiting once again gives way to displacement and the narrative resumes its forward momentum. Marguerite, who has already survived the collapse of another camp, warns David that the first sign of failure is when supplies stop arriving, a prediction that proves correct. When the camp catches fire and the remaining water reserves are exhausted, David is forced into a decision. Without water, the camp no longer functions as a holding space. During an earlier walk outside the camp, David and Lou have discovered Signe's abandoned boat in Magnus's garden. When the camp runs out of water and life there becomes untenable, this discovery gives direction to their flight. The departure from the camp marks the storyline's first significant expansion beyond the camp's confined space. The boat belongs to another hydrological world, one that presupposes open water and the ability to travel. Rather than returning the characters to open water, however, the boat leads them to an empty riverbed and a dried-up canal that once "delte Frankrike, men bandt havene sammen, Atlanterhavet og Middelhavet."²⁶ Nevertheless, the river and canal retain the shapes of water, preserving a cartography designed for water even after the water itself has disappeared.

The discovery of Signe's boat transforms displacement into a new form of anticipation centered on the future return of water. With the help of others from the now defunct camp, David hauls Signe's boat into the empty canal bed, hoping that future rainfall will eventually carry it to the sea. The boat remains a remnant of the watery world from which it originated, even as it rests in a landscape defined by absence. Unlike Signe, who moves toward a concrete destination, David must orient himself toward a hydrological event in the future. The canal preserves a route toward the sea, even though the water required to activate it is absent. In this way, narrative desire is redi-

rected toward an imagined future structured around rain.

The novel's closing chapters focus on the prospect of water's return. Just as the limited water in Magnus' house is about to run out, Marguerite discovers the containers with glacier water that Signe and Magnus buried in the garden decades earlier. The discovery links the novel's two storylines through the water that Signe transported to the south of France. In addition, it temporarily restores the possibility of survival. Rain emerges as the most explicit expression of this possibility, first through David and Marguerite's imagined sense of a change in the air and later through a shared vision of water filling the canal and carrying the boat toward the sea. Whether this rain ever arrives remains unresolved in the novel. Structurally, the narrative shifts from near drought-induced stasis toward the prospect of renewed movement, now oriented toward the anticipated return of water rather than escape from the threat of dehydration. By orienting its final pages toward rain and the anticipated return of water, *Blå* also reasserts the cyclical hydrological processes from its opening pages. Whereas Signe's storyline develops through water in motion, David's unfolds through its scarcity and becomes oriented toward its anticipated return. In both storylines, however, water shapes the course of events, while hydrological circulation connects the two narratives at the level of the novel's macro-structure.

Confluence

Throughout this article, I have traced how water informs the organization of narrative in *Blå*. Different hydrological conditions influence events in the novel, but also help determine when and how narrative progression becomes possible. Moving water, water scarcity and the anticipation of water's return each give rise to distinct narrative patterns. Hydrological conditions influence what characters can do and when the narrative can move forward, without constituting a narrating agency in themselves. In this way, Lunde imagines a story world in which environmental processes increasingly set the terms of human life.

This resolution to the novel departs from conventional narrative closure. As Frank Kermode argues, endings give shape and meaning

to what precedes them.²⁷ In *Blå*, Signe arrives at Magnus's house, as David and Lou do decades later, yet these moments of arrival do not in themselves produce a sense of an ending. According to Brooks, narratives are driven by desire for an anticipated ending. In *Blå*, that desire extends beyond Signe's and David's respective quests. Rather than resolving it through the completion of those journeys, the novel redirects desire toward the anticipated return of water. The glacier water that sustains David, Lou and Marguerite offers a temporary reprieve, but not a final resolution to their lack of water. Instead, the novel's closing vision of rainfall and a boat carried toward the sea points toward a future hydrological event that remains beyond the novel's final page. The ending thus offers a reconfigured teleology, in which narrative direction is organized around the possibility of water's return rather than the completion of the protagonists' quests.

In this article I have approached thinking with water in a formal sense, as a way of describing how hydrological conditions help shape narrative organization. In line with Moldovan, I view narratives as inevitably anthropocentric forms of sense-making, yet my reading of *Blå* suggests that environmental processes can still influence the conditions under which narrative develops.²⁸ This results in an aqueous narrativity in which various hydrological conditions shape the novel's spatial and temporal logic alongside the actions and intentions of its characters. In this respect, *Blå* suggests that environmental change may influence narrative organization as well as thematic representation.

Noter

- 1 Emmi Itäranta, "The Arctic on Fire: A Nordic Perspective on Climate Fiction," retrieved 2026-05-29, <https://climate-fiction.org/2021/07/13/the-arctic-on-fire-a-nordic-perspective-on-climate-fiction-by-emmi-itaranta/>
- 2 Maja Lunde. *Blå* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 2017). The other titles in the quartet are *Bienes historie* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 2015); *Przewalskis hest* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 2019); and *Drømmen om et tre*. (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 2022).
- 3 *Blå* also appears in Nordic educational research. See Maria Persson, "Framtidens svensklärare och ekokritiska perspektiv på klimatkfiction," *HumaNetten* 54 (Spring 2025), 87-112, <https://doi.org/10.15626/hn.20255405>; and Sissel Furuseth, "Bærekraftdilemmaer i Maja Lundes klimaromaner", in *Fortellinger om bærekraftig utvikling: Perspektiver for norskfaget*, edited by Marcus Axelsson

- and Barbro Bredesen Opset (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 2021), 85–102, <https://www.scup.com/doi/10.18261/9788215050089-2021-04>.
- 4 Juliane Egerer, “Facing Planetary Ecocide, Transforming Human-Earth Relations: An Eco-Cosmopolitan and Transcultural Comparison of Maja Lunde’s *Blå* and Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle*,” *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 96 (Winter 2024: 4), 49, <https://doi.org/10.3368/sca.96.4.45>; and Matthew Whittle, “The Dystopian Imaginary, Climate Migration, and ‘Lifeboat-Nation’”, in Corina Stan and Charlotte Sussman, eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of European Migration in Literature and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 151–166.
 - 5 Recent Nordic climate fiction that focuses on aquatic environments and hydrological crisis includes Emmi Itäranta’s young adult novel *Teemestarin kirja* (Helsinki: Teos, 2013) and Iida Turpeinen’s historical novel *Elolliset* (Helsinki: Schildts & Söderströms, 2023).
 - 6 Călina-Maria Moldovan, “The Ocean in Contemporary Norwegian Literature,” *Ecozon@*, Vol. 16 (2025: 2) *Vegetal Humanities in the Amazon*, 105–120, <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2025.16.2.5409>.
 - 7 Moldovan draws on ecocritical and new materialist theories to argue that water lives. Moldovan, “The Ocean in Contemporary Norwegian Literature,” 108. My argument is narratological rather than ontological; it concerns what water does in narrative structure, not what water is. Similarly, while *Blå* may be read as Anthropocene fiction, my concern is primarily with the ways hydrological processes shape narrative organization.
 - 8 I make no attempt to systematically theorize the term “blue narratology” in this article. My use of the term is best understood as a provisional placeholder for narratological approaches informed by blue humanities thinking.
 - 9 This argument loosely aligns with Bruno Latour’s use of the term “actant” for human and nonhuman entities that participate in chains of action by shaping outcomes without possessing intentional agency. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54–55. My concern, however, is less with the distribution of agency across actor-networks than with how water’s effects are organized narratively.
 - 10 For Steve Mentz, a blue humanities perspective involves “a way of looking at terrestrial literary culture from an offshore perspective.” Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 99.
 - 11 Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, “Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 33 (2015: 2), 247–264, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d14148p>. See also Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Toward a Critical Ocean Studies for the Anthropocene,” *English Language Notes*, Vol. 57 (2019: 1), 21–36, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-7309655>.
 - 12 Both Mentz and Oppermann emphasize water systems beyond the ocean alone. Steve Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2024); and Serpil Oppermann, *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene*, Elements in Environmental Humanities Series (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
 - 13 Oppermann, *Blue Humanities*, 1.
 - 14 Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Jane E. Lewin transl. (Cornell University Press, 1980), 27.

- 15 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 86-112.
- 16 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf [1984] 1992).
- 17 Lunde, *Blå*, 5.
- 18 Lunde, *Blå*, 131.
- 19 Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*, 99.
- 20 Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*, 98-100. See also Steinberg and Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking," 255-256.
- 21 Lunde, *Blå*, 269.
- 22 See Mentz and DeLoughrey for discussions of how oceanic environments challenge human-centered scales of perception and encourage planetary forms of ecological thinking.
- 23 Lunde, *Blå*, 283.
- 24 Lunde, *Blå*, 220-221.
- 25 Lunde, *Blå*, 84.
- 26 Lunde, *Blå*, 246.
- 27 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford University Press [1966] 2000).
- 28 Moldovan, "The Ocean in Contemporary Norwegian Literature," 108.

