For 21st-century playwrights and novelists, biology is set to be a hot topic. On every scale, from the microscopic to the planetary, ideas and images are seeping from the life sciences into creative writing. The rising tide of neuro-fiction takes readers on strange voyages through the landscapes of the brain, leading them to places of wonderment and estrangement from the self. As awareness of climate change increases, stories of ecological fragility and resilience give us increasingly precise accounts of species behaviour, from butterflies and fungi to trees and forests. And the thriving imagination of global-scale catastrophe continues to find inspiration in microbiology, answering our fears of contamination and extinction with killer virus novels or stories of genetic manipulation. Biological concepts play both literal and metaphorical roles in these different genres, bringing new topics but also new forms to the stories they tell.

This talk will explore a range of fictional writing and performance inspired by biology, and take a particular interest in the structure of these stories. Whose story is being told, and from what point of view? How does the current interest in life sciences affect the way in which stories are told, the very shape of narrative? In some cases biology brings new life to familiar categories, reshaping the Bildungsroman, the epic or the apocalyptic narrative. But it also participates in a decentring of narrative, away from the human towards other points of view, perhaps even towards points that do not have a ‘view’. In the selection of writing presented in this talk, neurological networks confuse the agency of human dramas, trees and microbes become characters in their own right, and ecosystems might be the heroes of the story. I will suggest that the turn to biology in contemporary writing destabilizes narrative focalization, agency
and scale, and that we consider this instability as both an epistemic strategy and an aesthetic transformation.