

The future when we don't do enough

The
Uninhabitable
Earth
Life After Warming
David
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As a kid growing up in rural Wisconsin, I used to be exhilarated by clear, moonless nights when the entire Milky Way stretched across the sky. Then, one evening, I brought a friend into the backyard to show her all the constellations I recognized and to point out the satellites rotating from pole to pole overhead. Her reaction was not one of awe but of sadness. I was shocked. Instead of seeing the beauty in the vastness, and the freedom it could offer, she saw only our insignificance.

My friend's despair in the face of this reality came to mind as I read the new book by journalist David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*. It is a fantastically detailed, grim and emotionally difficult read. Unlike the night sky, however, climate change is less about our insignificance in the face of grandeur, and more about our significance in the face of existential peril. We are all responsible for what is happening to our planet. And although we know the many ways in which we might act to change our future, the gap between what we know we need to do and what we are actually doing “yawns so wide it could swallow whole civilizations and indeed threatens to,” says Wallace-Wells.

The first half of the book lays out all the negative ways in which climate change will affect — or already affects — our planet and our lives. Dividing them into 12 interlaced topics, Wallace-Wells gathers a broad range of facts and forecasts, and expertly condenses them into manageable, though depressing, scenarios for our future. It is pointed out that even if we meet the emissions reduction targets set by the Paris Climate Agreement, we may still reach 4 °C warming; and “the last time earth was four degrees [Celsius] warmer, there was no ice at either pole and sea level was 260 feet higher.” From heat-related deaths to water shortages, conflicts and suicides, you will be able to impress friends at dinner parties with your knowledge of the world's imminent and apparently inevitable downfall after reading *The Uninhabitable Earth*.

Wallace-Wells admits the challenge of these dark chapters, and about 80 pages into this flogging, I found my hopelessness and despair transforming into a strong desire to stand up to this monumental challenge. I was ready to pivot to action; Wallace-Wells was not. There were even more depressing facts and theories to slog through. The latter half of the book continues the litany of despair by highlighting the systems that got us here; the author blames capitalism, Silicon Valley, our inclination for stories with clear antagonists, and even the domestication of grain, for our destruction of the planet's atmosphere.

But the book fails to take the next obvious step — defining a clear pathway for action. In pointing out that “we just haven't yet discovered the political will, economic might, and cultural flexibility to install and activate” climate solutions, Wallace-Wells fails to put himself on the line to suggest how we might accomplish it all.

“There is nothing the modern world abhors like a quitter,” notes Wallace-Wells, but it feels like he gave up on this book, choosing to scare us rather than inspire. He devotes under ten pages to how we might overcome obstacles and move towards action. He offers only that we, as individuals, should not retreat from political participation, and that we ought to “normalize climate suffering at the same pace we accelerate it,” which I believe means we just need to get used to all the suffering to come.

Perhaps it is enough that Wallace-Wells has taken the climate reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and various climate scientists' work, and condensed them down into 140 pages of tough but digestible reading. He has even summarized related work outside the IPCC's typical purview to discuss the influence of human culture, history and lore on climate change. For some, this book may be motivating and a complement to the more energetic and hopeful calls to action from the Al Gores and Greta Thunbergs of the world.

It takes fortitude to read this honest and overwhelming account of what is coming, but it will take much more than fortitude to do something about it. It's like the stark choice my friend and I confronted long ago under the night sky. Will we give in to the paralysis of insignificance, or will we be inspired and rise to the challenge? □

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