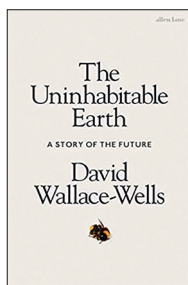


## The Uninhabitable Earth. A Story of the Future

David Wallace-Wells

Allen Lane, 2019, HB, 320pp, £20.00, 978-0241355213



### CLIMATE CHAOS: COMPLACENCY OR ENGAGEMENT?

Nearly half a century ago my undergraduate degree included a module entitled 'Human Ecology'. Our reading included Paul Ehrlich's seminal *Population, Resources, Environment*; the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth*; and Barbara Ward and Rene Dubos's *Only One Earth: the Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet*.

We learned about the greenhouse effect; we knew that our civilisation and material abundance were predicated on the profligate and ever-increasing consumption of fossil fuels; we knew that population growth and concomitant resource consumption could not continue indefinitely — and we assumed, naively, that this knowledge would soon become widespread, that solutions would be found, and that, possibly, the world would reach a steady state of sustainable productivity and a fair distribution of goods.

How wrong we were. In the sudden, belated, but welcome burst of interest in the climate emergency that now undeniably confronts us, a plethora of books on the subject is hitting the shelves, but if you are spoilt for choice or short of time, this is the one to read. David Wallace-Wells is a journalist and deputy editor of *New York* magazine, and caused a stir with a major article about global warming in July 2017. This book is an expansion of the issues discussed in that article, and covers just about every aspect of the subject. It does so in language that is at once elegant and urgent, and laced with powerful metaphors and striking similes; and it is supported by 65 pages of footnotes that leave one in no doubt that the author has done his homework.

The first section of the book is entitled

'Cascades', and emphasises the scale, speed, and self-reinforcing properties of the climate chaos that has already begun to engulf us. Among its more arresting facts is this: we have produced more atmospheric carbon in the 30 years since Al Gore's first book on climate than in *all the millennia preceding it*.

The second part of the book, 'Elements of Chaos', is a whistlestop tour through the tunnel of horrors that climate change creates — drought, famine, flooding, dying oceans, unbreathable air, disease epidemics, economic collapse, enforced migration, and armed conflict. Towards the end of this section we read:

*'If you have made it this far, you are a brave reader. Any one of these twelve chapters contains, by rights, enough horror to induce a panic attack in even the most optimistic.'*

Quite so.

Yet you should read on, for the third section, 'The Climate Kaleidoscope', is the most important, going beyond the catalogue of disaster into a discussion of our cultural assumptions, the power of ideologies (political and economic), ideas about history and 'progress', and what kinds of ethics might emerge as the crisis unfolds. Will we find a historically unprecedented capacity for universal cooperation and empathy, or — as seems more likely — *'by drawing our circles of empathy smaller and smaller, or by simply turning a blind eye when convenient, [will we] find ways to engineer new indifference?'*

The concluding chapter, 'The Anthropoc Principle', reminds us — as did Barbara Ward in 1972 — that this is the one planet we have. The *Voyager 1* space probe showed us:

*'... the inescapable smallness, and fragility, of the entire experiment we're engaged in, together, whether we like it or not ... You can choose your metaphor. You can't choose the planet, which is the only one any of us will ever call home.'*

The strength of this book lies in the way that it forces the reader to confront not only the external facts, but also their own subjective responses to the threats posed by runaway climate change. Moreover, despite the generally terrifying implications of his 'story of the future', the author has a positive message, albeit one buried in an extensive footnote on page 295:

*'I believe in engagement [his emphasis] above all, engagement wherever it may help. In fact, I find any other response to the climate crisis morally incomprehensible.'*

Sir David Attenborough, the inspirational Swedish student Greta Thunberg, and the innovative activists of Extinction Rebellion have shown us that engagement is possible and essential. Writing this review has increased my own engagement, and reading it might do the same for you. We owe it to our children and grandchildren — and to all the generations who follow them. Whether their planet remains hospitable to any kind of humane civilisation is largely down to us.

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### Machines Like Me Ian McEwan

Jonathan Cape, 2019, HB, 320pp, £18.99, 978-1787331662



### A RARE INTELLIGENCE

I couldn't help feeling that, since *Atonement* and *Saturday*, Ian McEwan had rather taken his foot off the pedal — *On Chesil Beach* seemed slight, *Nutshell* gimmicky and overworked, and even *The Children Act* was on the thin side. His new, gripping, beautifully written and constructed, disturbing, and provocative novel is none of those things, and is a thrilling read.

The action takes place in Britain in the 1980s, but not the 1980s that we knew. The technological revolution has already arrived. Most cars are autonomous, high-speed trains run from London to Glasgow in 75 minutes, and computer technology is

very sophisticated. Much of this has to do with the fact that Alan Turing is still alive and is a national hero and, with barely a nod to Francis Crick, has an institute named after him near King's Cross. Mrs Thatcher called a disastrous snap general election after losing the Falklands War, and almost 3000 British lives, and Tony Benn is the leader of the Labour Party. Oh, and the Beatles have re-formed.

Charlie Friend lives alone in a seedy flat in Clapham: his horizons are not exactly broad and he gets by playing the stock markets on his laptop. Miranda, who is beautiful, has a dark secret, and is doing a PhD on the Corn Laws, lives in the flat above. Charlie is in love with Miranda and they develop a close but asymmetrical relationship.

Almost unaccountably, Charlie blows the last £86 000 of an inheritance on a handsome humanoid called Adam, one of only 25 in the world, who possesses phenomenal powers of reasoning, analysis, and memory, and looks, speaks, and behaves exactly like a human being. He goes for walks alone and chats to the proprietor of the corner shop about Rabindranath Tagore. He has other characteristics that lead to what Charlie thinks must be the first cyber-cuckolding on record. We are already in subversive McEwan territory.

The developing plot throws up questions, insights, and paradoxes, about consciousness, love and affection, morality, free will, justice, nature and nurture, and humanity. Some of these may not be new, and the machine-human interface has been the subject of science fiction for a long time, but because McEwan cleverly creates powerful echoes between what was happening in his alternative 1980s and the problems that we face today, and which will challenge us in the near future, the narrative rarely seems dated, and occasionally is remarkably prescient.

I don't know who advised McEwan on the technical content of this book, but it does seem to include a very serious health warning about the potentially adverse effects of machine learning, the dangerously seductive attraction of very high speed 'reasoning', the development of understanding and insight that may be more apparent than real, and the chilling conclusions that hyper-rationalism can come to are brilliantly described.

**Roger Jones,**  
Editor, *BJGP*.

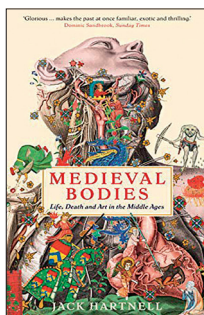
Email: [roger.jones@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:roger.jones@kcl.ac.uk)

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### **Medieval Bodies. Life, Death and Art in the Middle Ages** **Jack Hartnell**

*Profile Books/Wellcome Collection, 2018, HB, 352pp, £12.99, 978-1781256794*



### **A FASCINATING HISTORICAL JOURNEY**

Jack Hartnell's *Medieval Bodies* is a book about differences. The author forces us to think about how differently other cultures thought (and think) about the body, health, and illness, from modern medical views. Hartnell, an art historian well versed in the history of medicine, demonstrates that

medicine in the Middle Ages started from an understanding of the body (based in Galenic humoral theory) that bore little relation to our own. But he also connects medieval medical perspectives of anatomy, physiology, and pathology to larger social contexts, by exploring the assumptions about the body that underlay the ways medieval people lived, thought, prayed, ate, and drank. The author discusses, for example, not only views on the heart's physiology pre-dating Harvey's arguments for the circulation of blood, but also its increasing connections with emotions and love (associations that still survive in ideas like heartbreak and the heart as the ubiquitous symbol of love).

Each chapter is devoted to a body part, and provides various perspectives on it. For example, the discussion of bones begins with medieval theories of anatomical structure, and then turns to burial practices, saints' relics, and the Christian and Muslim theology of the resurrection of the body.

Hartnell has gathered a large number of very different sources — medical, literary, visual, religious — in a wonderful mosaic that will challenge, amuse, and occasionally even shock the reader. The book is designed for a general audience, and effortlessly connects a wide range of fascinating topics, from acoustics to sexuality. While there are a few errors in the book (for example, the incorrect conflation of limbo and purgatory on p.117), these are minor missteps and will not affect the general reader's enjoyment of this rich and provocative study of a culture that seems both distant from and familiar to our own.

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