

THE UNINHABITABLE EARTH by *David Wallace-Wells*

Reviewed by Anika Jain

Miranda House

The Uninhabitable Earth is a 2019 non-fiction book by David Wallace-Wells. This book revolves around the idea of global warming and its consequences. This book is inspired by his New York magazine article, “The Uninhabitable Earth”. I believe that every person living on this earth should read this book as it successfully makes the reader feel perturbed about the damages and the consequences Earth is facing at present, and are probable to get worse in the future due to the destructiveness and cupidity of mankind. It is, I promise, worse than you think.

If your anxiety about global warming is overpowered by fears of sea-level rise, you are barely scratching the surface of what terrors are possible. Especially for a citizen from a country like India and if you know what’s going on recently in terms of pollution, mainly carbon emission. Global plastic production is expected to triple by 2050 and by that point there will be more plastic than fish in the planet’s oceans. In fact, plastic disposal has been a major cause of the depletion of marine life.

This book is full of facts about what’s happening around the world, about which we hardly have any idea. The writer draws a clear picture of what’s going to happen to our planet and to us in future if we don’t curb our emission rates. It contains comprehensive and well-presented data on the climate crisis. While reading this book readers might feel like discontinuing the book due to the writer’s discontinuous flow of thoughts and problems which can be difficult for normal readers to understand but it covers some important aspects of climate change not addressed in general like hunger, wildfire, draining of fresh water, drying up of oceans, unbreathable air and economic collapse which are soon going to be the reason for the collapse of our ecosystem. “Elements of Chaos”, the book’s longest section, is composed of 12 short and brutal chapters, each of which foretells a specific dimension of our forecast doom, and their titles alone: “Heat Death”, “Dying Oceans”, “Unbreathable Air” and “Plagues of Warming”, are enough to induce a panic attack. A scary read and a wake-up call that we all need. The book may come across as apocalyptic and also as a book that spells doom and casts a shadow on our sunny lives.

Wallace-Wells undertakes two tasks in this book. First, he brings us up to date with the latest climate science and the most reliable forecast about the effects of climate change. The works of thousands of scientists converge around a variety of problems that would make everlasting consciousness. As the writer points out, we've been conditioned to think that climate change is just rising sea levels or increasing temperatures here and there. It's not so simple. In general, people have this unconscious mindset "I don't live near the coast, so what's my worry," because the problem is manifold and universal which everyone has to understand as there is no escape. The swelling seas—and the cities, they will drown. It has dominated the picture of global warming, and so overwhelmed our capacity for climate panic. Rising oceans are bad, but fleeing the coastline will not be enough.

Temperatures will rise to such an extent that some areas become nearly uninhabitable, especially around India and the Middle East, droughts and floods will increase in frequency and severity, and wildfires will also increase. Severe weather events, such as hurricanes and tornados, will occur and become stronger. We should start bracing ourselves for the designation of a category 6 hurricane. Established diseases will spread, and new pathological organisms will evolve in our hothouse atmosphere. Crops will fail and yields decline. Nature will survive but species will disappear like thin air. We'll see Nature altered in ways that we don't know and want to know. Human beings will be forced to migrate to survive or probably won't be surviving on this planet. Conflicts will happen and intensify, from domestic quarrels to wars and civil unrest. We seem intent on creating a perfectly materialistic world of the war of all against all.

The lessons there are unfortunately bleak. Three-quarters of a century since global warming was first recognized as a problem, we have made no meaningful adjustment to our production or consumption of energy to account for it and protect ourselves. For far too long, casual climate observers have watched scientists draw pathways to a stable climate and concluded that the world would adapt accordingly; instead, the world has done more or less nothing, as though those pathways would implement themselves. These lines from the book point out how indifferent and reckless our attitude has been to even bother making the slightest of change in our consumption or production.

Wildfires that had swept through different states in California like, Malibu in 1956, Bel Air in 1961, Santa Barbara in 1964, and Watts in 1965 made it to the headline and on television and via text messages. Five of the twenty worst fires in California history hit the state in the

fall of 2017, and over nine thousand separate ones broke out in this year itself, that burned more than 1,240,000 acres—nearly two thousand square miles. In the past, Hurricane Katrina, Harvey, Michael, Sandy and Irma, Americans have gotten acquainted with the threat of floods, but water is just the beginning. Someday the whole city might settle under the water. In the affluent states of the West, even those conscious of environmental change have spent the last few decades driving our highways and walking our street grids, navigating our supermarkets and all-everywhere internet and believing that we had built our way out of nature. With climate change, we are moving instead toward nature, and chaos, into a new realm that we humans have failed to foresee.

The author says that when critics of Al Gore compare his electricity use to that of the average Ugandan, they are not ultimately highlighting conspicuous and hypothetical personal consumption, however, they mean to disparage him. Instead, they are diverting the attention of the people towards the structure of political and economic order that not only permits this disparity but feeds and benefits from it. This is what Thomas Piketty calls the “apparatus of justification”, and it justifies quite a lot. If the world’s most conspicuous emitters, the top 10%, reduced their emissions to only the EU average, total global emissions would fall by 35%. Wallace-Wells, however, remains surprisingly optimistic.

In the second portion of the book, after establishing the likelihood of various varieties of hell that we humans are creating for ourselves, and choosing it. Wallace-Wells addresses our responses and also how individuals, societies, and countries may respond to the increasing pressures that we face.

We humans, like most of our fellow comrades on Earth, have three instinctive responses to threats: fight, flight, or freeze. I couldn’t help but think along these lines as I read about reactions to our increasing certain knowledge. As a whole, we’ve chosen to faint, to swoon at the thought of what we’ve created and then distract ourselves from our plight. We consciously distract ourselves from the challenge at hand, and 21st Century consumer capitalism is making us do this. Some say it’s just "God’s will" and take a dreadful approach to justify some bit of Bible misreading. Others seek to flee through technological problems, some of which may prove useful, but none of which promise reliable remedies and none of which can be attempted without high costs and a lot of uncertainty about unintended consequences. The super-rich investigate how to govern the bunkers they’re building to try to escape the wrath of the masses who will seek both vengeance and access to the resources that the super-rich have squirrelled away.

But as Wallace-Wells makes clear, we have options and the potential to dramatically reduce the suffering that the future holds for all humans if we don't take sufficient steps to alleviate our plight. And I believe, or at least I possess a ray of hope that we humans can respond in time. Thomas Friedman recently quoted an elementary but valuable insight from economic thinker Eric Beinhoffer, "There are only two ways to cure political tribalism: a common threat or a common project." Friedman uses this point to recommend that we need to undertake a common project to repair the foundations of the middle class. The writer suggests that repairing the foundations of the middle class must be subsumed under the project of dealing with climate change, which is a common threat and can become a common project. Indeed, starting now, we must reimagine our political structures, our political economy, and our entire culture. We have the potential to use the impending catastrophes to attempt to build a more just society. We either seek a just and sustainable world, or we can expect increasing international strife and civil anarchy. Environment and economy are interdependent and need each other. Hence, a development that ignores its repercussions on the environment will destroy the environment that sustains life forms.

In the aftermath of the 2008 crash, a number of historians and economists studying -fossil capitalism have started to suggest that the entire history of swift economic growth, which began somewhat suddenly in the eighteenth century, is not the result of innovation or the dynamics of free trade, but simply our discovery of fossil fuels and all their raw power. The timeline of growth is just about precisely consistent with the burning of fuels. But you do not have to believe that economic growth is a mirage produced by fossil fumes to worry that climate change is a threat to it. There is a widespread inclination toward climate change as a form of compound payback for two centuries of industrial capitalism. Wallace of individual choices. Choosing to eat vegan burgers, or sip out of reusable straws will not make difference on a huge scale. Vote for leaders who understand the scale of the crisis and make climate change their main priority, he urges.

The book, however, is less focused on solutions than on clarifying the scale of the problem. Till the end, Wallace is determined to focus on the destruction instead of ending the book on a positive and hopeful note.

Personal comment: Millennials will face this problem and must live with the consequences.

Of course, this is true. We bear the burden of responsibility for addressing our planetary illness. Alleviating the devastation of climate change must be a cross-generational project. We must begin to strive hard every day to bring about little changes even if they are small to conserve our planet earth. We have a moral obligation to hand over the planet earth in good order to our future generation. At the least, we should leave to the next generation a stock of quality resources no less than what we have inherited.