BOOK REVIEW

The world without us

By Alan Weisman

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Misanthropy – the dislike, distrust, and hatred of the human species – is once again dinner table chic. By contrast, both pre- and post-*Homo sapiens* 'Nature' is the resurgent Goddess, Gaia, giving new, if secular, credence to Reginald Heber's famous lines in his 1819 hymn, 'From Greenland's Icy Mountains': "Though every prospect pleases, And only man is vile!"

Weisman's book will undoubtedly become a major exegesis for the faithful of this self-loathing religion. His purpose is to imagine what the world would be like if we, as a species, *Homo sapiens*, were expunged from the face of the Earth: "Say a *Homo sapiens*-specific virus – natural or diabolically nano-engineered – picks us off but leaves everything else intact. Or some misanthropic evil wizard somehow targets that unique 3.9 percent of DNA that makes us human beings and not chimpanzees, or perfects a way to sterilize our sperm" (p. 4). How long would the Earth take to restore Eden, and to smell "the day before Adam"? What would happen to our finest creations, to our art and architecture, to our manifestations of the soul? And, would the world miss us, or would there be "a huge biological sigh of relief"?

In many ways this is an enjoyable and self-indulgent exercise, a kind of counter-futurology. I have often indulged in it myself when contemplating a derelict railway line, a deserted village, or an old quarry. It is the next stage on from the post-Wizard of Oz blight of Rachel Carson's 1960s' *Silent Spring* (1962). But it isn't science, despite the fact that *The World Without Us* expands on Weisman's previous essay, 'Earth Without People' published in *Discover* magazine (February, 2005), which was selected for 'Best American Science Writing 2006', and despite the claims of some commentators that the book represents a peak of non-fiction science. Jennifer Schuessler, reviewing the book in *The New York Times* (September 2, 2007), gets it right when she concludes: "Weisman's gripping *fantasy* [my italic] will make most readers hope that at least some of us can stick around long enough to see how it all turns out." In many ways, the nearer parallels are Margaret Atwood's dystopian novels, such as *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid's Tale* (2003 ; 1985). We are in the realms of speculative fiction, not even, perhaps, of science fiction.

This is unsurprising. Weisman is an award-winning journalist, and there is nothing wrong with well-written and engaging, speculative fiction. But dystopian speculative fiction is a far cry from careful and cautious scientific prediction. We should remember that the Earth itself always changes, so that Weisman's very own "lingering scent of Eden", the *Puszcza*, the "forest primeval" of Poland, is but a fleeting moment in the story of the Earth, which has been largely dominated by ice, cold, open grasslands, but, above all, by the seas and the oceans. My innate scepticism inevitably rises when an author sees Eden as 'forest', which is, and always has been, a small percentage of the cover of the Earth, with or without humans.

Moreover, our perceptions likewise change. Today, for example, the 'tropical rain forest' has similarly grown into a hegemonic, Edenic myth. Yet there were, and are, many other ways of seeing and describing such 'tropical rain forests'. The French geographer, Pierre Gourou, presented a markedly different entity in his magisterial survey, *Les pays tropicaux* (1947). The historian, David Arnold, writes that, in Gourou, "... there is scarcely a trace of the Edenic: poverty and pathogenicity are all pervading." The tropical world is full of "horrors", a region where climate and disease are "terrible foes" to humankind. Likewise, Lucien Febvre, the founding historian/geographer of the Annales School, denounced the Germanic creation of the 'tropics' as an "over-idealistic geography", in which the soils were not fecund and

in which virtually everything was inimical to humans. For him, the 'tropical rain forest' was no wooded Eden; it "was a desert, covered with verdure". Thus, for many, humanity has been the finisher and improver of Nature. Without humans, the world would return to a place in which there was neither the concept of Eden or beauty nor beauty itself, but rather a Nature red in tooth and claw.

With such caveats entered, however, we can still indulge ourselves in the frisson of thinking about some of Weisman's more startling imaginings. Our craving for disaster revels in the thought of the New York subway flooding within a couple of days, and Lexington Avenue caving in and turning into a rushing river. And then there are the world's 441 nuclear plants: "... possibly half would burn, and the rest would melt". "As the radioactive lava melds with the surrounding steel and concrete, it would finally cool – if that's the term for a lump of slag that would remain mortally hot thereafter" (pp. 213–14). And what would happen to sculptor, Gutzon Borglum's, iconic Mount Rushmore? Teddy Roosevelt would erode at about 2 cm every 10,000 years, and he might thus still be "around for the next 7.2 million years". "Should some equally ingenious, confounding, lyrical, and conflicted species appear on Earth again in our aftermath, they may still find T.R.'s fierce, shrewd gaze fixed intently upon them" (p. 182), just like the Argonath, the Pillars of the Kings, in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1955), and Shelley's "Ozymandias, king of kings".

And in this image, one grasps that Weisman is not quite the misanthrope some might want him to be. Deep down, and at the last, he hopes that: "... long after we're gone, unbearably lonely for the beautiful world from which we so foolishly banished ourselves – we, or our memories, might surf home aboard a cosmic electromagnetic wave to haunt our beloved Earth" (p. 275).

Weisman thus values our souls, if not our actions. In essence, he is more a dystopian, or a utopian, according to your preference, rather than an entrenched misanthrope.

Yet, as an intrepid heterotopian, this is where I must part company with Weisman. Some 9,000 years ago, near what would eventually become the Page Museum at the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, a young woman died, probably violently, possibly the first recorded homicide in that city's long history of violence. She was aged 18 to 25, about 4 feet 8 inches tall, and the fractures in her cranium may have been caused by a grinding stone found only 4 inches from her skeleton. 'La Brea Woman', as she is affectionately known, was discovered in 1914. Surely, she could never have imagined the Hancock Park of today, with its Farmers' Market, or Wilshire Boulevard's Miracle Mile, housing the prestigious County Museum of Art, an automotive museum, a museum of miniatures, and a museum dedicated partly to herself. After all, her California had only just lost many of its Ice-Age animals - the dire wolf (*Canis dirus*), the American lion (*Panthera leo atrox*), and, most famous of all, the saber-toothed cat (*Smilodon fatalis*).

Every child should visit this wonderful museum, if only to see for themselves that change is the norm - past, present, and future. And we survive change, not by trying to 'reverse-the-world-and-get-off', but by adaptability, flexibility, dynamism, drive, and initiative. Extinction is indeed a part of life and death, as it always has been and always will be. And future humans will surely be as shocked as the young woman of La Brea would have been by the Los Angeles that will someday occupy Hancock Park, 9,000 years hence.

In reality, it is quite simply beyond our imagination, even Mr. Weisman's.

This, then, is a book to savour on a winter's evening before the fire, with a glass of single malt - and a very wry smile.

References

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