

**Weisman A. 2007. *The World without us*. New York : Thomas Dunne Books/ St. Martin's Press. 353 p.**

Reviewed by Zack Lustgarten, March 2009

*The World Without Us* is an in-depth vision of what would happen to the world if *Homo sapiens* were to suddenly disappear tomorrow. It is made clear by the matter of fact writing style of author Alan Weisman that this grim outcome for humanity is an issue of when and not if. The focal question of the book is revealed and the stage is set for Weisman's thought experiment in the prelude. "Wipe us out, and see what's left. How would the rest of nature respond if it were suddenly relieved of the relentless pressures we heap on it and our fellow organisms? How soon would, or could, the climate return to where it was before we fired up all our engines? How long would it take to recover lost ground and restore Eden to the way it must have gleamed and smelled the day before Adam, or *Homo Habilis*, appeared? Could nature ever obliterate our traces? "

This book is not just another alarmist's attempt to scare us into cleaning up our dirty ways before it is too late with a bleak description of the future. Instead, Weisman, smartly and thoroughly paints a picture using descriptions based on experts in their respective fields. Using evidence of past and present for a future world he accurately depicts a future without humans and of our lasting legacy. This book is a platform to engage environmental issues, rather than criticize our current practices.

The first conclusion that Weisman draws is that when humans leave, nature will benefit immediately. Within decades of us moving out, our cities and dwellings will return to nature by rotting and crumbling away. New York's tunnels will flood as their pumps no longer work to expel water. Freezing and thawing of water will cause streets to crack and crater. Before long, trees will sprout from the fissures. Skyscrapers will eventually fall as pipes burst inside buildings, roofs cave in and water makes its way to the foundations soaking the steel structures. What is left of infrastructure will most likely burn as debris piles up inside structures as windows break and roofs become exposed. This will happen across the landscape, rural and urban, the main assailant being water. The decay of the built environment will be replaced by a rise of nature. The asphalt jungles will be restored to real jungles once again. Weisman shows that organisms that we hampered will return to healthy numbers. In Africa, without humans and industrial practices like flower growing, biodiversity will thrive. Nature will be thankful for the day we leave.

However, in the second half of the book a new theme arises that is a bit darker. Long after we are gone and forgotten some of our terrible legacy will live on. Weisman offers plastic polymers as a great example of our lasting impression. On the lifetime of plastic he writes, "No one knows, because no plastic has died a natural death yet... But give it 100,000 years says the optimist." This plastic will kill organisms that ingest it for thousands of years past our demise, but eventually, perhaps a microbe that can ingest and feed on it will emerge.

In the future, monuments of man will fall, cities will be returned to nature, and we will be forgotten, buried in the layers of the earth. Other species will flourish and eventually the world will fully cope from our lasting impression. In time our scars will heal. Nature is astonishingly resilient and will renew itself, but I think the main argument that Weisman is making is that we should lessen the strain we are putting on the Earth.

Alan Weisman has written a clear and concise depiction of a future world where humans do not exist using several great scenarios based on current practices and trends. This book has an extensive twenty-page bibliography that aids the validity of his arguments. At times the reader may become overwhelmed with the amount of information presented, but I think that Weisman did this intentionally to justify how much evidence there is out there of the havoc we have wreaked on the earth. Although not a sunny outcome for humanity, there is an underlying theme of hope and optimism for the planet. I think this book is essential reading for anyone that has an interest in the sustainability and well-being of the earth.