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The Uninhabitable Earth

Life After Warming

by David Wallace-Wells

Tim Duggan Books

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ABOUT THE BOOK

It is worse, much worse, than you think. If your anxiety about global warming is dominated by fears of sea-level rise, you are barely scratching the surface of what terrors are possible—food shortages, refugee emergencies, climate wars and economic devastation.

An “epoch-defining book” (*The Guardian*) and “this generation’s *Silent Spring*” (*The Washington Post*), *The Uninhabitable Earth* is both a travelogue of the near future and a meditation on how that future will look to those living through it—the ways that warming promises to transform global politics, the meaning of technology and nature in the modern world, the sustainability of capitalism, and the trajectory of human progress.

The Uninhabitable Earth is also an impassioned call to action. For just as the world was brought to the brink of catastrophe within the span of a lifetime, the responsibility to avoid it now belongs to a single generation—today’s.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID WALLACE-WELLS is a columnist and deputy editor at *New York* magazine. He has been a national fellow at the New America Foundation and was previously the deputy editor of *The Paris Review*. He lives in New York City.

First-Year and Common Reading Guide

#1 *New York Times* Bestseller

The
Uninhabitable
Earth
Life After Warming
David
Wallace-Wells



“David Wallace-Wells argues that the impacts of climate change will be much graver than most people realize, and he’s right. *The Uninhabitable Earth* is a timely and provocative work.”

—Elizabeth Kolbert,
author of *The Sixth Extinction*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The book begins, “It is worse, much worse, than you think” (3). What does the author say are some of the “fairy tales” that form our “anthology of comforting delusions” (3) about climate change? What are some of the reasons he believes we “chose not to discuss a world warmed beyond two degrees” (9)? What other commonplace climate change myths does Wallace-Wells dispel in this chapter? For instance, what does he reveal about the realities of the speed and scope of climate change, and what statistic counters the popular view of climate change as “a sort of moral and economic debt . . . now come due” (4)?
2. Why do you think the author chose to title the first section of the book “Cascades”? What is a climate cascade and what are some examples of regional and global cascades that the author predicts we will experience as a result of climate change? What are “feedbacks” and how do they compound this effect? What does the author mean when he says that “the collapse of trust” among nations at this time in history “is a cascade, too” (25)?
3. “Heat death” is the first “element of chaos” outlined in the book. What are some of the problems that an increase of just a few degrees in temperature will create? What does the author mean when he says that the question “How much hotter will it get?” is “almost entirely human—which is to say, political” (43)? What were the 2016 Paris climate accords and what insights do they provide as we are considering this same question? What does staying below a two-degree increase demand in addition to carbon scale-backs? How do cities magnify this problem and make slowing or stopping warming more difficult?
4. What impact will climate change likely have on our global food supply? What will threaten crops and how does “carrying capacity” (53) factor into these projections? What percent of global emissions does global food production currently account for, and what changes to our diet would be necessary in order to stop this percentage from continuing its rapid incline? What is “hidden hunger” (56) and how would further warming exacerbate this problem?
5. When considering the effects of climate change on the sea, what does the author say “is a given” (59)? What is the albedo effect and how would this be impacted by further global warming? What other related cascading effects may take place—or already are taking place—as a result of melting ice and rising sea levels? Although it is an important issue, why is the author concerned with how much emphasis we place on this subject when discussing climate change? How does a focus on this particular issue create a false sense of security or blind us to other threatening issues?
6. In the chapter entitled “Wildfire,” what does Wallace-Wells mean when he says that “all fires are not created equal” (71)? What does he say is “perhaps the most harrowing of ways in which [recent] fires seemed to confirm our cinematic nightmares” (72) and what two big forces “conspire to prevent us from normalizing them” (73)? How do these wildfires—and fires intentionally set in the name of industrialization—tie in with one of most feared climate feedback loops of all?
7. In the chapter entitled “Disasters No Longer Natural,” what does Wallace-Wells say is among “the scariest features of rapid climate change” (80)? How have we already begun to experience this feature, and what has it revealed about “one of the uglier aspects of our climate blindness” (81)? In considering land development and our relationship to our landscape and surroundings, why does the author say that what we mean by the phrase “natural disaster” is called into question?
8. Which does the author say is more alarming and why: the saltwater crisis or the freshwater crisis? How does this tie in with what Wallace-Wells calls the “most deeply delusional” of all urban entitlements” (89)? How does the story of Day Zero in Cape Town underscore this?
9. Wallace-Wells reminds readers that water is the planet’s predominant environment and that oceans serve several critically important functions. How is global warming threatening these functions? What is happening—or has already happened—to our reefs and what is the impact on marine wildlife and humans?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(CONTINUED)

- Why should we be concerned and alarmed about other effects including ocean anoxification (97) and the slowdown of the ocean conveyor belt (98)?
10. At present, how many deaths globally are caused by air pollution? In addition to carbon pollution, what other forms of pollution contribute to this? How does polluted air also affect education, mental health, and job performance? What are microplastics and where are they already being discovered? Why is aerosol pollution considered a so-called catch-22?
 11. How is warming likely to impact our global health? What will be different about diseases and the reach of bacteria and viruses? What are "mega-deaths" and how might increased warming hypothetically lead to an increase in the incidence of these types of deaths?
 12. What part have economic concerns and debates about capitalism played in non-action around climate change? How does the aftermath of the Paris accords highlight this? What does the author have to say to those concerned about the costs of acting to minimize global warming and its cascading effects and those simply not ready to abandon their faith in the benefits of economic growth? Why does he say, "You do not have to believe that economic growth is a mirage produced by fossil fuels to worry that climate change is a threat to it" (117)?
 13. What is climate conflict? What impact has climate change already begun to have on conflicts of all varieties—domestic, global, social, economic, racial, etc.—and what accounts for the relationship between them? Why does Wallace-Wells conjecture that the U.S. military is "obsessed with climate change" (125)?
 14. In the chapter called "Systems," what are some of the systems that the author points out will be impacted by climate change? In addition to the impact on our ecological system, how does Wallace-Wells encourage us to think outside the box about impact? For instance, how does he suggest that systems such as migration, the human body, and family planning may be impacted by continued climate change? How have these systems already been impacted by climate change?
 15. Throughout the chapters of the book, Wallace-Wells addresses the expansive subject of climate injustice. What are some examples of the injustices that climate change will indiscriminately inflict? What is the climate caste system, and who does the author point out will, ironically, be most affected by climate change?
 16. How does the author address the dual problems of climate trauma and normalization/acclimation? Why are both destructive and dangerous? Does he propose how they might be avoided or at least minimized?
 17. What is "climate's kaleidoscope" (143)? How does storytelling and representation of climate change in entertainment correspond to this? What is "the villain problem" and what other factors make it difficult for climate change storytellers? Why does the author say that there is danger in seeing nature as allegory or parable? What challenges does language also present? How does Wallace-Wells seem to confront this in his own storytelling?
 18. What is a cognitive bias and what are some cognitive biases that affect our view of and response to climate change? Which of these are the worst according to the author and why? That climate change touches so many of the biases is a sign of what according to Wallace-Wells? What question about capitalism is "a prism" (163) and how might our definition of capitalism change under a climate change regime? How might the "vectors of climate liability" factor into this?
 19. The author begins the chapter "The Church of Technology" with the following statement: "Should anything save us, it will be technology" (171). But how does the author really seem to feel about technology and its historical impact on us? At the conclusion of the chapter, what does Wallace-Wells tell us is "the main lesson from the church of technology" (184)?
 20. What does the book have to say about the politics of consumption? What are consumer choices not a substitute for? According to the author, as a new

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

- political equilibrium (or disequilibrium) is established because of climate change, is “a *Mad Max* world” “around the bend” (196)? Why or why not?
21. How does the book propose that climate change may alter the way we think of history? What prevalent Western notion of history is likely to be disrupted? According to the author, what will shape how we regard the shape of history in a time of climate change (200)? Will the popular notions of progress or cyclical history still be viable?
 22. What predictions does the book make regarding “ethics at the end of the world”? What concerns do Wallace-Wells and other climate change scientists and journalists have about eco-nihilism, fatalism, and alarmism? What does the author suggest is one way that we might actually navigate climate change without despair?
 23. In the final section of the book entitled “The Anthropic Principle,” what does the author say are the only questions that matter (219)? Why does he say there are so many “*possiblys* and *perhapses*” in the book (219)? What does Wallace-Wells believe is “much more helpful than Fermi or Drake” in thinking about climate change and the existential challenge of solving it (225)? How does he believe we should choose to feel about “our exceptionality” (225)? What does he mean when he proposes at the book’s conclusion that climate change offers an “invigorating picture” (228)?
 24. Throughout the book, the author addresses what he calls “red herrings.” What does he mean when he says that individual responsibility is a “weaponized red herring” (90)? What are some of the other red herrings addressed in the book, and how might they inform dialogue about the actions that might be most productive in combatting climate change? For instance, how does Wallace-Wells challenge myths about denialism and the question of who is really responsible for global warming? Were you surprised by any of these assertions? Why or why not?
 25. How does *The Uninhabitable Earth* compare to other climate literature you have read? What separates or distinguishes it from other writings on this subject? Did any of your views about global warming change as a result of reading this book?
 26. Some critics of the book (and of the 2017 *New York* magazine article that inspired it) have accused Wallace-Wells of alarmism and inciting fear in order to scare people into action. Within the book, Wallace-Wells acknowledges that the text may indeed be alarmist because he is alarmed, but would you say that *The Uninhabitable Earth* is a fatalist work as well as an alarmist one? Why or why not? Does the book ultimately suggest whether we possess the tools to mitigate or stop catastrophic climate change? Were you more inspired to take action on climate change after reading the book?

ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S WRITER

JE BANACH was an original member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers’ Workshop. She has written for *PEN*, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom’s literary series. She is the author of more than 90 literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.

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