

# In 'The Uninhabitable Earth,' Apocalypse Is Now

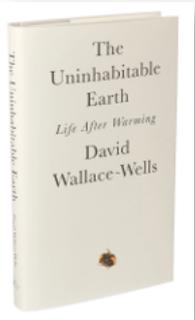


Image credit : Patricia Wall/The New York Times

More than halfway through “*The Uninhabitable Earth*,” David Wallace-Wells addresses the reader directly, commending anyone who has “made it this far” for being “brave.” After all, the previous pages of his book have depicted in meticulous and terrifying detail the possible future that awaits the planet should we continue to add carbon to the atmosphere and fail to arrest global warming. Floods, pestilence, famines, wildfires: What he calls the “elements of climate chaos” are veritably biblical in scope.

Wallace-Wells is a deputy editor of *New York magazine*, where two years ago he published an article<sup>1</sup> on climate change that went viral, understandably so; in 7,000 eloquent words, he bluntly laid out the calamitous costs of doing nothing — or, perhaps more realistically and therefore more menacingly, of doing something but not enough.

His new book revisits that approach, expanding his portrait of a planetary nightmare that, to judge by climatologists’ assessments, will soon take over our waking life. The crumpled carcass of a bee on the cover tells you only some of what you need to know. Yes, apian death gets passing mention, but Wallace-Wells is more concerned with the prospect of human suffering and even extinction.

There’s plenty of science consulted here, but the book, he writes, isn’t about the science of warming:

*“It is about what warming means to the way we live on this planet.”*

He warns of collapsing ice sheets, water scarcity, an equatorial band too hot to be livable and — for anyone fortunate enough to reside elsewhere — extreme heat waves that will burn longer and kill more. All this could come with 2 degrees Celsius of warming — the threshold<sup>2</sup> that world leaders pledged to stay below in the Paris accords of 2015.

Yet Wallace-Wells insists he’s optimistic; and in fact, he obtains some consolation by peering into the abyss, entertaining the worst-case scenarios of 6 to 8 degrees Celsius of warming. Given the prospect of utter annihilation, he says, the “degraded muddle” that we might still manage to eke out should count “as an encouraging future.” It would be “merely grim, rather than apocalyptic.”

Books about global warming have sounded the alarm for some time, with classic texts from writers like Elizabeth Kolbert<sup>3</sup> and Bill McKibben<sup>4</sup> chronicling the ways in which humans have irrevocably

<sup>1</sup> [nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/12/07/climate/world-emissions-paris-goals-not-on-track.html?module=inline>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/16/books/in-epoch-of-man-earth-takes-a-beating.html?module=inline>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/29/books/review/nicholas-wade-bill-mckibben-the-end-of-nature.html?module=inline>

transformed the climate. The science is “tentative, ever-evolving,” Wallace-Wells writes, but “none of it is news.”



David Wallace-Wells Credit: Beowulf Sheehan

“*The Uninhabitable Earth*” seems to be modeled more on Rachel Carson’s “*Silent Spring*” — or, at least, it’s a bid to do for greenhouse gases what Carson’s 1962 book did for pesticides<sup>5</sup>. “*Silent Spring*” became a galvanizing force, a foundational text for the environmental movement. The overarching frame for Wallace-Wells’s book is an analogous call to action:

“How much will we do to stall disaster, and how quickly?”

Part of his strategy is to tell us how much we have already lost.

“The climate system that raised us, and raised everything we now know as human culture and civilization, is now, like a parent, dead,” he writes.

Some of the technology we rely on to make the effects of climate change more bearable, like air-conditioning, also worsens them. The harms of global warming tend to fall disproportionately on poorer people and poorer countries, but the “cascades” already set in motion will eventually grow so enormous and indiscriminate that not even the rich will be spared.

Wallace-Wells avoids the “eerily banal language of climatology” in favor of lush, rolling prose. The sentences in this book are potent and evocative, though after a while of envisioning such unremitting destruction — page upon page of toddlers dying, plagues released by melting permafrost and wildfires incinerating tourists at seaside resorts — I began to feel like a voyeur at an atrocity exhibition. His *New York magazine* article already synthesized plenty of information about perilous climate risks and scared the bejeezus out of people; what are we supposed to do with this expanded litany of horrors?

“Fear can motivate,” Wallace-Wells writes.

He’s aware of those who denounce the graphic doomsaying as “climate porn,” but he arrived at his own ecological awakening when he started to collect “terrifying, gripping, uncanny narratives” about climate change. He describes himself as a Bitcoin-buying, non-recycling city-dweller who hates camping. He was scared out of his “fatally complacent, and willfully deluded” inertia when he became immersed in the awful truth and, his book suggests, you can be too.

Besides, it’s not as if any of the hair-raising material with which he has become intimately familiar has paralyzed him with fatalism — quite the opposite.

“That we know global warming is our doing should be a comfort, not a cause for despair,” he writes.

What some activists have called “toxic knowledge” — all the intricate feedback loops of societal collapse — “should be empowering.”

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/magazine/how-silent-spring-ignited-the-environmental-movement.html?module=inline>

In the course of writing this book, even while staring down the bleak decades ahead, Wallace-Wells had a child.

*“She will watch the world doing battle with a genuinely existential threat,” he writes. “She will be living it — quite literally the greatest story ever told. It may well bring a happy ending.”*

Wait — what? I found this lurching between sweet hopefulness on the one hand and lurid pessimism on the other to be bewildering, like a heat wave followed by a blizzard. But then Wallace-Wells has resolved to offer something other than the standard narrative of climate change and collective action, which *“is, dramatically, a snore.”* Mobilization is impossible for people who are sleepwalking their way toward disaster; and mobilization is necessary, he says, to deploy the tools at our disposal, which include carbon taxes, carbon capture and green energy.

*“The Uninhabitable Earth”* wagers that we’ve grown inured to cool recitations of the facts, and require a more direct engagement of political will.

*“There is no single way to best tell the story of climate change, no single rhetorical approach likely to work on a given audience, and none too dangerous to try,”* Wallace-Wells writes. *“Any story that sticks is a good one.”*

☐ *The Uninhabitable Earth*

Life After Warming

By David Wallace-Wells

310 pages. Tim Duggan Books. \$27.

☐ A version of this article appears in print on March 7, 2019, on Page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Future Shock? The End Is Near.