

Science

The Most Honest Book About Climate Change Yet

William T. Vollmann's latest opus is brilliant, but it offers no comfort to its readers.

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OCTOBER 2018 ISSUE

No Immediate Danger: Volume One of Carbon Ideologies BY WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN
VIKING

No Good Alternative: Volume Two of Carbon Ideologies BY WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN
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Nearly every book about climate change that has been written for a general audience contains within it a message of hope, and often a prod toward action. Vollmann declares from the outset that he will not offer any solutions, because he does not believe any are possible: "Nothing can be done to save [the world as we know it]; therefore, nothing need be done." This makes *Carbon Ideologies*, for all its merits and flaws, one of the most honest books yet written on climate change. Vollmann's undertaking is in the vanguard of the coming second wave of climate literature, books written not to diagnose or solve the problem, but to grapple with its moral consequences.

It is also a deeply idiosyncratic project: Vollmann's idiolect is obsessive, punctilious, twitchy, hyperobservational, and proudly amateurish. The data he presents are at times revelatory. A homeless person in America uses twice as much energy as the average global citizen; 61 percent of the energy generated in the United States in 2012 "accomplished no useful work whatsoever"; from 1980 to 2011, global energy use nearly tripled. Elsewhere the data are impossibly arcane ("Power Wastage by Group-Driven Machine Tools, ca. 1945 [Deducting Idle Machines]") or defiantly unscientific ("I am sorry that I could not make my table simple, complete or accurate"). His insatiable appetite for detail yields both irrelevant trivia ("Embarking on the Super Limited Hitachi Express, which was also known as the Super Hitachi 23 Limited Express") and magisterial portraits of landscapes befouled by poking and prodding and, in the case of West Virginia's mountains, decapitating.

The Fukushima section is especially uncanny in its evocation of a sublime coastal landscape vibrating with gamma rays. Vollmann breathes a cool wind "whose degree of particulate contamination was of course unknown," hears on a silent street at night the grunting of a radioactive wild boar, and walks on broken glass through an abandoned clothing store advertising a 50 percent-off sale and peopled by headless mannequins. Though nuclear fission does not produce greenhouse-gas emissions, its horrors come to stand for those of climate change, a vast terror invisible to those victimized by it—at least in the short term. Though Vollmann refers to the Fukushima chapters when he

writes that his project is sustained on “little more than blindness, uneasiness, helplessness and ignorance,” he is describing all of Carbon Ideologies.

These qualities reach their fullest expression in the statements made by government and industry officials against charges of environmental menace. In Fukushima, objects in the fallout zone are not radiated but “contaminated.” In West Virginia, mountains do not have their summits chopped off but are granted “removal of overburden.” Fracking “is safer and has less environmental impact than driving a car,” a marketing director from Shale Crescent USA claims, while coal miners, according to the president of the West Virginia Coal Association, “are the greatest practicing environmentalists in the world.” Vollmann records such inanities alongside observations from figures such as Buddha (“People are ignorant and selfish”), Edmund Spenser (“Worse is the danger hidden than descried”), and Loren Eiseley (“Just as instincts may fail an animal under some shift of environmental conditions, so man’s cultural beliefs may prove inadequate to meet a new situation”). Vollmann longs to prove Buddha, Spenser, and Eiseley wrong, and submits softball questions to every industry executive he encounters; but outside of Japan, almost nobody in a position of authority agrees to comment.

Most of the extensive interviews that dominate Carbon Ideologies are thus conducted with men who work in caves or pits to produce the energy we waste. If “nothing is more frightful than to see ignorance in action” (Goethe), these encounters are a waking nightmare. Oil-refinery workers in Mexico, coal miners in Bangladesh, and fracking commissioners in Colorado are united in their shaky apprehension of the environmental damage they do, not to mention the basic facts of climate change and its ramifications. “Mostly their replies came out calm and bland,” Vollmann reports, though this doesn’t prevent him from recording them at length, nearly verbatim. On occasion his questions do elicit a gem of accidental lyricism, as when an Indian steelworker at a UAE oil company, asked for his views on climate change, replies, “Now a little bit okay, but in future it’s very danger.” It’s hard to improve on that.

Vollmann doesn’t blame the migrant steelworker for his complacency or ignorance, of course. He blames himself—often and profusely. He takes special delight in quantifying, in painstaking detail, the energy he burns in such activities as writing a draft of Carbon Ideologies, walking around the corner from his Tokyo hotel to buy a tray of convenience-store tonkatsu, and making a milkshake for his daughter. These passages are as instructive as they are tedious. They dramatize not only the tenacity of our reliance on fossil fuels, but the impossibility of truly comprehending our own culpability in our planet’s fate. How often do you pause to think about the amount of coal burned every time you take an elevator, charge your phone, or operate your blender? Even extravagant acts of self-denial are powerless in the face of such profligate consumption. Vollmann likens our most ambitious energy-conservation efforts to “a dieter who keeps eating his daily fill of cheese, pastries and ice cream ... despite the laudable fact that he put broccoli on his lunch plate last Thursday.”

The global hunger for pastries grows more ravenous each year. Whatever Good Samaritan savings we can make by improving infrastructure or bicycling to work will be

dwarfed by the billions who will leap onto the grid in the coming decades. About a third of the human population cooks meals over biomass—wood, charcoal, farm scraps, and animal dung. Nearly 1 billion people have no access to electricity. It will not take all of India's adopting "the American way of life" to trigger gargantuan increases in global emissions. India's ascending to the Namibian way of life will be enough.

The demand problem, the growth problem, the complexity problem, the cost-benefit problem, the industry problem, the political problem, the generational-delay problem, the denial problem—Vollmann scrupulously catalogs all the major unsolved problems that contribute to the colossus of climate change. "Whatever 'solution' I could have proposed in 2017," he writes, "would have been found wanting before the oceans rose even one more inch!" (The title of a late chapter, "A Ray of Hope," is to be read sarcastically.) Nor have his six years of traveling the world, tabulating data, and interviewing experts changed his mind about any major aspect of the issue. The reader who begins *Carbon Ideologies* hopeless will finish it hopeless. So will the hopeful reader.

But there exist other kinds of readers—those who do not read for advice or encouragement or comfort. Those who are sick of dishonesty crusading as optimism. Those who seek to understand human nature, and themselves. Because human nature is Vollmann's true subject—as it must be. The story of climate change hangs on human behavior, not geophysics. Vollmann seeks to understand how "we could not only sustain, but accelerate the rise of atmospheric carbon levels, all the while expressing confusion, powerlessness and resentment." Why did we take such insane risks? Could we have behaved any other way? Can we behave any other way? If not, what conclusions must we draw about our lives and our futures? Vollmann admits that even he has shied away from fully comprehending the damage we've done. "I had never loathed myself sufficiently to craft the punishment of full understanding," he writes. "How could I? No one person could." He's right, though books like *Carbon Ideologies* will bring us closer.

The planet's atmosphere will change but human nature won't. Vollmann's meager wish is for future readers to appreciate that they would have made the same mistakes we have. This might seem a humble ambition for a project of this scope, but only if you mistake *Carbon Ideologies* for a work of activism. Vollmann's project is nothing so conventional. His "letter to the future" is a suicide note. He does not seek an intervention—only acceptance. If not forgiveness, then at least acceptance.

This article appears in the October 2018 print edition with the headline "The Brutal Truth About Climate Change."