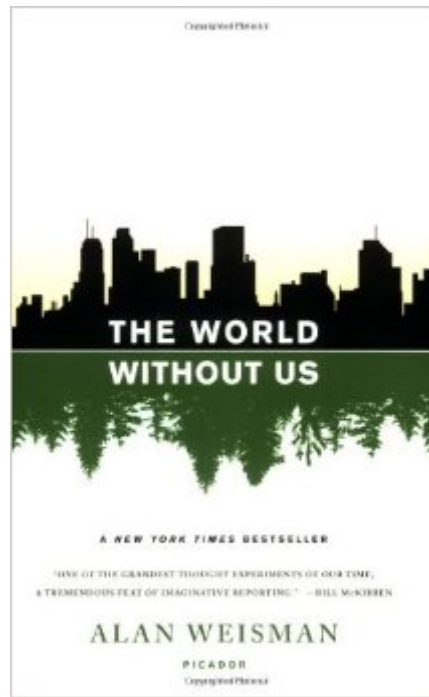


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The World Without Us



Synopsis

Time #1 Nonfiction Book of 2007
Entertainment Weekly #1 Nonfiction Book of 2007
Finalist for the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award
Salon Book Awards 2007 Top 100 Editors' Picks of 2007 (#4)
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If human beings disappeared instantaneously from the Earth, what would happen? How would the planet reclaim its surface? What creatures would emerge from the dark and swarm? How would our treasured structures--our tunnels, our bridges, our homes, our monuments--survive the unmitigated impact of a planet without our intervention? In his revelatory, bestselling account, Alan Weisman draws on every field of science to present an environmental assessment like no other, the most affecting portrait yet of humankind's place on this planet.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

My wife & I have lived on 19 acres in the southeastern USA for the last 13 years. Our policy on most of the land is to let nature do what it will with as little intervention as possible, and one of the most pleasant aspects of this is watching the progression of nature as barren soil becomes "weeds" then small trees then a young forest. In the warm, wet climate of the southeast, this happens very quickly. In the last few years, we have witnessed the return of forest birds, such as warblers, and the departure of pasture and cropland species. So, the premise of "The World Without Us" resonated

with me: suddenly, there are no humans; what happens next? It's difficult to see how this postulated situation could develop; war, catastrophic climate change or an asteroid collision would cause considerable damage to non-human aspects of the world, for example. A particularly virulent disease might do the trick, but how the people disappear is outside the scope of the book; they're just gone. What happens afterward is the subject here. Recent heavy rains in New York City have validated Mr. Weisman's first conclusion: the subways will flood, only without people to keep the pumps running, they stay flooded, undermining the towers of Manhattan. Steel corrodes; glass breaks; bricks and mortar fall apart. In a few decades, Manhattan has become a forest again. A recent trip to Central America convinces me that dogs might not survive without humans; the dogs there barely survive alongside the very poor humans. I am skeptical of some of the details of Mr. Weisman's scenario. Ailanthus trees do very well in a city, but are they sufficiently shade-tolerant to survive in a mature forest?

This is an oddly hopeful book. Hopeful because it offers compelling evidence that life on earth will outlive human tampering with the ecosystem, yet odd because it also demonstrates that the world won't miss us much. In fact, it's pretty clear that, on balance, the world would be better off without us. "Balance" is the key here, something that we as a species know little about. Even though we are well aware that we're destroying our own habitat, and have been for at least 60 years, we can't seem to stop ourselves. But author Alan Weisman isn't a scold and doesn't do a lot of overt finger wagging, which is one of the reasons to buy this book. Rather, he offers absorbing examples of the many ways in which life bounces back after eco-tragedies like Chernobyl and, going back farther in time, various ice ages, volcano eruptions and asteroid pummelings. One of my favorite examples is Weisman's description of the DMZ between the two Koreas, which has been a no-man's land since the late 50s when a stalemate was reached between the two sides. Rare cranes are staging a comeback in this zone, as are various types of flora and fauna that would probably be extinct by now were it not for this narrow strip of land where people don't go. And this resurgence has taken place in spite of rampant pollution and periodic explosions from abandoned land mines. There is even a conservation group that has grown up in South Korea to advocate for the cranes and, by association, preservation of the DMZ. There's one upside to the continuing standoff at the 38th parallel. Lately, I have been interested in emerging viruses and the resurgence of diseases that humans believed we conquered (at least in the US) such as TB and cholera.

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