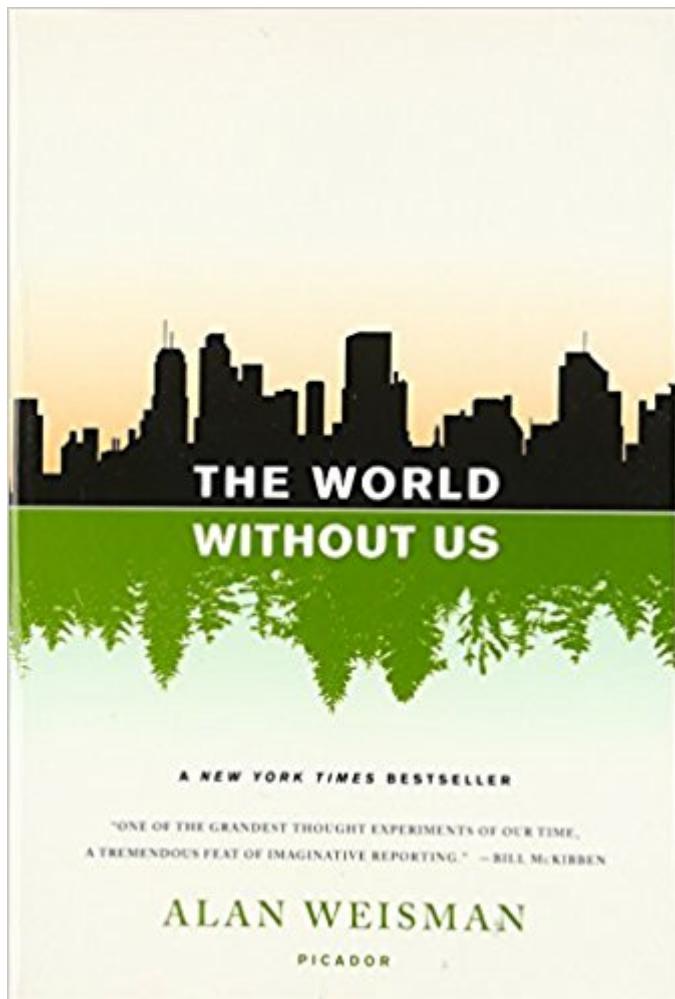


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The World Without Us



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) Barnes and Noble 10 Best of 2007: Politics and Current Affairs Kansas City Star's Top 100 Books of the Year 2007 Mother Jones' Favorite Books of 2007 South Florida Sun-Sentinel Best Books of the Year 2007 Hudson's Best Books of 2007 St. Louis Post-Dispatch Best Books of 2007 St. Paul Pioneer Press Best Books of 2007 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

Because of the scientific terminology and the interlinked data amassed bit by bit, this is not an easy read for narrator or lay listener. But it's a fascinating book, and Grupper handles it well. Grupper's careful narration brings to life Weisman's judicious organization, unambiguous grammatical structure and vivid descriptions of what would become of land, sea, fish, flora and fauna should humans disappear from the face of the earth. Weisman explains the earth's capacity for

self-healing. Unchecked by human intervention, a city like New York would flood within days, its buildings and infrastructure would collapse, and soon the city would revert to its original ecosystem. But the message of the book is our legacy to the universe: Every bit of plastic manufactured over the last 80 years or so still remains somewhere in the environment. Weisman and Grupper convert abstract environmental concepts into concrete ideas. Broadly and meticulously researched, finely interwoven journalism and imaginative projection, the book is an utterly convincing call to action.

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Teasing out the consequences of a simple thought experiment—what would happen if the human species were suddenly extinguished?—Weisman has written a sort of pop-science ghost story, in which the whole earth is the haunted house. Among the highlights: with pumps not working, the New York City subways would fill with water within days, while weeds and then trees would retake the buckled streets and wild predators would ravage the domesticated dogs. Texas's unattended petrochemical complexes might ignite, scattering hydrogen cyanide to the winds; a "mini chemical nuclear winter." After thousands of years, the Chunnel, rubber tires, and more than a billion tons of plastic might remain, but eventually a polymer-eating microbe could evolve, and, with the spectacular return of fish and bird populations, the earth might revert to Eden.

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The reason you came for this book is probably to find out what will happen to your home or New York City after people disappear. You want to learn if it will really be like "I Am Legend" or other Post-Apocalyptic stories where people are gone. At least, that's why I came. And Weisman does explain just that. But he does so in the first few chapters. The remaining 15 or so go into details about Earth without man you never would have expected. He examines places like Cyprus and the Korean DMZ, which people haven't touched in ages. He takes you to places you never would have expected. Each chapter is a different story, a different location, a different analysis. Each could be its own article. This book ends up teaching a lot about human history as well. I certainly didn't expect that. This book is an interesting read, a learning adventure across the globe. As cheesy as it sounds, it's a great ride.

Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* is supposed to explore what would or could happen to our

world if humans suddenly ceased to exist. Weisman does do this, but he must of necessity discuss how we have altered/destroyed much of our world, in order to illustrate what would happen if we were to disappear. So, Weisman takes us on a tour from the mass extinction of the passenger pigeon in North American, to the Moa bird in New Zealand. We look at climate change, nuclear waste, and plastic islands in the oceans. It is a depressing catalog. The only bright spot is that, to quote Jurassic Park, nature finds a way. Animals, plants and birds no longer found in Korea thrive in the depopulated DMZ. In the quarantine zone around Chernobyl, wolves have returned, along with moose, deer, badger, and horses. The take away, the world will do fine without us. In fact, it might just thrive.

No matter who you are or where you have lived, you have had an impact on the world, whether it is more global or local, immediate or delayed. When you compile the impact of the approximately 7 billion people alive today as well as the effect of all those that have lived before us, it amounts to many different consequences by our species, and everyday our impact increases. But what if we were all of a sudden gone? What if *Homo sapiens* no longer tread on the soil that we have so disturbed? What impact would we leave behind? Although Alan Weisman acknowledges that it is unlikely that our species will quickly perish, he still addresses this question in *The World Without Us* in order to more closely examine our environmental impact. Weisman examines human impact ranging from megafauna extinctions to genetically modified plants and from the altered composition of the atmosphere to what will happen to cities and nuclear plants when we leave. Unlike many authors that address human environmental impact, Weisman takes a surprisingly positive approach. Perhaps our impact may not be as lasting as many view it to be. In many of these chapters he does note that some things will last long after we have gone. Although, this does not appear to be his main focus. The book is well written, captivating, and definitely gives hope that *Homo sapiens* have not forever destroyed many aspects of the world. The atmosphere can return to normal despite the holes we have contributed to in the ozone layer. Forests can thrive even after we come through and displaced many species and harvest many trees. Despite these positive points, Weisman does some things that will last longer, but I find that Weisman fails to emphasize the fact that our impact will forever alter the world. The species that have gone extinct can never come back. Yes, extinction is a natural part of growth for the world, but many species have gone extinct primarily because of humans. At the same time I think of the fact that we must have an impact. There is no way for a species to have no impact. Each species on the planet affects many others both directly and indirectly. One example of when Weisman fails to bring concern is when he talks of the impact our

production of plastics is having. We are not seeing plastics biodegrade. There is hope that something will develop the ability to degrade the plastics, but in the meantime it will continue to kill all sorts of wildlife as they ingest it. The rubber we use for tires also has yet to find something that can degrade it. Both rubber and plastic will likely be around long after *Homo sapiens* are gone and continue to affect the world we left behind. Yet, after reading these segments by Weisman, I did not feel incredibly compelled to minimize my use of plastic or rubber. Weisman does not seem to be rallying people against their negative environmental impact. Since humans will likely be around a long time, we need to work on lessening the impact that we have, and I found that Weisman did not emphasize this as I believe he should. Comparing Weisman to George Perkins Marsh, we find some things that at least appear to contradict each other. Marsh examines the balance that is a key part of nature. As humans expend resources, they don't come back as they were. Nature is not able to bring itself back to where it was. Weisman seems to find that nature can reflect what it was in the past, and he appears to find this acceptable. Perhaps this is all we can ever expect. It may be best that nature is not exactly as it was. It is ever changing and adjusting together with all its interconnected parts. Whatever the result, Weisman finds hope where many fail to. Weisman also alludes to human's desire to be remembered. We've sent off signals to try and contact other intelligent life, and we do our best to preserve our bodies that inevitably decay anyways. If you think about it, we all have a desire to be remembered by others, to do something which will have impact that will outlast our bodies. However, we want to make sure that what we leave does not doom the earth that housed us for so long.

I'm judging Weisman's work a little more harshly than most here because I feel it's too slim and simple on presenting its ideas. Everything from this book can be found in the readings for a single introductory college course on environmental ethics or resource management--all it adds is the context suggested by the book's gimmicky title. That's not to say simple can't be excellent, but with how *World...* presents its info, it feels like Weisman did the bare minimum amount of research--as if his only source was a single introductory class or textbook filtered through a writer's whimsy. E.g., he shies away from referencing original research, and instead frequently mentions news articles inaccurately referencing original research as his sources. E.g., he references a number of outdated terms or ideas, such as continental drift or, positively, "The cure for pollution is dilution." (Ouch....) *World...* is an alright book, but there are certainly better-written alternatives out there that cover all the same material and more. And, as a science journalist with as big an audience as he has, Weisman really shouldn't be skimping out on his homework. That said, it's really not too bad if

you're in need of an introduction to these environmental topics.

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