

Book review,

Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out? By Bill McKibben, 2019, Henry Holt

Bill McKibben has been on the forefront of the climate change crisis ever since the publishing of his book, The End of Nature in 1989. He was also instrumental in establishing a climate activist campaign around his 350.org movement, one of the largest social movements in human history. As his book titles suggest, McKibben can come across as alarmist and pessimistic. In Falter he even admits as much, as he spreads the alarm about, not only global warming, but also threats to our humanity such as artificial intelligence and robotics, as well as constant problems such as unequal distribution of wealth and power. So, be warned, McKibben will take you to a dark place, but he does, as always, end with some solutions and possibilities to get us out of the mess he describes in vivid detail. As he states in the introduction, “The writer doesn’t owe the reader hope – the only obligation is honesty – but I want those who pick up this volume to know that its author lives in a state of engagement, not despair.”

McKibben’s use of the metaphor, human game, is appropriate to his thesis. It means that we are all engaged in the game together, that there are rules that are followed or not, but there is no certain end in sight, or certain goal to achieve. Humans have to decide how they want to play the game, but can’t opt out. McKibben says “the game goes well when it creates more dignity for its players, and badly when that dignity diminishes.” I would add that the game also involves the board we are playing on, the earth, and how we give it dignity or not.

McKibben introduces the reader to the amazing influence of Ayn Rand, author of Atlas Shrugged. This influence spread to politicians, religious leaders and famous people. Rand’s influence led to suspicions about liberal politicians, the main stream news media, and anything against the military/industrial complex that was exploiting workers and the environment. Obviously McKibben goes well beyond natural causes of climate change in this book.

The epilogue to the book ends in as much of an optimistic note as McKibben can muster. He talks about space exploration as a possible solution to devastating our planet. Then he describes what is happening to sea turtles, how we are destroying their habitat, and devouring the turtles as well. But some are also building up beach fronts so the turtles can survive, and also preserving the beauty of shorelines where turtles do their thing. One conclusion for McKibben, “And – this is for me the second lesson – the most curious of all those lives are the human ones, because we can destroy, but also we can decide not to destroy. The turtle does what she does, and magnificently.... We’re the only creature who can decide not to do something we’re capable of doing. That’s our superpower, if we exercise it rarely.” I will contemplate McKibben’s warnings and his solutions as I watch the mother snapping turtle emerge from the lake this spring and look for a sandy place to bury her eggs, in the hope that the next generation will continue to survive on this planet.

John Hanson