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A Possible World

***The Optimistic Environmentalist:
Progressing Towards a Greener Future* by
DAVID R. BOYD**

ECW Press, 2015 \$19.95

Reviewed by **JANET GRAFTON**

In an article in *The New York Times* on the greening of the Humanities, Jay Parini writes that much of

the work of intellectuals in our time is the work of grieving, but it's not just lamentations....We've come to a moment when we can think about loss, can absorb the extent of the damage done and perhaps engage in real action. (n.pg.)

At a time when stories of environmental crisis and degradation dominate media, David Boyd's timely monograph, *The Optimistic Environmentalist*, offers not just balm against harsh realities, but proof that hope for the future is valid. His purpose is to explore the unsung environmental success stories from the past 50 years, stories that have not been widely celebrated or shared, such as the Montreal Protocol, which was created in an effort to avoid further ozone depletion. Countries signed and acted on this agreement, and it is "now widely hailed as the most successful international environmental treaty ever negotiated" (98). As a result of unified political action, "thinning of the ozone layer stopped by 1998, and full recovery is expected in the mid-21st century" (98). Though most experts predicted this agreement would fail, and others believed it would lead to massive economic disruptions, the opposite, in fact, occurred.

Countries united their political will, and solutions and alternatives were created.

But these stories don't often make the headlines; they are tucked away on the back pages. In documenting success stories such as the Montreal Protocol, as well as the reports of the population comebacks of species such as peregrine falcons and humpback whales, Boyd counters the language of crisis that permeates our lives, and illustrates how being optimistic is an active, political decision. And he outlines why this perspective matters: he believes that "negativity inflicts real harm" (xvii), and that "in the face of overwhelming environmental threats, people are overcome by feelings of helplessness and are less likely to take any kind of remedial action" (xix). He provides a dynamic definition of what it means to be an optimist, clarifying that it's "more than just the kind of sunny disposition that makes a person pleasant company. Optimism is a powerful causal factor in shaping outcomes and futures" (xviii).

This sense of action is at the core of Boyd's book: the adaptability of species, political will, advocacy, resistance, innovation and problem solving are all key to a brighter future. His attitude is energizing at a time where many people feel disabled by depression, fear, and outrage at the observable changes human activity has inflicted on ecosystems. The common, and understandable, response is to feel numb and paralyzed. Boyd offers optimism as a means of fighting fear and harnessing anger into something more productive.

His joyful reaction to contact with whales, and his bafflement over those in positions of power who work to minimize our connection to the natural world—both how we depend on it and alter it—make

him a sympathetic and empowering environmental voice. And his writing is backed by the power of personal integrity; as an environmental lawyer who advocates “all people, including future generations, have the right to live in a healthy environment” (192), he engages with the advice he offers to others, and through his personal anecdotes, particularly around the topic of parenthood, he reveals his deep investment in working to make the future just for all species.

Boyd’s slim, accessible work is an engaging read, and while it is not comprehensive or exhaustive, the broad range of examples he cites, together with his awareness of the limitations of optimism and of the progress of the past decades, makes it a vital contribution to environmental literature in that it offers both critique and a call to action. Never pedantic, never cynical, and with no trace of complacency, Boyd navigates the fraught intersections of environmental, economic, human health interests with a clear directive: we need to “continue making progress in fulfilling human needs while reducing levels of ecological harm” (105); a green future depends on our ability to consider the symbiotic connections modeled by ecosystems.

Occasionally, there is a forced rosiness to some of his examples, such as the current state of organic farming—the product of selective reporting—but he also admits that solutions to global environmental problems are complex and that there are no standard fixes for the world’s problems. And he includes an in-depth selected bibliography for readers who want to know more.

At its best, his work promotes forward movement, and he offers concrete statistics and examples for action, such as

how residents in Amsterdam transformed their city’s culture by rejecting plans for a super-highway in the 1970s and prioritizing bicycle commuting as a means of achieving a safer, cleaner, and more affordable way of living (152). Just as EU cities provide the model for many green strategies, Boyd’s work is an encouraging collection of what is possible, a guidebook of effective solutions. Within minutes of finishing Boyd’s book, I happened across an article in *The Globe and Mail* by Justine Hunter on how “a little-celebrated sanctuary is reviving wildlife in the heart of Victoria.” It confirmed that these too-rare stories of optimism and renewal need to be shared and emulated, so that the environmental successes recounted in Boyd’s collection can grow in number. These examples of what the future could be provide a necessary counter narrative to the post-apocalyptic stories that dominate mainstream media, however compelling those stories are, and however possible those worlds seem to be.

Works Cited

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