



Book Review

Jonathan Safron Foer, *We Are The Weather: Saving The Planet Begins At Breakfast*. London: Random House, 2019; ISBN: 978-0-241-40595-6.

Reviewed by

George Jacobs

Centre for a Responsible Future, Singapore

E-mail: george.jacobs@gmail.com

Jonathan Safron Foer is best known for his novels, the first two of which – *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* – were made into Hollywood movies. His first non-fiction book, *Eating Animals*, was a thoroughly researched account of the horrors of how animal-based foods are produced. The book was made into a 2019 film by the same name, although the film, unlike the book, follows more of a story format.

As someone who writes frequently but only at a mediocre level, I really enjoy reading anything by Jonathan. For example, *Eating Animals* begins with the story of his Jewish grandmother refusing to eat pork even after spending months on the run from the Nazis towards the end of World War II. This story is a gem, and *We Are The Weather*, his new non-fiction book, glitters with many similar writing gems.

Most readers will, however, be more interested in the book's contents. So, let us move on to that. The book has five sections. The first section, "Unbelievable", explains why people have such difficulty taking action against the climate crisis. The section contains insightful stories, buttressed by scientific research, about successful and unsuccessful attempts to motivate people to change their behavior. In general, the message seems to be that getting people to take action to address the climate crisis is very difficult because the crisis is too abstract with so many moving parts. Thus, despite the overwhelming scientific consensus that the crisis is real and largely caused by human actions, and despite the fact that this news gets regularly blasted at us by the media, despite all this awareness, greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise.

Safron Foer's grandmother appears in the current book too, in the first section. In *Eating Animals*, she served as an example of someone who had the courage to stand by their convictions regarding food; in this book she embodies the rare person with the foresight to take action in the face of a coming cataclysm. In 1941¹, the Nazi army were only a few days away from the Polish village where the then 20-year-old woman lived.

¹ Reviewer's estimate

Everyone in her family knew the Nazis were approaching and knew Hitler's genocidal plans for the Jews but only she left the village, because she "felt she had to do something." Jonathan, who is now in his 40s, recounts himself daydreaming about traveling back in time to that Polish village and grabbing the Jews who did not leaving and screaming at them, "You have to do something." In the same way, he wants to scream at people today, including himself, that they have to do something about the climate crisis.

We Are The Weather's second section, "How To Prevent the Greatest Dying", presents a compilation of some of the salient facts about the causes and effects of the climate crisis including many facts about the role of animal agriculture (using animals for food, including animals' eggs and milk). Here are some of those facts, with the last one being perhaps the main takeaway of the book.

- Humans represent 0.01 percent of life on Earth.
- Since the advent of agriculture, approximately twelve thousand years ago, humans have destroyed 80 percent of all wild animals and half of all plants.
- There are approximately 30 farmed animals for every human on the planet.
- The planet can handle only so much warming before positive feedback loops create "runaway climate change."
- Trees are 50 percent carbon. Like coal, they release their stores of CO₂ when burned.
- Trees contain more CO₂ reserves than do all exploitable fossil-fuel reserves.
- The four highest-impact things that individuals can do to tackle climate change are: (1) eat a plant-based diet, (2) avoid air travel, (3) live car-free, and (4) have fewer children.
- Everyone will eat a meal relatively soon and can immediately participate in the reversal of climate change.

Section 3, "Only Home", focuses on the Earth as home to humans and our fellow earthlings. As the famed 20th century astronomer, Carl Sagan, noted, "There is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us". Possibilities for dealing with the climate crisis can be divided into two categories. First, we humans and our fellow earthlings can move elsewhere in the universe. Actually, this may not be as far-fetched as it would seem with Elon Musk's plan to move huge number of people to Mars; as Jonathan points out, it was only 66 years between the first airplane flight by the Wright Brothers and the moon landing. Now, with quantum computers and other technological advances, perhaps seemingly impossible progress can take place even faster.

However, Safron Foer's preference lies with the second option, repairing our relationship with our home, because moving elsewhere in the universe would reveal us to be "people who think of home as dispensable" and who thus "will be able to think of anything as dispensable, and will become a dispensable people." Jonathan highlights the first photo of the Earth from outer space, taken in 1972, the "Blue Marble" photo

(<https://www.nasa.gov/content/blue-marble-image-of-the-earth-from-apollo-17>) one of the most popular photos not just *of* Earth, but also *on* Earth. He believes this photo has the power to transform our relationship with the Earth. “Some credit the planet’s apparent fragility in the images—alone, unsupported, and suspended in black—for inspiring a collect desire to protect it.”

Humans and the Earth can, Safran Foer believes, be like a married couple one of whom (in this case us) has betrayed the other, but rather than divorcing, i.e., leaving the Earth, we can create a second, better relationship together. Inspiration for creating this more harmonious relationship can be drawn from the 1987 Montreal Protocols in which the countries of the world came together to protect the ozone layer by phasing out the production of chemicals that were damaging it. Unfortunately, powerful forces have arrayed themselves against similar action in the case of global heating: “senior employees at the company that would later become Exxon, like those at most other major oil-and-gas corporations, knew about the dangers of climate change as early as the 1950s. But the automobile industry knew, too, ... as did the major trade groups representing the electrical grid. ... The United States government knew ... Everybody knew.”

We Are The Weather, subtitled “Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast” highlights that a key part of undoing the climate crisis involves changing our food: “We don’t need to reinvent food but to un-invent it. The future of farming and eating needs to resemble the past.” While Safran Foer does not advocate for 100% plant-based diets, he advocates in favour of following a VB6 (Vegan Before 6pm) diet. Doing VB6 is seen as a small sacrifice: “If we do not demonstrate solidarity through small collective sacrifices, ... we will lose the childhood home of every human who has ever lived.” Sadly, even if we succeed in reining in global heating, terrible destruction and loss of life will nonetheless take place: “We cannot save the coral reefs. We cannot save the Amazon. It’s unlikely that we’ll be able to save coastal cities. The scale of inevitable loss is almost enough to make any further struggle feel futile. But only almost. Millions of people—perhaps tens or hundreds of millions—will die because of climate change, and the number matters. Hundreds of millions of people, perhaps billions, will become climate refugees.” Plus, Jonathan recognizes that it will be the poor, those who contribute least to the climate crisis, who will suffer the most. “Most of the populations that are already dying from climate change, and the populations that climate change will kill in the future, reside in places with minimal carbon footprints.”

Section 4, “Dispute with the Soul”, takes the form of a conversation between Jonathan and an unidentified voice. Part of what the voice does is to accuse the author of hypocrisy, as Safran Foer admits that even after writing “Eating Animals,” he has been more of a lacto-ovo vegetarian than a vegan vegetarian, and that he still craves meat and occasionally gives into those cravings. Perhaps this is why he supports VB6. Plus, VB6 does address one objection to being 100% plant-based: the need, for whatever reason, to eat the occasional special meal containing animal-based foods, special because the food has traditional significance or special due to the ingredients and the skill and time needed to produce them. These meals are or can be eaten in the evening.

The voice also raises other objections to cutting back on animal agriculture. One objection is that food really does not contribute much to the climate crisis. Efforts at addressing the crisis “have given us the impression that our planet is a factory, and that the animals most relevant to climate change are wild and far away [such as polar bears]. Not only is that impression wrong—it is disastrously counterproductive. We will never address climate change, never save our home, until we acknowledge that our planet is an animal farm. That correction is my starting point.”

Another objection to reducing animal agriculture is that animal agriculture feeds the world. Jonathan debunks this: “When we think about food waste, we need to stop imagining half-eaten meals and instead focus on the waste involved in bringing food to an animal to produce just one calorie of meat. ... Animal agriculture [transports many hundreds of millions of tons] of grain and corn—enough to feed every hungry person on the planet—to animals for affluent people to eat. We might call that crime ‘genocide.’ So, no, factory farming does not ‘feed the world.’ Factory farming starves the world as it destroys it.”

Perhaps the biggest mistake exposed in this section is to “dramatically overstate the role of science deniers, because it allows science acceptors to feel righteous without challenging us to act on the knowledge we accept. ... I know too many smart and caring people ... good people who give their time, money, and energy to improve the world—who would never change how they eat, no matter how persuaded they were to do so.” An example of this is provided by the lack of progress in the 14 years that lapsed since 2006 when the United Nations published *Livestock’s Long Shadow* in which they stated that animal agriculture accounts for more greenhouse gases than all forms of transport combined.

The book’s final section, “More Life”, looks to the future, including how Jonathan and other adults try to prepare their own children for the unfolding climate crisis. Firstly, he cautions that “We are killing ourselves because choosing death is more convenient than choosing life. Because the people committing suicide are not the first to die from it. Because we believe that someday, somewhere, some genius is bound to invent a miracle technology that will change our world so that we don’t have to change our lives. Because short-term pleasure is more seductive than long-term survival. Because no one wants to exercise their capacity for intentional behavior until someone else does. Until the neighborhood does. Until the energy and car companies do. Until the federal government [what the US government is often called] does. Until China, Australia, India, Brazil, the U.K. ---until the whole world does.”

Jonathan, nonetheless, remains hopeful. He believes that individual efforts can be impactful, perhaps more impactful than government and industry, at least initially: “the most contagious standards are the ones we model ... Yes, there are constraints on our actions, conventions and structural injustices that set the parameters of possibility. ... But we are free to choose from possible options. And one of our options is to make environmentally conscientious choices. It doesn’t require breaking the laws of physics---or even electing a green president—to select something plant-based from a menu or at the

grocery store.” Will Tuttle, author of *The World Peace Diet*, explained something similar, that eating plant-based represents an exercise of control over his own life, an act of rejecting norms and advertising to make his own decisions.

Safron Foer quotes from Scranton, who explains in an opinion piece² what he will say to his daughter with regard to the climate crisis: “I can’t protect my daughter from the future and I can’t even promise her a better life. All I can do is teach her: teach her how to care, how to be kind and how to live within the limits of nature’s grace. I can teach her to be tough but resilient, adaptable and prudent, because she’s going to have to struggle for what she needs. But I also need to teach her to fight for what’s right, because none of us is in this alone. I need to teach her that all things die, even her and me and her mother and the world we know, but that coming to terms with this difficult truth is the beginning of wisdom.” Optimistically, Jonathan adds, “This is not the beginning of wisdom. This is the end of resignation.”

Let us hope that *We Are The Weather* inspires us to not be resigned to the enormity of the coming climate crisis deluge and instead to seek our own solutions while accepting that other solutions may work best for other people. Personally, I am not at all hopeful about slowing the deluge, partly because the issue is so entangled with the Culture Wars, but I have been enjoying the process of collaborating with others to try to slow the deluge, and I plan to continue collaborating. By writing *Eating Animals* and *We Are The Weather*, Jonathan Safron Foer has provided us with valuable information, important points to ponder, and elegant prose as we fight for what is right.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/opinion/climate-change-parenting.html>