

Climate books with clout

David Reay examines the evolution of books about global warming and highlights those that have had most influence on public perceptions.



In the past two decades, a plethora of global-warming books has catered for increasingly sophisticated and specialist demand. Science, policy and public opinion evolve daily, so any new book on climate change risks being outdated before it hits the shelves. Nevertheless, some accounts have been highly influential.

The first popular climate-change books were generalists. Released into a world with few competitors, Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (Random House, 1989) and John Houghton's excellent *Global Warming: The Complete Briefing* (Lion Publishing, 1994) flourished as an increasing number of readers

looked for a digestible take on the dense tomes of the newly formed Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), of which Houghton was co-chairman. These books used the blunt declaration that anthropogenic global warming is real to pull in a lay audience whose awareness of climate change was only just beginning to build.

Then, against the backdrop of the Kyoto Protocol negotiations in the late 1990s, and with the first nudges of selection pressure from readers, climate-change books began to speculate. Expanding niche audiences demanded texts that were tailored to their own demographics, ethics and politics. As the new millennium dawned, there was the literary equivalent of a Cambrian explosion.

Vivid palaeoclimate narratives such as *The Two-Mile Time Machine* by Richard Alley (Princeton University Press, 2000) and impact travelogues like Mark Lynas's superb *High Tide* (Flamingo, 2004) shouldered their way into the territory of popular science. The genus of 'individual action' rapidly expanded, its variants ranging from Mayer Hillman's puritanical *How We Can Save the Planet* (Penguin, 2004) to the gentle hectoring of titles including Leo Hickman's *A Good Life* (Eden Project Books, 2005) and my own *Climate Change Begins at Home* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Meanwhile, manifestos illuminated by policy proliferated, such as *Contraction and Convergence* by Aubrey Meyer (Green Books, 2000) and

George Monbiot's incisive polemic *Heat* (Allen Lane, 2006). Along with them came contrarian lambasts including *Hot Talk, Cold Science* by Fred Singer (Independent Institute, 2001) and wide-mouthed critiques such as Bjørn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). Each found its own oasis of readers. With new editions, columns and serializations, they could draw in new readers or occupy another's territory. None could yet lay claim to a true mass audience. Then, in 2006, along came *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Al Gore's book (Bloomsbury), written to accompany his blockbuster film, quickly topped *The New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list. Nothing has matched it in terms of global popularity, although big hitters such as *The Economics of Climate Change* by Nicholas



Stern (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and updated instalments of the *IPCC Assessment Report* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) have arguably had a greater impact on global policy.

The evolution of climate books shows no sign of stopping. Recent years have seen the success of 'apocalypse-soon' titles, such as James Lovelock's *The Revenge of Gaia* (Allen Lane, 2006) and Fred Pearce's *The Last Generation* (Eden Project Books, 2006). Today, no big policy-maker's CV is complete without at least one climate-change book — Gabrielle Walker and David King's cracklingly good *The Hot Topic* (Bloomsbury, 2008) being my pick of the bunch.

Gore has penned a version of *An Inconvenient Truth* for the young adult market, and the current best-seller lists of global-warming titles include those aimed at audiences from church-goers and corporations to doctors and climbers. There are now far more books to read on

cutting emissions than there is time to act. On the projected impacts of warming, Lynas's *Six Degrees* (Fourth Estate, 2007) is hard to beat. But as for books on adaptation to a warmer planet, the literary landscape remains sparse. And with increasing pressure to reduce emissions and improve impact projections, more topics are still to come under the literary spotlight.

When I canvassed my carbon-management masters students on their favourite climate books, responses sampled most of the spreading family tree. Plaudits came in for Nigel Lawson's sceptical *An Appeal to Reason* (Overlook Press, 2008) alongside those for Stern's *A Blueprint For A Safer Planet* (Bodley Head, 2009); James Garvey's *Ethics of Climate Change* (Continuum, 2008); and Chris Goodall's *Ten Technologies to Save the Planet* (Green Profile, 2008). The common thread is that they are all recently published, well-written books that increase understanding and provoke debate — whether or not the thesis tallied with the reader's.

If books have changed public attitudes to climate change in the past two decades — and I believe that they have — then it is those that have challenged our preconceptions and taught us something new that deserve the credit. One of the triumphs of Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist* was the intense debate that each engendered. The very process of claim slugging it out with counterclaim on Internet message boards and newspaper correspondence pages increased awareness and understanding of the issues being discussed.

In the future, the public might opt for dynamic electronic-book titles that can hit screens with up-to-date information and respond to readers' queries. The carbon footprint of 'dead-tree' editions counts against them too, with the extra burden of emissions from production and distribution giving their e-competitors another boost.

In this market, there is little room for generalists without a big name. Newcomers must rely more on the publicity fillip of controversy, or on translating large online followings into book buyers — as with David McKay's surprise hit *Sustainable Energy* (UIT, 2008) and Greg Craven's *What's the Worst that Could Happen?* (Perigee, 2009), both YouTube-powered examples.

Another *Inconvenient Truth* may yet spring from the tangle of climate book publishing. Still, there is only one author who has sufficient fame, influence and writing talent to do it on a world-changing scale. His name is Barack Obama. ■ **David Reay** is a senior lecturer in the School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh, UK, and author of *Your Planet Needs You!*. e-mail: david.reay@ed.ac.uk

ALLEN LANE, 2006

BLOOMSBURY GROUP, 2006