

McKibben questions if the human game has begun to play itself out in his latest book

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

Thirty years ago, when computers were new, cell phones nonexistent, and Facebook unimaginable, Bill McKibben published "The End of Nature," which he claims to have been the first book that explained the dangers of global warming to a wide audience. His present book discusses the rapid progression of the climate crisis during those three decades; it argues that global warming has now reached a degree that threatens not just nature, but "everything that comprises the experience of our species."

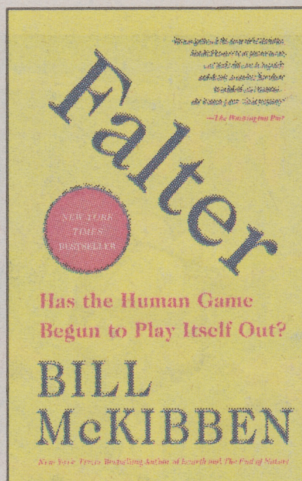
By calling that experience "the human game," McKibben avoids an alarmist subtitle (say, "is human civilization on the verge of extinction?"), but his book is, as he puts it,

"bleak": It describes not just what is happening to life on our planet but how "uniquely ill prepared" we are for it.

McKibben opens not with a deluge of charts and statistics, but with a simple example of the roof over our heads.

Usually, it's asphalt shingles, which are cheap, ubiquitous, practically unnoticed—and reliant on desert and undersea oil drilling, limestone mining, fiberglass construction, and a huge network of pipelines, refineries, and transportation to and from building supply stores. Every asphalt roof, in other words, is intertwined with the economy of fossil fuel that is warming the planet. Having brought our attention to the intricacy of the relationship between our basic comfort and fossil fuels,

McKibben goes on to describe the current state of climate change. While his descriptions will be familiar to those who follow the news, the aggregate portrayal of increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide, rising oceans, threatened food production, ocean warming and acidification is alarming, especially when he puts current climate trends in the context of geological history. Thinking of slow, incremental rise of oceans? Think again. Eight thousand years ago, similar massive ice melt greatly lightened the pressure on land; one result was an earthquake that broke off a section of Norway's continental shelf, begetting a tsunami that drowned "the Wales-sized landmass that once connected Britain to the Netherlands,



Denmark, and Germany." So why are we letting this happen? Because, he argues, of the massive "leverage" of a small group of very wealthy, powerful people motivated by self-interest. The best-

known of McKibben's examples is that of Exxon CEOs, who, having discovered the atmospheric dangers of fossil fuel, not only kept the knowledge secret but financed an enormous disinformation campaign. Philosophically influenced by Ayn Rand, other billionaires actively discourage

of "Falter" are deeply disturbing, the third offers alternatives to despair. Technologically, he argues that our greatest hope is solar energy, essentially replacing all those asphalt roofs with solar panels and supporting other means to harness the sun. Doing this will involve mass movements that take power out of the hands of the wealthy few people with "leverage" and work together for the common good. It's comforting to know that McKibben's environmental organization, 350.org, has made progress against the men with leverage. But his argument makes it clear that what we need is to harness not just the sun, but our excessive needs and our human energy. It's as simple, and as scary, as that.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels, "Return in Kind" and "Liar from Vermont," are both set on Boyd Hill Road.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

the US government from limiting investment in alternative energy. As for the hope that technology might save us, McKibben discusses artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and space colonization, only to raise doubts about their benefits and deep concern for their un-human side effects. In the process, he mentions that the most powerful technological moguls are obsessed with techniques that promise to make them immortal.

While the first three parts