

Tracing Our Legacy on a Changing Planet

Article by David Farrier, Raquel Nogueira

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How will our civilisation be remembered? David Farrier asked himself this question to reflect on how history will view us and ended up finding a new way of seeing the world. The professor of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh explores how humans are changing ecosystems and how this transformation will be perceived in the literature of tomorrow. In his book, *Footprints: In Search of Future Fossils* (4th Estate, 2020), he is hopeful about our ability to change the future.

Raquel Nogueira: *Footprints* opens with a reflection on the traces of our ancestors that can be found in literature - but what will our own time on earth look like to future generations?

David Farrier: How will we be remembered? And what story will be told by the plastic, carbon in the atmosphere, the combination of concrete, glass and steel that make up our cities, and nuclear waste we leave behind? In many ways, it will be a tale of destruction that shows how we have prioritised ourselves over all other ecosystems. It will describe what we value and what we do not. But it is a story we are telling right now: we are the authors and there is still time to decide how we want it to turn out. While writing the book, I began to realise that the story of our time on earth could be one about caring, about learning how to be better ancestors. In the future, they will see the damage we have caused, but also the turning point, how we have made up for lost time and changed the course of things to put a stop to the destruction.

No flying cars, no cities governed by machines. The twenty-first century is not quite what science fiction had us imagine. But who came closest?

While researching how cities become fossils - a chapter of my book is dedicated to this - I visited Shanghai, one of the largest metropolises in the world threatened by rising sea levels. It is practically guaranteed that this Chinese city will become our legacy in fossil form for future inhabitants of the planet. To help me imagine what this future fossil might look like, I read two authors from the past with completely different outlooks on what a city would look like today. One was J. G. Ballard, a British science fiction writer who was born and raised in Shanghai in the 1930s. The other was Italo Calvino, the great Italian writer, and in particular his *Invisible Cities*. Ballard gets across a sense of ruin, of a society that is out of control, obsessed, and he reflects on where this lack of control might lead us. With Calvino, on the other hand, you have this incredible imagining of what cities are like and what they could be. His vision offsets the emphasis on destruction we find in Ballard. Calvino offers hope for the future because he creates cities full of imagination and possibility.

Your book takes us through the various footprints we leave behind on the planet. Do we need literature to open our eyes to the consequences of climate change?

We all make sense of things in terms that we know, and it's natural for me to think of major challenges in terms of stories, narratives. There is so much information out there about climate change: we know what it is, people understand the correlation between what we as humans are doing and the effect it has on the planet. We can never have too much information, but what we need now are stories, we need literature, poetry, in order to truly understand what climate change means. We have traditionally looked to the arts to help us understand the world, because they are able to tell us who we are and what it means to be human. We need this more than ever because we are in a unique situation: the species that is transforming the planet is also the only one that can make it more human. To understand the situation, we first need to understand ourselves.

*We need literature to truly understand what
climate change means*

In the book you talk about the Pliocene as “paleo-laboratory to better understand the difficult and dangerous world we will live in if the planet continues to heat up”.

This was a geological period several million years ago and the most recent on the planet to have the same levels of carbon concentration in the atmosphere as today. It was a very different place, but even so, if you take a look at the world map of the time, the coastlines, for example, were similar to those of today, but the global temperature and sea levels were much higher. Scientists say that we can look to the Pliocene as a warning of the kind of planet we will end up having if we continue to do nothing. A couple of centuries from now, if we don't mitigate the effects of climate change, things could be this way again, and in the grand scheme of things, that's just around the corner.

T. S. Eliot wrote that “the sea has many gods and many voices”, but climate change seems to be changing the symphony of the seas.

In the chapter of *Footprints* in which I refer to T. S. Eliot, I look at which creatures are better adapted to life on a human planet, where we have oceans filled with islands of plastic, but also a higher concentration of carbon, which makes the water warmer and more acidified. Jellyfish have adapted very well to survive in this type of ecosystem in which most species would perish. But, if we continue down this road, we could create a situation whereby oceans are only suitable habitats for jellyfish and certain kinds of bacteria, and are emptied of the majority of current lifeforms. They would be drained of all colour. And what is most alarming is the fact that jellyfish are already interacting with the plastic floating in the sea, as are other animals. Turtles, for example, are eating plastic bags because, when they float, they look just like jellyfish.

We are becoming increasingly aware of our impact on Earth.

Not just climate change itself, but also the science – the reasoning and explanations – behind the climate emergency. We no longer simply believe in it or blindly accept it: more

and more people understand it, have an awareness of its causes and consequences in a scientific sense. We have started to grasp what we need to do to change the course of history, and the global reach of the student climate strikes is a case in point. The pandemic has also shown us that it is possible to effect radical change both as individuals and together, as a society, but also as economies, in order to address a collective challenge. This is what gives me hope. We have learned a very valuable lesson, despite the pandemic being a horrifying tragedy on so many levels: we are capable of fast radical change.

Can we change our ways in time?

We must – and we will – but the question is when. The most important thing to remember is that it is never too late: we can't reach the point of giving up and deciding there is nothing left worth fighting for. It is always worth taking action, though it is important that we do so as soon as possible.

Earth's long lifespan shapes our lives, but why is it so hard for us to imagine that the present, past and future are connected?

We live in the present, in *carpe diem*, in the next product we're going to purchase, the next iPhone model. We live by electoral cycles, or from weekend to weekend. We are programmed to think in the short term. And this stops us from seeing the planet we inhabit as a gift: scientists have told us how improbable it is for a planet like earth to have appeared, let alone to have the perfect conditions to harbour life. And, despite everything, here we are: we are part of a practically impossible possibility. The problem is that from a very young age we are taught to see the world as a resource from which to take whatever we wish to consume. A planet that allows life to continue thriving will be our gift to future generations.

The future fossils you speak of in your book are already beginning to take shape. How can we recognise them?

One day I was walking along a beach in Scotland with my students and we found a rock with a plastic fishing rope in it that had begun to sediment. They merged into a single object. This is what they call plastiglomerate, a new type of rock that is produced when plastic melts within it, and it's an example of how pollution is creating new objects. But we don't need to wait for this kind of chance encounter to realise that future fossils are already here: they are the materials all around us. Materials such as plastic, concrete, steel, glass are abundant and durable and they surround us every day. It's all these mundane, almost banal, materials that will shape our legacy. We see them wherever we go. I would encourage people to observe and consider the potential of these objects to become future fossils and remain on the planet for tens of thousands of years.

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David Farrier teaches English literature at the University of Edinburgh. His book *Footprints: In Search of Future Fossils* ((4th Estate, 2020) won the Giles St. Aubyn Prize awarded by the Royal Literature Society for the best first non-fiction commission. His works have been published in *Aeon* and *The Atlantic*.



Raquel Nogueira is a Madrid-based journalist of *Ethic* magazine, a human rights activist, proofreader, editor, translator, and community manager. She holds a degree in Journalism and Audiovisual Communication, and a master's in International Relations with a specialization in Peace and International Security and the Arab world.

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