

BOOK REVIEW

On Track to Dystopia

***2045: A Story of Our Future*, by Peter Seidel; Prometheus Books: Amherst, NY, 2009; ISBN 978-1-59102-705-8**

An environmental architect and planner and longtime population activist, Peter Seidel has written a troubling work of speculative fiction about environmental and social conditions in the U.S. and the world approaching mid-century. But the book is much more than a good yarn.

Like much science fiction, it is a diagnosis and a warning of the environmental and social ugliness mankind can expect in a mere three to four decades if we persist in our destructive pursuit of unending growth – of population, consumption and concentration of political and economic power.

Carl Lauer, the novel's protagonist, awakens in Madison, Wisconsin, in 2045 from a 35-year coma and steps into the ordeal of adjusting to a crowded, hot and impoverished world near collapse from overburdened natural support systems. We follow him as he learns that his family members are living in poverty, many of them unemployed because population growth had forced a policy of one meagerly paid job per family.

His beloved Wisconsin has become hotter than he can remember and the built environment of its cities deformed by the demands of unending population growth. Cheap housing has shouldered its way into every available space. Formerly large and stately homes have been sub-divided and re-divided into human rabbit warrens. And their inhabitants are the fortunate ones. The less fortunate are crowded into makeshift third-world shacks spreading inexorably along freeways, rail lines and waterways.

Energy shortages are crushing. Automobiles and airlines have become a prerogative of the elites. For the non-privileged, ersatz meat is common table fare. Light weight, drab clothing is dictated by high temperatures and higher fabric costs. Public urban transit and intercity rail serve nearly all Americans in grunge and discomfort.

Where do all the people come from? Carl learns that international migration has not eased and that rising temperatures and water shortages have driven mass migration from the Sun Belt to the better watered regions of the upper Midwest. Water shortages have led to a state of near-civil war in California, with northern California moving to break away from the arid and over-populated south. Carl mourns the depletion of the once stately lakes in and around Wisconsin: they have shrunk and become smelly mudflats. During his absence, the federal government had forced crippling transfers of water from the Great Lakes region lakes to the critically deprived west.

Much of the book is about Carl Lauer finding answers to his question, which the current generation of American's also faces: How could we allow this to happen?

The world's political and economic policy in 2045 are dominated by the "Big Eight" and its subsidiaries, a supreme global corporate oligopoly. Through his personal connections with a key Big Eight insider, Carl is able to become a privileged and overpaid marketing executive of a huge conglomerate. One of the products that he plugs worldwide is *Popzi*, an addictive soft drink.

Though facts are studiously concealed, Carl gradually learns that his employer and its corporate allies have used their wealth to amass and maintain hidden control over the world's political and economic institutions, even its cultural and religious life. The regnant corporations operate from three sovereign island strongholds. Extrapolating from today's consumer obsessions, the author imagines a complex and centrally-directed monopoly of electronic news, entertainment and pleasuring devices – some implanted in the body – to mold and pacify the public.

The Big Eight's control is benign where convenient but, as Carl learns, can be ruthless in suppressing behavior or information that might threaten its total control. His exposure to the desperate but little reported poverty and hunger of west Africa while on a routine sales promotion trip awakens Carl to the excesses of the profit-motive, its supporting myths and manipulations, its consummate pronatalism, and its denial of natural limits to growth.

The author provides a mordant vignette on the system's commitment to population growth. One of the Big Eight subsidiaries had developed a prototype "sex robot" that was even more satisfying than the real thing. But the corporate high command had killed it, fearing the result might be fewer babies. Abstinence is the Big Eight's disingenuous answer to over-population

Readers of Peter Seidel's book will find both a gripping work of fast-moving fiction and a jarring reminder to America and the world that "business and usual" can lead us to tragic, planet-altering consequences. If you savored such futuristic works as *Blade Runner* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, you will be right at home with Seidel's dark vision of a time not far off.