



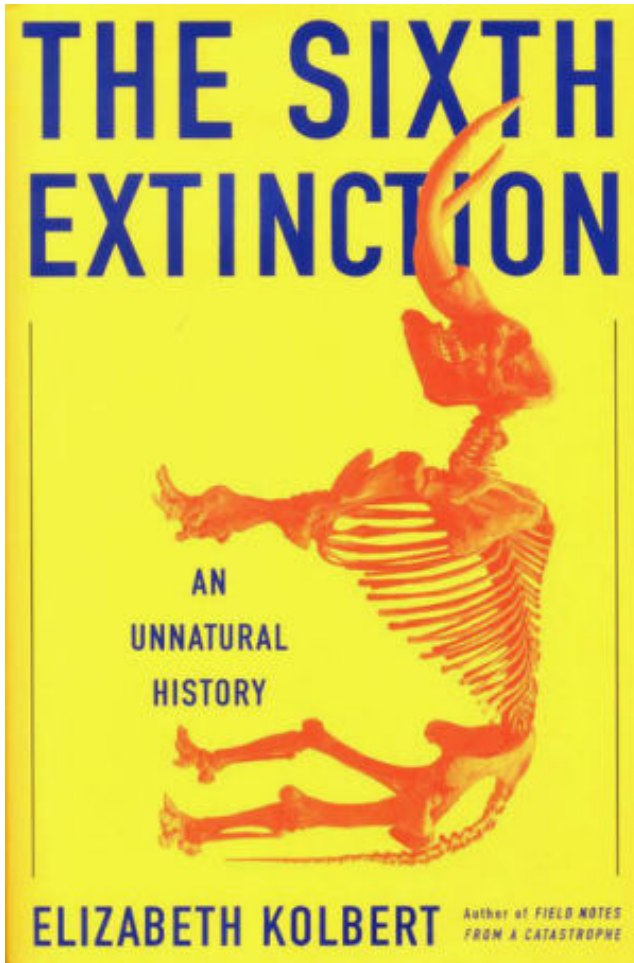
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# DAILY NEWS

## 'Window into mysterious world of scientists'

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*"The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History," by Elizabeth Kolbert. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014. 352 pages, \$28.*



The story of the Sixth Extinction, at least as I've chosen to tell it, comes in thirteen chapters," Elizabeth Kolbert explains in the prologue to "The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History," her new best-seller on the precarious place human beings find themselves at this moment in history. "Each tracks a species that's in some way emblematic – the American mastodon, the great auk, an ammonite that disappeared at the end of the Cretaceous alongside the dinosaurs."

"The Sixth Extinction" is meticulously researched, with 15 pages of source notes and a nine-page bibliography at the conclusion of the 13 chapters that form the main text. The author, who is no doubt well-versed in the subject matter about which she writes so eloquently, seems to have a knack for explaining things in a way that makes fairly complex concepts, relationships and events readily accessible to the average reader. She includes several pictures, illustrations, charts, graphs and other visual aids that help to bring the words on the page to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

Kolbert submerges the reader in these 13 episodes in a way that fosters a deep understanding and appreciation for the undeniable point she is desperately trying to make. Kolbert's literary style has a certain appeal often missing from similar tomes. She not only wants the reader to acquire an understanding of the science at the heart of her primary thesis, she also wants to provide a sense of the people who are engaged in the work being described.

One of my favorite chapters, for example, was "Dropping Acid," which deals with the disappearance of coral reefs around the world as a result of increased acidity in the oceans. In addition to clearly and concisely describing why the pH level in the oceans has been steadily rising since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, she genuinely wants you to get to know the people engaged in the research.

"Caldeira, who is in his mid-fifties, has curly brown hair, a boyish smile, and a voice that tends to rise toward the end of sentences, so that it often seems he is posing a question even when he's not," Kolbert observes. "Before getting into research, he worked as a software developer on Wall Street.

One of his clients was the New York Stock Exchange, for whom he designed a computer program to detect insider trading. The program functioned as it was supposed to, but after a while Caldeira came to believe that the NYSE wasn't really interested in catching insider traders, and he decided to switch professions."

Another aspect of Kolbert's prose I found interesting was the way she goes to some lengths to demonstrate the uneven way science typically advances and how many important discoveries are often due to chance and favorable circumstances. Most of us are aware of the Neanderthals and the somewhat unique place they occupy in the historical record. A once-thriving species, they mysteriously vanished around 30,000 years ago. The fact we know they even existed at all, however, could have been completely overlooked – or at least it might have taken a lot longer to acknowledge their existence – had it not been for the efforts of one man.

"The bones from the Neanderthal Valley were discovered by quarry workers who treated them as rubbish," the author notes in "The Madness Gene," the next-to-last chapter in the book. "It's likely that they would have been lost entirely had the quarry's owner not heard about the find and insisted that the remains – a skullcap, a clavicle, four arm bones, two thighbones, parts of five ribs, and half a pelvis – be salvaged. Believing the bones to belong to a cave bear, the quarry owner passed them on to a local schoolteacher, Johann Carl Fuhlrott, who moonlighted as a fossilist." And the rest, so the saying goes, is history.

Unlike some of her peers who have explored similar themes, Kolbert is not optimistic that our future will be any different than those who came before us: "Obviously, the fate of our own species concerns us disproportionately," Kolbert concludes. "Right now, in the amazing moment that to us counts as the present, we are deciding, without quite meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will forever be closed. No other creature has ever managed this, and it will, unfortunately, be our most enduring legacy."

Kolbert writes for *The New Yorker*. Her previous books include "Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change," "The Prophet of Love: And Other Tales of Power and Deceit," and "The Ends of the Earth: An Anthology of the Finest Writing on the Arctic and the Antarctic," which she edited with Francis Spufford. The recipient of a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in Science Writing and an American Association for the Advancement of Science Journalism Award, Kolbert has studied at Yale University and the University of Hamburg in Germany. My introduction to the author occurred when she appeared on "The Daily Show" with Jon Stewart this year to discuss the book currently being reviewed.

Regardless of where you fall on the question of evolution, I believe many readers would be fascinated by the stories Kolbert tells in "The Sixth Extinction." The book is not just another sermon on the evils of man-made climate change, a cautionary tale about how we need to regulate business and industry or a treatise on how we all need to be focused on saving the world. More than anything else, it is a window into the mysterious world of scientists – who they are, what motivates them and ultimately how human they are.

I think many readers would find it fascinating.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*