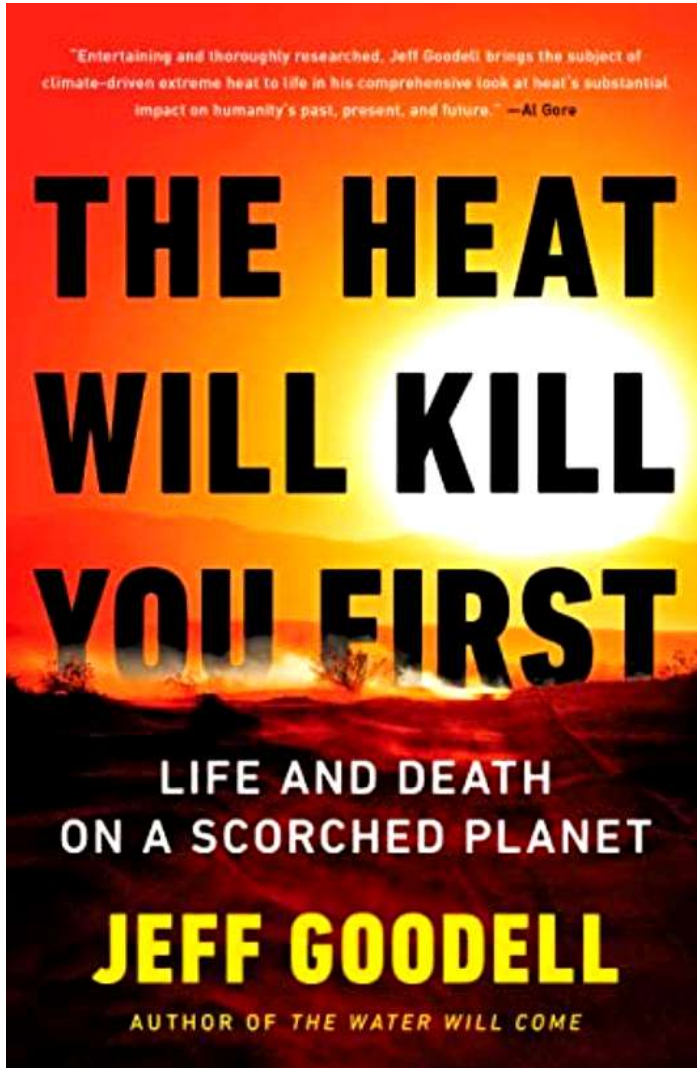


‘The Heat Will Kill You First’ gives dire warning

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“*The Heat Will Kill You First: Life and Death on a Scorched Planet*” by Jeff Goodell. New York, NY: Little, Brown & Company, 2023, 400 pages, \$29.00 (hardcover).



“When heat comes, it’s invisible,” Jeff Goodell explains in the preface to “*The Heat Will Kill You First: Life and Death on a Scorched Planet*,” his latest effort to warn us about the dangers that lie ahead if we continue to deny reality. “It doesn’t bend tree branches or blow hair across your face to let you know it’s arrived. The ground doesn’t shake. It just surrounds you and works on you in ways that you can’t anticipate or control. You sweat. Your heart races. You’re thirsty. Your vision blurs. The sun feels like the barrel of a gun pointed at you. Plants look like they’re crying. Birds vanish from the sky and take refuge in deep shade. Cars are untouchable. Colors fade. The air smells burned. You can imagine fire even before you see it.”

“You probably think of heat on a temperature scale, either Fahrenheit or Celsius,” he continues a little farther into the narrative. “You think of it as a gradual, linear thing, a quality of the air around you that moves up and down in increments, or that can be controlled by a thermostat. Seventy degrees is a little hotter than 68 degrees, which is a little hotter than 65 degrees. The change of seasons also plays into the incremental perception of heat – winter gradually warms into spring, spring into summer. Yes, there are some days that are noticeably hotter or colder than others, but we crank up the air-conditioning

or throw on a sweater. We trust it will pass and things will return to normal. Temperature is a merry-go-round that we are used to riding.”

“This sense of incrementalism also holds true with the climate crisis,” he adds. “The Earth is getting hotter due to the burning of fossil fuels. This is a simple truth, as clear as the moon in the night sky.”

If you’ve decided this is just another desperate attempt to get us to wake up before it is too late, then you win the door prize. Still, Goodell makes perhaps the best case I’ve ever had occasion to peruse regarding the reality of human-caused climate change and the consequences it already has for our collective survival as a species. The prose is accessible, definitive and unambiguous – and reinforced with scientific evidence that is beyond question by any serious student of the subject matter being dissected. What we are witnessing is not part of some long-term, natural cycle that the planet has experienced since the beginning. It is a completely new paradigm precipitated by the onset of the Industrial Revolution and maintained by our ongoing arrogance and disingenuous bias toward what we want to believe instead of what constitutes actual reality.

As many can attest – and as Goodell eloquently explains - wildfires may indeed be nothing new to California, but it is well-documented that their frequency and intensity are increasing exponentially. You

may have already surmised that spring now arrives a lot sooner, and fall takes longer to kick in than it did only a few short years ago. What you may not have thought about – and one of the points the author makes explicit – is that these changes constitute more than a minor inconvenience to our way of life. They will have a devastating impact on everything from our food supply to outbreaks of diseases that were once rare.

Moreover, Goodell provides solid evidence that the Arctic and Antarctic are both warming at an unprecedented rate, causing the icefields and glaciers that have historically trapped a large portion of the earth's fresh water to add to the already record-breaking rise in sea-level we are currently experiencing. Consider this: If the entire Greenland Ice Sheet melted, it would cause an overwhelming 24-foot rise in sea-level around the world. Always wanted to own some beach front property? Well just sit tight. You may not have to move. Then again, you probably wouldn't enjoy it given the vanishing quality of life that will be affecting us in the near future.

A Senior Fellow at Atlantic Council and a 2020 Guggenheim Fellow in addition to being a Contributing Editor at Rolling Stone, Goodell has spent over a decade covering climate change and its implications for our collective future. His resume includes work as a blackjack dealer, a glazier, a janitor, a bartender, a professional motorcycle racer, an editor at a Russian literary journal, and a technical writer at Apple Computer; he has a BA from the University of California, Berkeley, as well as an MFA from Columbia University. Goodell has appeared on NPR, MSNBC, CNN, CNBC, ABC, NBC, Fox News and The Oprah Winfrey Show. His previous books include "The Water Will Come: Rising Seas, Sinking Cities, and the Remaking of the Civilized World," a New York Times Critics Top Book of 2017, "Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future," and "How to Cool the Planet: Geoengineering and the Audacious Quest to Fix Earth's Climate."

One feature of the book that really drew me in was the way Goodell alternates between the macrocosmic and the microcosmic, while seamlessly integrating the two as opposite sides of the same coin. It's one thing to talk about global implications and statistical projections – which he does with some degree of authority. It's another to relate how those broad changes translate to implications for our personal, everyday experience. Consider the following, from "A Cautionary Tale," the first – and perhaps one of the best – chapters in the entire volume:

"If there is one idea in this book that might save your life, it is this: The human body, like all living things, is a heat machine. Just being alive generates heat. But if your body gets too hot too fast – if doesn't matter if that heat comes from the outside on a hot day or the inside from a raging fever – you are in big trouble... It doesn't take long. And being young or in great shape won't save you. In fact, being young and strong allows you to fight off the warning signs of heat exhaustion until it is too late. A few years ago, eighteen-year-old Kelly Watt, a track star and aspiring journalist in Virginia, parked his car on a hilly road where he often trained and went out for a fifty-minute run on a hot summer afternoon. A few hours later, Watt's father found his body in some bushes not far from his car. Handprints on the car suggested Watt had made it back to the car after his run, but had become disoriented from the heat, couldn't open the door, and then wandered off into the bushes, where he collapsed and died."

Yes, "The Heat Will Kill You First" does have an alarmist aura, but I would argue that it's entirely warranted given our inability to marshal the political will to act on a verifiable threat. Science is not something you "believe" in; science is the best approach ever devised for giving us insights into what is real and what is fiction. If I want to know about brain surgery, I'll consult the neurosurgeons. If I want to know about financial markets, I'll consult the economists. If I want to know about global warming, I'll consult the climate scientists.

If you want to know how rising temperatures are affecting us individually and collectively, consult Jeff Goodell. Highly recommended.

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