

Another Six Honest Reviews by Chris Loyd (second in a series)

Authors spotlighted: Dan Baum, Ben Bova, Michael J. Graetz, Jonathan V. Last, Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff (as co-authors), and Diana Walstad...

[Chris Loyd](#) is a mission-support scientist at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. These reviews include categorical shorthand: COHERENCE (letter grade), READABILITY, IN A WORD, IN A PHRASE, and -- a dimension most other reviewers overlook -- WHO NEEDS THIS BOOK. The first installment -- "Seven Reviews in 1,400 Words" -- is waiting for you at www.ExactingEditor.com/Reviews-by-Loyd.html

Loyd will accept free nonfiction books of recent issuance, too, and -- before committing to produce a review here or anywhere else -- would appreciate an e-mail exchange. Publishers, authors and media representatives can write CNLoyd@gmail.com.

The next installment is set for August. The series began with my casual question: "What book has made the biggest positive/productive impression on you this past year?"

-- Frank Gregorsky, February 2014

(1) For "fertility is destiny", *What to Expect When No One's Expecting: America's Coming Demographic Disaster* by Jonathan V. Last.

The author summarizes the literature on recent demographic trends, citing data, policies and anecdotes about countries that have experienced fertility decline. At 230 pages including the index, for a topic this big, it's a short book. While the author cites much data, his political bias gently overwhelms the reader.

Two key points are highlighted. First, that Americans have been sorting themselves into communities of like-minded individuals. (That includes individuals and families that favor having children, and those that, through their behavior, do not.) He also cites the data that not only are Hispanic immigrants' birth-rates declining, so are Mexico's, and other nations'.

Coherence: B-. While the author quite clearly wants people to have children, he

doesn't explain adequately if and how secularization is driving down birth-rates in places like Iran. He glosses over the economic differences between rich countries having labor shortages, and poor countries having unstable political structures.

Readability: The book is a quick read, though the reader might be distracted by the overt bias. For example, the author writes that large apartment buildings and condominium complexes are "tenements." This reviewer was left wondering if price did not matter. No matter how nice your townhouse or high-rise apartment, "tenement" implies poverty.

In a Word: Fertility.

In a Phrase: Have 2.1 kids to keep the lights from going out.

WHO NEEDS IT: For those who believe that the global population is increasing exponentially, this book can serve as a helpful corrective. Otherwise, for those who have known for a while that fertility is declining in most urban societies, and that the world is urbanizing in general, this book offers little new information.

NOTE: Last's policy recommendations are unlikely to offend anyone who realizes their limited novelty, low level of practicality, or both. His recommendations include more and wider freeways, and enabling current and potential college students to "test out" of getting a Bachelor's degree. There were others, but those two stood out. And -- he doesn't threaten reluctant parents with state power.

(2) For "1990s Nanotechnology on the Moon", *Farside* by Ben Bova.

The author walks the reader through a workplace of poorly developed characters, on the Moon. Two rival astronomers are competing to image an exo-planet first, and their competition -- predictably -- brings out snarky behaviors extending all the way to murder. In lieu of letting action and dialogue build characters and motivation, the author writes out chapter-length dossiers, as a way to provide the back story.

With this book, Ben Bova re-treads ground he first broke in the 1990s, casting the culture wars of that time in the light of futuristic nanotechnology. The politics he covered then, and brought back for this book, are clear -- so clear they lack subtlety and nuance. I had to keep checking to make sure this book really did come out in 2013, as opposed to 1998.

Coherence: A+. The action flows clearly and unambiguously. Very little is left to

the imagination; it's all telling and no showing. The author is definitely pro-science and pro-technology -- no problem there -- but none of the action or characters leave much for the reviewer to support.

Readability: There is not a single misspelling or grammar mistake anywhere in the entire book. **Farside** consists mostly of short chapters, and this breaks the action unnecessarily. Instead of letting scenes unfold from multiple, extended points of view, he jumps around among various characters.

In a word: Nanotechnology.

In a phrase: You can find better books -- including some that came out during the 1990s -- about nanotechnology.

WHO NEEDS IT: Ben Bova completionists. Everyone else who is interested in 1990s nanotechnology (complete with politics and sociology) should read the excellent [Diamond Age](#) by [Neal Stephenson](#).

(3) For “aquarists who want naturally supplied CO₂ and know what that means”, ***Ecology of the Planted Aquarium: A Practical Manual and Scientific Treatise for the Home Aquarist*** (3rd Edition) by Diana Walstad.

Here is a comprehensive and accurately titled treatise on the science of planted aquariums. It's a pleasure to find an author able to walk the reader through all the necessary concepts.

She covers allelopathy (“chemical interactions between organisms”), the roles of bacteria and carbon, and ways to control algae. There are studies, data sets, charts, tables, and graphs galore. Citations are listed at the end of every chapter. The author documents her own extensive, original research.

And, should a reader wish to skim the explanations and research, there is a chapter devoted to setting up and maintaining one's own aquarium. (The reviewer would like to note that he is using Walstad's book to guide his own experiment.)

Coherence: A+. The book goes into a lot of detail, and the author does a good job of keeping all the presented information relevant to aquariums and plant ecology.

Readability: The book was written originally in MS Word. Every now and then, an odd paragraph return or formatting change calls attention to itself.

In a word: Plants.

In a phrase: Like the title says, ecology of the planted aquarium.

WHO NEEDS IT: Anyone who is interested in ecology in general, and aquariums in specific. Everyone else, especially those who find biology or chemistry inherently boring, should pass this one by.

(4) For “Best American Ethnography 2009-2012 (so far)”, *Gun Guys: A Road Trip* by Dan Baum.

The author is a textbook liberal, apart from the fact that he loves guns. He embarks on a journey across the United States, interviewing people in Phoenix, Detroit, Cincinnati, New Orleans and elsewhere, to learn more about other people who love guns as much as he does.

Baum tries to focus on the personal and business aspects, and avoid the politics. He fails at the latter, but keeps on exploring, and the result is a compelling story.

You would have to read the whole book to appreciate his summaries near the end. To oversimplify his conclusions, the debate over guns is one way to avoid debating the harder socioeconomic issues of recent times.

Coherence: A-. There is one misspelling and one misused quote-mark that throws the reader off for a moment, but that is it. The book is personal, humorous, sensitive -- the hallmarks of a great narrative.

Readability: The author covers a lot of ground, and several chapters ended sooner than the reviewer wanted.

In a word: Americans.

In a phrase: Americans have problems beyond that of guns.

WHO NEEDS IT: Every American of voting age -- especially those who never intend to own a gun. This book will not convert anyone, and that is not the point. The point is to understand what your fellow Americans (some of whom happen to be gun enthusiasts) are going through, and how they view the world.

(5) For “Most Inaccurate Title”, ***The End of Energy: The Unmaking of America's Environment, Security, and Independence*** by Michael J. Graetz.

First of all, this book is not about thermodynamics, and it mentions “peak oil” just once. Instead, the author covers the history of the U.S. Government's energy policies during the 1970s. The result is an eye-opening treatise on how various Presidents, Congresses, the business community, and assorted activists sought to control or at least influence energy policy.

The author formats the story by energy type (oil, nuclear, coal), followed by a storied political drama. Organizing a book in this manner can be tricky and confusing. The reader may feel a weird *deja vu*, going through the same Nixon-Ford-Carter-Reagan character sheet. On the other hand, each topic (oil, etc.) is given so much focus that the book is indeed worth the pseudo-rerun.

Coherence: A. Michael Graetz's book shows the trade-off between having a single, coherent story of the 1970s, and delving into each energy format thoroughly. It might not make sense at first but, in retrospect, the reviewer understood the need to focus on "just nuclear" for a whole chapter, followed by some other energy type during the next one.

Readability: The book is mostly historical, if not clinical. The occasional innuendo -- the implication that President Nixon may have been a homosexual -- surfaces only to distract.

In a word: Politics.

In a phrase: Ignore the title, and benefit from the rest of the book.

WHO NEEDS IT: Policy wonks, especially energy-politics nerds, might find the book useful. It is also useful for conservatives born after the 1970s -- because they will learn what "regulation" used to mean. That is what shocked the reviewer -- price controls based on age of the oil well, paperwork required to raise gasoline prices, the Interstate Commerce Commission, and more.

(6) For "Most Exhausting Review of Financial Crises", ***This Time is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*** by Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff.

For this site in 2013, I reviewed *On the Brink* by Hank Paulson, which though educational was ultimately not satisfying. This book by Reinhart and Rogoff was purchased in an attempt to learn more about financial crises -- and the reviewer

got much more than he bargained for.

The authors are very thorough in presenting eight centuries' worth of data, the bulk of which deals with the most recent century. The reader is exposed to table after table of countries, years, asset prices, relative changes, time elapsed since peak of each crisis, and so forth. The text explains the data, though, after a while, it all blurs together.

Coherence: B. While there is nothing wrong with the book, after the first 100 pages or so, this reviewer felt lost. Overall, it's dull. A big-picture view is necessary, and eventually it emerges. Trouble is, getting there may require the 290 pages of narrative plus 170 pages of appendices, indexes, and references. Every bit of the information presented may be accurate, but the reviewer had to re-read several sections to remember what he had read only 10 pages earlier.

Readability: The presentation is highly professional. As a tool, the book is very effective, with extensive citations.

In a word: Economics.

In a phrase: It felt like eight centuries passed during the reading of it.

WHO NEEDS IT: Economists and economics majors, historians and history majors, and so forth. This is not really a book for the lay audience -- unless the prospective reader is a very dedicated amateur economist or historian.

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