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BOOK REVIEW

SIX DEGREES: OUR FUTURE ON A HOTTER PLANET

by Mark Lynas

Reviewed by Matthew Padilla*

Mark Lynas, writing for National Geographic, pens his warning as if writing a travel book. The book begins with a quote from Dante, warning the reader that the journey they are embarking on is akin to a visit to the depths, where sinners atone for their misdeeds on earth. The sinners in this story are the emitters of carbon, however, and those who will atone are likely not yet born.

While Dante's allegorical journey takes the reader to successive depths, Lynas' work takes the reader on a journey of degrees: both authors lead the reader through a series of frightening and potentially catastrophic stages. Broken into six parts, Lynas explains what may occur as global temperatures increase and the climate changes. Lynas distinguishes between the impacts of an average temperature increase and a mere seasonal rise in temperature, emphasizing the dire consequences of the former. While a difference of a few degrees on a day-to-day basis is hardly noticeable, an average annual increase of only a few degrees will affect global air and water circulation causing dramatic and dangerous impacts.

As Lynas effectively conveys, the extent to which one or two degrees can affect the planet is alarming. Beginning with a rise of one degree, which is already occurring, Lynas takes the reader to places where climate impacts are already starkly apparent. He travels from the highest peaks, where glaciers once covered mountains but now are quickly receding, to the depths of the sea, where coral bleaching is now afflicting Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Along with concrete examples, Lynas uses scientific models to demonstrate that multiple species face eminent extinction as temperatures rise. For most species, climate change means that habitats will shift towards the poles and to higher elevations. However, migration is not always an option; some species cannot move to new locations fast enough to beat the rising heat. Other species, such as polar bears, will have no place to go. The overall effect described by the author is a great extinction of plant and animal life, caused primarily by human activity.

Lynas makes it clear that it is not certain whether even humans will be able to adapt fast enough to avert disaster. A mere two to three degree rise in temperature will lead to wider

desertification, water shortages, crop failures, and increased risk of disease which may force human populations to migrate. Although wealthy, developed nations are better situated to adapt to the impacts of climate change than poor, developing countries, we will all feel the impacts of each degree. Using the fall of the Maya as an example, Lynas warns that even the heartiest civilizations may succumb to the adverse impacts of climate change.

Serious students of climate change may not find much new information in this book, which covers many of the same topics Al Gore described in *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Earth in the Balance*. Without going into the more complicated aspects of climate science, Lynas describes global warming in simple terms enabling him to reach an audience that may otherwise shy away from a scientific text. *Six Degrees* is probably most similar to Tim Flannery's *The Weather Makers*. However, where Flannery's book arguably offers more hopeful solutions, *Six Degrees* views those solutions through a skeptical lens. There is good reason for skepticism. As the book outlines the realities of a hotter world, it becomes clearer and clearer that our future planet is likely to be drier and more desolate despite human efforts to reduce carbon emissions.

At the end of Lynas' journey, the author brings us back to Dante's expedition and questions the potential for a solution to this harrowing problem by looking at science and psychology. The last chapter is dedicated to the possibility that we can solve the climate change crisis, but also clearly outlines the pitfalls and challenges that interfere with eliminating a carbon-fueled lifestyle. Echoing a line from Al Gore's award-winning documentary, Lynas states that there "is nothing so difficult as trying to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it." Despite the grim outlook presented by *Six Degrees*, the book is recommended for all readers concerned about climate change. Lynas' perspective is sure to send chills down the spine of a casual reader on an unseasonably warm winter day.



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