

down, fervently defends the Ehrlichs, insisting that the Green Revolution merely bought us some time. Still, *The Population Bomb* is not counted as a classic along the lines of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. It surely didn't help that Ehrlich later made and lost a high-profile bet with economist Julian Simon about the future price of commodities and generally remained a pugnacious public figure. By contrast, shortly after the publication of her book, Carson died.

The ambiguous legacy of *The Population Bomb* points to a larger issue: What's the most compelling way to tell stories about threats to the environment? Does apocalyptic language ultimately do the environmentalist cause more harm than good, undermining the credibility of the warnings? Does it alienate readers by demanding that they think about an unbearable future? Or, by garnering more attention than mild-mannered writers, do doomsayers succeed in spurring essential conversation? Environmental writers face a host of choices: to invoke self-interest or moral responsibility; to elicit hope or sow fear and sorrow; to dwell on problems or solutions.

In *A Climate of Crisis*, a fascinating intellectual history of American environmentalism, Emory University historian Patrick Allitt discusses *The Population Bomb* and many other environmental texts. Though his account is fair-minded, it is book-ended by an argument that "the mood of crisis that surrounded a succession of environmental fears was usually disproportionate to the actual danger involved." Our society, Allitt contends, has proved quite capable of addressing environmental problems. He highlights in particular the landmark legislation of the 1970s and the consequent, underappreciated "great cleaning" of America's air and water; and he criticizes environmentalists for persisting in their rhetoric of doom rather than celebrating these triumphs. But Allitt's very argument reveals another possibility: the progress he chronicles occurred not despite but in part because of the mood of crisis. Could major environmental legislation ever have passed without a pressing sense of urgency? If you warn loudly of potential disaster—whether regarding Y2K or air pollution—the price of success is to seem alarmist in retrospect. Allitt acknowledges that "the anticipation of catastrophe can often contribute to preventing it," but he restricts that lesson to the case of nuclear weapons while downplaying the risks of climate change.

Writing about global warming and the associated ecological emergencies brings

## Books Discussed in This Essay

### A Climate of Crisis

*America in the Age of Environmentalism.*

By Patrick Allitt.

Penguin Press. 384 pp. \$29.95.

### Scatter, Adapt, and Remember

*How Humans Will Survive a Mass Extinction.*

By Annalee Newitz.

Anchor. 305 pp. Paper \$16.

### The Sixth Extinction

*An Unnatural History.*

By Elizabeth Kolbert.

Henry Holt. 319 pp. \$28.

### Oil and Honey

*The Education of an Unlikely Activist.*

By Bill McKibben.

Times Books. 255 pp. \$26.

### Apocalyptic Planet

*A Field Guide to the Future of the Earth.*

By Craig Childs.

Vintage. 343 pp. Paper \$16.95.

distinctive challenges. Different audiences disagree sharply on the facts. A recent survey conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication found that 23 percent of respondents believe that global warming is not happening. The project divided Americans into six groups with respect to climate change: the Alarmed (16 percent); the Concerned (27 percent); the Cautious (23 percent); the Disengaged (5 percent); the Doubtful (12 percent); and the Dismissive (15 percent). Rhetoric that will galvanize the Alarmed stands little chance of engaging the Disengaged or converting the Dismissive. Should writers choose an audience and tailor their work accordingly? How can language be exquisitely fine-tuned to prompt the desired response—to steer a course between despair and complacency?

Words alone will never halt a hurricane or stay the rising seas. But few would deny that the way we communicate about issues matters. Notwithstanding some encouraging developments, notably the Environmental Protection Agency's new rules curbing emissions from coal-fired plants, it's fair to say that climate-change polemicists have so far failed to achieve their goals. How might they promulgate their messages more effectively?

in the standard environmentalist worldview, humans—and especially American consumers—are destroying the earth, which is equal parts deity and victim.

This view is always going to antagonize a lot of people, who see it as preachy, misanthropic and joyless. Annalee Newitz, a science writer and proud member of *Homo sapiens*, takes a different approach. Her book *Scatter, Adapt, and Remember* is a primer for long-term human survival, spinning a sci-fi vision of the future. It downplays human culpability and the earth's indispensability, espousing instead a can-do optimism oriented toward pragmatic problem-solving.

Newitz begins with an overview of our planet's turbulent history, putting current realities and forecasts in context. Though our climate is changing and we are probably in the midst of a mass extinction—with scores of species vanishing daily—Newitz portrays these events as far from novel. She delivers a time-lapse narrative of planetary metamorphosis: continental plates smashing into each other, forming mountains and spilling carbon dioxide into the sea; blue-green algae emerging and beginning to release oxygen into the atmosphere; the climate lurching between "greenhouse" and "icehouse"; species dying out in massive numbers and then, slowly, new life repopulating the earth.

Newitz explains that a frequent culprit in mass extinction is climate change, and that minor shifts can trigger a cascade of effects that can quickly tumble into catastrophe. This pattern is at once alarming—it confirms the warnings of contemporary climate scientists about our own possible future—and somehow reassuring. It casts today's strange weather as unexceptional in a natural, cyclical process. Newitz fully acknowledges the human role in the current warming and stresses the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But her larger point is that if human societies hadn't fouled the environment and altered the climate, some other force would—will—eventually threaten our survival anyway.

This fatalism is not bleak. On the contrary, there's something liberating about the idea of ineluctable global catastrophe—to know that the asteroid will strike, the sun will explode, the supervolcano will erupt. Only when we think we can avert it—by driving less, installing solar panels, buying local, growing basil on the roof, attending protest marches, chaining ourselves to coal plants, getting arrested, inundating our elected representatives with phone calls—do stress and guilt set in.