

Neufeld on books: Author of 'The World Without Us' comes to Cullowhee

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BOOKS COLUMNIST

We all should read more science. It has become so godlike these days.

Technical scientists play God. Naturalists sing Gaia's praises and warn of the apocalypse. Scientists clash with fundamentalists over truth and heresy.

The new face of science comes to Western Carolina University in a bright light on April 7, as Alan Weisman, author of the bestselling book "The World Without Us" speaks in Coulter Auditorium. He is one of several great authors participating in the Spring Literary Festival, running April 3-7 (see box).

"Picture a world from which we all suddenly vanished," Weisman writes in the prelude to his book. "How long would it take to recover lost ground and restore Eden to the way it must have gleamed and smelled the day before Adam, or Homo habilis, appeared?"

Weisman begins by giving a glimpse of Bialowieza Forest in Poland-Belorussia, still in a primeval state. And then he starts showing how the modern world would crumble and transform, if humans were gone.

"It starts with wood-frame construction," he writes, particularly at the flashing around chimneys. Water enters. Trusses collapse. Wrought iron survives.

Manhattan floods, subways first. Chimps take over at Olduvai Gorge. Kenya's killer cut flower industry stops sucking water out of the region. And on and on.

Weisman concludes with two hopes: miracles and prayers.

"There will be many surprises," Doug Erwin, the Smithsonian's expert on extinctions, promised Weisman.

"Who would've predicted the existence of turtles?" Erwin added. "That an organism would essentially turn itself inside out, pulling its shoulder girdle inside its ribs to form a carapace?"

Paranormalists, Weisman reports, "insist that our minds are transmitters that, with special effort, can focus like lasers to communicate across great distances, and even make things happen. ... That may seem far-fetched, but it's also a definition of prayer."

Science as savior?

One of the great surveys of contemporary science is Houghton Mifflin's annual "The Best American Science and Nature Writing," published as a Mariner paperback original.

This year's editor, Freeman Dyson, groups and sequences the entries. Space exploration leads to inward-looking neuroscience; wonders of nature precede ecological scenarios; and the book concludes with stories of good stewardship around the world.

Dyson ratifies hope in science and scientists. For instance, Kathleen McGowan writes in her piece, "Out of the Past," scientists have discovered something called "memory reconsolidation."

Memories get changed every time one accesses them, and scientists can erase specific memories by blocking a certain enzyme or protein at the moment of re-remembering. In addition to nightmarish uses, the procedure has benefits, such as curing addictions.

In one essay, "Purpose Driven Life" by Brian Boyd, the volume addresses religious matters.

"Does evolution by natural selection rob life of purpose, as so many have feared?" Boyd asks. "The answer is no."

Boyd goes on to cast the story of evolution as efforts by organisms to attain immortality. Art and religion are the two

highest-level achievements along these lines.

And here in Western North Carolina -- so rich in religious thinking, ecological initiative and biological enterprise -- do we have writers contributing to the noteworthy body of science and nature writing?

Thomas Rain Crowe's "Zoro's Field" (2005), reflected on back-to-nature living on a wilderness homestead near Saluda.

John Lane, associate professor of English and environmental studies at Wofford College (and, at times, a mountain man), develops programs and writes books that make the ecology-literature connection. One of Lane's books is "Chattooga: Descending into the Myth of Deliverance River" (2004).

Last year, Jennifer Frick-Ruppert, Brevard College associate professor, published one of my favorite books on the region's wildlife and ecology, "Mountain Nature: A Seasonal Natural History of the Southern Appalachians."

Also last year, Mallory McDuff of Warren Wilson College published "Natural Saints: How People of Faith are Working to Save God's Earth."

Crowe directs the Southern Nature Project, www.southernnature.org. I wonder if this region might foster even more of a voice on these subjects.

Rob Neufeld writes the weekly book feature for the Sunday Citizen-Times. He can be reached at RNeufeld@charter.net and 505-1973.

SPRING LITERARY FESTIVAL

Western Carolina University's ninth annual festival features 11 programs. All are in the University Center Theatre, unless otherwise noted. To learn more, call 227-7264 or visit litfestival.org.

April 3: 7:30 p.m. Live webcast with Elizabeth Kostova about her novel, "The Historian," in Illusions, University Center.

April 4: Noon: Award-winning student poets. 4 p.m.: Poets Ginger Murchison and Delana Dameron. 7:30 p.m.: Don Lee, author "Wrack and Ruin."

April 5: 4 p.m.: Lee Martin, author of "The Bright Forever." 7:30 p.m.: Bret Lott, author of "Jewell" and "Ancient Highway."

April 6: 4 p.m.: Poet Frank X. Walker, editor and publisher of "Pluck! The New Journal of Affrilachian Art & Culture." 7:30 p.m.: Susan Vreeland, author of "The Girl in Hyacinth Blue" and "Clara and Mr. Tiffany."

April 7: 4 p.m.: Nature writer David Gessner, author of "Return of the Osprey." 5:30 p.m.: Reception in Illusions Cafe with N.C. poet laureates Fred Chappell, Kathryn Stripling Byer and Cathy Smith Bowers. 7:30 p.m.: Alan Weisman, author of "The World Without Us," in Coulter Auditorium.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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