

## Book Review

Mark Hertsgaard. 2000. *Earth Odyssey: Around the World in Search of Our Environmental Future*. New York: Broadway Books.

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Most readers of this journal will be aware of Mark Hertsgaard's *Earth Odyssey: Around the World in Search of our Environmental Future*, the product of a journalist's seven-year world tour in search of answers to whether humanity will survive our self-inflicted environmental wounds. This review, therefore, will examine the book's suitability for use in the classroom as a supplement or alternative to the usual texts.

*Earth Odyssey* focuses primarily on the aspirations and choices of people in the second and third worlds (the developed world is not on the itinerary). It effectively and intelligibly brings to life the discussions around sustainable development, population, nuclear waste, globalization, capitalism, and global justice. This Hertsgaard accomplishes in part through conversations with the ordinary people and government officials he meets in his travels through nineteen countries, and in part through a cook's tour of influential books, statistical analyses, and interviews with such environmental newsmakers as Herman Daly, Jacques Cousteau, Vaclav Havel, Al Gore, and Lester Brown.

In the classroom, it may be worth pointing out the obvious—Hertsgaard is concerned about the survival of human beings—not of non-human species. The question, “whether the human species would survive the next hundred years” drives his journey from the pollution centers of Chongqing to automobile-immobilized Bangkok to Brazil, where families with thirteen children are common. For graduate students, it would be instructive to contrast this very anthropocentric odyssey with David Quammen's brilliant and poignant *Song of the Dodo*, which similarly weaves complex ideas together with personal adventure, explicating the relationship between skyrocketing extinction rates and the insights of island biogeographers. Even for undergraduates, *Earth Odyssey* may provide an opportunity to reflect critically on how values and core questions govern research choices and condition conclusions.

Hertsgaard combines an endearing personal touch with information and argument, presenting himself as intrepid, outgoing, diligent, and sincere. Undergraduates should respond well to his tone and admire him for choosing some harrowing destinations, including Chelyabinsk, the site of three nuclear

disasters, a Dinka refugee encampment in Sudan, where death from starvation is common, and the foully polluted factories in China, where Hertsgaard is told, "We are used to it."

For undergraduates, the book is best used in selections. Some chapters are simply better than others, perhaps because parts of the book appeared as well-edited magazine articles. Among the strongest sections are those on nuclear waste, the automobile, population growth and its environmental impacts (or not), and China, where a Chongqing paper-making factory continues to pour chlorine into the Jialing River despite official pronouncements that it has been shut down, and environmental concerns recede in the face of the enormity of the huge population's material ambitions. The chapter on the Earth Summit, while unfairly critical of delegates' alleged failure to investigate the slums of Rio, provides a good, if partisan, discussion of the environment and development debate and the failures of international environmental agreements.

Teachers who struggle to open students' eyes to their own roles and responsibilities in global issues may appreciate such simply stated musings as ". . . what right did people in wealthy countries have to blame the poor for their poverty, much less for humanity's environmental dilemma, when it was the rich countries' consumption patterns that were responsible for the vast majority of the world's resource depletion and ecosystem destruction?" The book should prove eye-opening for students who tend to see issues as contained within national borders or who blame the South for global overpopulation and despoliation. Indeed, Hertsgaard's most valuable contribution may be in conveying the viewpoints of people in developing countries. In China, for example, after trying to speak with local people about the dangers of pollution, he comes to understand that the choice is "between unemployed misery on the street and jobs in factories that poisoned them." In Africa, Hertsgaard finds refugees and poor people barely surviving, while the better educated are interested to learn about global warming for the first time.

Although Hertsgaard writes relatively little about Northern lifestyles and consumption patterns, students are likely to feel motivated to examine their own behavior, and that of their government, as a result of this book. They may even respond well to Hertsgaard's "global green deal," although this idealistic and impracticable concluding proposal for a complete shift in the global economy is the least convincing section of the book. His predictable recommendations include technological fixes and energy and resource-use efficiency, taxes on pollution, and job-creation in the labor-intensive clean-up and renewable energy fields. But given his findings of population explosion, rising material expectations in developing countries, and leadership failure in the North, his optimism that such a shift can be achieved seems shaky at best. The alternative may have been despair, however, and the Polyanna-ish final chapters, which find the writer in a meditative mood in a cabin by an ancient California sequoia grove, may be the basis for a good classroom discussion.