

## Book Reviews

*Hold the Apocalypse and You Only Go Extinct Once*

both by Bob Lorentson

A Stand-Up Comedian Posing as a Sit-Down Scientist

*Hold the Apocalypse*

Pass Me a Scientist Please

published 2021

ISBN 9798454735616

200 pages, \$9 paperback, \$3 eBook

*You Only Go Extinct Once*

Stuck in the Anthropocene with the Pleistocene Blues Again

published 2023

ISBN 979-8-218-26203-7

218 pages, \$11 paperback, \$5 eBook

<https://BobLorentson.wordpress.com>

Book reviews by Mark Mathew Braunstein

Humor! Literature! Philosophy! Psychology! The fine arts! The natural sciences! These two books explore all of these. While Bob Lorentson is a Humorist, he writes not just to make us laugh, but also to make us think. So add to his résumé, Satirist, because his two books are best summarized as social satire.

Social satire is often associated with political commentary, such as the skits on nighttime TV shows broadcast live. Lorentson steers clear of politics, a narrow feature of human society. Instead, he sets his sights on the deeper and broader entire human condition. And not just our role in society, but humanity's place on the planet Earth.

When he takes aim at lofty subjects, he reveals truths that you would not expect to find in a book of humor and satire. Along with all the fun and laughs, we learn a lot from him. And for the academically inclined, both books provide bibliographies, so naysayers who might suspect the author of steering from the truth can see that all the author's assertions and conclusions are based on solid science.

Lorentson's books are collections of eclectic essays whose medley is akin to the diversity of the articles in *Neighbors*. In addition to its many random contributors, *Neighbors* features several regular columnists. From among them, you can gain insightful views of nature and civilization through the socio-political lens of eco-feminism. Or you can be dazzled by stellar philosophical meditations inspired by the simple act of stargazing. Or you can be brought back down to earth with visits to our local farms. Or you can learn about the practicalities for maintenance of your car. Or you can study the technicalities of solar energy for your home. And all in a freebie monthly newspaper whose pages can still smudge your fingers with newsprint ink rather than only strain your eyes with computer screen fatigue.

While not as a columnist, Lorentson has been making regular guest appearances on these pages, yet his many short articles have been easy to overlook. As they never puff themselves up across an entire page, they can get lost among other short articles. Their titles rarely are provocative, so garner little attention. Neither flashy photos nor clickbait graphics ever illustrate them. Only recently have bylines concluded them to connect them with the author's previous articles. Lucky you, now you know to keep a watchful eye for his byline in future issues.

Meanwhile, to read what you've been missing, you can poke around the PDF's of past issues of *Neighbors*. Or support the local arts by buying the dang books. Or muck around the author's website. I should not tell you this (meaning, I'm going to go ahead and tell you this), but some of the chapters from both books can be found lurking on his website.

Published only two years apart, each book contains 50 short chapters. Their essays are interchangeable, so the differences between one book and the other are slight. If pressed to recommend one to read first, I suggest *You Only Go Extinct Once*. Lorentson's writing shines brightest among his menagerie of animals, and animals populate *Extinct* more than in *Hold the Apocalypse*. By no coincidence, the essay, "Food Fight at the Bird Feeder," first published without fanfare in *Neighbors* and later republished in *Apocalypse*, alerted me to thereafter be on the lookout for Lorentson's writings.

In his 2021 book, *Hold the Apocalypse*, no subject is too insignificant or small for the author, as evidenced in an essay about bonsai trees. Nor is any subject too broad or complex, as in its opening chapter, "The Complete History of Humankind." Even at less than four pages, it is the longest essay in the book. Thus each chapter can be read in a single sitting. Or if you like to read yourself to sleep, in a single reclining. Perfect for those of us whose brains have become atrophied by videos on unsocial media and by soundbites on old news shows.

As if to provide comic relief to *Apocalypse's* al-

ready comical 29 essays, 21 poems are sprinkled around. Don't let that dirty four-letter word "poem" scare you. They are lighthearted and limerick-like. They never fill the page, so like all poetry they waste a lot of paper. Some are so pithy and witty that they could be mistaken as posthumously published by my dearest of all philosophers, Dr. Seuss. Outside my home, I travel unplugged, so little wonder that one of my fav poems is this little ditty, "Who's Smarter?": "My smartphone gives me the world / Yet I feel like a martyr. / I give it my life / But don't feel any smarter."

This great debut anthology is nevertheless undermined by its two genres mixed into the same vat and by the apparently random arrangement of the chapters. Organizing the essays thematically would have greatly improved my reading experience.

In his 2023 book, *You Only Go Extinct Once*, deleting the poems and arranging the essays into categories are exactly what the author has done for his second anthology. Maybe he was reading my mind, or maybe only my reader review on Amazon. The 50 essays are categorized into two broad topics, the first 25 into "The Plants and Animals," and the remaining 25 into the most dangerous and destructive of all animals, "The Humans."

Without providing empirical evidence to support his claim, Lorentson describes himself as a retired environmental scientist. As a job description, that sounds elusive and evasive to me, so I conducted an extensive background check (meaning, I googled his name) and found his allegation to be true. He retired from the environmental arm of Connecticut's Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP).

By no surprise, the author's writing excels among "The Plants and Animals" where he ponders flora and fauna, and mostly fauna at that. Here are excerpts from *Extinct* of three topical animal essays of special relevance to us in Connecticut.

About Roadkill, the author instills humor even into a deadly serious matter for which we all share blame. "Why did the chicken cross the road? It didn't. A 2,000-pound vehicle turned it into pavement pizza. ... It's Carmageddon out there! ... Please give animals a brake."

About Dairy Cows, we gain insights into the tenets of veganism through an interview with Elsie. "If I don't make my quota, I'll be inside a bun rather than a barn. ... We give you milk, butter, and cheese, but instead of saying thank you, you eat us and turn our children into veal."

About Black Bears, we learn their habitat and habits. "Most make their homes in forests, except those that do so in zoos. ... Cubs are weaned at six months, then forced to eat grubs and garbage until they learn to like it. Afterwards they leave in search of picnic baskets and refrigerators. ... They can track a refrigerator for miles."

And let's not forget the essays in both books specific to Connecticut. One very funny chapter is titled, "Is Connecticut Funny?" Another, "The Connecticut State Animal You've Never Seen." Two of Lorentson's essays were recently published in the paywall-protected *Hartford Courant*, so let's be thankful for what we read here for free.

Speaking of Hartford, America's great humorist Mark Twain lived for 18 years in Hartford in a 25-room mansion, now an historic museum. Some 22 miles southeast of Hartford you'll find East Haddam, the town that is home to Lorentson, our local author in whom a century later Mark Twain's literary spirit lives on.

The book reviewer, Mark Mathew Braunstein, is the author of six books. [www.MarkBraunstein.Org](http://www.MarkBraunstein.Org)

How to read these two books:

You can't tickle yourself. To make yourself giggle, someone else must tickle you. Laughing out loud, too, is a shared experience. In a movie theater, when the audience around you laughs out loud, you are more prone to join in the laughter. In a movie theater, a scene might get you laughing so hard that you almost pee in your pants. But that same scene when viewed alone at home streamed on TV will leave you silent and dry.

Reading is an equally solitary act. In response to something funny, you might chuckle inwardly and silently, but never aloud. Yet someone nearby who can hear you just might provoke you to verbalize your appreciation by a guffaw or two. So I recommend that you read aloud some chapters of either book to your friends or family. Their LOL's will get you, too, roaring in laughter. — M.M.B.

