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Peer reviewed

Review: What We Know About Climate Change
By Kerry Emanuel

Reviewed by Matthew Aaron Tennant
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Emanuel, Kerry. *What We Know about Climate Change*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007. 87 pp. ISBN 9780262050890. US\$14.95, hardcover. Alkaline paper.

What We Know about Climate Change is part of the Boston Review Series from MIT Press. The aim of the series is to provide “accessible, short books that take ideas seriously” (p. 87). Kerry Emanuel’s contribution to the series hits its mark. This book is accessible (few technical terms) and short (85 pages of fast-reading text), and Emanuel engages the reader with an overview of the current scientific knowledge about climate change. He writes clearly, so this book will be of interest to the general reading public. Book clubs will enjoy this book because non-specialist members will be hard-pressed to find an excuse for not reading it.

Emanuel begins with “the myth of natural stability.” He argues there is a delicate balance in nature, and the environment does not naturally sustain itself. The second chapter is a lay explanation of greenhouse physics. He presents the concepts in an easy-to-follow format. The third chapter examines the difficulty of the climate problem. Emanuel explains the interdependency of climate variables and the chaos of climate forcing. Chapter four connects the physics of chapter two and the complexity of the climate in chapter three with anthropogenic climate change. He considers the difficulty in distinguishing between human-caused factors and natural variations in climate patterns. By introducing readers to parameterization, Emanuel suggests one of the weaker areas of predicting the future of climate change.

The consequences of climate change are as complex as predicting how the climate will change. In chapter five, Emanuel writes about the various costs or penalties of climate change, including both the benefits and the detriments. He identifies warmer winters as a possible benefit and more intense storms as one of the potential detriments. Chapter six is about the role of the media. He suggests the media’s desire to appear impartial actually gives a biased picture of climate change by allowing equal exposure to both legitimate climate scientists and pseudo-scientist-detractors. Emanuel points to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a truly unbiased alternative to the media’s desire for scientific debate. The final chapter explores the political implications of the climate change debate and identifies the polarization of the climate issue along the lines of the conservative-liberal spectrum. Judith A. Layzer and William R. Moomaw write an afterword that points to the necessity of action, and they suggest inaction in the United States could become highly problematic in a future that will be dependent on sustainable energy technology.

My only criticism of this book is that it might be *too* simple. Readers might accept Emanuel’s explanation but not know what to do with it or not be engaged enough to stay with the problem. However, this book might be short enough to be widely read. If it stimulates conversation among readers, they might feel aroused to learn more about anthropogenic climate change and how to positively influence society’s response to the increasing climate crisis. That outcome would make it well worth owning and recommending this little book.

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