

## Fire and Falter

### Brief Review

Naomi Klein, *ON FIRE: The Burning Case for a GREEN NEW DEAL*, Penguin, Allen Lane, 2019.

Bill McKibben, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*, Wildfire, 2019.

Klein and McKibben are two of the most prominent and passionate climate warriors today. They have both published books this year. Klein's *On Fire* is both an urgent warning and a call to act. McKibben's *Falter* is a call to act but also an elegiac warning that we may not achieve the goal. But he also insists this is no time for either simple hope or hopeless despair but for out-and-out engagement.

Klein documents what any half-awake person already knows: the Earth is burning. What she also points to is a fire growing in the hearts and minds of more and more people - from school-striking children - and their teachers - to the growing awareness of the climate and ecological emergency in the general populace, evidenced in the social action of groups such as ER and the Sunrise Movement.

As would be expected, she accompanies her narrative with some analysis of the historical factors which have brought us here. This book is a collection of "long-form reporting, think pieces and public talks" over the past decade, which explore "the deep stories about the right of certain people to dominate the land and people living closest to it, stories that underpin Western culture".

So urgent is the apocalyptic danger our Western culture has caused, Klein argues that only a Green New Deal will make any difference. It would not only call a halt to our wasteful and catastrophic carbon-dependent economy but could transform our economy and society at the same time. She lists how it would do that and describes the demand for a New Green Deal that many are now making. Many critics think it unrealistic but she urges that "we were born for this moment".

Bill McKibben strikes a slightly different note. He warns that we may be faltering - that we may have "played out the human game". His original book, *The End of Nature*, published

thirty years ago in 1989 painted a gloomy picture, which has been more or less vindicated. *Falter* is, in some ways, bleaker and gloomier because the picture is now even worse. McKibben describes how the new technologies of artificial intelligence and robotics has threatened to drain the soul out of our world and civilisation.

He also provides a narrative account of the origins and growth of neoliberalism - its ideology and practice - from the end of the second world war, through the propaganda novels of Ayn Rand and the espousal of possessive individualist theory and gross material capitalism by Western governments, up until the extreme deregulatory economics and absence of ethics of today's administrations. It's a shocking story and McKibben doesn't hold back on the detail or the documentary evidence.

The bleak message of *Falter* is qualified, however, in a number of ways. McKibben offers us honesty rather than simple hope but, as we would expect, neither does he give in to despair. From his experience in building up [350.org](http://350.org) he urges committed engagement. In his epilogue he also provides two reasons we shouldn't give up. The first is "we do live on an unbearably beautiful planet" - something neoliberals have little sense of. Apart from the reality that there is no other planet to go to - anyone who thinks otherwise is fatally deluded - Mother Earth is worth all our energy in fighting for.

The second reason we should not despair, and something we should not forget, is to do with human nature. It is "*because we can destroy, but also because we can choose not to destroy*". If all species, all animals have their special gifts, "ours is the possibility of restraint". We can do incredible things, but we can also choose not to do them.

McKibben devotes a whole section to the power of "leverage". By this he is referring to the power the neoliberal establishment wield in terms of wealth and ideology. A point he could emphasise more is the leverage the Green movement has, in terms of truth and wealth of ideas. The scientific fact of climate change and our awareness of ecological wisdom is a powerful lever to use against the poverty of the neoliberal view. Any movement that has truth and imagination on its side is potentially very empowered. Both Klein and McKibben sense that the world is waking up. Now, more than ever we need to use and direct that power.

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