

Q & A with author David Christian and publisher Karen

Christensen

***This Fleeting World: A Short History of Humanity* by David Christian**

Why *This Fleeting World* is an important book

Why is the story told in *This Fleeting World* so important right now?

D. C.: I believe that all humans seek unifying stories that help them to see their place in the universe. Today, the world is so interlinked that, for the first time, there is a single story that makes sense for people in all cultures and all places. I believe it will be meaningful for all human societies because we are all involved in the global problems and challenges facing modern global society.

The Content and shape of *This Fleeting World*

***This Fleeting World* is both concise and expansive. How did you go about choosing material to include?**

D. C.: When I wrote this book, I had already written a history of the universe. In that history, human history occupied quite a small space, so I already had many ideas about what were the most important parts of the human story. I understood that what makes us humans unique is our capacity for sharing information so that information accumulates over time, giving us more and more power over our environment.

So, the main story is really about human creativity; how humans learned more and more about their environment and about each other, and what we should do with that knowledge today. It is also, of course, about conflict because as humans accumulated more power, they often used that to take resources from other humans in wars of conquest. There is a tragic and dangerous side to human history as well as an inspiring and creative side.

Historians and scientists differ in their theories of the past. Why did you select the theories to include in *This Fleeting World*?

D. C.: I am not an expert on most of the fields I write about. So I do what all non-experts do and try to find the most convincing and up-to-date scholarship. I am a scholar myself (I have done research on Russian history and the history of vodka!), so I know the difficulties and limitations of research. There are no guarantees that I will get it right, but, like every reader, I have to take responsibility for making careful judgments about which scientific theories look best at the moment.

I also have to understand that those theories may change, so that the story itself is constantly changing in its details. That is the virtue of modern science, and that is the skill that makes us humans different; we can adjust our ideas when we get new information.

***This Fleeting World* combines natural science with the humanities. Is this a new approach to history?**

D. C.: Actually the idea that science and history were different is very recent. Most societies have had intellectual traditions that saw human beings as embedded in the entire universe. So they believed it was important to think about human beings as being part of the universe. Really, all Big History does is try to return to that older tradition of unified knowledge, but with all the insights and information of modern science.

***This Fleeting World* is a short book for the long history for mankind. Why did you choose to tell the story this way?**

D. C.: This book is a bit like a world map. If you make the book too long, people get lost in the details and cannot remember the beginning when they reach the end! So we need both detailed histories and synoptic histories like *This Fleeting World*. I had been teaching histories of the universe for a long time before I wrote this book, so I was used to seeing human history as part of a much larger story.

In *This Fleeting World*, you say that collective learning was a significant step for evolution and progress. In the age of artificial intelligence and big data, what will be the outer limits of collective learning?

D. C.: I do believe that collective learning is what makes humans different. We are the first species in the history of the planet to share information so effectively that the amount of information available grows from generation to generation. That is why we are so powerful.

Technologies like printing and the internet make collective learning more powerful. But I do worry that eventually machines may become so good at collective learning that they become so powerful that we humans cannot control them!

The evolution of *This Fleeting World*

Why did you decide to write *This Fleeting World* and how did it come to be published?

D. C.: I have been greatly inspired by the work of the great world historian, William McNeill. A good friend of his, the publisher Karen Christensen, decided to prepare what would be the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, and I said I thought it would be very important to have some essays on the whole of human history.

I wrote three essays, one on the Paleolithic era, one on the Agrarian era, and one of the modern era, all based on my thinking about Big History. Then she asked me to put them together in a single book and that is the origin of *This Fleeting World*.

K. C.: I was introduced to David Christian on a hot summer's day in Colebrook, Connecticut, at the home of William H. McNeill. We discussed my plans for the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*. As David said, he expressed his doubt about the project because he felt that hundreds of separate articles would not convey the interconnectedness of the different stories. I said that perhaps he should write something that would tie it all together.

That led to his writing the three chapters that now form the majority of *This Fleeting World*. They first appeared as introductory chapters in the five-volume encyclopedia, but before long we were offering them separately to teachers. This proved so popular that I decided we could turn them into a very small book, and it has been very successful because it is so short and yet so complete.

Where does the book's name come from?

K. C.: The title *This Fleeting World* comes from a verse in the Diamond Sutra, the world's first known printed book, discovered in a cave in Dunhuang, in western China. It was the original working title for David's much longer academic book on Big History (published by the University of California Press). When that book was given a new title, *Maps of Time*, I was a little sad. But I realized that I could use the title I loved for this new book that I would be publishing. It's special to me, too, because on my first trip to China in 2001 I took my children to the caves of Dunhuang, and that trip was the beginning of my expanding involvement with China.

How did you get a blurb from Bill Gates to include on the cover of the book?

K. C.: We ran out of copies of the first printing in June 2010 and sent an urgent order to our printers in Michigan. By that time, three years after the first publication, Bill Gates had discovered David Christian's work and the Big History Project was in its early stages. I got the idea that perhaps Bill Gates would write a blurb for the book cover, and sent an email to one of his assistants asking if this might be possible. I was not very hopeful: Bill Gates is very busy and the book was already in the queue for printing.

I was going to Beijing that month with my daughter Rachel, who was in charge of the printing order. We had to change planes in Hong Kong and had a few minutes to get onto Wi-Fi and check email. I opened my email and found a message that Bill Gates could probably write a few words for us. I looked up at Rachel and said, "I'm not sure how you're going to feel about this news, but we need to stop the presses." So we held the presses for another week, giving us time to get the comment from Bill Gates and change the cover.

What does this book mean to you, Karen, and to your publishing company, which specializes in information about China and sustainability?

K. C.: As David Christian has said, one of the lessons we learn from a study of Big History is that the choices we humans make now about environmental challenges are crucial to the future history of humanity. I began focusing on China because I am committed to doing what I can to make the world a better place, and by providing fascinating educational books like *This Fleeting World* to readers in China, as well as other countries, Berkshire Publishing is able to fulfill its mission to provide “knowledge for a common future.”

Big History in *This Fleeting World*

How did you first become interested in the concept of Big History?

D. C.: I began teaching Big History in 1989 because I thought it was important for someone to try to put together all our knowledge about the past, from the sciences as well as the humanities. This would help us see human history as part of the larger history of the planet and even of the universe. There is a sort of origin story within modern science, a total story that can help people see the links between all modern forms of knowledge, just as origin stories provided unifying stories for ancient cultures.

Why is it necessary to look at human history within the context of the history of the universe?

D. C.: If we look at the past on a scale of 200,000 years, you can see the trajectory of the whole of human history. If you look at it at a scale of 500 million years, you can see other things, such as the fact that the role played by humans is quite unique. No other species has ever dominated the biosphere the way we do. That is a huge responsibility. Can we use our power in ways that benefit future generations? We desperately need this understanding because, without it, our current actions may cause a huge, global ecological catastrophe.

What Big History has to teach us

What can Big History teach us when it comes to current political trends such as the rise of nationalism in the United States and Europe?

D. C.: My personal view is that a surge of nationalism is just what we do *not* need in a world with nuclear weapons. Focusing too much on what divides us is more dangerous today than at any other time in the past. I see Big History as a way of countering some dangerous trends in today’s world and as a way of helping young people understand the challenges, opportunities, and problems we face as a united humanity.

Do you think Big History can inspire politicians and others in powerful positions?

D. C.: I hope Big History will help those in power to take seriously the problems that will stretch into the next 100 years and beyond. Big History might also help them to become more global and see themselves not just as servants of a particular country but also as servants of humanity, who have to collaborate with politicians from other countries to solve big global problems.

Big History and the future

How does Big History explain the present and predict our future?

D. C.: The only way of thinking about the future is to think about the past. Big History makes it clear that we humans have evolved as part of the history of a planet and an entire biosphere. So it highlights our relationship to the biosphere, and above all the fact that in the last century or two, we have begun to use resources on such a colossal scale that we are changing the biosphere. Of course, this raises lots of questions about the future. How will the changes we are causing to the climate system, to biodiversity, even to water flows, affect the lives of our grandchildren?

Are there any emerging trends, since the publication of *This Fleeting World*, that will be incorporated into the Big History narrative?

D. C.: Like all science-based stories, the details of the story will improve and get better as we gain new information. The Higgs boson particle has been shown to exist! We also have a much better understanding of the very real dangers of climate change. And I believe that all the many people engaged in developing the Big History story are learning to understand that story in new and more subtle ways.

Big History in the classroom

Does Big History oppose or complement national histories?

D. C.: Of course every nation needs to teach students about the history of the nation. But human beings have a unified history and I think it is a huge blind spot in modern education that we do not teach this to students, since that, after all, is the best way to learn what it means to be human.

National histories also encourage us to see the differences between humans, rather than the many things we share. In today's globalized world, the big problems such as climate change or global poverty cannot be solved nation by nation; they will need collaboration between nations around the world.

Should all historians be teaching Big History?

D. C.: I love teaching Big History and talking about it, and I am not the only person doing this. I would be very excited if more historians began to do Big History. But it would be terrible if that was all they did! We need historians to study the past at multiple scales. We need very detailed history (I have done such history myself) but I believe we also need history at very large scales.

How does Big History help explain something like why industrial growth began in Europe?

D. C.: In my view, information was accumulating at different speeds in many different parts of the world. Under the Song dynasty in China, there was a profound industrial revolution, but at that time the world was not yet connected, so ideas did not spread. The key breakthrough, in my view, was the discovery of the most efficient way of exploiting fossil fuels, beginning with coal.

Since the sixteenth century, Europe had been connected to all parts of the world through the first global trade networks. Because China had such vast resources, Chinese traders and governments were less interested in global trade. But these connections brought new knowledge, new wealth, and new resources to Europe, and new ways of thinking, which is why modern science really began in Europe.

In addition, Britain was an island with limited supplies of wood for energy. Yet coal reserves lay quite close to the surface, and close to river routes by which it could be transported. Then, the technologies that began with the steam engine suddenly gave Europe and Britain huge advantages in wealth, power, and armaments. They used those to build the empires of the nineteenth century.

But as modern knowledge spread around the world, the Europe advantage proved to be quite short-lived. Around 500 years ago, China and India and the Ottoman empire were probably the greatest empires in the world. Today, China and India are returning to that role after a brief absence of two or three centuries.