

# BOOK REVIEWS

DOI: 10.1377/hlthaff.2020.02011

## Food And Climate

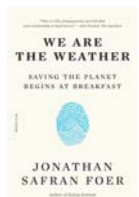
BY JESSICA FANZO

### WE ARE THE WEATHER: SAVING THE PLANET BEGINS AT BREAKFAST

By Jonathan Safran Foer

New York (NY): Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019

288 pp., \$25.00



The well-known fiction writer Jonathan Safran Foer has penned two major nonfiction works in the past several years, both with a focus on diets. *Eating Animals* was about his journey toward veganism, and *We Are the Weather*, published ten years later, is a natural second act. It delves more deeply into a topic that Foer clearly cares about: humanity's footprint on the planet and the imminent climate crisis.

I hesitated to pick up this book when it first came out because of its naïve title: Weather (short-term) is clearly distinct from climate (long-term averages of daily weather over time and space). It may seem like a technicality, but the lack of clarity on how urgent climate change is for the future of people and the planet, which this book emphasizes, requires us to get the terminology right.

In his book Foer argues that, collectively, people should eat fewer (if any) animal products, and at minimum, people should be vegans at both breakfast and lunch if they want to have a sustained, substantial impact on climate change. Foer writes, "We cannot keep the kind of meals we have known and also keep the planet we have known. We must either let some eating habits go or let the planet go. It is that straightfor-

ward, that fraught."

Foer illuminates for readers the grand scale of the problem, shying away from hard-hitting, doomsday facts on climate change in the first part of the book. He writes, "It is excruciatingly, tragically difficult to talk about the planetary crisis in a way that is believed." Knowing what people know, he wonders, why has such little action been taken to address the climate crisis?

Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* profoundly affected how Foer viewed climate change, but he is critical of the work's failure to mention that eliminating animals from the diet is, in his opinion, the most profound change an individual can make. According to some researchers, however, the most powerful change one can make to mitigate climate change is having one fewer child, followed by living car free and taking fewer transatlantic flights. Moving toward plant-dominant diets is certainly impactful, but there are more life-altering changes that individuals can make. And Foer's arguments that there is not enough attention by scientists and governments on diets is just not true. Never has there been more attention paid to the impacts of food systems on climate—and vice versa. But no one wants to talk about family planning because of its ethical sensitivities. Foer even derides electric cars and other potential solutions as impractical, although most people in this field of research believe that it will take many solutions across a range of sectors, systems, and behaviors for enough of a change to be made to matter.

Foer articulates that shifts in societal norms and human behavior start with individual choice, citing the public health examples of significant declines in tobacco smoking and the acceptance of the polio vaccine. Those changes took leadership, but also changes in behavior that then changed social norms. But are individual actions enough? Many say we

should drive less, fly less, and eat less meat. But others argue that personal actions such as these are a pointless drop in the ocean when set against the huge systemic changes that are required to prevent climate change. "When a radical change is needed, many argue that it is impossible for individual actions to incite it, so it's futile for anyone to try," Foer writes. "This is exactly the opposite of the truth: the impotence of individual actions is a reason for everyone to try." I believe he is right: Individual actions are part of a larger, collective action, and it matters.

In the second part of the book, Foer discourses on the inefficiencies of how food is produced and consumed and how food systems are decimating ecosystems, the natural resource base, and species biodiversity and wild habitats and triggering climate disruption and climate-related natural disasters. (The addition of citations here would have fostered more confidence in the reliability of the scientific findings and facts he describes.) He argues that we have a duty to act. However, much of this part of the text is spent on Foer's internal wars with eating meat, including a thirty-five-page self-reflection in which he doubts his own ability to be a vegan. He ends with a letter to his children, taking a page from Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, but with much less effect.

*We Are the Weather* is a great attempt at arguing that change is possible from the viewpoint of someone grappling with making radical transformations to their everyday diet. Unfortunately, as a scientist who has been working on food systems and diets for twenty years, I know it will take more than dietary changes to keep the planet healthy. ■

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