

The 11.15.15 Issue

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RE: THE FUTURE

For the Future Issue, the magazine considered ways to think about the future, instead of assuming anyone knew what was to come. Jon Gertner wrote about the secrets in the earth's ice: Scientists are studying it in an effort to determine how much time we have to respond to sea-level rise, or whether it's already too late. Jennifer Kahn investigated Crispr, a revolutionary — but ethically slippery — technique for genetic engineering.

Articles about changing ice sheets either tilt toward the hyperbolic, which ultimately undermines their impact among those skeptical of the science, or toward the political, which does the public's understanding of scientific investigation further disservice. This ice article, by contrast, takes a refreshingly rational approach, by breaking down the complex science and lucidly explaining its likely implications.

Thank you for not only presenting the science to the public, but also for introducing the scientists as neither superheroes nor hyperventilating partisans. *Reed Scherer, Distinguished Research Professor, Geology and Environmental Geosciences, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Ill.*

The scientist at the heart of the excellent ice piece was quoted as saying, "The obvious way to avoid a grim and flooded future would be to drastically curtail our carbon-dioxide emissions."

The quickest and most effective way to do this would be to impose a national tax on carbon emissions. The fairest way to do that would be to refund all the money collected to taxpayers on an equal basis. This should be something that all rational Democrats and Republicans can agree on. *Dennis Thompson, Santa Barbara, Calif.*

Seemingly an afterthought, Kahn concludes with a concern that Crispr may lead us to a eugenicslike situation wherein we attempt to cure genetic mutations that many (but not all) see as disabilities. Although a future that includes Crispr will necessarily raise these questions, we need not wait for that particular technology to come of age. We already have the ability, through preimplantation genetic diagnosis (P.G.D.), to make similar eugenic decisions today, by selecting, for I.V.F. implantation, only those embryos lacking an undesired disability. And like Crispr, P.G.D. also presents us with a not-so-far-fetched alternative concern that parents will actively select for embryos that have a trait that most, but not all, would consider a disability. This raises nontrivial legal, ethical and social concerns that ought to be dealt with today, before the power of Crispr and related technologies become widely available. *Dov Greenbaum, Assistant Professor, Department of Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry, Yale University, Lawrence, N.Y.*

It's certainly interesting to wonder what our future will look like, but for me it is equally fascinating to consider how the future will view the present. If pressed to differentiate between, say, the years 1120 and 1195, many of us might say, what's the difference, really? After all, that's only a 75-year span. Even the years between 1815 and 1890 — another 75-year span — might for many of us seem basically analogous. So when future generations look back, is it not possible that they'll simply lump 2015 together with 1940? Watch any movie musical from 1940 (or any movie, for that matter) or read any newspaper, and the urge may be to shout to future observers that 1940 and 2015 have very little in common. Or do they? Maybe that will be for future observers to decide. *Joel Samberg, Avon, Conn.*

RE: LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Rachel Monroe extols the “Death in ...” books, which chronicle death in American national parks.

Rachel Monroe's story about “Death in ...” books allows my family to confess a secret guilty pleasure. Several years ago we went to the Grand Canyon on spring break. My wife and I prepared our two preteens with tales of grand vistas and amazing hikes. When we got there, a weather front had moved in and the clouds and fog reduced the visibility to near-zero, with snow and sleet forecast the rest of the week. Our two children had the look of betrayal that every parent knows. The park ranger told us that it wasn't uncommon to have a late-afternoon clearing, so we decided to stay for the day anyway. Killing time in the gift shop, I stumbled upon “Death in the Grand Canyon.” To make a long story short, we spent the afternoon with me reading aloud tales of fathers doing foolish things and killing themselves, much to my children's delight. “The Cat in the Hat” it was not, but it saved the day, and at 4 p.m. the clouds parted and we got our majestic views. *Dave Kanzler, Oak Brook, Ill.*

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