

Reflections on "The Top 50 Sustainability Books"

By Wayne Visser

On 8 December 2009, I spoke at the launch event for my new book - The Top 50 Sustainability Books - at Heffers bookshop in Cambridge. At the end of this 3 year project, it is both a relief and a triumph to see the book in print - and it looks great, even if I say so myself! :)

One of the comments by our bookshop host was that they were surprised (and delighted!) that the 50 books were so diverse. That is certainly true, and there were some surprises even for us - books like A Sand County Almanac and The Dream of Earth were not even on our radar screen before we conducted the poll among the Cambridge alumni (on which the list is based).

In addition to this, I had three main reflections that I touched on in my brief talk, largely based on the

interviews I did with around 30 of the authors:

1. Worldviews - It was very clear that the books said much more about the authors' worldview - the lens through which they see reality - than the actual 'facts' of sustainability. Someone like Paul Ehrlich (The Population Bomb) was very pessimistic, while Jeffrey Sachs (The End of Poverty) was very optimistic.
2. Stories - I soon realised that the books mostly represent stories - possible futures that the authors' have imagined, based on their own culture, knowledge, experience, etc. Whether we buy into 'The Limits to Growth' or 'When Corporations Rule the World' story depends on where we are at in our own journey, as much as the authors'.
3. Hope - Finally, I deliberately asked them all where they derive their hope from, and almost without exception, it was the inspiration from people who are working tirelessly and selflessly to solve social and environmental problems.

Two anecdotes about the late Donella Meadows stick with me (as told by her ex-husband Dennis). On her door, she had a quote that said: If I die tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today. And when people used to ask her if we have enough time to solve our global problems, she would always say: Yes, precisely enough time, if we start today!

To me, these capture the spirit the lies at the heart of sustainability. It is an optimism built on making a difference; an attitude of action for hope.

For more information on the book, see [here](#).

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