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A Year Without a Winter Edited by Dehlia Hannah

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Dare to Imagine Climates Past and Future

A Year Without a Winter edited by **DEHLIA HANNAH**

Columbia UP, 2018. \$23.00 USD

Reviewed by **CONRAD SCOTT**

Under confoundingly and uncharacteristically wet July 2019 conditions in Edmonton in a year that saw a life-threatening delay to the Southeast Asian monsoon, a historic European heatwave that melted over ten billion tonnes of Greenland surface ice in a single day, and (later) an incalculable loss of flora and fauna with Australian bush fires, I sat down to read Lord Byron's 1816 poem "Darkness." This poem is included in editor Dehlia Hannah's timely 2018 collection of critical and creative works, *A Year Without a Winter*. This perceptive book attempts to capture the chaos of our time, from disruptions in global-to-regional weather cycles to a variety of ecological and social fallouts. As I read, the near-black, enclosed sky suddenly broke to illuminate the page through a skylight above, and I was struck by the unpredictability of this sudden shift. Perhaps fittingly, the reverse experience occurred for Hannah and the book's four contributing creative writers as they sat down to read Byron's piece together on an arid night in Arcosanti, Arizona: "[o]ut of a cloudless sky, a thundershower appeared directly overhead just as" they "sat down to read" the poem "under the stars" (Hannah 17). This moment was part of an "impromptu writing retreat, during which" Tobias S. Buckell, Nancy Kress, Nnedi Okorafor, and Vandana Singh "found inspiration under the unwelcome constraints imposed by a disordered environment" (16). Their insightful science fiction narratives collectively embody the unpredictability of the near-future, but also aptly anchor the stories' concerns with those of today. Buckell's "A World to Die For" (143-70) unveils a series of parallel realities where humanity has made choices that either destroy or preserve the natural world. Kress' "Cost of Doing Business" (173-211) positions a tech icon to reshape the American economy as a fossil fuel related viral pandemic mysteriously erupts. Okorafor's "Mother of Invention" (213-31) conflates impending motherhood with smart homes and life-threatening pollen storms. Singh's "Widdam" (233-67) redeems a sentient Arctic fossil fuel extraction unit in its quest to seek out and protect fresh water even as other "Saur" also rebel from their tasks and human characters attempt to go on living with purpose despite potential for ugliness and destruction in the world. Importantly, though, before the group parted ways to work on their respective short fictions, this gathering was also an echo of events two centuries earlier.

Hannah's *A Year Without a Winter* project and subsequent book collection makes a bold yet discerning choice, as it was orchestrated to coincide with the bicentennial of not only Byron's writing of "Darkness," but the inception of what would become Mary Shelley's famed *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). The young Mary Godwin's June 1816 Grand Tour with her lover, the married Percy Bysshe Shelley, was hampered by "ominous weather" (10) while staying on the shores of Lake Geneva. Here Shelley made the acquaintance of the nearby Lord Byron, who proposed to a select gathering a literary "'dare'" that, in part, "spawned ... the new genre of science fiction" (10). But, as Hannah astutely points out, this

small group, writing from experience borne of being put out of their element, had no larger conception of the global processes driving their regional weather (12). In fact, their creativity during what was later dubbed the Year Without a Summer has, at its root, the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, which altered the expected seasonal processes in places like Europe and as far away as North America.

Yet Hannah's collection is not specifically about Shelley's achievement, the "dare," or even the volcanic eruption: it is a well-timed, gathered-together treatise on our current engagement and reactions to the ongoing and extremely complicated climate crisis. The volume contains a multiplicity of modes meant to variously and accurately consider the problematic, prismatic mirror-house of our questioning—for example, poetry (25-27), essays (29-54, 65-87, 277-301, 333-41), and fiction (143-267). But the text actually begins with a cosmographic image interpreting its philosophical grounding by month (8) and continues, interspersed throughout, with epistolary excerpts from correspondence (57-63), narrative excerpts (332), various images, and collected Tambora postcards with "An Invitation to Disappear" (342-65). Adding further texture to the book are scientific and artistic experiments and installations (91-97); "narrative about [the] architectural narrative" (99) of conceiving and attempting to build Paolo Soleri's ecotopian enclave, Arcosanti (99-125); interviews (303-16, 327-31); and travelogue (319-26).

While a potentially dizzying and impenetrable ensemble faces the reader of *A Year Without a Winter*, echoing how thinkers like Jodi Dean and Timothy Morton have characterized climate change, each part is markedly considered and placed both organically and functionally within the whole. Uncovering the variety of documented perspectives on the extended Tambora event, the book's contents also mirror the necessarily multiple observations about the present climate disaster. This accumulation of elements is vital to the book's sense of perspicacity and its potential for prescience—considering its interlude of science fiction writing—and parallels what David Higgins asserts in his critical contribution when he says that the most productive current way of understanding the wide-reaching effects of Tambora is through "an assemblage of disparate voices from that time" that are available to be "gathered into a coherent narrative of the crisis, as registered from within its midst" (12). Surely *A Year Without a Winter* is just that, but from within the heart of our immediate, pressing, and rapidly expanding storm of interrelated environmental and social issues exacerbated by anthropogenic climate change processes. In a fresh and highly recommendable manner, Hannah and her co-conspirators soberly take up what was once perhaps meant as a diverting parlour game (the infamous "dare") and, following Shelley's serious example, populate these pages with measured critiques and imaginings of where we sit within the human-initiated catastrophe. Notably, in doing so, they pass the challenge on to modern audiences, who are implicated through the environmental impacts they perpetuate, and who must imagine creative ways forward as global systems accelerate towards the titular concern of the impending first year without a winter.

CONRAD SCOTT holds a PhD from and is an Instructor in the University of Alberta's Department of English and Film Studies. He researches contemporary science fiction and environmental literature, and his current project examines the interconnection between place, culture, and literature in a study of environment and dystopia in contemporary North American fiction. His

reviews and essays have appeared in *Science Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation*, *UnderCurrents*, and *Canadian Literature*.