

Nominee for the David Brower Award

Nominee:

Elizabeth Kolbert

The nominee deserves this award because:

There are a limited number of journalists and authors in the country who truly qualify as modern Paul Reveres. Elizabeth Kolbert, who manages to raise alarms without being alarmist, is one of them. In the dozen years since she came to the New Yorker from the New York Times, no one has done more to make clear to a national readership the true risks of a destabilized climate -- or to educate that audience on other threats to the ecological integrity of the planet, from bee colony collapse disorder to the white nose fungus that is devastating our bat populations to the worldwide plight of amphibians.

Kolbert's 2006 book *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, based on an award-winning three-part series for the New Yorker, stands alongside former Boston Globe reporter Ross Gelbspan's 1997 *The Heat Is On* as one of the most powerful commentaries to date on climate shift. Earth Day founder Denis Hayes, reviewing *Field Notes* for *Grist*, opened with praise for Kolbert's earlier work *The Prophet of Love* and used that as a jumping-off point to recount the virtues of the newer book:

"Elizabeth Kolbert began building a fan base among political junkies with a series of vivid New Yorker profiles that were collected in 2004's *The Prophet of Love*. Ranging from George Pataki and Hillary Clinton to Regis Philbin and Al Sharpton, from title character Rudy Giuliani to former Weatherman Kathy Boudin, Kolbert's pieces were filled with telling details missing from her characters' celebrity images.

"She pulled no punches... Still, I found myself developing empathy, and sometimes an unexpected trace of respect, for personalities I had blindly loved or loathed -- mostly loathed -- as distant caricatures. She made them human.

"Kolbert has now done for climate disruption what she did for celebrities. She has taken a topic that many people think of as an impersonal collection of hurricanes, spreading deserts, and rising oceans -- or perhaps as two lines crossing on a graph some decades from now -- and given it a human face. And, as important, given it urgency.

"*Field Notes From a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* is an extraordinary piece of reporting."

<http://www.grist.org/article/hayes>

Hayes was hardly alone in his positive response to the book. In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* noted,

"On the burgeoning shelf of cautionary but occasionally alarmist books warning about the consequences of dramatic climate change, Kolbert's calmly persuasive reporting stands out for its

sobering clarity. Expanding on a three-part series for the New Yorker, Kolbert (*The Prophet of Love*) lets facts rather than polemics tell the story: in essence, it's that Earth is now nearly as warm as it has been at any time in the last 420,000 years and is on the precipice of an unprecedented 'climate regime, one with which modern humans have had no prior experience.' An inexorable increase in the world's average temperature means that butterflies, which typically restrict themselves to well-defined climate zones, are now flitting where they've never been found before; that nearly every major glacier in the world is melting rapidly; and that the prescient Dutch are already preparing to let rising oceans reclaim some of their land. In her most pointed chapter, Kolbert chides the U.S. for refusing to sign on to the Kyoto Accord. In her most upbeat chapter, Kolbert singles out Burlington, Vt., for its impressive energy-saving campaign, which ought to be a model for the rest of the nation -- just as this unbiased overview is a model for writing about an urgent environmental crisis." cited at <http://www.powells.com/biblio/1596911255?&PID=25450>

The UK's Guardian was equally enthusiastic, starting off by citing Kolbert's exchange with an Inuit on the subject of robins that have turned up 500 miles north of the Arctic Circle, and proceeding to an appreciation for her recounting of the constructive steps we can -- if we choose -- take to forestall the threat of climate shock:

"We just thought, 'Oh gee, it's warming up a little bit,' islander John Keogak tells Elizabeth Kolbert. 'It was good at the start -- warmer winters, you know -- but now everything is going so fast.'

"If you have any doubts about the potential devastation facing the planet as a result of global warming, Kolbert's book will eradicate them. She takes the reader on a terrifying journey from Canada, Alaska, Iceland and Greenland through Manhattan and Washington to the Netherlands and York. The effects of global warming, she argues, can already be felt on every continent, in every country, by plants and animals alike.

"She describes butterfly populations edging northwards through the English countryside, mosquitoes that have mutated so that they go into diapause (or dormancy) later each year in the US and an extraordinary toad -- 'a flaming shade of tangerine' -- that has disappeared completely from the Monteverde cloud forest in Costa Rica. As for humans, families in the Netherlands have already moved into floating homes.

"All these tiny signs, brought to life in remarkable detail, point to a coming catastrophe. And it is the scientists -- not the campaigners -- who are ringing the alarm bells. 'It is true that we've had higher CO2 levels before,' one expert at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tells Kolbert. 'But, then, of course, we also had dinosaurs.'

"Kolbert presents the arguments in an utterly compelling and convincing manner and she does not shy away from the science. She goes into great detail about what can be done. As you reach the final chapters, you are left with some hope. 'I think we have a shot,' says one leading physicist."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/aug/12/scienceandnature.features>

Perhaps the most elegant summation of the impact of *Field Notes*, however, came from Sylvia Nasar, the author of *A Beautiful Mind*, who said simply,

"Reading *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* during the 2005 hurricane season is what it must have been like to read *Silent Spring* fifty years ago. When you put down this book, you'll see the world through different eyes."

Kolbert, whether inside a cave full of moribund bats or splashing through a rainforest stream in search of disappearing frogs, manages to bring her readers vividly into the situation with language that is clear and economical, yet highly evocative. She manages to underscore, even when her words might at first glance seem to understate -- and, implicitly or explicitly, she drives home the terrible cost to the human species of living as if cultural carelessness and deliberate ignorance of science did not have long-term and crippling consequences. Here, from a 2007 *New Yorker* piece -- "Unconventional Crude" -- is an excerpt from her description of a visit to the Alberta tar sands:

"We made our way out of the pit and headed on, following the bitumen to its next stop, the upgrader. Along the way, we passed a murky expanse of water with oily scum on the surface. A few dozen scarecrow-like creatures, fixed to empty barrels, were bobbing on top. This, Gloria Jackson explained, was a tailings pond; it held water that had been used in the separation process and was too contaminated with mercury and other toxins to be released back into the Athabasca. (Suncor has nine such ponds, which collectively cover an area of eleven square miles.) The scarecrows, known as 'bitumen,' were supposed to discourage birds from landing on the pond and poisoning themselves. Every minute or so, a dull boom filled the air. This was the sound of a propane cannon, another bird-intimidation device...."

"No matter how it is carried out, oil extraction is a destructive business. Conventional oil wells require pipelines and drill pads and roads for heavy equipment; all of these fragment (or destroy) the landscape. The flaring of natural gas, which often accompanies oil production, produces an array of air pollutants, and leaks and spills release toxins ranging from volatile chemicals, like benzene (a known carcinogen), to much heavier compounds, like benzopyrene (another known carcinogen). With unconventional oil, the damage tends to be higher all around -- more land gets disturbed, more pollutants are produced, and more opportunities arise for contamination. And then there are the greenhouse gases."

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/11/12/071112fa_fact_kolbert#ixzz1KbiRNjPi

Unlike some environmental writers, Kolbert is equally as skilled at capturing the essence of a human subject as capturing the essence of a place or circumstance. Of *Green for All* founder Van Jones she wrote in 2009, in "Greening the Ghetto,"

"A few months ago, Van Jones, the founder and president of a group called *Green for All*, went to visit New Bedford, Massachusetts. His first stop of the day was the public library, where someone had assembled an audience of about thirty high-school dropouts. They leaned back in their chairs, hands in the pockets of their oversized sweatshirts. A few appeared to be stoned.

"Jones, who is forty, is tall and imposing, with a shaved head and a patchy goatee. He wears rimless glasses and favors dark clothing. On this particular day, he was wearing a black turtleneck, black jeans, black boots, and a charcoal jacket. He was introduced by a community organizer and aspiring rapper, who described him as 'a leader with answers,' a 'genius from the hood, similar to our own,' and a youthful version of Barack Obama. When it was his turn to speak, Jones rejected the lectern that had been set up for him, saying that it reminded him too much of college.

"I love Barack Obama,' he said. 'I'd pay money just to shine the brother's shoes. But I'll tell you this. Do you hear me? One man is not going to save us. I don't care who that man is. He's not going to save us. And, in fact, if you want to be real about this -- can y'all take it? I'm going to be real with y'all. Not only is Barack Obama not going to be able to save you -- you are going to have to save Barack Obama.'"

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/01/12/090112fa_fact_kolbert#ixzz1KbYH8JhC

While global warming has been a particular focus, Kolbert's environmental "beat" extends well beyond the climate. In her 2009 piece "The Sixth Extinction", she recounts in some detail -- her attention to which makes the situation the more moving -- the plight of bat populations devastated by white nose fungus, which may have been introduced into caves by human tourists. Describing a visit to Vermont's Aeolus Cave, she estimates that "before white nose hit, more than two hundred thousand bats -- some from as far away as Ontario and Rhode Island -- came to spend the winter", but the scene in the cave today is "horrific":

"Despite the cold, there was an awful smell emanating from the cave -- half game farm, half garbage dump... There were giant icicles hanging from the ceiling, and from the floor large knobs of ice rose up, like polyps. The ground was covered with dead bats; some of the ice knobs, I noticed, had bats frozen into them."

She finds parallels between the plight of the bats and that of amphibians, and gives a clear-eyed view of the likely involvement of the human species in the ongoing collapse of thousands of others being witnessed by scientists:

"It is now generally agreed among biologists that another mass extinction is under way. Though it's difficult to put a precise figure on the losses, it is estimated that, if current trends continue, by the end of this century as many as half of earth's species will be gone."

<http://hectocotylus.blogspot.com/2009/05/sixth-extinction-by-elizabeth-kolbert.html>

Writers with Kolbert's gifts may not be comforting, but they perform a unique, powerful, and critical service to their readers and to the world. The role they play is eloquently summarized in the citation that accompanied the 2010 presentation to Elizabeth Kolbert of the Heinz Award:

'She is an award-winning journalist who brings her natural curiosity and intelligence to bear on the growing concerns raised by our warming planet. By dissecting and making accessible the vast and highly technical scientific information available on global climate change, she brings these crucial issues to a wider audience.

'She has become a trusted resource to a growing network of concerned citizens who crave informed expertise on the environmental issues but who lack the access she has acquired to the many disciplines researching the topic.'

<http://www.heinzawards.net/recipients/elizabeth-kolbert>

No journalist writing today is more richly deserving of the Sierra Club award that bears the name of David Brower. We need many more Elizabeth Kolberts if we are to awaken the country, and the culture, to the true extent of the crisis we face. The Club will do honor to itself, and to the memory of Dave Brower, by recognizing this singular, dedicated observer, commentator, and creator.

[Please note: the phone and email contacts given on this nomination form for Elizabeth Kolbert are those of the literary agency that represents her, The Robbins Office, through whom contact should be initiated. Also, the "previous recognition" window below is too small to allow full identification of relevant honors and awards. I would request that a separate form be created for the Brower Award that allows for such necessary anomalies where well-known writers are concerned. -- CC]

Previous recognition

yesAAAS, 2006; NAS, 2006; Lannan Fdn., 2006; Heinz Award, 2010

Local newspapers to notify:

New York Times, 620 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018
Berkshire Eagle, PO Box 1171, Pittsfield, MA 01202

Group Newsletter:

Chapter Newsletter:

Nominator:

Christopher Childs
Nat'l: EE & RE Task Force; Chap: CARE Com