

## **FMS Book Club Bremen 1.Dec.2015**

Host: Susan Gaines, Händelstr. 5, Bremen

### **Participants:**

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### **Book discussed:**

*ODDS AGAINST TOMORROW*

by NATHANIEL RICH

Published 2013

### **Summary**

The book tells the story of a young professional nerd in New York who is working for a new type of insurance company predicting catastrophic events by using advanced statistical techniques. He is described as intellectually brilliant but he is often a nervous wreck as he both hates and loves the anxieties of his work. The name of this main character is Mitchell Zukor.

Elsa is a fellow student, who has a heart disease that could cause her death at any moment. Early in their studies Mitchell saves her life and he is fascinated by her. Elsa lives in a completely opposite world in the green back country of Maine trying to farm land for vegetables together with some friends. To the great astonishment of Mitchell she does not fear death, although or maybe because it is such an imminent threat to her. The two exchange letters to express their opinions about work and life in general but they never meet again during the main part of the book.

The third main character of the book is Jane who later becomes Mitchell's partner in more than one aspect: he hires her to work in the same company and they also have an affair especially in the second part of the book when they are escaping from the environmental catastrophe that had been correctly predicted by Mitchell.

The major event of the book is this flood, a tsunami-like flood that inundates all of New York and more territory along the coast. The author describes how this catastrophe changes the attitude of people and how they change their behavior in various ways.

### **Personal Statements**

#### **Discussion Points**

- All 8 people in the discussion group thought that the novel was interesting enough to read but that it was definitely lacking in science. They agreed that the problem of climate change is an up-to-date topic and that the novel gives many issues to think and discuss about.
- The story told in the book is not believable.

- The book is really a parody of this world, showing the most extreme positions of individual ways of life.
- There is a change of character in Mitchell and Elsa, in a way they change their roles: First Mitchell lives his professional life in the office of a New York skyscraper, in the end he wants to grow vegetables in the new so-called “flatlands” of New York as a main occupation, whereas Elsa starts growing vegetables on her farm in Maine in the beginning of the novel but at the end wants to become an environmental lawyer.
- The topic of Mitchell’s neurotic anxiety is repeated endlessly in the first half of the novel.
- There are some beautiful scenes described in the novel, e.g. gliding in a canoe through the inundated city.
- The book focuses at the same time on the technology-driven society of America and on the American dream of living in the wilderness of this vast continent.
- Statistics are important in this novel, especially statistics used for calculating the risks of insurance companies due to disasters. Comment of one participant: Statistics have led to social policies one hundred years ago and statistics lead to environmental policies today.
- In this book there is no middle group, there are only extremes.
- Elsa is a romantic figure with another worldliness, that of a fairy.
- In the second half of the book people are completely overdone and radical in their behavior: There are for example hoards marauding stores and also killing people.
- Could this novel ever be made into a movie, is there enough “story” to do it?
- Is the transformation of the characters credible, e.g. Mitchell loses his fear and changes to the opposite of his former self?
- The book deals with the economics of the climate catastrophe but not with its politics. Why is this so?
- Are all the facts of the novel well researched and “true” to the novel?
- The book is written in 4 parts (college, Mitchell’s transition to FutureWorld, the flood, coming back to New York). The English version of the book uses the same illustration of the flood in all parts. This is not the case for the German version (Titel: Schlechte Aussichten); the latter seems to be the better design.
- The topic of risk assessment was discussed – personal risk can be handled more easily than public risk. A special case is that Mitchell cannot handle Elsa’s risk.
- Is statistics a useful strategy in the real world? What form of knowledge is it?
- Can statistics provide a solution in the real world, e.g. in environmental problems like the ozone hole, dying forests or melting ice caps?