

WHY HAVE WE DONE SO LITTLE TO TACKLE CLIMATE CHANGE?

By Meara Sharma – April 6, 2018

Rain clouds hover over Los Angeles. In his new book about climate change, “No Immediate Danger,” William T. Vollmann presents an overwhelming archive of who we are, and what we’ve wrought. (Robyn Beck/AFP/Getty Images)



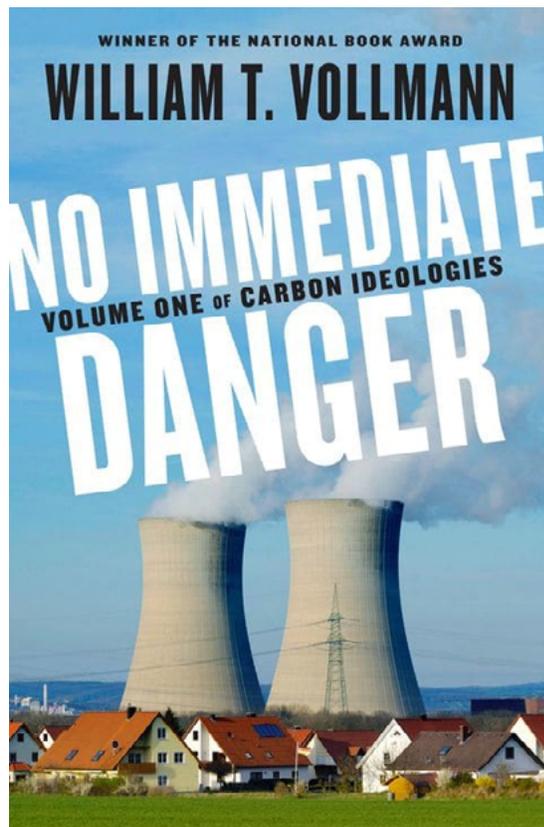
A decade ago, the environmental philosopher Timothy Morton invented a new word: hyperobject. It describes something so “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” that it eludes our understanding. The best example of a hyperobject is climate change. Its scale confounds our perception. It is everywhere—“viscous,” as Morton has it — and yet it is hard to see directly. Its implications are so great that they verge on unthinkable.

William T. Vollmann’s new book, “No Immediate Danger,” tussles with the comprehension-defying nature of climate change. It is a 600-page amalgam

of scientific history, cultural criticism, mathematical experiments, risk-benefit analyses of energy production and consumption, and diaristic meanderings through radiation-festooned landscapes after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011. The effect is bewildering.

[William Vollmann’s ‘The Dying Grass’ is the reading experience of a lifetime]

The first of two volumes, jointly called “The Carbon Ideologies,” the whole book is written as a letter to the future. “Someday,” it begins, “perhaps not



“No Immediate Danger,” by William T. Vollmann (Viking)

long from now, the inhabitants of a hotter, more dangerous and biologically diminished planet than the one on which I lived may wonder what you and I were thinking, or whether we thought at all. This book is for them.” We know more today about the effects of climate change than ever before (although, as Vollmann and others have noted, we’ve really known for a half a century). We are experiencing heightened storms, record droughts, rising seas and temperatures, increased pollution. And yet we have done little to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions, which are at record highs. The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is at a level not seen since the Pliocene era — more than 3 million years ago. Why so little action? Is it because many of us don’t care about some “ecosystem somewhere”? Because the science lacks certainty? Because of companies’ concerns about their profits? Because of data suppression? Because it is easier not to act? These questions course through the book.

“No Immediate Danger” is divided in two parts, beginning with a primer. It is a kind of encyclopedia of the causes of climate change, including manufacturing, transportation, agriculture and industrial chemicals, with occasional stretches of commentary and analysis that are some of the most compelling parts of the book. In the opening section, titled “What Was the Work For?” Vollmann acerbically logs the small, seemingly routine comforts that many of us enjoy — the ability to wake up and turn on the lights, to shower at will, to cook with gas, to take fresh vegetables out of the refrigerator, to leave our devices plugged into the wall, to wash clothes in a machine, to throw out our trash, to cool our houses, to heat our houses, and on and on. “I think we felt a kind of grandness to have so many energies at our call, even if we rarely thought about our situation,” he writes. “Why shouldn’t they serve us faithfully?” (In 2012, 61 percent of power in the United States was wasted.) It’s an elegant indictment of the mundane behaviors that require immense amounts of carbon-emitting fuel, and the ways we’ve structured our world around fulfilling and continually augmenting energy demand. “In each two days of 2009,” Vollmann points out, “the world burned the entire oil output of 1990.”

He adds: “Being one of those pathetic creatures called ‘literary’ writers, I never before got called upon to quantify peak load capacity or ponder the carbon content of dirty diapers.” Thus, he throws himself exuberantly into numbers, producing dozens of calculations and comparative tables on the global-warming potentials of the three worst greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide), the energy required to manufacture the “big five” materials (cement, paper, steel, plastics, aluminum), the solar energy lost en route to reaching the Earth’s surface, and dozens of others. These sections are dense and sometimes inscrutable, but terrifying insights are to be found. For instance, the cultivation of rice — “the most important grain crop in the world” — accounts for about 50 percent of Japan’s

methane emissions. A pound of nylon sends up 10.5 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Brussels sprouts are among the highest producers of nitrous oxide.

The title “No Immediate Danger” refers to a phrase Japanese authorities used after the Fukushima disaster, and in the second part of the book, Vollmann enters that realm. Our insatiable demand for energy has pushed us toward nuclear power, touted as a miracle solution that can sustain our way of life without emitting carbon dioxide and thus contributing to climate change. During trips to Japan, Vollmann wades through the zeal that surrounds nuclear power (“Will free us from the fear that our energy resources will run out.”) and considers its hidden and heinous costs. He also interrogates the safety failures of the plant operator, the Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), whose management plan stated, “The possibility of a severe accident occurring is so small that from an engineering standpoint, it is practically unthinkable.”

Vollmann treks through communities in the vicinity of the Fukushima plant, measuring radiation with a dosimeter and a scintillation counter wherever he goes. He meets tsunami survivors, decontamination workers and plant officials, often supplying them with radiation levels that suggest they’re not as safe as they think. He is repeatedly met with chilling stoicism. The disaster was “just bad luck. “Even natural radiation exists, and if it is natural, it must be all right.” Nuclear power “is necessary. Whether it is good or bad is another story.” Perhaps this is true patriotism. Or a coping mechanism. Or, as one of Vollmann’s taxi drivers says, “it’s invisible, so I don’t feel anything.”

I read much of “No Immediate Danger” in Delhi, where the air is heavy with the refuse of coal plants, construction and the steady thrum of 10 million cars (as Vollmann calculates, gross domestic prod-

uct growth and the growth of emissions go hand in hand). Breathing in Delhi is equivalent to smoking about 40 cigarettes a day, and 1 in 3 children has impaired lungs. One hazy day, while sitting in snaking, mind-numbing traffic on a major flyover, I peered over the edge. Beside the sacred Yamuna river, putrid and parched, a large group of men were burning a pile of what looked like refrigerators and televisions. Thick black smoke billowed up toward the highway. Vollmann’s refrain — What Was the Work For? — rang through my ears like a drill.

There are swifter, simpler, more efficient ways to learn about how human impact on the planet has set us striding into a “hot, dark future.” But “No Immediate Danger” — written as calculated denial becomes policy — takes a tack that feels appropriate. It is overwhelming. It drowns us in calculations, facts, images, stories. It embodies the confusion of our current moment, the insidiousness of disbelief, and the mania-inducing reality that our greatest threat is the hardest to act upon. It is a feverish, sprawling archive of who we are, and what we’ve wrought.

In describing the vast amounts of research, travel, personal expense, risk and, indeed, energy consumption he engaged in to write this book, Vollmann admits to the reader from the future that much of it had to do with assuaging his own guilt, avoiding the shame of doing nothing. “Well, in the end I did nothing just the same,” he concedes. “And the same went for most everyone I knew.”

NO IMMEDIATE DANGER
Volume One of Carbon Ideologies
By William T. Vollmann

Viking. 601 pp. \$40

[Link: Why have we done so little to tackle climate change?](#)