



A History of the Future

James Howard Kunstler

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A History of the Future is the third thrilling novel in Kunstler's "World Made By Hand" series, an exploration of family and morality as played out in the small town of Union Grove.

Following the catastrophes of the twenty-first century—the pandemics, the environmental disaster, the end of oil, the ensuing chaos—people are doing whatever they can to get by and pursuing a simpler and sometimes happier existence. In little Union Grove in upstate New York, the townspeople are preparing for Christmas. Without the consumerist shopping frenzy that dogged the holidays of the previous age, the season has become a time to focus on family and loved ones. It is a stormy Christmas Eve when Robert Earle's son Daniel arrives back from his two years of sojourning throughout what is left of the United States. He collapses from exhaustion and illness, but as he recovers tells the story of the break-up of the nation into three uneasy independent regions and his journey into the dark heart of the New Foxfire Republic centered in Tennessee and led by the female evangelical despot, Loving Morrow. In the background, Union Grove has been shocked by the Christmas Eve double murder by a young mother, in the throes of illness, of her husband and infant son. Town magistrate Stephen Bullock is in a hanging mood.

A History of the Future is attention-grabbing and provocative, but also lyrical, tender, and comic—a vision of a future of America that is becoming more and more convincing and perhaps even desirable with each passing day.

A History of the Future Details

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From Reader Review A History of the Future for online ebook

Lori L (She Treads Softly) says

A History of the Future by James Howard Kunstler is the highly recommended third book in the World Made by Hand series. These books are set in a future America after a complete economic, political, and cultural collapse has occurred. Epidemics have swept the land and the population has been decimated. In this world, those who are going to survive are forced to live literally by what they can do with their own hands and labor. It is sort of a dystopian pioneer setting - the simple life but in a changed, harsh world.

It is just before Christmas in the town of Union Grove in upstate New York. While there is no electricity, the town is doing what it can to decorate and celebrate a much simpler holiday, but perhaps one with more meaning after the catastrophes of previous years. The New Faith Covenant Brotherhood Church has opened a tavern, a pet project for Brother Jobe, which gives the townspeople a place to fellowship and helps bring a sense of a new normalcy returning to Union Grove. Andrew Pendergast is thriving. He has kept busy, and with his many varied interests, is actually doing quite well in this new world where self-sufficiency is the key.

But then the unthinkable happens - a double murder. It appears that Mandy Stokes, a woman whose sanity is truly in question, has murdered her child and husband on Christmas Eve. She needs to be locked up. The Brotherhood volunteers a place where this is possible and now the town must decide how to proceed. Is there a legal system intact to handle a murder trial? During the same time, Daniel Earle, the son of Mayor Robert Earle who left Union Grove at the end of the first book, World Made By Hand, has returned home. Emaciated, exhausted, and ill, Daniel needs a chance to recover, but even more important is the news he brings of the fractured outside world.

The series started with World Made By Hand and The Witch of Hebron. Although I have read World Made By Hand, I have not read the second book and had no problem following the story. It might behoove readers interested in this series to at least read World Made By Hand first.

Many of the same concerns I had with World Made By Hand continued with A History of the Future, with the exception of tying up the loose ends of the story. Naturally, if you are writing a series of books set in the same world, certain parts of the story and plot may continue on into the next novel, so that problem was neatly answered. The female characters continue to feel one dimensional and I still know that people around my part of the country could survive and thrive because they have a wealth of skills and knowledge that the people of Union Grove, NY, are somehow lacking. It is encouraging that the survivors are doing better and learning old/new-to-them skills.

Disclosure: My Kindle edition was courtesy of Grove/Atlantic for review purposes.

Chrissy says

This is the 3rd book in the World Made by Hand series and I have loved them all. This one ended in such a way that I know a 4th is coming. I'm already looking forward to it!

Hannah says

I'm really enjoying this series of books. It's an interesting thought experiment on topics that have occurred to me many times - what happens if we have no more electricity or oil? How is climate change going to affect our lives? Why do we build cities the way we have been doing?

The author has a way with words, and has clearly had some of the same thoughts I have had, about community and city planning and education. The only thing that's starting to annoy me is that so far there are only white Christians in the books. I happen to think that an interesting question would be how a diverse community might (hopefully) pull together if everyday life suddenly became very different. I'm okay with suspending disbelief, and I don't think every novel needs to perfectly accurately address every topic, in order to be enjoyable. That's just what I perceive is missing from this series: different kinds of people. However, I am listening with rapt attention and can't wait to get back to my audiobook when I have moments of free time. The narrator is amazing, and the whole thing feels like an adult version of *Little House on the Prairie*, which was totally my jam as a kid.

Jennifer says

A couple of years have passed since we last hung out the residents of Union Grove, New York. In many ways not that much has changed. There's progress being made in the construction of a community laundry and a new tavern has opened providing a focal point for socialization. You'll still bump into Robert Earle and his friend Loren Holder. Those who have survived the collapse of the government and all its subsequent illnesses are still scratching out a living out of what remains by their newly embraced roles. Awesomely enough though, Union Grove is about to expand. With the unexpected arrival of Robert's son Daniel, who left town with Loren's son two years ago and had not been heard from since, we are finally able to get a first hand account of what the America of now has become.

Daniel's account of his travels reveal a country in the grips of a race war. Loving Morrow, the leader of the Foxfire Republic has gathered a band of white supremacist thugs and driven the blacks and "others" out of certain states. The dispossessed rally under their own leader Sage. Meanwhile, what remains of the US federal government has drifted from DC to Nashville, to Chicago, and finally to St Paul. The Foxfire Republic is poised against the government for control of the Ohio River. Daniel himself is recruited for an assassination plot against Loving Morrow, a task which he struggles to relate to his family. As Daniel weaves the tale of his American journey existence, others in Union Grove are handling more local dramas including a supernaturally motivated murder and individuals trying to fit in in this still fairly new world.

I would recommend this entire series for its variety of characters, real sense of place and a spattering of weird in all the right places.

Ted Stark says

I enjoy this series. A different take on the post-apocalypse world.

Erica says

Certainly not the best of the World Made by Hand series... the writing seemed overly simplistic and repetitive, even for Kunstler. This is the first time I actually didn't get pulled in head over heels into Union Grove and I finished the book feeling disappointed.

Bryan Winchell says

This is another interesting addition to this series, which takes place in post-collapse America maybe 20-30 years in the future. The previous two in the series were probably better as stories in and of themselves, but I enjoyed how Kunstler used this one to show the changes to the broader world outside of upstate New York. I also think he has done a nice job laying the groundwork for the fourth and final book in the series, which I heard him say in a podcast interview would likely be out in 2015. All in all, if you are at all interested in the possibility that our techno-centric, cheap-energy-based world may not survive the century and what a world beyond our current situation may look like, this is a very well-thought-out series that also happens to be good stories in their own right.

Shari says

It is hard for me to admit that I was disappointed by this book. I really wanted to like it. I really expected to like it. It was not a bad book, but it was not nearly what it could or should have been, considering how good the previous volumes were. I give it 2 stars, which according to GoodReads means I find it ok. And that's accurate. I didn't dislike it, but it didn't blow my skirt up.

Almost all of my gripes about the book come from believability--or the lack thereof. I enjoy James Kunstler's positing of his particular style of dystopian future because I find it the most likely to happen. Zombies and viruses and mutants are fun, but the end of the oil age is far more likely.

Both "World Made by Hand" and "The Witch of Hebron" were interesting, full of characters who engaged me and who I wanted to know more about. "A History of the Future" did not engage me very much and I found the new characters either weak or unbelievable and the returning characters largely unrealistic.

The part of "A History of the Future" that bothered me the most, though, was the story-telling from the prodigal son Daniel. I realize that Daniel had a huge story to tell and that it would take time to tell it. My complaint is not with the length of the story or even the content, but rather the language used to tell it. Because Daniel literally "tells" his story, the language he uses should be believable and natural. It is neither.

People--especially young people--do not speak the way Daniel speaks. Several times I found myself wishing Daniel had carried a small notebook and written down his story so he could read it rather than tell it. When we write, we use different language than we use when we speak aloud. Daniel's words would have been far more believable if they were read from a journal. Besides, how can I believe that his memory is so excellent that he remembers the great detail he apparently remembers? I just can't.

The part of Daniel's storytelling that I found most off-putting was his incessant and inappropriate (even by today's standards) use of the word "like." I felt that Kunstler wanted to be, like, timely and, like, relevant but instead managed to be, like, trite and forced, and the eye-popping number of, like, commas that using the word necessitates makes it, like, really hard to read. Like.

I don't have much to say about the relationship between Daniel and Loving Morrow. I also found it to be unbelievable and almost embarrassing. Perhaps 18-year-olds in a world as broken as this one would behave much differently than they do in our world today. Perhaps. If they do, I hope they, like, stop using the word "like" in a ridiculous fashion. And I hope we are never able to be led as such simple-minded radicals the way Loving Morrow managed to lead this batch.

I do look forward to reading "The Harrows of Spring." I want to know what happens to these people. For the most part, I like them and care about them. I want to see whether Brother Jobe is the brilliant schemer I felt he was in the first book or the practical opportunity-seizer of the second. Or was he initially a schemer and now truly wants to build a community? What about Jasper Copeland? He is the character with the most promise to improve his community, yet he was dropped after a shining moment in the second book. I want to see his potential realized. And what happens to Stephen Bullock? That old asshole has something coming and I want to be around to see it, whatever it is.

Jason says

Although I have stopped reading Kunstler's blog because of his tiresome tirades against tattoos and black Americans, I still think his overall thesis about the "long emergency" is an accurate one. Plus I really enjoy the world he has made (by hand!) in these novels. *A History of the Future*, the third in this series, was as enjoyable a read as the first two novels. It also (finally) provided a look at what happened to the world outside of upstate New York, as recounted by a prodigal son who barely survived his voyage through what remains of the United States. Barge travel, unskilled labor, horse traders, local whiskey, indentured servitude, racial politics, neo-Confederates (i.e., "corn pone Nazis"), and the treatment of the mentally ill by a justice system in tatters are a few of the topics that Kunstler explores here. By the time I finally put this book down, I couldn't wait to see where this imagined future is headed next. It will be a hard world in any case, but not one without beauty and humanity. And lots of locally produced alcohol, which cannot be a bad thing.

Kathryn Bashaar says

I really enjoyed *World Made by Hand* but hadn't realized Kunstler had turned it into a series until I came across this third in the series at the library.

The premise of this series is that in the near future the world has undergone a series of catastrophes - a disastrous Middle East war, annihilation of LA and DC, a series of epidemics - that have caused the collapse of consumerist, central-government-managed, fossil-fuel-driven civilization. Humanity is back to the 19th century - at best.

I don't think our civilization would collapse as quickly as these books represent, but, if you can suspend that disbelief, Kunstler's post-apocalyptic world is vivid and plausible.

World Made by Hand included good characters and a tight plot with a lot of tension, if I recall correctly. The characters in this third book are not as well-drawn, and the plot lacks tension. I think Kunstler made a

mistake in telling Daniel's story as a retrospective. We already know he will survive, since he is telling the story once he returns to Union Grove, so his story lacks drama. I think Daniel's story should have been told in present tense, alongside the events in Union Grove, even though they are not happening concurrently. And it would have been a neat trick to relate them somehow. The plot of this book is driven mostly by the showing of how the world works, and how various people adapt or fail to adapt, after the collapse. That's interesting, to be sure - the book was a real page-turner for me- but does not excuse a kind of flabby plot.

As a Christian, I really liked that religious faith was given a place, but not a disproportionate place, in the life of Union Grove after the collapse of the "old times." Some people are bitter against God, but the Congregational Church survives, as does a new Christian sect that seems weird but does a lot of good in the town. This seems about right to me. Kunstler treats faith with what seems to me proportionate respect.

As a feminist, I was disappointed that women seem to have very little agency in the post-apocalyptic world, but, hey, it's not my book, I don't get to decide these things. Overall, this was a good read and I will probably go back and read the second in the series, *The Witch of Hebron*

Carolyn McBride says

Couldn't Put it Down

Not quite as impactful as the first in the series, but gripping and engaging all the same. I couldn't put it down, and ended up reading it in two sessions. Very pleased with Brother Jobe, whom I wasn't quite sure I liked initially.

I do hope there is, or will be, another volume in this series. The characters all grow on you and the reader is left with hope at the end. Very glad I bought this and the ones before it.

Kevin says

It's the third novel in his *A World Made By Hand* series, which is a great take on the post-apocalyptic future. I like his style and like the world, but the plot isn't quite there. It follows a bunch of mostly disconnected stories that overlap occasionally and none of them come to a very satisfying conclusion. It feels kind of lackluster. It's worth reading if you like the series, but it's not a great chapter.

John Norman says

This is a fun read. I've given it five stars, and it is important that you understand that rating in the context of what the author is trying to do: This is an entertainment, a fable, a cautionary tale, a ripping yarn. If the novel was positioned as high literature, I'd give it a different rating. There are a couple of negatives but on the whole if you care about what life will be like when the fossil fuels are gone: read this and its predecessors in its series.

This is the third book in a series kicked off with *World Made By Hand* and *The Witch of Hebron*.

In the first novel the power is gone, and the small town of Union Grove, New York, contends with other

local communities: A quasi-feudal plantation; an anarchist group of bikers who oversee the dump; and a religious crew on the run (not unlike the early Mormons). The Witch of Hebron is sort of a side-story involving a boy and a woman who provides different kinds of comfort to a variety of seekers.

This novel takes up the main story from *World Made By Hand*. A heinous murder happens, and the town and its environs must decide how to deal with it. The question is: Does the area still have the legal structures to exact justice and mercy in a civilized fashion? Meanwhile, a young man who at the end of *World Made by Hand* had lit out for the country to see what had happened elsewhere in the former USA, comes back with tales to tell. As the first novel was about the competition between societal structures in the small, this novel explores the emerging governmental competitions between what remains of the federal government, and some competing new countries in what was the Southern United States.

The novel is packed with appreciation for old ways and contempt for the productions of modern culture, most of which have decayed faster than their older counterparts (for instance, buildings made in the 1850s are intact, while buildings made in the 1960s have slumping roofs).

If you're curious about this, I'd advise starting with the first one, *World Made by Hand*. But this novel can be read standalone.

My concerns: Kunstler has some strong female characters but they are bundles of stereotypes. Meanwhile, as in the first novel especially, there are some supernatural elements that seem to be just thrown in. I think in part with the use of the supernatural, Kunstler is trying to remind us that this is just a story. That's the charitable view. But, really, I found the behaviors of Brother Jobe to be a stretch. The last thing: Kunstler paints the emerging Southern state in broad strokes: They are hypocritical religious fascists who love country music and car racing, and hate black people, Jews, and homosexuals. There's little subtlety here. But by keeping it simple and cartoonish, there is some great narrative propulsion and efficiency.

Mike Johnson says

A rather thought provoking book about a future US post two major bombings of DC and LA. In the current US environment of unbridled American exceptionalism, it's hard to even think about the US not continuing to dominate world politics forever - this possibility is what makes this book so fascinating.

I couldn't help but be continually reminded of the 1960's Whole Earth Catalog environment when many of us baby boomers were planning for the worst and figuring how to live with no electricity, plastics, etc. Again, in today's US, this sort of thinking seems downright crazy - at least for now.

This book is loads of fun - although the anti-suburban rant gets a little tiresome - even to me - a consummate anti-suburban guy. I thought it made some really interesting observations about physical health care and mental health and the return to a much more simple way of life in every regard.

I'm off to find Book Number One of this series!!

Kit Kimberly says

While I have greatly enjoyed Kunstler's post apocalyptic series, I am quite disappointed that his vision is still so based in white male patriarchal privilege and oppression.

There's nothing progressive in his view of women, children, persons of colour, etc. He barely even bothers to develop any characters at all other than privileged white men (the kind of "alpha" males that MRAs, et al, seem to see as "natural" rulers).

I can't help but think that a World Made By Hand will simply fall to the same basic pitfalls of valuing power over life, might-makes-right, and destruction of anything that doesn't support the elite of the world that preceded it.
