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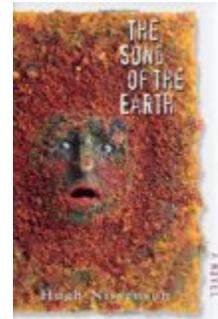
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Hugh Nissenson. *The Song of the Earth: A Novel*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2001. 272 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56512-298-7.

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Ambitious Novel about Genetically Engineered Environmental Artist Falls Short

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In his new novel, *The Song of the Earth*, Hugh Nissenson sets himself what I believe are two of the most difficult problems in fiction. First, he sets the novel in the mid-twenty-first century. A future world must be rendered so that it seems credible, logical, and capacious; it must contain a story's characters and themes while at the same time receding enough that it never becomes a distraction. To manage that with a future near enough that readers will live to see it is extremely difficult. Nissenson mostly succeeds on that front. Though some aspects are less than convincing (for example, everyone—including the Catholic church—refers to humans as “humins” and women as “womin”), his vision of a global-warming-altered world is often compelling. The fields of Nebraska are now the Creeping Sand Hills. The American middle class lives in completely enclosed neighborhoods called keeps and many never venture outside of them into the 90- and 100-degree days. New York City is threaded with canals. A female political group, the Gynarchists, carries out assassinations and bombings all over the world. Insurance companies and medical groups make extensive use of genetic profiles.

Nissenson also succeeds at the other, more difficult task: creating works of art purportedly by the artist who is his main character. Often, when art—visual or otherwise—is represented in another creative work, it's awful, as if the writer had expended his energy on the creation of the world surrounding the work of art and had

nothing left for the imagined work itself. (See the novel-within-a-novel in A.S. Byatt's *Babel Tower*, or the hilarious symphony that ends the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*. On second thought, please spare yourself that one.) Nissenson works more than twenty pieces of visual art into *The Song of the Earth*, ranging from scratchboard drawings to color reproductions of three-dimensional, textured paintings and sculptures. They're not all good, but they are believable and could certainly be argued for as art.

The novel—composed entirely of brief sections, usually a few sentences each, from interviews, journals, newspapers, and such—concerns the short life of John Firth Baker, the world's first genetically engineered visual artist, murdered at age 19. His mother, Jeannette Baker, a graduate student in art history at the University of Chicago, has her whole life been frustrated by her lack of artistic ability. After reading about a plan by the world's leading genetic engineer, Plowman, to create children whose genetic profiles have been altered to make them more likely to be artists, she decides that such a genetically-altered son will be the answer to her frustration.

Because genetic modification is illegal in America, she visits the geneticist in Japan, where she is artificially inseminated; she is also ordered to discontinue her prescription anti-depressant for six months after the boy is born. Plowman believes that her depression will lead her to neglect the baby, as Munch, Van Gogh, and Magritte were neglected—with, he hopes, similar results. Plowman

makes the same demand of the other two women who are involved in the experiment. Willing to do anything for an artist, Baker submits, and for the first six months of the boy's life, his aunt, Polly Jean, is stuck raising him, as Jeannette is increasingly helpless. That wanton disregard of both herself and her child has lifelong consequences for both.

Whether it's the genes or the neglect, the boy, John Firth Baker, does grow up to have a hyper-developed visual sense, and a desire to express that visual sense through art. He draws from an early age, and the drawings, though childlike, show an innate understanding of form, line, and subject. As he moves through adolescence, he realizes that he's gay—which was predicted by Plowman as a consequence of the genetic engineering—and he begins what will be a lifelong religious quest. An affair with a friend who is Christian leads him into Christianity, but the end of that affair confuses his beliefs. He meets and falls in unrequited love with a Gaian guru, Billy Lee Mookerjee, a man who has had breasts implanted as part of his attempt to become more at one with the earth. Gaianism, in one form or another, remains with John Firth Baker most of his life, through his own breast implants and Mookerjee's eventual acceptance of him as a disciple/lover/servant.

As Baker becomes a young adult, the book follows his life and art, as life events lead to artistic works and vice-versa. The other two genetically engineered artists from Plowman's project turn up. One dies tragically, while the other, fearing the disapproval of his father's spirit, stops making art entirely. Baker alone continues to make art. He becomes disenchanted with Gaianism and with Billy Lee Mookerjee. Though still in his teens, he is becoming an art world sensation, and his works—dealing with the earth, religious faith, death—are already beginning to assume a life of their own, interpreted and coopted by, among others, Mookerjee and the Gaians.

Baker is an artist, Nissenson seems to argue, for a host of reasons, only one of which is his genetic makeup. After all, the other children of the project failed in their artistic efforts, and Baker himself experiences constant doubt. At the same time, the art seems to come easily, almost effortlessly; there is little sense that the production of art, though sometimes halted for long periods, is in itself difficult for him. There is no sense in which his art seems a product of dedication or application, and the questions about innate talent and environment and hard work circle upon themselves. Though the artworks themselves are sometimes called “environmen-

tal art,” they seem to have far less to do with life in general than they do with Baker's own life. The creation of art for Baker is a way of understanding personal questions and experiences; it is almost as if art is a byproduct of experience, emerging fully formed as a consequence rather than a conscious undertaking.

Similarly unclear are the novel's religious themes. Mookerjee is not a fake, yet at the same time, he is clearly not entirely honorable, adopting Baker's art for his own ends. Gaianism itself reveals little substance and seems to have at best a marginal effect on the relations of its adherents to their planet. Its adherents' elusive, sought-after goal is “Gaian consciousness,” a supposed oneness with the earth that seems more like an inward-focused trance state. The Gaians participate in Earth Day celebrations and parades, but other than that, they appear no different from any other guru-based religious sect.

The religions of *The Song of the Earth* seem like an extension of 1990s identity politics; for that matter, so do the future's world politics. Disputes—often violent—are based around gender and tradition, rather than being class-based, as I would expect in a world of diminishing resources and dangerous climate change. The book doesn't consider the world's poor, yet it is clear that the world's wealthy—Americans, Europeans, Japanese—continue to consume resources at unsustainable levels. Add in global warming models that suggest that the developing world is likely to suffer most from the changing climate, and global resource conflicts seem extremely likely.

In some ways, the novel's misunderstanding of the likely political world of the future is intertwined with the short shrift given to the actual consequences of global warming and resource depletion. It all seems too simple: the world gets hotter, so people move into domed neighborhoods. The vast amount of energy required to cool a neighborhood, the lack of water consequent on the higher temperatures, the need to import food—all of those are unconsidered. People's lives have changed, but they haven't changed all that much.

The novel ends with Baker's murder, and its circumstances are neither unexpected nor particularly interesting. After a promising set-up, and some intriguing thoughts about the birth of artistic talent, the second half of the book is far less interesting. That is in part due to the chopiness inherent in the composite style of the book. The journal entries and interview responses lend themselves to short statements about events and intentions, while tending to reduce psychological and intellectual

understandings of characters to speculations about intent and emotion. Nissenson's previous novel, the National Book Award-nominated *The Tree of Life*, was written as a diary, so unusual novelistic forms are not something new to him. However, a diary can at least build force—even through short entries—by the accumulation of thoughts from a single consciousness. In the jumping back and forth among voices and sources, the events of *The Song of the Earth* lose force, so that after a time, the life of Baker seems almost as if it is only a frame on which to hang the artworks. Baker himself changes remarkably little in his nineteen years, despite his spiritual questing, and those around him are not compelling enough to hold attention, especially when they have to work against the fragmentation of the style.

Ultimately, *The Song of the Earth* is more ambitious than it is successful. There are a few fine moments, though, when its themes coalesce and its possibilities are realized. The best, early on, is when Baker, a teen, works part-time sweeping his aunt's beauty parlor. He becomes transfixed by the short clippings of hair on the floor and by the unusual patterns they make. The patterns become a compelling scratchboard drawing, my favorite in the book, where the hairs, abstract, form a pattern that looks almost scientific, like a web of electron trails. That drawing in turn is adapted for the Earth Day banner of the local haircutters' guild. It's a compelling drawing, and an effective demonstration of the ways in which life informs art, and art then both stands on its own and at the same time is used and interpreted in the larger world.

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