

***Future*, Sardar, Z. in *All That Matters (series)*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2013, 158 pp.**

Reviewed by Richard Slaughter

Futures Studies in its modern incarnation has been around in one form or another for at least half a century. During that time it developed and evolved into a complex, globe spanning and diverse entity that can be hard to describe and explain to newcomers or interested others. Yet, despite an obvious need and various efforts a truly satisfactory and culturally aware introduction had proved elusive. Some ten years ago I had a conversation with Sardar about collaborating on one. The message that came back at the time was that publishers were simply 'not interested.' So the first thing to say about this handily diminutive and very welcome book is that I'm glad one publisher finally did see the point. Secondly, while no two people would approach such a book in the same way, I doubt if a better person could be found to take it on. As a former editor of *Futures*, and a formidable scholar and writer in a number of areas, there can be few anywhere better equipped to deliver the readable introduction we now have.

The book begins and ends with the same carefully nuanced question: what are you doing tomorrow? This firmly locates 'the future' right where it belongs – in the structure and texture of everyday life. Sardar quickly dispenses with the common tendency to assume that the future will 'take care of itself.' Of course it doesn't. You only have to reflect on familiar topics such as family, schools, property, careers, investments, pensions and so on to know that. So this is a great way to begin. Furthermore, he points out that everyone has an investment in the future - especially *now* in a world beset by powerful forces of change.

He takes the view that FS is a mode of enquiry - rather than a discipline per se - that takes as its subject the contesting and negotiation of ideas about the future. Its underlying purpose is to 'keep the future open to all alternatives, and to ensure that ideas about the future do not simply become steps toward new forms of oppression.' This sense that FS can be intensely liberating is maintained throughout, as is the importance of valuing diversity and traditions. He briefly shows how culturally embedded views of time have consequences and walks the reader through the familiar quartet of possible, probable, plausible and preferable futures. His answer to the problem of how to reconcile the plethora of mid-term futures on offer is a clear and comprehensible one – consider the consequences for future generations.

There's an enviable and, in this context, necessary lightness of touch as the author runs through a short history of FS, terminology, principles, concepts and methods. A short chapter is devoted to scenarios, arguably the most widespread and well-known method. Utopia and dystopia are covered as part of the history and in terms of their contemporary uses. Then there's a section intriguingly called 'Looking in all directions' where he provides a fine overview of two influential perspectives - Integral Futures and causal layered analysis. Having worked with Sardar over many years I've some idea of where he actually stands

on these and was impressed by the objectivity and restraint displayed. In many ways the overview provided is also a model for presenting complex ideas to a broad generalist audience. Then in order to show how FS is relevant to people and communities, the penultimate section deals with community futures. Issues of powerlessness vs. participation are briefly raised and also illustrated by reference to different examples in three contrasting cultures.

A short final section called 'What's next?' reprises the history of failed predictions to drive home the point that 'the future is less a domain of prediction and more ... an arena of change and action.' It draws on various sources to argue that short-term thinking and the priorities of major western institutions are currently working against widely shared interests in peaceful and liveable futures. A highlight in 'bold' similarly provides a brief but powerful critique of how current business interests in shareholder value, consumerism and growth appear unsustainable and even 'misguided.' He makes a more general point that 'futures thinking becomes meaningful when it identifies and critiques potential hazards that could close the future or colonise it, and attempts to make sense of the present.' Who could disagree with that? Or, again, with the author's view of the 'overriding concern' of FS which is characterised as the need 'to make the future more real, more accessible, more immediate and hence make the present the domain where action is taken to transform the coming decades.'

The final reference section neatly labelled '100 Ideas' is a valuable, wide-ranging and generously expansive resource that I hope many people will consult. (Item 36 to the 'famous Australian Foresight Institute' is certainly appreciated but if there's a second edition I hope that the notion of it being a 'hotbed of futures studies in the 1990s' will be revised as teaching actually started in mid-2000.) Overall, however, and as noted at the outset, I doubt if anyone, anywhere, could have done a better job of writing this long awaited introduction. It deserves to be widely read, distributed and promoted by any and all who care about the future of the area and, indeed, the world it seeks to serve.

For anyone wanting a succinct introduction to futures studies, there's no better place to begin than here.

-----

Richard Slaughter, 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2014

PO Box 793, Indooroopilly, Queensland 4068, Australia.