

The Extreme Future Reviewed

Industry Week: The Future Isn't What It Used To Be

Industry Week's Editor-in-Chief, David Blanchard, Reviews The Extreme Future

Every once in a great while, somebody will write a book that as soon as you pick it up, you find it nearly impossible to put it down. That happened earlier with this book, and it's happened again with *The Extreme Future* by James Canton. Somehow I missed this book when it came out in hardback a year ago, but a fresh new paperback edition is now available and if you have any interest at all forecasts, predictions, prognostications and the occasional blind guess, this book ought to satisfy you.

James Canton is a futurist, which means he gets paid to think about stuff that hasn't happened yet, based on his analysis of what has happened and what is currently happening. Don't get hung up on the word "futurist," because it's got nothing to do with horoscopes or guys like the Amazing Kreskin; futurists don't just "make stuff up" – they apply exhaustive analytical studies to vast databases of historical information to arrive at their conclusions. True, sometimes (a lot of the time?) they get things outrageously wrong, but more often than not futurists are looking at trend lines as opposed to identifying exactly when something might happen. So to use a trivial example, a futurist wouldn't be able to predict exactly when the Chicago Cubs will next win a World Series, but they'd be able to tell you that if the Red Sox and the White Sox could win in consecutive years, then the likelihood that another historically underachieving team could also win seems to be at least statistically possible.

Now, I'm no futurist myself but I was once invited to speak to a group of people who were all clients of a futurist. I had contributed a few items to this futurist's newsletter on the topic of business applications of various advanced computing technologies (virtual reality, neural networks, that kind of stuff), and within about 15 minutes, I shut off the overhead projector (this was back before the days of PowerPoint presentations) and ended up moderating a very high-spirited discussion amongst the group, some of whom were convinced that virtual reality was a complete joke while others already had success stories they could share. It became a day-long Q&A session, one of the most fascinating exchanges of opinions I'd ever participated in.

James Canton talks about virtual reality in his book, as well as other "weird science" (his term) technology trends like nanotechnology, robotics, artificial life, teleportation, even a self-aware Internet. But what the book really does is serve as a wake-up call to people who want to believe it could still take decades for sweeping changes to occur. The book is kind of an antidote to Thomas Friedman's largely optimistic *The World Is Flat*, as Canton's tone is much more alarmist.

According to Canton, these are the Top Ten Threats That Could Kill America's Future:

- Religious fundamentalism
- Damaged environment
- Limited immigration flow
- War and rampant terrorism
- Poor education system
- Lack of high-tech skills in the workforce
- Reduced funding for R&D

- Dysfunctional health care system
- Weak defense and security infrastructure
- Attacks on privacy and individual freedoms