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Environmental lawyer turned novelist Sam Bleicher spins a climate change thriller for Earth Day in “The Plot to Cool the Planet”



Coming this Earth Day, a new novel puts global warming and geoengineering at the center of a gripping speculative fiction that involves a murder mystery, a daring secret plot, and dangerous international controversy and conflict.

In “**The Plot to Cool the Planet,**” (Newman Springs Publishing, April 22, 2019), author Sam Bleicher draws on his broad knowledge as an environmental lawyer, academic, and government official to craft a narrative around real-world threats to the human species.

But the story isn’t just about an abstract future danger. When outspoken climate scientist Dr. Ilsa Hartquist is murdered in 2020, the Canadian investigators assigned to the case are convinced the motive lies in her push for a controversial, untested method to slow global warming. They are determined to find not only the murderer but also those who paid for her assassination.

With each passing year, the world Hartquist has left behind suffers from more extreme storms, disappearing polar icecaps, recurring floods, and falling agricultural and fishery yields. These changes disrupt coastal cities and undermine national economies. But the world’s leaders are paralyzed, as desires for short-term economic gain eclipse the long-term well-being of humanity.

In desperation, a handful of small-state diplomats pursue a rogue plan to implement a solar geoengineering experiment, disregarding international procedures and institutions in an attempt to save their island nations and humanity. The outcome of their efforts raises important questions about the global governance of geoengineering.

While the book’s storyline is fiction, Bleicher marshals scientific fact to convey the urgent need to avoid the irreversible impacts of global warming. Bleicher hopes his novel will bring these abstract dangers to life and make them more accessible to a wider audience.

“Despite the growing evidence of a grim future, the world’s leaders continue to promote new fossil fuel energy extraction and transportation facilities,” Bleicher says. “If we don’t abandon this ‘business as usual’ path, we may soon cross the line to uncontrollable, irreversible destruction of civilization.”

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About the Author



SAM BLEICHER is an adjunct professor of law at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. From 2014 to 2018, he was a member and vice chair of the Virginia Air Pollution Control Board. He is an active Member of the League of Conservation Voters and its Climate Victory Council.

He holds a J.D. degree from Harvard Law School and B.A. degree from Northwestern University, Phi Beta Kappa with honors in economics. His new novel, **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** draws on his experience as a senior official in the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Department of State; a law firm partner and lobbyist; and a law professor in the United States, China, and Russia.

For more information about the author, visit <https://www.strategicpathllc.com/novelist>

In an interview, SAM BLEICHER can discuss:

- Why climate change is an urgent global issue that governments and society must address immediately
- The social and political obstacles to addressing the irreversible dangers posed by climate change
- The real-world science of solar geoengineering and its role in his novel
- What individuals can do about climate change

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About the Book



“The Plot to Cool the Planet”

Sam Bleicher | April 22, 2019

Newman Springs Publishing

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64096-289-7 | \$24.95

Digital ISBN: 978-1-64096-290-3 | \$9.99

Speculative Fiction | Mystery

June 2020. Dr. Ilsa Hartquist, an outspoken climate scientist, is murdered. Investigators believe she was assassinated to end her forceful, unorthodox advocacy for untested geoengineering techniques that might slow global warming.

Frequent extreme storms and rising sea levels are undermining the viability of coastal cities. Millions of subsistence farmers and fishermen are facing starvation and ruin as crop yields fall and fisheries disappear. No nation is volunteering to take in climate refugees.

Frustrated by the global paralysis, three small-island diplomats secretly launch a rogue venture to cool the planet. The odds of success are low, and the threat to their careers and lives is tangible. But they feel morally obligated to try.

Their project uncovers other surreptitious climate interventions, causing perilous political, diplomatic, and military confrontations. It ultimately forces fundamental international decisions on global governance of geoengineering.

An Interview with SAM BLEICHER



1. You have a solid, shall we say “non-fiction” foundation in academia – why did you decide to write “The Plot to Cool the Earth” as a novel rather than addressing issues related to climate change in a non-fiction book?

I wrote **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** for several reasons. First, I wanted to provide a more hopeful vision of the future than we are getting from both advocates and opponents of action. Advocates of action tend to emphasize the necessity for radical transformation of our entire economic and social structure to mitigate climate change, which seems unacceptable, if not impossible. Opponents of action on climate change argue either that immediate action is unnecessary, or that the situation is already hopeless. Right now the world seems to be trapped into thinking the task is too big, too demanding, too impossible. I wanted to suggest that bold, unconventional steps forward are possible if we try.

Second, I have seen what happens to non-fiction reports on the challenges of climate change. Reports on scientific research are typically carefully balanced, narrowed, and qualified. They don’t provide clear policy guidance or arouse an emotional response. Government policymakers focus on those findings that reinforce their own policy

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priorities. Media coverage of these reports is often slanted to fit into a larger, more immediate political story. The general public rarely reads or acts on the implicit policy messages in non-fiction reports.

Third, I have observed that most people instinctively become far more engrossed in the fate of a handful of human beings, even fictional ones, than in statistical studies of the thousands, millions, or billions of faceless, anonymous human beings who will suffer. I want readers of **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** to empathize with my characters and come to care about what they are attempting to accomplish. I hope they will absorb some of their urgent desire to slow the global warming threat.

Fourth, I enjoyed the challenge of taking this complex scientific and political reality and creating a human story that would engage readers’ attention and sympathy. Even so, **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** still drastically simplifies the scientific and political complexities obstructing efforts to change the future of our planet.

2. Is the science and engineering in your novel real, or science fiction?

I have made a serious effort to present the current scientific, social, and political realities as clearly and accurately as my knowledge and understanding allow. Of course the specific events in **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** are set in the future, and I have no reason to believe they will actually occur. But I think they qualify as plausible realities, not simply fantasies.

3. Are the government decision-making processes in your novel realistic?

I spent more than a decade working inside government agencies at a fairly senior level, and many more decades trying to understand and interpret government processes to clients and colleagues as a lawyer in private practice. I have also had time as a professor teaching environmental law and international law to mull over my experience.

Any single description of governmental decision-making at any level is inevitably a shorthand description of the total constellation of inputs and outputs that culminate in a government policy. That reality is demonstrated by reading books by high-level participants in government decisions, whether the topic is Allied military decisions in World War II or the operation of the Trump White House. Each participant views the

process differently. I believe **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** realistically captures the essence and flavor of the way government decisions are made.

4. It’s clear from reading your book that you feel climate change is an issue that needs to be dealt with sooner rather than later. Is “The Plot to Cool the Planet” a battle cry?

In some ways, yes. But the battle is primarily political and diplomatic, not a great military battle or a heroic crusade. The characters in **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** are real human beings with strengths and weaknesses, personal anxieties and ambitions. They learn and grow and seize opportunities, make hard choices that affect themselves and others, and sometimes suffer serious consequences, fairly or unfairly. The global policy system in which they operate produces unforeseeable outcomes, for better and worse, in what I believe is a plausible way.

One of the major obstacles to action on climate change is the current governance structure of the United Nations, which is deeply tilted toward inaction. The Security Council veto power and the lack of any reliable funding mechanism make it impossible for the UN to lead implementation of the economic transformation that must take place quickly if our species is to avoid extinction.

5. What are the most dire consequences of climate change?

The range of consequences of climate change will vary significantly from place to place, from decade to decade, and from one social class and economic livelihood to another. But it will have an ever-intensifying, cumulative adverse impact. **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** lays out the effects in some detail in chapters 2 and 4, and elsewhere in the story. It is a snapshot of a near-future effort to postpone these disasters, not the end of the story.

Without prompt action, the long-term result will be the same for everyone – much of the planet will be uninhabitable because of drought and desert, and most of the world’s urban coastal areas will be inundated. These conditions will shrink the planet’s ability to support earth’s current human population, resulting in social, economic, and political upheavals, and ultimately the collapse of civilization as we know it.

6. What can the average person do about climate change?

Not all decision-making about climate change will happen in national and international governmental institutions. Every family must recognize that changes in their behavior right now are essential and will make a difference. While the government struggles to reduce the carbon emissions of utilities and other carbon-intensive industries, transportation, housing, commercial buildings, and agriculture have become America's major sources of carbon emissions.

Buying an emission-free electric car instead of a gas-guzzling SUV or truck is one of the most important steps people can take. The auto industry has a strong financial interest in slowing the conversion to electric vehicles so it can continue to profit from its investment in factories that produce gasoline and diesel vehicles. These corporations justify their go-slow policy with the assertions that most of the public doesn't want electric vehicles and the infrastructure is not yet in place. Every purchase of an electric vehicle demonstrates to the fossil fuel industry and manufacturers who drag their feet that they will be left behind in the inevitable transition.

Other individual decisions also matter right now: Reducing energy consumption by insulating homes; moving to an urban center near public transportation rather than a suburban single-family house; installing rooftop solar electricity in apartments, homes, and office buildings; and reforming local zoning to stop urban sprawl. Taken together, these actions will make a significant difference.

Most important, individuals and public interest groups must press our political leaders to make global warming the top priority concern. The public everywhere must push them by words and actions to face up to politically unpopular decisions that many powerful interests oppose.

We must make our public and private sector leaders recognize that saving ourselves and our children (not just abstract "future generations") from lives of economic misery, social disruption, anxiety, hopelessness, and anger at our generation's short-sightedness is a real public concern. We have only one chance to get it right.

7. You’ve lived and lectured in Russia and China – is climate change a major concern in those two countries?

What I’ve discovered from teaching and lecturing abroad is that I’m pushing on an open door. Once people, especially younger people, learn the physical realities and the economic, social, and political consequences they will face, they understand that action is essential. Unfortunately, young people in China and Russia have less opportunity than Americans and Europeans to demand action by their leaders.

The Chinese in particular tend to view society as a long-term enterprise. Concern for their descendants is the mirror of concern for their ancestors. In Russia, by contrast, the ethos tends to be less communal, more self-interested, and less self-sacrificing. The Russian economy and society are built around exploitation of minerals, and oil and natural gas. Ironically, Russia may be in a more precarious position than China or the US as the Arctic permafrost melts and climate change takes its toll.

I hope that **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** can attract foreign as well as domestic readers and expand global awareness of the need for action everywhere to address this problem.

8. Why did you include a murder mystery subplot in your novel? What do you think that adds to the story?

I hope the suspense and personal drama at the outset of **“The Plot to Cool the Planet”** keeps the book from feeling like a poorly disguised lecture on global warming. That Dr. Hartquist is a climate scientist is not incidental. Mitigating climate change is the core of her life and career, the cause of her death, and the inspiration for the unorthodox actions of the diplomats and government leaders that follow.

9. What books are currently on your nightstand?

I have just read *The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States: A Speculative Novel*. It is stimulating reading, constrained by the concept that it is a government report, but the author does manage to inject some humor into this grim subject. I also have read *The Uninhabitable Planet* by David Wallace-Wells, which vividly catalogues the grimly destructive effects we can foresee if society doesn’t abandon our “business in liquidation” economic model.

I'm in a book club that tends to focus on American history, so in the last few years I have read, among others, *The Bully Pulpit*, *The Quartet*, *The Passage of Power*, *Scorpions*, and *The Soul of America*. We are currently working our way through Chernow's *Grant*.

Loving and Leaving Washington by John Yochelson is a memoir and summary of his government service that I find comparable to my own in some ways. I have also just finished a quick read entitled *Eternal Life*, a fantasy with an intriguing premise, which I stumbled across in my synagogue library.

Finally, my nightstand is littered with copies of the New Yorker, each open to a particular article I wanted to read but didn't have time for (and still don't).

10. What's next for you?

As a retiree, I've learned that long-term planning is somewhat presumptuous. I've always been intrigued by the Tom Stoppard play, *Rosencranz and Guildenstern Are Dead* – a story about minor figures unwittingly participating in great events. If **"The Plot to Cool the Planet"** is successful, I will probably try writing another book, if I can find a worthwhile story to tell.

Another possibility is to revise and update *Appointments: A Novel of Politics in Our Nation's Capital*, which I self-published seven years ago under the pseudonym David Carmell. It was inspired by Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, but takes place in Washington, DC, and involves the appointment of a Supreme Court Justice.

That process is a recurrent drama in American public life, so it remains timely. *Appointments* was favorably reviewed by friends with long years of Federal government and private sector government affairs experience. I know a lot more now about the craft of writing fiction, and this time I would publish it under my own name.