

## ENGLISH: *THINGS WE DIDN'T SEE COMING*

**'The disasters in the text add nothing to the story.' Discuss.**

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Steven Amsterdam's episodic narrative "Things We Didn't See Coming" depicts a dystopian society characterised by human misery, natural disaster and disease. A bleak world on the verge of societal collapse is deliberately incorporated by Amsterdam to enhance his speculative fiction, and provoke thought around the central theme, 'what if?' And if so, is it better to focus on the "[e]verything will be fine until it's not" rather than existing with endless paranoia as to the future? The collection of vignettes, therefore is far less concerned with the catastrophic state of society as it is interested in the human response to adversity. While the narrator, and other minor characters perpetually display immoral behaviour, Amsterdam encourages us to refrain from judgement – these are ordinary characters in extraordinary circumstances and their actions are therefore influenced by the disastrous state of their surroundings.

Amsterdam's narrative presents a series of relentless societal disasters, which enhance the dystopian nature of the text, and emphasise the helplessness and suffering of the narrator's world. Throughout the episodes, the narrator is exposed to "dry, decaying suburbs", "fires, floodwaters, windstorms" and a "brown haze [in the sky] growing like skin cancer," creating the image of a world of sorrow. This is further intensified by Amsterdam's discontinuous structure in which readers are besieged with relentless disaster, encouraging a sense of continual chaos. In addition to this, the present tense narration highlights the immediacy of the narrator's surroundings, enforcing the uncertainty of his future. He refers to the "barricades" of 'The Theft That Got Me Here' which separate the rural and city dwellers leaving behind a divided and segregated community. Furthermore the corruption and deceit of a seemingly "compassionate" new government in 'The Profit Motive' is symbolised by a "nasty little snort" exemplary of a world of "so much awfulness." The description of the harsh, unforgiving world however is not the key focus of Amsterdam's narrative. Instead the catastrophic surroundings catapult the narrator's quest for solace, acceptance and belonging in a world of little hope, allowing exploration into the narrative's primary concern of the human condition.

The rapidly evolving environment is mirrored through the morally ambiguous actions of key characters, and through them, Amsterdam suggests that the ethical state of humanity may be at risk when physical survival is paramount. Growing up in an unstable environment, the narrator had to learn to be "resourceful", always prioritising "mine, mine, mine, mine and mine" and habitually "putting a price" on the valuables of others. This decline in morality further highlights the foreign universe of the narrator, which is incompatible with our own. A loss of compassion and sentimentality is revealed in 'Dry Land' as the narrator burns other people's "photo paper" and again in "Predisposed" when he unashamedly abandons the vulnerable Jeph in a completely unfamiliar city, after using his "funds" to access "doctors" and become "invincible." Through these actions, Amsterdam demonstrates the clear tendency of human beings to favour self-preservation in the face of social and political disasters. He does not, however, invite readers to judge the apparent immorality of the narrator. In the vignette the 'Profit Motive', the narrator reasons "It was never a conscious wish of [his] to become a criminal. It was an apocalyptic choice." Through our protagonist, Amsterdam reveals the impact that threatening circumstances may have on the ethics of humanity. In intentionally leaving the narrator unnamed, Amsterdam enforces the notion of universality, suggesting the response of the narrator may not in fact vary significantly from our own, if confronted with similar disastrous circumstances.

Amsterdam's narrative none the less permeates not around the catastrophic environment, but around personal response to adversity, and the need for human connection in times of hardship. The fragmented narrative is framed by the narrator's connection with his father Otis. In 'What We Know Now' Otis appears to instill a sense of fear about a "future packed with sick people" as he "rocks" psychotically. The narrator adapts to this mindset and is painfully burdened by it for much of the novel as he embarks on a personal voyage for peace amidst the disasters of his world. The

narrator searches for an unachievable stability with Margo only to be abandoned, and left mirroring the actions his father, “hugging [himself] rocking” in ‘Uses For Vinegar’ and again “hurt” in ‘Forest For The Trees.’ The constantly changing external environment of each vignette, reminds the narrator, and by extension, the reader that security is elusive in this dystopian universe. The cyclical structure of Amsterdam’s narrative, however allows the narrator to find meaning amongst the chaos and disaster of his world. His cynicism, immorality and insecurities are relinquished at the conclusion of the final vignette ‘The Best Medicine’ as the narrator “suddenly realise[s] that it’s better here with [his father] than anywhere [he’s] been.” In one “breath” of the “unfiltered” air he finds the bond, and human connection, which has been evading him throughout each episode of his life – a relationship symbolised through shared trait of “green eyes,” metaphorically alluding to an emotional connection between the pair. The narrator releases his firm hold on physical survival, leaving instead a cathartic peace, providing hope for the future of humanity. Through this image, Amsterdam conveys a key message of his narrative that through times of hardship and suffering, human connections are essential.

Through his incorporation of an apocalyptic world of natural disaster, amorality, corruption and personal suffering, Amsterdam is able to focus his text on the ideas of self-preservation and human response to danger. The grim and ruinous state of the environment propels an exploration into the narrator’s journey for peace and human connections amidst the tragedy of his world – a voyage that Amsterdam suggests could be similar to that of any human being, as represented through his unnamed narrator, and unspecific location. The disasters of the text provide the foundations for Amsterdam to encourage readers that hope can be found in a dystopian world through authentic relationships with others.