THE FATE OF THE EARTH
by Jonathon Schell.
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Bookshop.

This volume reprints three articles on
the nuclear dilemma from the New
Yorker. Their appearance in such a
journal helps explain the growing
opposition to the nuclear arms race in the
United States. While atomic scientists
may have first sounded the alarm in 1945,
it is now being echoed throughout the
scientific, mediatic and religious worlds.
Schell's book helps to carry their message
to non-experts whose response will
ultimately be decisive.

The first part of the book, "A Republic
of Insects and Grass", outlines the
probable effects of a large-scale nuclear
exchange. Schell recognises that most
people shrink from the unimaginable
horror of a holocaust but he leads the
reader "through the valley of the shadow
of death" with great skill. One is actually
compelled to go through it.

It helps the reader to get through this
chapter by the revelation that some of the
effects of nuclear war border on the
ridiculous. Thus, while the notion of "the
economy" will be meaningless for the
unlucky survivors, just one of the multi-
kiloton weapons detonated 125 miles
above Omaha, Nebraska, will generate
an electromagnetic pulse capable of
crippling all the unshielded computers
from Mexico to Canada.

The only new data which could be
added to Schell's study relates to long-
term effects on climate. Frank Barnaby,
interviewed on the ABC's Science Show
on August 21 last year, estimated that
1,400 million, or about one quarter of the
earth's population would die from
starvation in both hemispheres. The
clouds of dust and smog would obliterate
the sun for months and food production
would be reduced to near zero in the main
food-producing regions. This opinion is
supported by Joseph Rotblat, Emeritus
Professor of Physics at the University of
London who is one of the leading figures
in the Pugwash Movement.

Both American and Soviet authorities
agree that a full-scale nuclear exchange
would mean the end of civilisation, if not
the end of the human species. But insects
are unusually resistant to radiation and
the roots of many grasses survive
underground for considerable periods.
On an earth deprived of most of its
terrestrial species, strange insects and
grasses would settle down to a new
ecology.

In The Second Death Schell
introduces the notion that the
destruction of the species implies that the
countless numbers of the unborn, who
may perhaps look forward to happiness in
a better world, are also to be eliminated.
He writes: "To kill a human is murder,
and there are some who believe that to
abort a foetus is also murder, but what
crime is it to cancel the numberless
multitude of un conceived people? In
what court is such a crime to be judged?"

He goes on to point out that by
extinguishing the species we also destroy
all cultural heritage and, in a sense,
betray the efforts of humanity over
millions of years. Among Reagan's
supporters are a few Christian
fundamentalists who suggest that the
nuclear holocaust is the Armageddon
threatened by God in the Bible. Schell
replies that this view "arrogates to
ourselves not only God's knowledge but
also His will". He adds that Christ is
believed to have died to save the world,
not to destroy it.

I found the third section of the book
'The Choice' less satisfactory. While his
philosophic insight continues to be
perceptive — the holocaust would
certainly mean the end of war since there
would ultimately be no-one to fight it —
his command of history falls short.

While it is popular in some quarters to
equate the policies and much of the
behaviour of the United States and the
Soviet Union, and much suggests that
Schell takes this view, I do not believe it
can be supported by history which is a
good deal better than much of the
scientific data that Schell draws on. The
evidence that the first use of the atom
bomb had little to do with WWII and
much with the preparations for WWIII is
compelling. As Schell has pointed out
earlier, "overkill" is senseless and
irrational but he does not point out that
the continued arms race makes sense to
those who profit from it, and to those
who hope to break the Soviet economy
with massive arms spending. This is
certainly understood by both the US and
Soviet leaders and I believe by
many in the USSR and Europe. Until it is
equally understood by the peoples of the
US and her not-so-reluctant allies, I fail
to see how Schell's support for so many
admirable goals will make the necessary
progress.

The book is certainly a powerful
addition to those in constant use in the
peace struggle. It has been
enthusiastically received by the reviewers
cited on the back cover. I would,
however, warn that, in many places it is
very tightly argued and those not used to
such material might tire after the first
hundred pages. I had to read some parts
three or four times and found a pencil for
notation useful. But it will certainly be of
use in invading areas still to be reached by
the peace movement.

Jack Legge was a professor in the
science faculty at Melbourne
University until his recent
tirement.