

Book Reviews: World Made By Hand

by Martin Holsinger

James Howard Kunstler's new novel, *World Made by Hand*, which introduces us to the daily reality of life in upstate New York a decade or two after the trucks have stopped running and the electricity has gone off.

There are no newspapers in Kunstler's world, no antibiotics, no rubber and not much plastic, but there are plenty of bullets left, and less inhibition about using them. The book starts on an almost idyllic note as it sets up a picture of clear-running, fish-filled streams, old railroad beds overrun with berries, and a slower-paced life reminiscent of the early 19th century, but we are brought back to earth with an unjust murder and a town left wondering how to deal with the powerful bullies who committed it.

The question is left simmering as Kunstler introduces his other players: the dispirited townspeople, a wealthy, far-sighted, lordly landowner, members of a Christian religious community fleeing the chaos prevalent in more urbanized areas to the south, and the lonely widow of the young man who was murdered, who seeks refuge in the home of Robert Earle, the story's main character.

The Christian sect's willingness to help their neighbors provides the main engine of the story. They help recover a crew of traders who have been kidnapped on a trip down the Hudson, bring justice to the murder that began the book, and raise some interesting questions about the power of their faith that may be answered in a sequel, but it is just at that point that Kunstler brings our tour of the future to a close.

Kunstler is best known for writing *The Long Emergency* and the video *The End of Suburbia*, which lay out the facts, figures, and trajectories that lead to the scenario he portrays in *World Made By Hand*. By creating believable human beings who inhabit the post-industrial, post-electrical America he posits, he brings his statistics and predictions to life. When we are told a story about what life after industrial collapse could mean for people like us, we have an easier time understanding it. Just as books like Neville Shute's *On the Beach* and Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* helped people understand what nuclear war would mean to them, and helped galvanize millions into action that has largely reduced that threat, so perhaps Kunstler's novel and others like it will help us avoid ending up in the world he portrays.

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