

For sale — visions of the future

SPECULATING about what the future holds has always been a good way for an author to attract an audience. With the start of a century and a new millennium looming, crystal-ball gazing is getting to be an even hotter genre, as evidenced by recent publishers' lists.

Anybody that can string words together and make predictions — the more outrageous the better — seems to have a shot at getting a book published. As a result, future-gazing books have been, to be charitable, a mixed bag.

At the upper end of the scale are the likes of *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey, which predicts Armageddon. Forecasting the end turned out to be the beginning of a fine windfall for the author. The only book to have been a better seller since 1970 is the Bible.

But sadly, most have exploited the trendy topic without casting much credible light on what's behind the curtain.

Two examples are *Shifting Gears* by Nuala Beck, and *No Small Change* by Dian Cohen. Beck tries to tell us we're all fine, there's no recession and the displaced workers from abandoned factories have all landed new jobs in information technology.

A 20-something economist, she might be forgiven for such naivete, but Cohen, a seasoned journalist who heads one of the country's major financial newspapers,

should know better. If she does, she doesn't include that dimension in her book, which prattles on in an approach almost as superficial as Beck's.

But all those bitten by the futurist bug, take heart. A new collection of 21 essays offers a welcome respite. *Rethinking the Future* was edited by Regina writer Patricia Elliott for Fifth House Publishers in Saskatoon. It is the second in the publisher's reader series and it offers a thoughtful trip across the shifting human landscape.

Most of the 21 contributors are academics, but Elliott's journalistic instincts stand her in good stead. With two or three exceptions, the articles are accessible, the writing crisp.

Technology gets a lot of attention. William Leiss and Archie Graham, communication and philosophy professors respectively, both poo-hoo the late 20th century preoccupation with gadgetry.

Leiss writes of the "false notions" about technology's saving graces. Graham compares today's techno-optimists to an "undisciplined child hooked on a novelty."

Montreal political science teacher Arthur Kroker warns of "cultural extermination" and says in future it's "create or perish."

Journalist and author Michael Posner, in the most readable piece in the book, speculates on the future for leisure when so many of us continue to be work addicts.

He paints delightful word pictures, such

as one of a post-modern fitness buff "who rides a stationary bicycle in front of a muted TV set while reading *People* magazine and listening to music on earphones."

Toronto writer Brian Fawcett says Marshal McLuhan's "global village" has ended up just mirroring the "consumerist monoculture" of Los Angeles; federal policy advisor Arthur Cordell describes the "information age" as a mish-mash of facts without context.

Science, hubris, ethics, politics — the topics are wide-ranging. But the heart of the book is in three essays on the population explosion, infertility and biomedical ethics.

Ecologist Adrian Forsyth writes that the planet is soaring toward the six billion mark and he questions whether the world's ecosystems can sustain all life in the future. He warns that exponential growth is a "fatal blind spot."

In stark contrast, family planner Rona Achilles writes of the obsession of some couples, the woman in particular, with having babies, and how infertility has come to be regarded as a disease in wealthy societies.

Varda Burstyn, former co-chair of the National Status of Women's committee on health and reproductive technology, writes about what is certain to be one of the huge debates of the 21st century — genetic selection and medical ethics.

This is a collection to savor for all who find the mysteries of the future an irresistible lure. The paperback price is \$16.95. ◆

Column by Verne Clemence
