Ragnarok - a post-collapse novel / Author interview

Contributed by Jerry Erwin and Tuna Cole
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Ragnarok, A Plausible Future by Tuna Cole is a non-chronological, near-future projection. In it, a small group of people, alarmed by the descending/contracting spiral apparent in a broad range of global trends, decide to pool resources in rural, arable property toward a self-sustainable, agrarian lifestyle conducive to survival. When key connections unravel (economic? energy shortfall? biospheric disruption?), civilization as we know it crumbles.
The narrative recounts the struggle to reinvent social constructs and recreate the means to provide the group's livelihood, culminating in their violent defense against desperate marauders in the post-petroleum world.

The term Ragnarök refers to the "final destiny of the gods,"says Wikipedia. Ragnarök "is a series of future events, including a great battle foretold to ultimately result in the death of a number of major figures (including the gods Odin, Thor, Týr, Freyr, Heimdall, and the jötunn Loki), the occurrence of various natural disasters, and the subsequent submersion of the world in water. Afterward, the world will resurface anew and fertile, the surviving and reborn gods will meet, and the world will be repopulated by two human survivors." Four out of seven days of the week in English are named after Norse gods, so perhaps they still matter to modern people on some level. What did these warrior gods, or rather the culture that worshiped them, bequeath to us?

Jan Lundberg, publisher of Culture Change, says this about the book Ragnarok:

Many futuristic novels provoke thought, but not necessarily from anything more than an imaginative and artistic urge to write stories. Two that transcended mere novels, 1984 by George Orwell and Ecotopia by Ernest Callenbach, were among the most visionary, based on a well informed analysis of society and where it could head "some day." Welcome to the new state of non-innocence and fewer options: Ragnarok makes you feel the gritty, imminent and not so nebulous side of our probable post-collapse world -- with a practical bent.

Interview of Tony ("Tuna") Cole, author of Ragnarok, A Plausible Future, 2009, self-published, by Jerry Erwin for CultureChange.org:

Culture Change: When asked by Jan Lundberg to do a review of your book Ragnarok, I informed him that I would not be able to objectively help sell the book, as it is technically a novella, or short novel, that seemed somewhat pricey at $17.00 + shipping, through Lulu.com. However, I did enjoy the story very much, particularly as a "wake up call," regarding our converging catastrophes. What ultimately drove you to write this story?

Tony ("Tuna") Cole: I recognize that my book is a little "short" relative to many other popular works of fiction. It matters little to me, though, whether it is considered a novel or a novella; I characterize it as speculative fiction. In writing, as in any art valuation, it is often a mistake to measure quality in terms of quantity. But the pricing is an issue worthy of discussion.

As you may know, the publishing industry has undergone significant changes in the last decade or two in an attempt to stay competitive/profitable. There are now something like four major publishers, and scads of independents. It is the dream of every writer to have her/his work accepted by one of the giants with their fat wallets to advertise, promote, and distribute to all booksellers. The catch 22 is you must already be known and marketable -- or come with rave reviews -- before they will take the risk. The small independent publishers, with minuscule budgets, look for manuscripts that conform to their niche of previous successes. I did submit Ragnarok to a couple of regional publishers; one hung onto it for months and then issued a rejection without any critique as to how I'd failed to meet their expectations; the other simply declined to respond at all. As you can imagine, after spending three years writing a book, it is sheer agony to dangle month in, month out, while publishing bureaucrats dither to their own drummer. So it was that I chose Option Three: self-publishing. The exigencies of publishing one's own book, however, make the price-per-book more expensive, since the print runs are measured in tens, or hundreds if you are very confident, but not thousands. It's a familiar story: the process

minimizes the chances of a newcomer by making everything more expensive.

By 2005 I was starting to tune into the likes of Jan Lundberg, Jim Kunstler, Jared Diamond, Paul Roberts, David Korten, Alan Weisman and others, regarding the converging vectors of peak oil, climate change, burgeoning human population, imperiled environment, and a willfully oblivious dominant narrative; but when I tried to engage my peers in a discussion of these issues, I'd get the ol' fish eye: "Boy, wouldja look at the time? It's been good chattin' witcha, but I gotta run!" Ragnarok is the product of my frustration to communicate my growing concerns in my spoken voice. It is a near-term projection of how some people might create a viable community in the midst of the old paradigm's collapse.

CC: Was there any particular reason why you kept Ragnarok a short story? I noticed that you kept a cap on developing the characters in your story, for instance.

TC: At 240 pages, even with 1 ½ line spacing, I'm not sure I'd call it a "short story", but there are a couple of, to me, compelling reasons why I launched the book when I did. The book's theme is "time sensitive." I care deeply about getting this message out prior to the mechanisms of collapse kicking in. In addition to the importance of the message in the near term, I'm gradually becoming aware of my own looming "pull date" -- not so near as to read the specific date, but imagine it to be not distant, owing to entropy, in the guise of decrepitude -- wages of sin? -- and the vicissitudes of 69 years. Hence, a sort of double urgency.

I thought I gave the central characters adequate "flesh." It's not War and Peace; my intent was to present a horrific, game-changing sequence of events as survivable by people, if they were highly adaptable, resourceful, cooperative, and very lucky -- kind of from that perspective. It's probably wrong-headed, but there was an element of design in keeping the protagonists muted. I meant for the story to be replicable. I wanted readers, all three of you!, to be able to identify with the context and this or that person at any given time.

CC: The main characters in this book form an intentional community, wanting to exist cooperatively with their neighbors. Eventually, they have to face an outside violent threat. Do you sense that there is currently a disconnect between the current "eco-community" culture, and the more immediate threats facing such groups during the transition of a "fast crash" scenario?

TC: Reluctantly, I'd have to say there is indeed a disconnect, a suspension of rationale/conclusions regarding urban life in any kind of rapid-descent scenario -- of course among the general society, but within the Eco-community, as well. Having been raised with opulence as our "birthright," it is very hard to imagine, let alone accept, the plausibility of a fundamental, draconian shift to subsistence living for the survivors. Why would anyone willingly entertain such a notion? Alas, because the more one looks, the more evident it becomes that such a Crash is unavoidable. Look, I cherish my city, Portland, as much as anyone -- in the petroleum economy. But how are 1.6 million people going to eat, say, within a couple weeks of the semi's no longer hauling groceries to the markets? A mantra of Ragnarok is "Desperate people do desperate things." For people stuck in a city, locked into the way we've always done things, it's going to get ugly.

CC: I also noticed that you kept the general location the story takes place completely unreferenced, other than being in the Pacific Northwest. Why was that?

TC: We who live in the Pacific Northwest have a benign climate and abundant water (so far!), unlike many other areas in the US. I wanted to portray the consequences of a Collapse in any urban center, thus the ambiguity, even one which began with natural advantages.

CC: What plans do you have for future writing?

TC: Thank you for asking, Jerry! In the very near future -- weeks, perhaps a few months -- I will self-publish Shards, a collection of essays from before, during, and since Ragnarok, and, I think, Ragnarok's non-fiction bookend. This is bare-your-soul interrogation -- as much of myself -- I'm definitely psychically bare-nekkid in some of these pieces -- as the world I encounter. But it's also whimsical and literary at times.

And just so you don't think I'm slacking off, I'm deeply engaged in a multi-voice narrative of our commune experience in Eugene, starting summer of 1968, the Yellow Submarine. Stay tuned.

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To order Ragnarok, A Plausible Future, use print-on-demand ordering at Lulu: lulu.com or write to the author via email: tcole "at" cnnw "dot" net