

# SAN DIEGO<sup>®</sup>

MAGAZINE

## 'EMBRACING EARTH'

An important new book puts our world and its future in focus

WITH DECEMBER COME the gift-giving holidays, and I always feel that I should take this time to recommend books targeted for a gift list. That usually means books for children and adults that are either specifically about one of the holidays—Hanukkah, Christmas and New Year's—or otherwise appropriately packaged for giving. Often such books are not meant for serious reading, relying instead on visual beauty, charm or tradition to engage the buyer.

Most of them are referred to as coffee-table books, not only because they are too large for the average bookcase but because they are intended for superficial browsing and because there is a certain status in displaying these handsome art or photography books, tastefully illustrated and elaborately bound. (October's book-marketing sensation, Madonna's oversized, overexposed and overpriced *Sex*, had all the above specifics with the exception of taste; nevertheless, it was destined more for under the sofa cushions than atop the coffee table.)

This year I have carefully chosen, from the many specialty books that circulate around the winter holidays, some typical examples I think should make great gifts. But I will suggest only a few, because I conclude with one book in particular that

I consider not only a perfect gift to give or to get but one of the most important books of the year or, perhaps, even the century—a large, elegant book of incredible photographs that holds within its covers both a threat and a promise for all our futures.

EVERY YEAR AT THIS TIME, at least one of the books I recommend is a collection of photographs of Earth from overhead—fascinating aerial photography of deserts and coastlines. This year, the very special book I wish everyone could both see and read is *Embracing Earth: New Views of Our Changing Planet* (\$39.95). Published by Chronicle Books, it is a series of incredibly beautiful photographs of our planet seen not from overhead but from "way out there":

"Seen from space, our planet is not only a beautiful blue marble, but a complex interaction of many components: land, air, water, snow and ice, life. We are in the process of gathering a portrait of our planet that will enable us to understand how these elements interact and interrelate. Without this satellite perspective, we would never advance beyond struggling to tell the forest from the trees."

Conceived and created by Payson R. Stevens, an Earth systems scientist and consultant who trained at Scripps Institution of Oceanography and lives in Del Mar, and Kevin W. Kelley, who edited the best-selling *The Home Planet*, the book is not only a feast for the eyes but

deeply moving. Its urgent and heartfelt text focuses on the world rolled into a ball and spinning into a questionable future. This unusual book's pages are filled not only with conventional photographs but also scientifically contrived pictures of the ocean, the land and the atmosphere made possible by recent advances in technology.

*Embracing Earth* is heralded as a "warning and an inspiration for the third millennium" and, indeed, it chronicles both the wonder and the fragility of our planet. It is dedicated to the new discipline of Earth system science, which "draws on all the natural sciences to help create a new approach for understanding how our planet works and how we affect it."

"Natural Rhythms," the book's main section, offers some fantastic visions of the ebb and flow of land, air, water, ice and life, tracing incredible patterns across the globe. The darker second section, "Human Impacts," includes pictures of the growing hole in the ozone layer and the destructive results of acid rain, urbanization, deforestation, desertification and war. Some of the saddest photographs are those of the sea and land destroyed by the deliberate oil-well fires and oil spills on and off the shores of Kuwait:

"War has always taken a toll not only on human life but also on the environment. Cities and countryside have been burned, bombed and exposed to chemical warfare and atomic radiation. The Persian Gulf War of 1991 represented an alarming advance in the ability of the human species to make war on the environment."

The final section (excepting W. Stanley Wilson's addenda explaining remote sensing and other technical advances) echoes the book's title, "Embracing Earth," and offers the reader a more optimistic summation. But while "we have to take heart in the fact that the Earth regenerates," we must also remember that "a philosophy of embracing the Earth is very old. Yet as the third millennium approaches it is clear that we need to revitalize the tenets of this philosophy to ensure that we can create a future for ourselves and for all other life forms." □