

## ENGLISH: *THINGS WE DIDN'T SEE COMING*

**The text shows a society in which facts are uncertain, relationships are temporary, and decisions are based purely on self-interest.**

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Steven Amsterdam's episodic narrative, 'Things We Didn't See Coming' depicts a dystopian society characterised by human misery, natural disaster, and disease. Amsterdam's bleak and catastrophic environment appears void of all security and stability – as the narrative's title suggests nobody can predict what's "coming" next. Amsterdam's novel suggests that when physical survival is at risk, relationships will be compromised, with human's naturally favouring self-preservation in the face of adversity. Despite this insinuation, however, Amsterdam still alludes to a hope, which exists for the future of humanity as achieved through authentic relationships with others.

Amsterdam's disaster-ravaged environment is depicted as one of uncertainty, and this lack of security and safety is mirrored in his portrayal of human relationships. The episodic structure of Amsterdam's narrative highlights the ever-evolving nature of his setting, which is constantly besieged with "fires, floodwaters, windstorms" symbolic of a world in which "security" has become elusive. As the narrator muses in 'Forest For The Trees', "you think you're worrying about the right thing, then you're side swiped." His rapidly changing environment is unpredictable, and thus Amsterdam's characters are "always running." Consequently, the moral nature of human relationships have been compromised for those which are not so "romantically ethical", with self-interest rising above the need for "trust[ing]," loving relationships. The definition of marriage is altered to "renewable" "18 month unions" which focus on the personal gains of either partner. As Margo understands, "the seasons change" and therefore, commitment is fragile. Amsterdam's relationships are therefore unstable, and uncertain. Like his rapidly evolving dystopian environment, nothing is firmly set in stone.

The insecurity of the environment also appears to breed characters with selfish tendencies, whose decisions are often based upon personal needs. From as early on as the first vignette, 'What We Know Now', Otis justifies his "hit and run" as for the protection of his own family. This mindset is then adopted by Otis' son, the narrator, who has been raised to prioritise "mine, mine, mine, mine and mine", habitually "putting a price" on the valuable of others. Through his flat, cynical tone, it becomes evident to readers that the narrator's focus for much of the narrative is purely self-motivated. He bluntly remarks in 'Dry Land' that the "real reward" of his "miserable" government job is "having the pick of the abandoned property," and understands "how practiced [he's] got at talking people out of everything they care about." Readers are positioned to view Amsterdam's society as one void of human kindness and compassion, in which the narrator justifies abandoning a weak, vulnerable Jeph in 'Predisposed' with his own "invincibil[ity]." Amsterdam therefore aligns readers to acknowledge the natural human tendency to favour self-preservation in the midst of social and environmental disasters. By presenting an unnamed narrator and unspecific location however, Amsterdam encourages readers to refrain from judgement. These are ordinary characters in extraordinary circumstances and their apparent immoral response to uncertainty is therefore intrinsically human and utterly flawed.

None the less, Amsterdam's narrative always maintains a hope that exists for a return to the care and compassion of humanity. In 'Cakewalk', the narrator's moment of insight is revealed as he acknowledges, "stealing...all suddenly seems barbaric." Despite arguably being led astray by the uncertainty of his environment, the narrator returns to this mentality in 'The Profit Motive', again revealing hope in his declaration, "I'm too old for theft. This was my chance to get back on the good side of the ledger." By allowing readers into the mind of the narrator through a stream of consciousness writing style, Amsterdam positions them to understand that "it was never a conscious wish of [the narrator's] to become a criminal. It was an apocalyptic choice." Therefore, in the final vignette, 'Best Medicine' as the narrator alludes to the pride he gains from "helping people", readers are invited to see that despite its self-interested appearance, the narrator's world is not entirely void of human compassion and kindness. Amsterdam's cyclically structured narrative is cleverly framed

by the narrator's relationship with his father Otis. In trying to "protect" his son from the uncertainty of the future in 'What We Know Now', Otis was questionably driven to the brink of insanity, left "hugging [his young son] as tight as he can hold the world still." This authentic emotional connection is then re-ignited in the final vignette, 'Best Medicine'. With one "breath" of the "unfiltered air", the narrator discovers the elusive security and sincere relationship which had been evading him throughout each episode of his life – a connection symbolised by the shared trait of "green eyes" alluding to the timelessness of the relationship between father and son. In "suddenly "realis[ing] it's better here with him than anywhere [he's] been", the narrator is finally able to release his firm hold on physical survival and self-interest, embracing instead a loving, cathartic unity of peace. Thus, Amsterdam concludes his novel, leaving readers to understand the hope which exists for the future of humanity as achieved through authentic relationships with others.

Amsterdam's dystopian narrative is seemingly uncertain in all aspects – facts are constantly changing, relationships are built upon insecurity, and self-preservation naturally prevails over human compassion. Amsterdam positions readers to understand however, that despite the rapidly evolving external environment, humanity and internal peace may still be achieved through authentic relationships with others. Therefore, despite appearing void of all hope, Amsterdam reveals how human kind may triumph despite tragic adversity.