

LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION



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LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

e-ISSN: 1474-8479

Journal homepage:

<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/london-review-of-education>

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How to cite this article

Young, H. (2021) 'Book review: *The Good Ancestor: How to think long term in a short-term world*, by Roman Krznaric'. *London Review of Education*, 19 (1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.19.1.20>

Submission date: 9 September 2020

Acceptance date: 16 March 2021

Publication date: 23 June 2021

Peer review

This article has been through editorial review.

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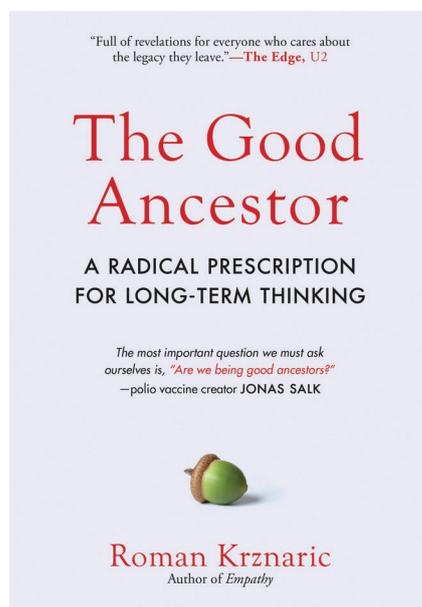
The *London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Book review

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The Good Ancestor: How to think long term in a short-term world, by Roman Krznaric

London: W.H. Allen, 2020; 336 pp.; ISBNs: 978-0753-55451-7 (pbk), 978-1615-19730-9 (hbk), 978-0753-55452-4 (ebk)



As educators, we can get too focused on the current academic year and the near future, neglecting our responsibility for the long future. Roman Krznaric is a public philosopher who writes on a range of topics, including empathy and its power to change society. In his latest book, he explores our current tendency to short-term thinking and our increasing collective need for long-term thinking to address global challenges. His central argument that people must focus much more on what we leave for future generations provides food for thought for all educators.

There are some stimulating ideas in this book. He begins by talking about humans having both 'marshmallow brains' (wanting instant gratification) and 'acorn brains' (planting tree seeds or the foundations of religious buildings for the future beyond the human lifespan). Both have value, but the distinction raises questions about whether education based on the instant gratification of extrinsic motivation (including test results) can educate for 'acorn brains' that think long term. Education is mentioned explicitly in a later chapter, where he suggests that:

Education appears to suffer from an inherent time tension. On the one hand it embodies long-term thinking by providing investment in young people, the fruits of which may not fully emerge for at least a decade when

they enter the workforce or become active citizens. On the other hand, what they need to learn is in a constant state of flux perhaps now more so than ever due to rapid technological changes like automation. (230)

Krznaric suggests that this context implies the need for educators to support the development of two core skills. First, we need to educate for 'relationship skills like empathy, where humans have a big advantage over the AI machines that threaten to take their jobs'. Second, we all need 'the skill of long-term thinking itself' (230). Despite its limited explicit discussion of education, the whole book is of great interest to educators and can help us think more deeply about the ideas underpinning our teaching for now and the future. Education is (or, I believe, should be) about exploring ideas. As Krznaric puts it, 'Ideas provide the mental playground in which human action takes place. They are the secret ingredient of the paradigms that shape our lives' (240). Students not only need to be taught *about* ideas; they also need to explore *how* ideas become powerful and operate in shaping the future for good and ill.

This accessible book is valuable for all stages of education. Krznaric's reference to Dr Seuss's *Lorax* (the fable about endless growth and environmental destruction) reminds us how so much of our world view can be developed in the early years. Similarly, his concept of 'good ancestors' will shape my work in doctoral education (I will add a greater emphasis on power). He emphasizes 'collective responsibility' (72), not just responsibility for our own grandchildren. Central to the challenge for educators is ensuring that we are educating students for a collective future as well as for their individual futures.

His approach has implications for how we teach all subject disciplines, although it might also make us question the boundaries between them. He presents a comprehensive discussion of how art and literature can extend our time horizons to consider possible futures. There are reminders to history teachers of the long-term thinking of ancestors who constructed material objects, from ornate buildings to sewers, which are still valued today; of those who worked for social change that would not be seen in their own lifetimes; and of the message of the 'S-curve' that 'nothing grows for ever' (120). For economics teachers, Krznaric challenges the apparently rational economic principle of the 'dark art of discounting' (73) which gives decreasing value to future lives. There are similarly valuable examples of short-term versus long-term thinking for teachers across the age range of students and for all subjects.

The book is structured around 'six ways to think long', which present concrete challenges for us to consider as educators. This is followed by an exploration of what a 'time rebellion' might involve. One focus here is considering future generations as part of 'deep democracy' – Krznaric defines this as including 'guardians of the future', 'citizen assemblies', 'intergenerational rights' and 'self-governing city states' (163). In recent work looking at student voice in higher education, we were encouraged by how student representatives considered future students in their work for change (Young and Jerome, 2020). This needs more explicit cultivation in student councils and other forms of decision making throughout education. It also relates to the governance of educational institutions, which is in danger of ever shorter-term thinking. As Krznaric comments, 'short-termism is built into the genetic code of the neoliberal paradigm' (196).

The future is uncertain. Re-assuring students with certainties and platitudes, about both the future and particular knowledge, is frequently unhelpful. We cannot be prescriptive about sustainable behaviours in the here and now, as these may turn out to be unsustainable in other places and times (for example, Wals, 2010: 144). Hence, recycling behaviours, for example, are limited and need to be complemented and

made meaningful by critical thinking (Vare and Scott, 2007). The latter forms part of developing what Krznaric calls the 'skill of long-term thinking itself' (230).

Following thinkers from Karl Marx to Milton Friedman, Krznaric emphasizes how it often takes a crisis to provoke change. To return to the building of Victorian sewers, Krznaric says British politicians were provoked to act quickly for the future by the 'Great Stink' of 1858, which led to them fleeing the Houses of Parliament (108). He suggests that hope might be important to motivate change for some, but the powerful and privileged seem to need a crisis to change (130). Society and our educational institutions have certainly faced a crisis with COVID-19. It remains to be seen whether both the economically and politically powerful, and those experiencing massive 'insecurity in the here and now' (240), can seize the moment to think about how education can support the long-term future of our species and the planet.

Notes on the contributor

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Declaration and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interests with this work.

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