

An Invitation to the Futures: A Review of Wendell Bell's 'Memories of the Future'

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Book Review

Wendell Bell 2011, *Memories of the Future*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey

This is an autobiography and a futures story. It illustrates how our past, present and future imaginings influence our choices and actions. It is the story of hope and dreams that linger whether realised or not. It is told through the life story of one of the leading figures in the Futures field and it is told with candour, charm and love. It is an intimate story which not only includes the broad narrative of a life but also shares those special moments which can have such a profound effect on us. This attention to the details of life is part of what makes this book such an interesting read. Life's 'wild cards'; the unexpected joys, sorrows, chance encounters and illness are also dealt with as significant actors in life's trajectory. Future ideals and aspirations are nothing without someone to share them with and in this tale Wendell shows how his success relied on the support of those around him, in particular his wife Lora-Lee. The themes of personal and shared visions of the future are found throughout the book and become more central to the story line in step with Wendell becoming a renowned sociologist and then a founding figure in the Futures community.

We are introduced to interesting characters, and for most, the reader discovers something of their life beyond the direct role they play in Wendell's life story. These side tales provide a more rounded sense of the times. Times which touch on the Great Depression, World War II and its immediate aftermath, then the social upheavals of the 60-70s and through to near present. We learn of family life, school, learning to fly and flying for the US Navy at the end of the war. The story then turns towards an academic career, in which Wendell rises to become a key figure in the field of Sociology, working in some of America's leading academic institutions. A significant element of his career focused on a passion for research.

Particularly influential was the research and association with the Caribbean, notably the coming independence of Jamaica. Wendell blends the stories of leading characters during the transition to independence with those of ordinary citizens; both are told with equal grace and poignancy. It is during this period that the ideas about peoples' images of the future and the relationship to their actions become more explicit. The book goes on to further explore his university life though a period which included the rise of the civil rights movement, the introduction of female undergraduates at Yale and the Vietnam War. Here we are offered insight

into university politics particularly the battle over the future direction at Yale. Throughout these periods Wendell illustrates how our ideas and images about the future can be used to promote social justice, something for which Wendell reveals his passion throughout the book, at both national and organisational levels.

Beyond the Caribbean and Yale the tales turns to work, learning to ride horses and other adventures in the UK, France and Australia. During this time Wendell starts to devote more and more time towards the Futures Studies and gradually identifies himself as a Futurist. The latter stages of this period embrace the time when Wendell writes the seminal Foundations of Futures Studies, a near all consuming passion.

Throughout the book Wendell manages to weave together the threads of academic, social and family life. There is always something of interest whether the tale is of parties, horse riding, teaching, politics or flying. He manages to celebrate his successes as well as those of colleagues and family, and accept the misfortunes with equanimity.

This is a candid and intimate autobiography; the intimacy of this story invites the reader to consider their own past, present and future. It is an invitation from someone who has worked for a long time to make the world a better place for current and future generations and it is an invitation well worth taking.

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