

Foreword to Michael Aleksik's 'Billy Beaver'

Central to the story of Billy Beaver is an insight into the state of the world at the beginning of a new century. 20th century achievements that all admire are exemplified by a doubling of life expectancy (from 40 to 80 years), improved living conditions and spectacular scientific and technological progress. While these advances have greatly improved life for a fifth of the world's population, four fifths remain in persistent poverty, living increasingly insecure and miserable lives. Wars have been waged on an unprecedented scale. Millions of people have been killed and mutilated. Displacement of people has profoundly altered and disrupted the lives of millions who have become refugees. Disproportionate emphasis on economic growth and on frenzied consumerism has distorted our value system and resulted in continuously widening disparities between rich and poor. The fracturing and collapse of complex systems is evident at several levels.

At the level of individuals, impoverishment of life is evident in the erosion of interpersonal relationships, the neglect and abuse of vulnerable people and in our selfishness and alienation from each other.

At the communal level, excessive attention to individualism is progressively destroying our sense of community and civic responsibility. Social support systems are eroding. Within nations such impoverishment manifests in the growth of 'under-classes' that are relegated to living under humiliating conditions on the fringes of society.

At a global level, billions of people are considered superfluous to a market-oriented economy. The lives of those with limited purchasing or producing power are of little consequence to dominating economic giants. Population growth accompanied by wasteful consumption patterns, pollute the soil, water and air, the natural "commons" on which we are all dependent. The destruction of forests, aquatic life and the earth's protective environment beyond their inherent regenerative capacity threatens all life. Extinction of species and maintenance of biological diversity are absent from the thoughts of those who can focus only on the control of economic resources.

As a result of these pervasive changes at all levels of life, delicate and mutually supportive ecological balances, including those between humans and microbes that have evolved over millennia, are also being disrupted. This has resulted in the emergence of many new infectious diseases including HIV/AIDS. Another potential threat to life on a mass scale arises from the diversion of resources to the military rather than to human sciences and needs. The legacy of a stockpile of nuclear armaments and waste may yet be matched by the destructive power of biological and toxic weapons.

Instead of wisely applying currently available knowledge in ways that could begin to reverse these adverse trends, the most privileged and powerful people continue to promote unsustainable patterns of life, while relying on the hope that new scientific discoveries will be used for benign purposes to solve major global problems. The emphasis on economic growth as the dominant feature of human development is thus being accompanied by impoverishment at spiritual, intellectual and emotional levels of human existence.

Michael Aleksyuk's allegorical narrative draws on his unique combination of insightful knowledge of beavers and human psychology. He eloquently draws attention to the folly of selfish pursuit of prestige and material possessions and to the consequences of failing to appreciate the value of solidarity and interdependence. All who aspire to Billy Beaver's goals stand to lose the precious life that he and his wife, Becky, could have had. They also jeopardise the potential for the wholesome lives of future generations. Those who read this book will hopefully be stimulated and empowered to shape their lives differently and through individual efforts, stimulate more constructive global trends.

Solomon R Benatar
Professor of Medicine
Director, University of Cape Town Bioethics Centre
Visiting Professor University of Toronto