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BUSINESS BOOK REVIEW

\$20 gasoline? There's a bright side

Civilization can survive and even thrive with high fuel costs, author Christopher Steiner says. Benefits would include fewer road deaths, less obesity and tastier, locally grown food.

By Ed Crooks

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It is often pointed out that if Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speech had declared: "I have a nightmare," he would not have persuaded anyone.

He might not have sold very many books, either. There is only so much gloom the average reader can take, and today's publishing climate is not receptive to Old Testament prophecies of imminent destruction.

During the boom years, there was a spate of books warning that we were all doomed. One of the most popular spine-chillers was the threat of "peak oil" -- the prospect that the world's oil production is about to go into irreversible decline, bringing about the downfall of civilization as we know it.

At its most apocalyptic, the underlying message of these books was, in the words of "The Simpsons" newscaster Kent Brockman: "It's time for our viewers to crack each other's heads open and feast on the goo inside."

Christopher Steiner's book "\$20 Per Gallon: How the Inevitable Rise in the Price of Gasoline Will Change Our Lives for the Better," as its cheery subtitle suggests, is very different. It is the latest, and



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the best, example of a new type of book that seeks to put a feel-good spin on the imminent exhaustion of one of our most vital natural resources.

Hot on the heels of Jeff Rubin's "Why Your World Is About to Get a Whole Lot Smaller," which also examined the prospect of peak oil without panic or despair, Steiner focuses on the brighter side of a world in which a shortage of oil has sent gasoline prices soaring.

He builds on Rubin's argument and quotes him a couple of times, but he accentuates the positive even more. Steiner deepens the analysis into a more granular level of detail, coming up with a wealth of intriguing observations and ideas.

Expensive gasoline, he suggests, will bring all sorts of benefits, including fewer road deaths, less obesity and tastier, locally grown food. It could also mean the downfall of Wal-Mart and the "carnival of excess" that is Las Vegas, deaths that Steiner does not seem inclined to mourn.

There will be costs too, he admits: The bulk of the U.S. aviation and motor industries is likely to join Wal-Mart in the history books. But overall his intent, as elegantly outlined in the epilogue, is that civilization can survive -- thanks in large part to nuclear power -- and indeed flourish after the end of the Oil Age.

The book's smartest trick is in its structure, which follows the lead of "Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet," Mark Lynas' book on climate change, in casting each chapter as a step up on a numerical scale.

Starting at \$4 per U.S. gallon -- the level reached last year, although we are now back to about \$2.65 -- the book counts prices upward in \$2 increments, hypothesizing about the social and economic changes that are likely at each level up to \$20 a gallon. At \$6 a gallon the SUVs will go the way of the dinosaurs, along with the industrial poetry of names such as Chevy Tahoe and Cadillac Escalade. At \$8 a gallon, cheap air travel disappears, and so on.

The focus is unashamedly U.S.-centric, as the title's use of dollars and gallons makes clear. One of Steiner's most arresting insights is that cheap oil has built America the way it is, and expensive oil will make it much more like Europe.

Readers in Britain, where gasoline costs about \$6.25 per U.S. gallon and was 30% higher a year ago, will crack a wry smile at the prospect of the huge social changes resulting from gasoline's climb to the unprecedented heights of \$8.

Nevertheless, the book's vision of a changing America is gripping enough to sustain an international reader's attention. Anecdotes such as the story of Orion Briney, who makes a living fishing in Illinois

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for Asian bighead carp that are sold in Hong Kong, are artfully deployed.

As with many books of this type, "\$20 Per Gallon" is too long and runs out of fuel itself in the later chapters. Energy efficiency is at work in the writing, which ekes as much mileage as possible out of some of its ideas.

Steiner could also be faulted for overdoing the optimism, particularly in light of the experience of the last year.

It is true that in the long run, economic development in China, India and elsewhere will drive up the price of oil. But if the price rises too high, the world economy will go into recession, oil demand will drop and the price will fall again.

Last year proved that the U.S. economy cannot live with \$4 gasoline; coping happily with \$20 still looks a long way off.

Even so, as a thought-provoking introduction to one of the most important forces shaping the 21st century, it can be highly recommended.

Ed Crooks is the energy editor of the Financial Times of London, in which this review first appeared.

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