Review of Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution - And How it Can Renew America by Thomas L. Friedman. 
Farrar, Straus and Giroux 
448 Pages

In the summer of 1968, during another significant presidential campaign, Norman Mailer covered the Democratic and Republican National Conventions for Harper's Magazine. His resulting book, Miami and the Siege of Chicago, along with the work of journalists Tom Wolfe (Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers) and Hunter S. Thompson (Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas), emblemized a new style of reporting in which a large-than-life writer becomes the central figure in the story. As Frank Rich has written, "The American tumult of the 1960's required a new language to chronicle it" - and the New Journalism provided it.

Forty years later, the I's still have it. But the New Journalism has gone cold, flat, and crowded, as too many books, movies, and TV talking heads showcase journalists calling attention to themselves. Paradigmatic example: Thomas Friedman's new book.

According to Hot, Flat and Crowded, we have entered the "Energy-Climate Era" ("E.C.E.") and the world faces daunting challenges of global warming ("hot"), globalism and the growth of the middle class ("flat") and over population ("crowded"). The "perfect storm of hot, flat and crowded" poses five large problems: (1) inequities caused by energy supply and demand; (2) petrodictatorships in oil rich countries; (3) climate change and its impact; (4) energy poverty across the world's poorer nations; and (5) the loss of biodiversity in nature.

The situation is grim. Friedman makes a compelling case that we have reached a pivotal moment, and that our future depends on decisive action, right now. Accordingly, "the ability to develop clean power and energy-efficient technologies is going to become the defining measure of a country's economic standing, environmental health, energy security, and national security over the next fifty years." So while things are really bad, human beings have a chance to fix it - we just have to "walk the line between can-do optimism and a keen awareness that the hour is late and the scale of the problems is practically overwhelming."

As for America, Friedman makes the book's best argument: "we are not going to regulate our way out of the problems of the Energy-Climate Era. We can only innovate our way out, and the only way to do that is to mobilize the most effective and prolific system for transformational innovation and commercialization of new products ever created on the face of the earth - the U.S. marketplace." But, if we are able to get our act together, we can not only survive, we can thrive - and even make a healthy profit while we are at it. As one of Friedman's many friends, an investment banker, gushes: "the green
economy is poised to be the mother of all markets, the economic investment opportunity of a lifetime, because it has become so fundamental.'

Hot, Flat and Crowded is an informative, timely, and accessible call to action. It also presents a number of sensible and practical remedies. Why, then, do we find ourselves so inclined to fight it off? The answer, we think, lies with the book's style - and its stylist.

Friedman seems so cocksure - even when he shouldn't be. He's certain, despite a tsunami of evidence to the contrary, that the world is flat. That ten-dollar-a-barrel oil caused the downfall of the Soviet Union. And that a gas tax will be a universally acclaimed "win-win-win-win-win" as soon as a tell-it-like-it-is-a green candidate reminds voters that right now we're being taxed by Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Russia, and Iran.

In September, 2007, he tells us, he "thought hard and long" about his talk to a conference of auto-makers in China. Guess what? He succeeded in giving them "a perspective they hadn't heard before." When he told them clean power would be the next great global industry, they adjusted their ear pieces to make sure "they were hearing me right." After soaking in his wisdom, they nodded and smiled in agreement.

Friedman is a peacock. He's wants us to know he's the smartest guy in every room and everybody who's anybody admires him. Why else include this paragraph:

In early 2007, I was having lunch with my friend Nate Lewis, an energy chemist at the California Institute of Technology. We were eating at the faculty club on the palm-lined CalTech campus in Pasadena, and I could not resist asking Nate: 'Why was Katrina so unnerving?' Nate rolled this over in his mind for a moment, sipped his strawberry lemonade, a specialty of the house, and finally answered my question about Katrina with questions of his own: "Did we do that? Or did God do that?"

Surprise: Nate's questions reveal that Tom knows - and will tell America - that insurance companies call natural disasters "acts of God" when, actually, there's so much CO2 in the air "we no longer know where nature stops and we start in shaping today's weather."

Addicted to the self-referential anecdote, Hot, Flat, and Crowded makes sure you know that Friedman took his daughter Orly to see the play Billy Elliot at a theater near Victoria Station; that a street vendor in Peshawar asked him what color Osama Bin-Ladin T-shirt he wanted; that his "friend," Alfred Nakatsuma, who runs the bio-diversity preservation program for the United States Agency for International Development, told him that Indonesia had entered the Guinness World Records for having the fastest deforestation rate in the in world; and that Montana's governor, "the best tour guide imaginable," met him in Billings with a twin-engine propeller plane (and his dog Jake) to show him what a strip coal mine looks like.

Having shown that he knows how to win friends and influence people, Friedman also parades his peculiar predilection to wave the American flag. Like a politician, he is careful not to blame votes, while passive-aggressively chastising their habits. The public, he panders, is "ahead of leaders" who exhibit a "dumb as we wanna be" attitude. Friedman hopes every country will go green sooner rather than later, "but as an American I want to make sure my country is in the lead."

The problems identified in Hot, Flat, and Crowded are too important to be interwoven into the travelogue of a self absorbed gasbag. The book leaves us wondering how the New Journalism, like Infotainment, could have gotten this weird, pervasive, and weirdly pervasive. We wish that Thomas Friedman would give us more zebras and less Marlin Perkins, and leave the field of personality journalism to someone with a little more personality.