

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“Things We Didn’t See Coming”

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AUTHOR NOTES

Steven Amsterdam is an Australian writer living with his partner in Melbourne although he was raised in New York. He has broad interests, ranging from cooking and writing to globetrotting. Amsterdam has travelled extensively, including trips to Indonesia, China and Japan.

He studied at Bronx Science, The University of Chicago, The French Culinary Institute and the University of Melbourne.

His work includes writing travel guides and designing book jackets. He purports to being a liberal voter, having sent in an absentee vote for Obama, from Australia, in the most recent U.S. election. He also describes himself both as a psychiatric and palliative care nurse.

Amsterdam's book, *Things We Didn't See Coming* received literary acclaim upon its release. It won *The Age* 'Book of the Year' award in 2009 and was chosen for the NSW Premier's Literary Prize shortlist. It was also selected for a Barnes and Noble's 'Discover Great New Writers' series. It was his first novel.

For a full account of Steven Amsterdam's life and works, explore his website: http://www.stevenamsterdam.com/Steven_Amsterdam.html. Also, examine Angela Meyer's 'Literary Minded' blog: <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/literaryminded/2009/03/23/steven-amsterdam-a-responsive-interview/> and a second interview with the author at: <http://expressmedia.org.au/voiceworks/?p=640>

CONTEXT

The context of *Things We Didn't See Coming* is within an unspecified Western country suffering the ravages of various environmental disasters and dramatic political changes. The exact location remains deliberately imprecise, along with the narrator's name, presumably to show how applicable the circumstances are to too many situations.

Amsterdam draws on a range of dystopian themes in his work yet sets them in the context of natural or environmental disaster rather than the more traditionally dismal outlook of totalitarian control, such as that detailed in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or the more feminist *Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. He also steers clear of notions of nuclear holocausts such as those suggested in *Z For Zachariah*. Significantly, Amsterdam's work deliberately eschews political moralizing, as he does not stand in judgment of a particular world view, nor does he give specific warnings embedded in heavy-handed, bleak scenarios. In fact, his work has been praised for its vision of hope, as writer David Rakoff says:

"One puts down the book feeling something close to hope. Perhaps it's the life-is-long, cyclical wisdom of it all, maybe it's a newfound appreciation for the 'Here And Now', although I'm inclined to think it's just gratitude that there are such writers around." —David Rakoff, author of *Don't Get Comfortable*

Amsterdam does evoke a shattered political framework in his novel yet it is always tempered by very personal and human touches. Steered by emotions, past experiences and embedded in relationships with others, the political scene emerges naturally as part of the human experience rather than a remote and omnipotent force in individual lives.