



Winter 2018

Shooting Stars and Dancing Fish: A Walk to the World We Want by Antonio A. Oposa Jr. (Ramon Aboitiz Foundation Inc., 261 pages; 2017)

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Recommended Citation

Olga Starcher, *Shooting Stars and Dancing Fish: A Walk to the World We Want by Antonio A. Oposa Jr. (Ramon Aboitiz Foundation Inc., 261 pages; 2017)*, 58 Nat. Resources J. 216 (2018).
Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol58/iss1/9>

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BOOK REVIEW

Shooting Stars and Dancing Fish: A Walk to the World We Want by Antonio A. Oposa Jr. (Ramon Aboitiz Foundation Inc., 261 pages; 2017)

In his new book, *Shooting Stars and Dancing Fish: A Walk to the World We Want*, Antonio A. Oposa Jr. tells a compelling story of how human civilization, guided by its philosophy of conquest and its exploitative relationship with nature, is creating an environmental crisis. A lawyer by trade and a storyteller at heart, Oposa uses his experiences in environmental litigation, his family's history, and a multitude of poems, photographs, and drawings as a backdrop to a story of how careless plunder of natural resources can slowly give way to hope. He explains that human beings can be better and can learn to do better by building a world that is defined by appreciation and cooperation rather than by greed and strife. These stories and images illustrate both the natural beauty that may be forever lost to future generations, and the natural wonders that remain and can still be protected and restored. Yet, nature, in *Shooting Stars*, is not a passive object that humans act upon; rather, it is a dynamic, resilient, and sometimes vengeful force. Given a chance, forests, coastlines, and rivers recover—ecosystems can and do bounce back. However, when nature is angered and oppressed, it pushes back—battering humanity with catastrophic typhoons, floods, and fires. Oposa urges his readers to work with nature and to acknowledge the importance of the natural world to the health, well-being, and happiness of people and communities.

Shooting Stars begins with a poem of the same title, and both the poem and its theme are repeated throughout the book: “A shooting star I do not see, [a]nd the world becomes all [a]bout me.”¹ The poems in the first chapter speak of the carelessness with which humankind treats the planet that sustains us and the carelessness with which people treat one another. This theme of callous destruction is sharply juxtaposed against the illustrations that accompany it. These images show the lush, colorful, and pristine beauty of unadulterated landscapes, as if saying “look, look at what we have been throwing away.” This concept sets the theme for the rest of the book: we have made terrible mistakes, but now we stand on the precipice of change and must decide whether we keep going as we have been and face an uncertain fate or if we make changes in line with a belief that the generations of people to come, the Earth, and all its inhabitants have a right to a future.

The book is split into sixteen chapters, each one challenging readers to set aside their understanding of what makes civilization work and imagine a different way forward. Chapters Two through Five discuss the logical and practical flaws of traditional economics of extraction. In these chapters, Oposa offers new definitions for well-known economic terms: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) becomes “Great Disaster for the Planet,” and the mindset of extraction and consumption is dubbed “ex-con” economics. To Oposa, the way forward is simple—countries around the

1. ANTONIO A. OPOSA JR., *Shooting Stars and Dancing Fish: A Walk to the World We Want* 5 (Ramon Aboitiz Foundation Inc. 2017).

world must move away from GDP and ex-con economics and strive towards Conservation, Protection, and Restoration, or “CPR Economics.” Once Oposa has armed his readers with this new vocabulary, *Shooting Stars* takes them on a tour of Philippines, or Perlas. Chapter Seven is filled with stories from Oposa’s experience litigating on behalf of the environment of his native Perlas. He shares his many courtroom losses and bittersweet victories. Oposa is skeptical of legal victories and he is likewise skeptical of legislative victories, tempering his reader’s enthusiasm with harsh wisdom: laws are only as good as their implementation, and there is always plenty of room to doubt governments and industry when it comes to the implementation of environmental laws.

Yet, at its core, *Shooting Stars* is a story of hope. Oposa argues persuasively that when the majority of citizens work towards change, and when governments are responsive to the wishes of the people, change can and does happen. The second half of the book describes steps that countries around the globe are taking to combat climate change and, at the same time, to improve the lives of the populace. From floating solar panels in Japan to the ample walking spaces and traffic-free zones, to local gardens in Philippines, human ingenuity, imagination, and ability know no bounds. Oposa celebrates these victories. He urges us to go further and do even more. He argues that years of marketing and myopic thinking have caused people and communities to value possessions and lifestyles for their own sake rather than for the original purposes they were meant to accomplish. Transportation, for example, is about getting people from point A to point B in the most efficient way possible. However, when people place greater value on cars as possessions or status symbols, they tend to overlook hours of life wasted in traffic jams, the real health costs associated with car exhaust, and the costs of owning an automobile. These car owners are often unhappy with their lifestyle, but this lifestyle is so entrenched that they do not think to ask whether their environment could be structured differently and whether this restructuring could result in greater happiness. *Shooting Stars* seeks to shift this type of mindset. Instead of asking “what do the Joneses have,” the book challenges its readers to focus on what they need from their governments and their communities to be safe from natural disasters, to be healthier, happier, and to spend more time with friends and family.

Page after page, chapter after chapter, the mind inevitably floats back to the titular poem of this book. Shooting stars are seen but momentarily in the night sky. Human lives are similarly short. We are here one moment and gone the next, and yet we spend little time considering the damage we do to the planet that sustains us. Nature is also mutable, fragile, and temporary. Our planet is rare and unique. The poem invites us to notice the lights of shooting stars around us and to acknowledge our own light—fleeting yet capable of great beauty. Oposa provides a vision in which this beauty can be realized—people working to care for one another and for the environment.

The last chapters are dedicated to a proposed action plan that can take the world from ex-con to CPR economics. Oposa does not pretend that the change will be easy. In his own years of practice, Oposa has been defeated in court, has seen the work of government agencies set back by elected officials, has had his life threatened, and has lost a friend to assassination. He simply invites us all to not dwell on setbacks, but to work towards a sustainable future, and to remember that

“[t]here is no limit [t]o what we can achieve [w]hen we unleash [t]he native genius of [t]he Human Heart.”²

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2. *Id.* at 234.