



COMMON READING DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Long Thaw: How Humans are Changing the Next 100,000 Years of Earth's Climate Class of 2024

1. Who is the intended audience for *The Long Thaw*, and how can you tell? Archer himself is a professor of geophysical sciences at the University of Chicago, and a leading expert on climatology, global warming, and environmental chemistry. In this book, is he speaking primarily to his fellow scientists? to politicians? business leaders? students? environmental activists? the general public? Does he seem to be addressing primarily an American audience, or a global one? Is he addressing readers who already believe in the global significance of climate change, or readers who remain skeptical of climate change science?
2. *The Long Thaw* encourages us to think about time on the scale of thousands and millions of years. But we can also reflect productively on the much shorter “lifespan” of the book itself: it was first published in 2009, and republished with a new preface in 2016. Is the experience of reading this book in 2020 fundamentally different than it would have been ten years ago in 2009, or even four years ago in 2016? If not, why not? If so, how would you characterize the difference? Another way of thinking about this question: if Archer were publishing a new edition of the book this year, would it have a different preface? Ideally, what would that preface say in 2020?
3. *The Long Thaw* has a deceptively simple structure: it is divided into three movements, titled THE PRESENT, THE PAST, and THE FUTURE. How do Archer’s evaluations of the present and the past prepare the way for his assessment of the future? Is this an effective structure for his argument? Why or why not?
4. As Archer points out, “the lifetime of global warming” is usually viewed in centuries (xi). Current global warming forecasts are especially attuned to climate change between now and the year 2100—a year when most of the humans reading his book today will no longer be alive. What challenges come with anticipating and addressing the long-term effects of climate change now, i.e., planning for the next 100 years, the next 1000 years, or—per the book’s title—the next 100,000 years?
5. “Why should we mere mortals care about altering climate 100,000 years from now?” (9) Archer poses this question early on, and argues throughout the book that we bear an ethical responsibility to future generations. In your opinion, is Archer successful in bringing a sense of immediacy and urgency to the impact that our actions today will have on our descendants 100,000 years from now?
6. Archer observes that the timescale of climate change is at odds with the timescale of the economy: climate choices that prioritize the future are often at odds with economic choices



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that prioritize returns right now. Do you think that *The Long Thaw* would convince readers whose first priority is economic? Does Archer's final chapter chart a convincing and possible path forward, given the competition between economic priorities and ethical climate change decisions?

7. Conversations about climate change often oscillate between optimism and fear—between the hopeful belief that something can still be done, and the deep-seated fear of apocalyptic consequences should we fail. In his preface to the 2016 edition, Archer himself briefly alludes to the “horror” of climate change: “The longevity of our impact on Earth’s climate gives it a whole new dimension of horror” (xi). Yet by and large, the book itself is devoid of such horror: even its descriptions of the devastating natural disasters associated with climate change—flooding, droughts, cyclones—are relatively mild in tone. What is your evaluation of the book’s tone? Does it strike the right balance between optimism and fear? What *is* the right balance between optimism and fear, when it comes to speaking about climate change? In 2020, how scary should a scientific book on climate change actually be?
8. *The Long Thaw* is a science text, one that ultimately seeks to convince readers through the presentation of clear scientific evidence. What does Archer accomplish in this book, that another kind of book on climate change—a novel, a legal history, an economic account—could not accomplish? Are there any limitations to what this book can accomplish? What kinds of arguments is Archer most and least equipped to rebut?
9. Relatedly, are there audiences whom you feel would be less convinced by Archer’s arguments than others? If so, is there another kind of book that these audiences would find more convincing?
10. Would you recommend *The Long Thaw* to other readers—friends, relatives, classmates? Why or why not?