

By Lane Jennings

A Global Overview of Futures Studies

Authoritative reference work covers past, present, and future of futures studies.

With some 40 authors discussing complex issues and ideas, a breezy writing style is not to be expected. But Richard Slaughter's *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* offers an authoritative reference source for educated readers with serious concerns about the future. And on this level, the venture succeeds very well.

The first volume of *The Knowledge Base* reviews the origins and history of futures studies (with special emphasis on the twentieth century). Several writers discuss how different concepts and metaphors can influence what people hope for and expect from the future. Other contributors critique influential books and articles on futures topics, and suggest from varying perspectives what working futurists can hope to achieve.

The second volume profiles selected organizations that typify futures studies in different parts of the world and also covers tools and techniques employed in futures research, including global modeling, future workshops, visioning, etc.

The third volume deals with new ways of looking at the future that reflect ongoing changes in society (e.g., the feminist movement) and recent developments in science (chaos theory, etc.). The volume concludes with predictions from various perspectives for the twenty-first century and beyond.

Each volume is separately indexed and provides source notes for every article. All three volumes offer the same handy glossary of futures terms and list of frequently used acronyms. Large author photos and brief biographies help give each contributor a face and a history as well as a voice.

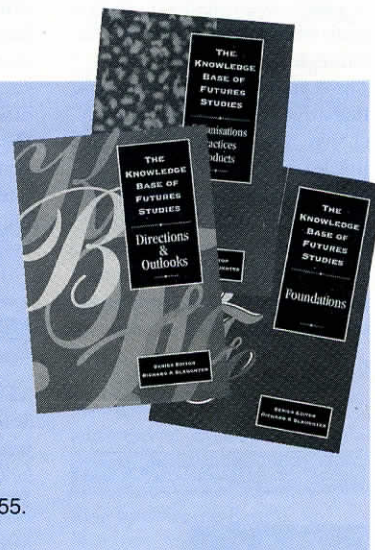
One of *The Knowledge Base's* most interesting features is its showcasing of non-Western futures thinking. Be-

cause the industrially developed countries of North America and Europe were culturally dominant during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when modern futures studies emerged, many futurists have long assumed that Western concepts of time, progress, democracy, personal ambition, etc., would be essential elements of any desirable global future. But the rising economic and cultural influence of nations with Buddhist, Islamic, Confucian, and other strong traditions makes continued dominance of modern Western values one of today's least-likely futures. In fact, many of the world's most pressing social and environmental concerns may defy solution inside a wholly Western frame of reference. Political scientist Lester Milbrath notes that the values upheld as "good" in Western political discourse include economic growth, consumption, efficiency, productivity, jobs, competitiveness, risk-taking, power, and winning. "Societies pursuing these goals cannot avoid depleting their resources, degrading nature, . . . and upsetting biospheric systems," Milbrath warns.

The Knowledge Base project developed over five years and involved many individuals and organizations. The results are described by the publisher as "a vital resource for all those drawing upon, working in, or intending to work in, any of the emerging futures professions" and "particularly useful as a foundation for a new generation of secondary and tertiary courses." This is a fair claim.

The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies

edited by Richard A. Slaughter. DDM Media Group Futures Study Centre (Australia), 1996. Three volumes. Paperback. Available from the Futurist Bookstore for \$195 (\$185 for Society members), cat. no. B-2008. To order, use the coupon on page 55.



Each volume in the set could be used alone as the core text for a college- or graduate-school course on the future. But even the three volumes together seem designed to be supplemented by lectures, class discussion, outside readings, and individual projects. In short, *The Knowledge Base* is a foundation that individual users can expand and build upon, not a finished product to consume as it stands.

It will be interesting to see what will be built on this foundation once these volumes are adopted as texts at colleges and universities. I can envision teachers and students developing multimedia "illustration sets," hypertext links to some or all of the works cited in the articles, and global on-line seminars where students from every institution where the volumes are used meet to compare notes and expand classroom discussions.

The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies deserves an honored place in educational libraries, as well as on the shelves of business firms and private citizens concerned enough to seek the thoughts of outstanding futurists from around the world. □

About the Reviewer

Lane Jennings is research director of THE FUTURIST and author of *Virtual Futures: Wordviews of Alternative Tomorrows*.