

A Review of *The Culture of Make Believe* (Derrick Jensen, Context Books, 2002)

By Terry Shistar

Derrick Jensen is a writer, a teacher, and an activist. As an activist, he is deeply involved with the particular—deforestation and the extinction of salmon, for example. Fortunately, he has used his power with words to weave thousands of particulars into an incredible (or at least, it would be incredible if we weren't in the middle of it) tale of our culture's assault on this planet. *The Culture of Make Believe* investigates the role of hate and economics in our culture. "I think about the relationship between economics and hatred and what it means—what it must feel like—to live in a society where more atrocities are committed in the name of economics than even in the name of hate." This investigation of necessity makes for a long book—700 pages of text and notes—because there are so many ways in which hate is manifested in our culture.

Perhaps you are thinking this is going too far. Perhaps it is. Jensen asks, "Was slavery in the United States based on hatred of the Africans, or was it economics? Is hate even the right word?" Or is the problem that we objectify those who we wish to exploit? "Does someone who objectifies, one who perceives the living planet and its members as objects to be used, hate the world, and hate life? ...I have to admit that it seems like a stretch to say that those who objectify the world hate life, but given that our culture clearly objectifies the world, and given that it is rapidly destroying life on the planet, maybe it's time to stretch."

Risk assessment is a great tool for objectifying human life. It is easy for a pesticide manufacturer or EPA to say that a use of a certain pesticide will result in "only" one cancer death out of a million people. They don't have to put faces on the 270 Americans killed by that pesticide. "I told my scientist friend that I

thought the authors of these risk assessments ought to be held accountable for their predictions. ...a life for a life. They kill, they die. Isn't that how capital punishment is supposed to work?" Do pesticide manufacturers and EPA hate farmworkers? Do they hate children? If not, why do they do it?

This question—"Why do they do it?"—is a central theme of *The Culture of Make Believe*. It is impossible to have been an advocate for those poisoned by pesticides for over 20 years and *not* be preoccupied with the question of how those who make and use these biocides can ignore the deadly consequences of their actions. And why don't the rest of us consider it murder—mass murder, in fact? Is it true that "Where decency threatens profits, our leaders have no choice but to abandon their humanity as if it did not exist, or to risk disappearing from public view.?"

The conversation about risk assessment came from a long section of the book dealing with the 1984 explosion of the Union Carbide pesticide manufacturing plant in Bhopal, India, where it is estimated that 8000 people died and 200,000 were injured after the release of forty tons of methyl isocyanate (MIC). Jensen says, "I have heard the Bhopal disaster referred to as an accident. I do not see the deaths as any more accidental than the killing of the woman in San Francisco by a dog trained to kill, nor the filling of prisons built to be filled. Union Carbide makes bulk industrial chemicals, many of which are poisonous, and it does so to make a profit. "...Just how accidental is it that people are poisoned by an intentionally

fabricated poison?" Jensen's list of reduced safety features in the Bhopal factory parallels conditions for farmworkers here—Mexican migrant farmworkers are as expendable to the pesticide industry as Indian factory workers.

He asks questions: "Did those who supported Union Carbide hate the people of Bhopal? "...By what right did those who own and run Union Carbide set up a factory to manufacture poisons in Bhopal? Who gave them that right? What entitled them to do this? None of these questions are rhetorical: I want answers."

Jensen returns time and again to accountability:

"But as we would see, time and again, in the daily workings of our culture, were our acculturation not so complete, many laws are written, enforced, and most im-

portantly, perceived in such a way as to hold no one accountable for some types of murder. The same is generally true for ecocide, and for genocide, especially against people of color. The same is effectively true, also, for many crimes against women and children. The same cannot be said for affronts against the property of the wealthy."

The Culture of Make Believe is a powerful book—too powerful to take in large doses or just before bed. But it is what its author intended: "This book is a weapon. It is a gun to be put into the hands of all of us who wish to oppose these atrocities, and a manual on how to use it. It is a knife to cut the ropes that bind us to our ways of perceiving and being in the world. It is a match to light a fuse." Read it and use it.

