



# Chestnut Hill Local

(/)

Wednesday, August 28, 2024

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## Prolific Hill professor pens fictional 'Climate Change'



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Orvell.jpg)

**Chestnut Hill professor Miles Orvell's new book, his 11th, "Death in the Age of Climate Change," is his first work of fiction.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF MILES ORVELL

Posted Thursday, August 22, 2024 12:00 am

by **Len Lear**

Long-time Chestnut Hill (<https://chestnuthilllocal.com/chestnut-hill/>) resident Miles Orvell has been a professor at Temple University ([https://chestnuthilllocal.com/browse.html?search\\_filter=Temple+University](https://chestnuthilllocal.com/browse.html?search_filter=Temple+University)) for more than 50 years, teaching American Literature, among other subjects, and he has published 10 scholarly books and edited the Encyclopedia of American Studies for 10 years, "which was like a long journey in a spaceship to another planet — Planet Earth."

But Orvell has now decided to swim in water over his head, just releasing his first book of fiction, "Death in the Age of Climate Change," which he worked on for three years.

“After I finished 'Empire of Ruins: American Culture, Photography, and the Spectacle of Destruction' (Oxford, 2021),” he explained last week, “I wanted to try something completely different. When I first began to publish scholarly books, my Aunt Bertha used to ask me, slightly bemused, 'So when are you going to write a novel?' My mother seconded her opinion. It took me 50 years to finally write a book they might have read (alas, long after they died).

“I'm not sure why so many academics, especially English professors, write mystery fiction, but maybe it's about solving puzzles. And don't forget that it's one of the few jobs that begins with a death threat: publish or perish,” he said. “When I started 'Climate Change,' after completing the book on ruins, I was obsessed with post-apocalyptic scenarios, and writing something about climate change seemed unavoidable. Obviously it's what we've all been thinking about for years.”

There are three connected stories in “Climate Change,” and each features a Humanities professor, Trevelyan, who can't suppress his Hitchcockian curiosity. He needed a partner in crime – crime-solving, that is – and in the first story he meets a detective, Naomi Tanaka. Things develop between them over the next two stories.

The whole book was very much inspired by Philadelphia and especially Chestnut Hill and Center City, Orvell said. The first story, "The Dome," developed out of a tennis racket someone left in Orvell's office at school and involves the idea that the solution to our problems is to escape them. In this case, an escape from climate disaster is offered to the very wealthy, who can buy a share in one of the self-sufficient, artificial communities – they are huge plastic domes – being built by a wealthy entrepreneur who lives in a Chestnut Hill mansion.

The second story, "The Stone," begins with a copy of the Lenape Stone. An author, Henry Mercer, wrote a book about the real stone, and that led Orvell to bring Fonthill Castle, his home, into the story. Another major inspiration for "The Stone" was the huge Chief Teedyuscung statue in Wissahickon Valley Park ([https://chestnuthilllocal.com/browse.html?search\\_filter=Wissahickon+Valley+Park](https://chestnuthilllocal.com/browse.html?search_filter=Wissahickon+Valley+Park)). In the last story, "The Battery," Orvell incorporated the Franklin Institute, Art Museum and North Philadelphia into a story about a revolutionary new battery for electric vehicles and about the regeneration of neighborhoods.

“You could say that climate change is one broad subject in the book, and the other is academia,” said Orvell. “University departments are fascinating subcultures, and I took advantage of the occasion to step back and write, sometimes satirically, about academic routines and eccentricities. No two departments are alike, but they're typically somewhere between happy families and ruthless corporations.”



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Orvell, a resident of Chestnut Hill for the past 35 years, earned an undergraduate degree from Columbia University in 1964 and a Ph.D. from Harvard University in English and American Literature in 1970, and he came to Temple University for his first job out of graduate school in 1969 when he was 25. He is still at Temple 55 years later, no longer actively teaching but giving occasional post-retirement lectures and supervising some doctoral students. “I miss the classroom,” he said, “but it's nice to have more time!”

Orvell is on two Chestnut Hill Conservancy (https://chestnuthilllocal.com/browse.html?search\_filter=Chestnut+Hill+Conservancy) committees, the Historic District Advisory Committee and the Collections Committee. "I got involved with the Conservancy, an amazing organization, more than a dozen years ago," he said, "when I was writing a book called 'The Death and Life of Main Street,' which included a piece on Chestnut Hill. This community is a balancing act between continuity and change, and I tried to talk about that theme in a slide talk at the Venetian Club last year for the Conservancy, called 'Sustaining Main Street: Chestnut Hill in the 21st Century.'"

In his non-writing and researching time, Orvell rides his bike along Forbidden Drive a few times a week, "although it is almost a forbidden pleasure these days, with the stream bed construction at the bottom of Valley Green Road. Thanks to my electric bike, I can get back up the hill without suffering a heart attack."

Orvell also loves to play music "for my own amusement and probably to the neighbors' annoyance. I got into playing wind instruments as a pre-teen, starting with the saxophone, and I still play. Over the years, I've gone backwards in time, to earlier instruments like the Baroque recorder and the Scottish bagpipes. I've got a very basic set of panpipes. It is very hard, like learning Greek."

Miles Orvell can be contacted at orvell@temple.edu (mailto:orvell@temple.edu). Len Lear can be reached at lenlear@chestnuthilllocal.com (mailto:lenlear@chestnuthilllocal.com).

OTHER ITEMS THAT MAY INTEREST YOU

**A long fight over Watershed rules pits old maps ... (/stories/a-long-fight-over-watershed-rules-pits-old-maps-against-new-ones,33323)**

**New book of poetry pays homage to Chestnut Hill (/stories/new-book-of-poetry-pays-homage-to-chestnut-hill,33330)**

**Unraveling a long Gillies family history of weaving (/stories/unraveling-a-long-gillies-family-history-of-weaving,33275)**

**Hill zoning clash reaches state's highest court (/stories/hill-zoning-clash-reaches-states-highest-court,33180)**



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LOCAL CALENDAR

Sun, Sep 01 <b>American Political...</b> Pennsylvania Con... Philadelphia, PA Wed, Aug 28 @8:30am <b>Harmony Summer Camp for ages 3-8 years</b>  Beth David Reform Congregation Wed, Aug 28 @9:30am <b>The Riverlink Ferry System on the Delaware River Waterfront</b>  Penns Landing Waterfront Wed, Aug 28 @10:00am <b>Jill Dougherty- Glass and Petals: A Still Life Exploration</b>  Black Moth Gallery	Sat, Sep 14 @4:00pm <b>Paint and Sip and Socializ...</b> Manassas Park, VA	Thu, Aug 29 <b>Read, Baby, Read...</b> Richmond Branch Philadelphia, PA	Sun, Sep 01 <b>American Political...</b> Pennsylvania Con... Philadelphia, PA	Sat, Sep 14 @4:00pm <b>Paint and Sip and Socializ...</b> Manassas Park, VA
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All Events (https://chestnuthilllocal.com/events/)

THE LATEST

**CHCA Agenda (/stories/chca-agenda,33388)**

To register for any of the Zoom meetings go to: <https://www.chestnuthill.org/meetings.php>



**Heat wave forces some NW Philly schools to close (/stories/heat-wave-forces-some-nw-philly-schools-to-close,33387)**

As Philadelphia braces for a short but intense heatwave, the city's school district has announced early dismissals for dozens of schools.

(/stories/heat-wave-forces-some-nw-philly-schools-to-close,33387)



**More trains, better times: SEPTA expands regional rail (/stories/more-trains-better-times-septa-expands-regional-rail,33377)**

In the face of a \$240 million budget deficit, SEPTA announced that it plans to add trains to its regional rail service starting Sept. 8.

(/stories/more-trains-better-times-septa-expands-regional-rail,33377)



**New CHH leadership charts ambitious plan for growth (/stories/new-chh-leadership-charts-ambitious-plan-for-growth,33376)**

If you want to know what a hospital means to a community, just consider the impact when one is suddenly closed.

(/stories/new-chh-leadership-charts-ambitious-plan-for-growth,33376)

**A local 'living legend' celebrates 100 years (/stories/a-local-living-legend-celebrates-100-years,33375)**

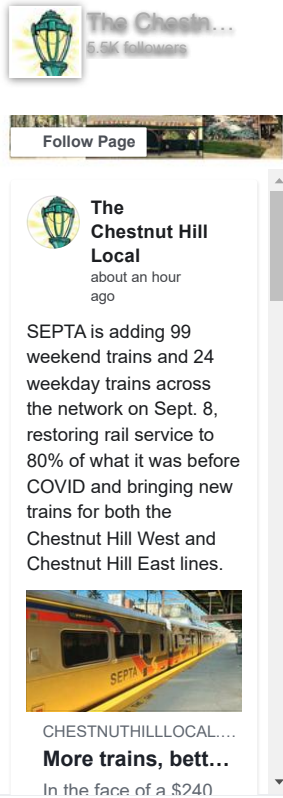
Tom Fitzpatrick's life "is a tapestry of bravery, knowledge, humor and deep faith," said a close friend.



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SEPTA is adding 99 weekend trains and 24 weekday trains across the network on Sept. 8, restoring rail service to 80% of what it was before COVID and bringing new trains for both the Chestnut Hill West and Chestnut Hill East lines.



CHESTNUTHILLLOCAL...  
**More trains, bett...**  
In the face of a \$240



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