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Intervene

What Will It Take To Substantially Adjust the Trajectory of Human Civilisation?

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Australian novelist Guy Lane [previously introduced](#) how he embeds sustainability themes in fiction writing using the example of his novel [Yongala](#). Below, Lane shares an excerpt from the novel [Intervene](#) exploring what it will take to substantially adjust the trajectory of human civilisation.

In my twenty years of watching the biosphere die, I have yet to be convinced that there is anyone, or any agency, that has the capacity to substantially adjust the trajectory of human civilisation.

In the absence of this home-grown influence, we are going to need outside help. This is the basis of my novel, [Intervene](#).

In the story, a special agent spaceman is sent to Earth on a ten-year mission to restructure the global economy to make it sustainable. On Earth, he adopts the identity of a billionaire from Ukraine called Anton Vorlov. In reality, he is a trillionaire from Parrathea, and his real

name is Zem.

Zem's first task is to recover 15 mega-tonnes of ruthenium alloy that his people have deposited on the seabed. The ruthenium alloy is a high-temperature superconductor, and the spaceman sells this to raise the \$20 trillion that he needs to fund his work.

Zem also has a strain of algae that produces prodigious amounts of oil. This algae oil can replace petroleum oil. He sets up joint ventures with oil companies: they write off their drilling and production infrastructure, and instead, use the carbon neutral algae oil as a feedstock for their refineries.

The plan is all going swimmingly until the oilman Tom Wayward starts running interference. Fortunately, Zem has been trained to handle the likes of Tom Wayward:

Chairman, Deepwater Petroleum

In Houston, Texas, the boardroom of Deepwater Petroleum is full, and the tension is palpable. Brenton Prest, C.E.O., observes the edginess of the other board members, but he himself is calm.

The sight of a large shadow moving rapidly along the frosted glass wall announces the Chairman's arrival. The doors swing open, and Tom Wayward storms into the boardroom. His face is red, he has three shots of bourbon in him and freshly brushed teeth. He halts, looking at his directors with contempt. A secretary moves past him from behind, cradling a pile of documents. "What's this?" he barks.

"Minutes from the last meetings," she is instantly cowed by him.

Wayward swipes his hand, knocking the documents onto the floor and shouts, "I only need one minute to sort this shit out." He storms to the head of the table and berates his Chief Executive, "What's this bullshit about a joint venture with Between Destiny?"

"Hi Tom," says Prest, placidly. He can smell the Colgate on Wayward's breath, and knows what to expect.

"I give you the keys to my truck, Brenton, don't drive it into Lake Shit!"

Prest is a karate black belt, he's been dealing with Wayward's fiery temper for six years. He says calmly and plainly, "This is a very good proposal for the firm, Tom."

Wayward thumps his fist on the table, and growls, "You're forgetting that old Tom, who birthed this company, is an oilman."

“It’s an oil project, Tom,” says Brenton. “It’s fifth generation algae oil that is set to blow gold.”

“But old Tom is a petroleum oilman. Not a god-damn pond-scum oil-man!”

The director of public relations addresses the Chairman, “Tom, we all appreciate the cultural sensibilities, but this is a win all round; economically, socially, environmentally.”

Wayward fixes the PR man with a glare and ominously moves around the table to stand behind his seat. After a few moments feeling Wayward’s bulk emanating heat at him, the PR man steps away from the table and leaves the room.

“What is this, save a whale day?” Wayward looks at each one of his board members in turn. The only one who meets his eyes is Prest.

“So it’s a good deal, is it Brenton?”

The C.F.O. says, “Mr. Wayward, the financial projections for the green crude are exceptional. Because this oil is grown, not pumped it—”

“I am not talking to you!” Wayward moves over to Prest and eyeballs him at close range. “It’s a good deal is it, Brenton?”

“Tom. Listen to me.” Prest observes a subtle indication that Wayward will hear him out, so he says, “The supply of our raw material - petroleum oil - is running out. And because of global climate policies, it is soon to become a stranded asset. Un-burnable carbon, Tom. Between Destiny’s algae oil grows and grows and will never run out. It burns with no net carbon emissions, so we can continue to produce oil without exposing ourselves to litigious carbon policies.”

“Then what?”

“We write off our drilling and production assets, but continue to use our refinery, storage and distribution infrastructure. We will be in the oil business forever.” Prest closes, changing his intonation, “We should take the lead in this inevitable shift in our industry, Tom. The JV with Between Destiny will... blow... gold.... all... over... this... firm.”

Wayward says, in a whisper, “Oh, but you are missing something, Brenton.”

Prest sits back in his seat, gently clasping his fingers together, “What is that, Tom?”

“I am a petroleum-oil-man. And this is a petroleum-oil-company. It’s that simple.”

Wayward points his finger at his board members one by one, “If I hear of this project again, I will replace you pond-scum mother-fuckers with real oil people. Even if I have to sue every one of you to get you out of my life.”

Prest watches the reaction of the other board members. They are all submissive, wanting the exchange to end. Tom straightens up, and changes his tone.

“Now, you all know that I want to go to heaven,” he chimes. “I will meet the Between Destiny man that you so admire. Brenton, why don’t you get him a seat at my table at the Houston Oilman Awards.”

Prest, nods his head slowly. “I can do that.”

“So,” Wayward clasps his hands together. “Anything else on the agenda?”

I wrote *Intervene* for a few reasons. First, I wanted to highlight the fact that it is possible to transform the global economy in ten years and that [it would cost something in the order of \\$20 trillion dollars](#).

Secondly, I wanted to highlight that [algae oil is a viable replacement to petroleum oil](#). True, the technology is not yet as advanced as it needs to be to compete on cost and be produced in sufficient volume.

The third reason for writing *Intervene* was to highlight the fact the global oil industry is the major impediment to the advancement of human civilisation. And while we talk about the industry as a monolith, it is actually driven by individuals who have names and hold roles such as [CEO, Chairman, Director, C-Suite etc](#). These people are the new public enemies of every living thing on our planet and [ought to be treated as such](#).

(Okay, I also wrote *Intervene* so that I could investigate the dramatic tension between a lusty, binge-drinking red-head and a special forces agent from another planet.)

Of course, the takeaway message of *Intervene* is that there is no spacemen coming to save us, and **if we want a rapid transition to sustainable energy, we are all going to have to intervene, ourselves.**

Find *Intervene* and Lanes other books here: guylane.com

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MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/intervene/>