The UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) has passed its mid-point and we are now close to 3 decades removed from the UN General Assembly passage of Resolution 38, authorizing what was to become the Brundtland Commission Report. In the ensuing years, sustainable development has remained more of an ideal than an actual goal in much of the world, much less an actual accomplishment. What we now understand, much better than we did when the Brundtland Report was released, is that “sustainability” entails thinking and behaving in ways that are fundamentally different than has been the norm for most of the last century, indeed the last several centuries. This book provides a “cooks tour” of the knowledge and skills that underlie sustainability literacy. Being sustainability literate entails a wide range of practices viewed by the chapter authors as necessary to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

The book is an edited volume comprising 32 chapters in two sections. Most (but not all) of the chapter authors are faculty members at universities in the United Kingdom and much of the content is based on the considerable work in sustainability education that has been ongoing in the UK for more than two decades. However, the content and ideas discussed have universal appeal and the book would be valuable for anyone engaged in sustainability education, particularly in formal settings.

In the aggregate the chapters create a compelling vision of sustainability literacy that includes intra-personal psycho-social dimensions as much as it includes specific technical skills and knowledge. While the book clearly has its roots in the work of critical theory, the overarching premise for the chapters is that critique alone is inadequate. Learners need skills and knowledge to be able to move to action. To that end, the first section of the book (28 chapters) focuses on a broad range of skills necessary to negotiate the tremendous changes that will accompany the 21st century. Much of the work in this section is easily recognizable as belonging to the growing knowledge-base in sustainability education. Chapters addressing topics such as permaculture design, community gardening, systems thinking, media literacy, ecological intelligence, economic awareness tread familiar ground in the sustainability discourse. However, this more recognizable content is interspersed with writing that pushes sustainability thinking into new territory, long overdue for exploration.

Indeed it is the chapters that address the personal practices associated with sustainability that make this book an important contribution to the literature. These chapters address ideas such as personal sufficiency which involves learning how to want less, emotional well being, and the ability to find meaning without consuming. Much of this writing is grounded in social psychology research. However, several of the chapters that address personal practices associated
with sustainability literacy are more philosophical in nature, particularly borrowing from Taoist and Buddhist teachings. For example, Ling Feng’s chapter Effortless Action applies ideas from the Tao Te Ching to the problem of living and working in flow with nature. Similarly, Stephen Harding’s chapter Gaia Awareness borrows from chaos theory, holistic science and Gaia theory to advocate exploration of individuals’ spiritual connections with the planet.

Much of the sustainability discourse encourages a search for positive solutions and often assumes a “glass half full” approach to challenges and opportunities. However, several of the authors in this book promote a more pragmatic point of view. These authors assume that “peak oil” and climate change are now inevitabilities rather than mere probabilities and that our collective project now is as much about adaptation as it is about mitigation. This perspective is given full voice in Stephen Quilley’s chapter Transition Skills. Quilley argues that the severe disruptions and upheavals are likely to occur during this century and that survival will require a return to artisan skills along with academic knowledge. He presents a compelling list of crafts associated with Education for Upheaval. Transition skills involve the craft knowledge that would have made a Victorian village run smoothly, including, woodland, field, building, workshop, textile, and domestic crafts. The vision of disruption and upheaval that Quigley and his fellow “transitioners” predict is dark to say the least but the idea that learning in the 21st century will entail “learning how to do” as much as it will entail “learning about” is an exciting and fundamentally optimistic vision.

The strength of this first section of the book is also its Achilles heel. The chapters in this section take the form of concise thumbnail sketches quite sufficient for raising awareness and broadening the range of ideas associated with the sustainability discourse. However, they lack detail or extensive application examples. Readers interested in exploring any of the topics more than superficially will need to look elsewhere to go deeper. In this respect, the book might be most useful in an introductory course in sustainability or for professional development workshop providers. At the same time, the fine distinctions among some of the chapters in this section of the book may be somewhat unimportant and might have benefited from consolidation into longer, more comprehensive works. For example, the chapters addressing systems thinking and complexity really constitute a single body of knowledge rather than three chapters. Similarly, the chapters addressing personal sufficiency and finding meaning without consuming cover similar territory. Certainly they would be best read as a single work.

Although sometimes lacking detail, most chapters do include descriptions of hands-on learning activities. Clearly the intent is that readers actively engage with the ideas presented in the chapters to develop new skills. Many of the learning exercises involve group activities and some are quite involved, entailing work both in and outside of the classroom. It is also apparent that most of the authors are teachers, generally working in university settings and that they have most likely refined these learning activities in their own classrooms. The learning activities are for the most part pedagogically sound, feasible, and effectively described.

The final three chapters of the book are configured as a separate second section that focuses on the larger organizational and societal transformations that will need to occur if sustainability is to be achieved. Again, though, rather than merely offering critique, the authors of these chapters are describing a strategy for applying the various skills described in the first section of the book.
with the aim creating a new kind of civic engagement, personal enactment, and institutional transformation. Fundamentally, these authors are arguing for a new kind of educational enterprise that reaches beyond the traditional boundaries of classroom, school house or university. They envision strong ties to community and a re-invigorated respect for traditional ways of knowing and learning. The image of a transformed education enterprise portrayed here is an exciting and also daunting trail map for the way forward.

Sustainability education is a still emerging paradigm that is not yet fully understood or even discovered. This book brings into sharper focus the distinct characteristics of sustainability literacy, as a domain that has roots in the natural and social sciences as well as philosophy and psychology, includes specific knowledge, dispositions, and calls for personal enactment. Unlike some volumes that are called “handbooks” but are really encyclopedic compendia, this book really does accomplish what its title promises. It is a concise reference book that will help the reader navigate a territory that is only now being charted. Like any rough guide to an unfamiliar place, this handbook deserves a place at the top of any sustainability educator’s backpack.