Headline: The delicate art of persuasion may require a pumpkin
Cutline: A debut book by a local environmental activist inspires through confessional, wry wit

"The Big Swim: Coming Ashore in a World Adrift," by Carrie Saxifrage, New Society Publishers, 2015, Paperback, 192 pages, $16.95

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By Rachel Gintner
Contributing Writer

The debut book "The Big Swim: Coming Ashore in a World Adrift," by environmental activist and former Seattle lawyer Carrie Saxifrage is a swift, loving, persuasive text that reads as activist-art. The memoir, a detailing of her more recent years as a parent and climate reporter, dances with the reality that we're all adrift on an unsustainable and destructive path in maintaining a not-so-healthy earth. The masses of us are not aware of the havoc we're wreaking, and we're facing a projection of future-earth that's nothing short of gruesome.

In fact, it's ugly.

But Saxifrage happens to be the Tina Fey of all this depressing earth-talk. She spews confessional hilarity. She's swapped places with David Sedaris — instead of "Diabetes with Owls" we have "Deforestation with Cinderella's Pumpkin."

And the saving grace she imparts within this golden comedy nugget is that we still have room to be key players in the climate change game. If we join now, if we end our normalized, counterproductive habits and if we see to it that our friends, strangers and the big-granny-wolf corporations around us to do the same, we can reap goodness. We cannot save or fix everything, no, but we can do much.

Such grave and guilt-inducing topics as rising seas and animal extinction and plenty more might have left a reader in another tale riddled with insurmountable apprehension and a half-read book. But Saxifrage lets us see her anxiety and somehow feel better for it: "Understanding physical consequences [of greenhouse gasses] that are well underway can terrify me, like the dentist who observed that of course my gums were receding because I clearly never flossed." It's the sort of solidarity of thought that Saxifrage brings that grants relief — she has agonized about this too, and she has made me laugh and cry because of it.

Her 12 chapters read as scrumptious snippets, 10- to 15-page vignettes of goodwill gone awry, then polished with a momentous silver lining. Like the time she was denied entry into an exclusive pumpkin-growing club on Cortes Island, only to green-thumb her way in and grow the largest submission of them all. "I could have gone on about its celebrity status in children's literature: Linus's Great Pumpkin who rewards sincerity; or Cinderella's sparkly pumpkin carriage … Or Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater, who had a wife and couldn't keep her. In retrospect, what a creep … I expected that these people, the Pumpkin people, would someday be my people.

How could I be disallowed from the pumpkin in-crowd? They were romantic and fascinating. I wanted in."

She owns that she "wanted to write in the service of nature," and she does — I've certainly adopted a fascination of pikas through her own concern for the adorable creatures. Her love of the ocean, obvious from chapter 1 inspires much — especially when she tells us she studied 70 pages worth of tidal flow charts as she and her friends plan a "big swim" from Cortes Island to Quadra Island, "five miles apart as the crow flies."

We are challenged in following chapters by her commitment to organic farming, composting, peaceful protest, low-carbon (aka no-flying-ever-again) lifestyle, and more. And while she struggles with change — "How could [flying] be bad? Besides, everyone flew" — she reconciles that small privileges do not satisfy us when they in truth inflict such damage, and when we can be positive change agents instead. "We didn't need climate change. We didn't want to say 'Climate change is wrong.' We wanted to say 'We can be just as happy without those things that are causing it.'"

While they aren't explicitly named, Saxifrage also offers personal moments in how feminism, classism, racism, etc., function in the socialization of climate change — the good sort of fodder that feeds critical thinking of microaggressions in our own lives. Sharing our experience, both the aggressions we commit and the aggressions we face, is necessary. We share this world, and to keep it we have to recognize "we're all in the same boat, we need all hands on deck."

Saxifrage writes as a climate-activist-warrior. She certainly made me feel like one. I think you will too, if you give her memoir a chance.



ARTS

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Real Change

THE DELICATE ART OF PERSUASION MAY REQUIRE A PUMPKIN

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She owns that she "wanted to write in the service of nature," and she does — I've certainly adopted a fascination with pikas through her own concern for the adorable creatures (look them up, dear reader). Her love of the ocean is obvious from chapter one and inspires much — especially when she tells us she studied 70 pages worth of tidal flow charts as she and her friends plan a five-mile swim from Cortes Island to Quadra Island.

We are challenged by her commitment to organic farming, composting, peaceful protest, low-carbon (aka no-flying-ever-again) lifestyle and more. And while she struggles with change — "How could [flying] be bad? Besides, everyone flew" — she suggests that small privileges do not satisfy us when they in truth inflict such damage, and when we can be positive change agents instead. "We didn't want to say 'Climate change is wrong.' We wanted to say 'We can be just as happy without those things that are causing it.'"

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Illustration by Jon Williams, Real Change