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## pH: A Novel by Nancy Lord

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***pH: A Novel*** by **NANCY LORD**  
Westwinds, 2017. \$16.99 USD

Reviewed by **JENNIFER SCHELL**

In his landmark book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon encourages environmentalists “to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence” (2). Whether it was written with Nixon's scholarship in mind or not, Nancy Lord's novel *pH* attempts to represent the ravages of slow violence insofar as it chronicles the exploits of a group of scientists and students, who make several alarming discoveries about the detrimental impact of ocean acidification on zooplankton in the Gulf of Alaska.

As the novel begins, Ray Berringer and Jackson Oakley—two rival professors at the University of the North—enter the Gulf of Alaska aboard a research vessel in order to collect data on ocean acidification. Shortly thereafter, Jackson hitches a ride to shore on a fishing boat, leaving Ray in charge of the expedition and its members: Helen, an Iñupiat graduate student; Nastiya, a Russian graduate student; Annabel, an idiosyncratic visual artist; and a motley crew of undergraduate and graduate students. As the team gathers samples, records data, and examines results, they discover that ocean acidification more severely threatens zooplankton calcification than previously thought.

As the novel progresses, the scene shifts to the University of the North campus in Fairbanks, Alaska, and matters become infinitely more complicated. When Jackson ignores email requests for data from Ray, the rivalry between the two men intensifies and escalates. Eventually, Ray finds himself

suspended by the university after harassment claims are lodged against him. Meanwhile, Annabel launches protests against the university on Ray's behalf, and Helen discovers that Jackson is secretly working for the Center for Science Integrity, a conservative think-tank funded by the fossil fuel industries, in order to spread misinformation about climate science. All of these events culminate in Ray's trip to Hawaii, where he experiences a rare “moment of clarity” that changes the trajectory of the novel (212).

A former Alaska Writer Laureate and an accomplished writer of such nonfiction as *Beluga Days* (2003) and *Early Warming* (2011), Lord does an excellent job of describing the science behind anthropogenic climate change and ocean acidification. She deftly lays out complicated scientific concepts in terms simple enough for non-scientists to understand. To her credit, she does not oversimplify her information or treat readers as unintelligent.

Not insignificantly, Lord also presents a convincing case for the similarities between art and science. According to Annabel, “Both required creative minds, speculation and hypothesizing, experimenting, sometimes-tedious detail work, a willingness to fail and try again” (44). Although he does not at first recognize the value of Annabel's artistic vision, Ray comes to appreciate it, so much so that he encourages his daughter, Aurora, to attend a summer art camp in Sitka. As Lord indicates in these moments, much is to be gained when artists and scientists work together to combat environmental degradation.

Perhaps the most commendable aspect of the book, though, is its focus on the ocean's invisible—or almost invisible—

microfauna. As Ray explains early in Chapter 1, zooplankton possess a beauty and charisma all their own:

There was nothing that excited him more than the tiny, footed, flagellated, ciliated, bristled, tentacled, transparent creatures, in all their life-cycle stages, all the way up to pulsing jellyfish as large as the reflected moon. It had become a primary goal in his life to encourage as many people as possible to look at his microfauna, to know that they existed. If ordinary people could admire their great beauty, maybe they would want to learn more about them, and maybe they would begin to understand why it was important for such creatures to have a home in the ocean. With his photographs, shot through the lens of a microscope, he was able to capture and enlarge the tiny larval forms of fish, the amphipods, the copepods, the microzooplankton radiolarians with their incredibly intricate mineral skeletons, and the shelled pteropods known as sea butterflies. (19)

Here, as she does elsewhere in the book, Lord indicates that tiny pteropods are just as majestic and amazing as the huge whales that consume them. Thus, she encourages her readers to invest their emotions—and their concern—in the ocean's smallest as well as its largest denizens.

Although *pH* certainly contains much to admire, it is not without a few flaws. From a craft perspective, the opening chapters are a bit short on plot and a bit long on exposition. Most of the characters spend far more time thinking—and justifying their thoughts to themselves—than they do

acting. As a result, the plot takes some time to get moving in a clear direction.

Insofar as it attempts to engage in political and academic satire, the novel also has a few issues. Anyone wishing for subtlety will be disappointed. Although she does not mention anyone by name, Lord takes some obvious jabs at Alaska's congressional delegation and university administrators. Also, some attempts at humour (such as Ray's conference with a provocatively dressed, overweight student) fall short of the mark.

Flaws notwithstanding, *pH* represents an important addition to the burgeoning genre of cli-fi. It introduces readers to the alarming aspects of ocean acidification and encourages them to appreciate the obscure beauty of zooplankton. Along the way, it attempts to entertain them with humour and inspire them with hope about the future of the planet. Both are worthy endeavors, indeed.

#### WORKS CITED

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

**JENNIFER SCHELL** is an Associate Professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her specialties include North American literature, Arctic writing, animal studies, and environmental humanities. She recently completed a series of articles on the ecogothic, and she is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *Ghost Species: North American Extinction Writing and the Ecogothic, 1820-2018*.