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The Ocean Container by Patrik Sampler

Angie Abdou
Athabasca University

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**A Country Named Economy:
Environmental Activism in Patrik Sampler's
*The Ocean Container***

The Ocean Container by PATRIK SAMPLER
ninebark, 2017. \$16.00

Reviewed by **ANGIE ABDOU**

The Ocean Container is about the end of the world, but not in a heavy-handed way. The novel's brevity and lightness of tone, as well as the narrator's matter-of-factness about his dire situation, suggest that we all know exactly where we are: climate collapse, mass extinction of species, capitalism run amok, corporate corruption, worship of the almighty dollar, the death of individual privacy, deadly weather events, and popular art reduced to performative sex and other forms of distraction. It is a world where human rights have been replaced by economic rights. Patrik Sampler seems to be saying that there is nothing new here: we have arrived at a point where the end of the world is a given, simple backstory.

The Ocean Container's male narrator works as an environmental activist, and the current government has therefore labelled him an eco-terrorist. During his family's absence, the narrator's co-worker Janet insists that he abandon his cell phones and other traceable devices and sneak off to live in a compound with other dissidents who find themselves under threat by the government's War on Eco-Terror. For almost the entirety of the book, the narrator lives in a shipping container, separated from his wife and son who are travelling in Japan.

This is an experimental, surreal novel, and the more time the narrator spends alone in his box, the more readers will grow unable to distinguish what he imagines

from what he knows to be real, what he experiences from what he dreams. But his initial fear of the government seems real enough, and alarmingly plausible. "In the twenty-first century," the narrator says, "there is still a ritual known as *general election*, not to be confused with *democracy*, whatever that means" (17). The Prime Minister "named this country Economy—which means money" (17). What used to be known as the human rights committee has been renamed the economic rights committee (58). "The Economy" itself issues statements, particularly against people like the narrator whose environmental work qualifies as "terrorism" because it might deny citizens "the right to jobs, money, and freedom" (59).

Sampler infuses the narrative with sharp satirical observations. Despite the evidence of environmental disaster, people attending conferences with names like "Working for the Future" still brag about owning gas-guzzling cars: "I happened to have lunch with a guy who told me about owning a 1974 AMC Javelin (colour: fawn beige). He said that when you really put the pedal down, you could *actually* see the needle move on the fuel gauge" (143). Even friends and colleagues whom the narrator once trusted have begun using faux environmentalism to push consumerism. For example, Janet, after the narrator is out of her way, takes control of their environmental company and denounces "so-called direct action tactics as 'a thing of the past'" (142). She also announces plans "to roll out a 'CoolGreen' campaign, including an app to help consumers find 'all the cool stuff you can buy to green the planet'" (142). In the match of The Economy versus The Environment, The Economy is winning.

Despite the absurdity of the above examples, anyone paying attention knows that this blind sprint toward oblivion is not the material of futuristic dystopian novels. This is the stuff of right now. Readers might wonder why the characters in the book don't seem more alarmed and why they don't take action. I suspect Sampler would direct the same questions right back at the readers. In the characters' case, the answer is straight-up denial. The narrator notes that the other people living in shipping containers are not being honest with themselves: "They say, 'Now I know how it feels to be homeless.' They do not say, 'Now I am homeless'" (25). They stay a comfortable step away from acknowledging their true reality.

Sampler challenges readers to step out of denial and face the reality of our current situation, to embrace environmental activism, and to resist consumerist culture. In a direct articulation of this connection between art and activism, the narrator reflects: "I always thought art had a place in social activism, and social activism in art" (42). Art shows up throughout the story, initially in typical ways like art shows or bookmobiles but increasingly in bizarre manifestations such as the piano concert that builds to the youngest protégé of all: a fetus who plays piano from the womb. Sampler asks us to question the role of art, what makes it important, how it can effect change. If art does not effect change, is it mere distraction, and, if so, what justifies its existence in a world so clearly in crisis?

This west coast novel ends, of course, with an earthquake. The narrator pre-emptively rejects accusations that his ending is convenient or contrived: "I assure you, however, this earthquake is not an act of contrivance. Rather, it is a very real earthquake for a very *real* story" (155).

Earthquakes on the west coast are now an inevitability, not merely a convenient plot device.

The question, of course, is what to do in the face of imminent apocalypse. The mistake Sampler's characters make is they do nothing. They use the euphemism "weird" to describe the political and environmental emergencies happening around them (96). They know they will have to make changes one day, but they defer. They wait for the right time to take action and for some clear sign of what that action might be. They wait and wait and wait, until it is too late.

The Ocean Container is a challenging book, if by "challenging" we mean unexpected, surprising, and uncomfortable. It is a novel that bears up under—even demands—multiple readings. For example, readers may not agree on the meaning of the super-pygmy-blue whale or the man with two right eyes or the Rocky Mountain tour busses with no windows. The book lends itself to multiple interpretations and open-ended conversations in a way that commercial fiction too often does not. Ideally, this provocative novel will make its way into many eco-lit classrooms where it can inspire crucial conversations, the kinds that lead to action.

ANGIE ABDOU has a PhD in Canadian Literature and Creative Writing from University of Calgary and has published seven books, most recently a memoir called *Home Ice: Reflections of a Reluctant Hockey Mom*. Angie is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Athabasca University.