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Review of *While Glaciers Slept: Being Human in a Time of Climate Change* by M Jackson

***While Glaciers Slept: Being Human in a Time of Climate Change* by M JACKSON**
Green Writers Press, 2015 \$24.95USD

Reviewed by **STEPHEN SIPERSTEIN**

Living in the Anthropocene entails living on what scholar Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has provocatively termed “the psychological frontlines of climate change.” M Jackson’s *While Glaciers Slept*, an example of the growing genre of climate change memoirs—which includes works such as Amy Seidl’s *Early Spring* (2009) and Sheila Watt Cloutier’s *The Right to Be Cold* (2015)—positions itself firmly on these psychological frontlines. That is, the book embraces the entanglements of the personal and the planetary that truly do define what it means to be human in a time of climate change.

Unlike many other nonfiction works about this subject, *While Glaciers Slept* is neither polemical nor didactic; in fact, this is not the book to go to for thorough explanations of climate science or policy. Instead, the book looks equally outward and inward, blending autobiography with dazzling and scientifically rich descriptions of the world’s fast-disappearing icy landscapes. The book is part nature writing, part travel narrative, and part memoir. Jackson draws on her deep knowledge of glaciers (she is a noted glaciologist who conducts research around the world situating glacier science within specific social and cultural contexts), and she recounts her adventures as an expedition leader and educator for National Geographic. However, despite its forays to scenes of immense beauty and adventure,

at the heart of the book is its profound and at times painful story of loss. In the opening pages, Jackson explains that both her parents died of cancer within a two-year period when she was in her twenties, an experience that functions as the lens through which the book understands climate change. “I cannot untangle in my mind the scientific study of climate change and the death of my parents,” Jackson writes:

I cannot understand realistically what has happened to my family without stepping back and seeing what is happening to this world. There are too many parallels, and, at times, there is too much darkness. They can’t be separated. The language and, to some extent, the experiences for both remain deeply similar. (21)

The parallels between Jackson’s personal loss and the losses being caused by climate change are what bind together the book’s multiple scales—from the cellular to the domestic to the geologic. The most fascinating moments in the book are those in which slippages occur between the different scales. For instance, in one intensively lyrical passage, Jackson describes the body of a glacier marked by climate change, which then becomes her mother’s body marked by cancer, which then again becomes again the body of a glacier:

Where the ice buckles, where it is rough and jagged, where the surface shows a wide field of crevasses and cuts, then underneath, sub rosa, there has been a disturbance, a stress, a sudden newness to the

known topography. The stress might be a leftward or rightward flow around a mountain, a sudden uphill or downhill, a change in earth material, an unsettling rumor or a doctor's diagnosis; it might even be the invasion of another glacier, intruding, overtaking. (43)

It would be understandable for a narrative that faces such personal tragedies like Jackson's to try to keep the unimaginable losses of climate change at bay. The beauty, and nuance, of this book is that it so willingly allows an awareness of climate change to infuse almost everything else. No moment, no matter how small—washing underwear or leafing through a dictionary or steeping a pot of jasmine tea—is immune from its connection to planetary grief.

Yet refusing to dwell only with the losses, *While Glaciers Slept* also takes up the task of illuminating “too much darkness” with moments of joy, pleasure, and wonderment (21). Through Jackson's lyrical prose, readers encounter the beauty of both human relationships and glacial landscapes, which, Jackson reminds us in one of the book's most eloquent passages, are made up of “millions and millions of little snowflakes, reaching out to one another, grasping hands” (56). The image of hands is a recurring trope in the book, and it functions metaphorically as Jackson's collaborative solution to climate change. Indeed, the book expresses some doubt about the kinds of “solutions,” such as geoengineering schemes, espoused by techno-optimists, but it nevertheless upholds the human imagination as the key to addressing the climate crisis. In particular, recognizing that

the decisions, the dreams, the imaginings of each individual person, gradually, and in both known and unknown ways, reach out and touch each and all of us in turn. (179)

Jackson argues that

we have to believe anew in the sacredness of the collective dreamer, the unlimited imagination of a nation and a planet. (179)

Ultimately, climate change memoirs like Jackson's are handbooks for being human together in the Anthropocene, and as Bill McKibben suggests in his foreword, we should approach such writing with “the spirit of openness it deserves, making [ourselves] vulnerable to both hurt and joy” (4). Jackson explains how, over the years, she has “garnered the courage to step off the proverbial edge and commit [...] to people, ideas, organizations, schools, identities. To hope” (58). Even with the pain that comes from living in a world of personal and ecological wounds, Jackson still seeks out deep connections with humans and nonhumans alike, and her book asks its readers do the same. That is, it asks us to hope.

Works Cited

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