

THE QUICKENING: ANTARCTICA, MOTHERHOOD, AND CULTIVATING HOPE IN A WARMING WORLD

Rush, E. (2024). Milkweed Editions. Minneapolis, USA. 424 pp. Paperback: ISBN 9781571311795, US\$20.00

The Quickening is a story of the journey to Antarctica and into motherhood. As someone who has undertaken both journeys, I was awestruck as Elizabeth Rush put eloquent words to feelings that I thought were impossible to describe – the wonder of being in a remote and harsh environment, the joy and anxiety of becoming a mother, and the sharp pain of climate grief. Rush was a Writer in Residence on an expedition to collect measurements on the Thwaites Glacier in 2019, a retreating glacier that, if lost, would precipitate the melting of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet and raise sea levels by 3.3 metres (Voosen, 2021). At the same time, Rush was contemplating motherhood, and weaves stories of birth and maternalism into her observations of science and climate change in Antarctica.

At one point in the book, Rush describes stories from Conceivable Future (<https://www.conceivablefuture.org/who-we-are-2>), a woman-led collective that forms community around the climate crisis and its effect on reproductive justice, and says: “there is an uncanny familiarity to it all, a sense of eavesdropping on not only their thoughts, but my own.” This is how reading *The Quickening* felt – eavesdropping on my own inner thoughts as a scientist and mom trying to raise kids in a time of troubling change.

Like Rush and her shipmates, I too have struggled to rectify my observations of rapid environmental degradation and my decision to bring children into the world. Around the time I went back to work as a new mom I started a project that explored scenario modelling of land use change and climate change. These visions of the future sent me spiraling into climate anxiety for my sons’ future. Everything made me feel guilty – every purchase and car-ride felt like I was further unravelling the web of life on which my family’s future depends. “If you like to think,” said Guilherme Bortolotto, a Marine Mammal Ecologist and father on the boat ride to Antarctica in *The Quickening*, “it’s very hard to accept the challenge of contributing to the world with one more person and being responsible for helping this person become someone good.” Adding one more person can make the world a little less livable for everyone. Similarly to Rush and many authors she draws from in the book, I have come to terms with parenthood as an act of faith that the world will change, an act that has made me work hard to try to be part of that change.

The way Rush draws a symbolic link between natural processes, Antarctica, and mothering is something I have long felt innately but couldn’t consciously conceptualize until reading *The Quickening*. I can’t find the right words to express how beautiful her comparisons were of glaciers and mothering, their abilities to nourish and create communities; glacial calving and childbirth, when one thing becomes two; and an ultrasound and the layers of an icesheet. She imagines Antarctica itself as a mother, “a being powerful enough to bring new life into the world” and a teacher that by raising sea levels “demands that we acknowledge our interconnectedness.” Experiencing the beauty of Antarctica and becoming a mom transform the way you see the world. Reading *The Quickening* transformed the way I think about motherhood, my connection to nature, and environmental science.

The Quickening so aptly portrayed the experiences of remote field work. Rush’s descriptions of being on a ship in rough, cold

waters were so vivid I could almost smell the diesel – and feel the seasickness. At one point she describes the colour of the sky as “just this side of periwinkle – perplexing and quiet” and it brought me right back to the deafening quiet of being surrounded by a vast sky and undulating sea. Rush captured so many details, from the importance of baby wipes to the feeling of the weeks starting to slide into one another. The games that Rush and her shipmates would devise to care for each other and pass time reminded me of silly costume parties and trivia on the maritime radio when doing remote seabird field work in the Aleutian Islands, Alaska. In the way she describes her interactions with her shipmates, Rush captures the intense and unique feeling of community you develop with total strangers when in isolation. If we could only spread this fast establishment of community and care off the boat, we may not be in such a dire geopolitical situation.

Among my favourite parts of *The Quickening* was Rush’s confrontation and rewriting of the narrative of Antarctica as a place of imperial conquest and a backdrop for the heroics of well-educated white men – a place where women were not welcome until recently. Like Rush, I remember counting the number of women in pictures of crews overwintering on the ice and watching their numbers dwindle as the years went back further into the past. As Rush makes her way through the Antarctic literary canon, she laments the tired trope of Antarctica as a prize or trophy, or even, a “virgin, clean and pure, to be subjugated”. “As the metaphors of sexual violence piled up, my boredom gave way to alienation and ultimately anger”. Rush offers an alternative: Antarctica as a being that shapes us as much as we shape it, that offers lessons about the importance of community and the need for transformation – Antarctica as a mother.

The Quickening offers lessons about science and how to share discoveries and warnings about environmental degradation. Although collecting expensive data can be stressful and running complex models is challenging, sometimes the science feels like the most straightforward part of being a climate or biodiversity scientist. Rush and her shipmates stress the importance of collaboration – to address big scientific questions and to communicate implications. She talks about the shortcomings of the aim of scientists to be objective above all else. In truth, we are but human and not acknowledging our values may have gotten us into this mess in the first place.

“Going to Antarctica is like falling in love,” says Bortolotto. Motherhood is like falling in love in a way that you never thought possible. *The Quickening* is a love letter – to science, to the rugged, remote places in the world, and to the process of bringing people into the world. It urges us to band together and protect these things we love.

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Voosen, P. (2021). Ice shelf holding back keystone Antarctic glacier within years of failure. *Science*, 347(6574), 1420–1421. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.acz9821>

NEW(ISH) AND NOTEWORTHY

Spring 2025

The Storm-Petrels

Thomas, R. (2024). T. & A. D. Poyser. London, United Kingdom. 335 pp. Hardcover: ISBN 9781472985811, £60.00

My love of storm-petrels is inversely proportional to the amount of time I see them, which is to say that since I don't see them very much, I love them a lot. Rob Thomas, a Senior Lecturer at Cardiff University, has the opposite relationship—he sees storm-petrels a lot and loves them a lot, too. We who count ourselves among the storm-petrel-loving public have benefited from that hugely thanks to Thomas's lovely new book, *The Storm-Petrels*. The work is a thorough compendium of storm-petrel biology, ecology, and lore. While it centers on the European storm-petrel, Thomas also spends time with each of the world's 28(ish) storm-petrels. Helpful illustrations and beautiful photos are liberally scattered throughout, such that I learned I will never tire of an image of a storm-petrel winging over gray waves slightly blurred. Indeed, *The Storm-Petrels* makes me want to spend more time trying to see storm-petrels that frequent the waters where I live. Absent that time, though, Thomas's book is the next best thing.

Sea Level: A History

von Hardenberg, W. G. (2024). University of Chicago Press. Chicago, USA. 200 pp. Cloth: ISBN 9780226831831, US\$27.50

A common trope in these times for all the changes the oceans are undergoing is sea level rise. The land is eaten away due to it, countries have elaborate engineering solutions to stave it off, ice sheets melt and contribute to it. But where did sea level come from? Look out from a coast at any wave-tossed ocean, and the notion of a level sea can seem absurd. In his new book, *Sea Level:*

A History, Wilko Graf von Hardenberg traces the origins and geographic breadth of sea level, from its early definitions through the ways humans wrestle with its climate-induced dynamics today. "Human cultural conceptions of what sea level is," von Hardenberg writes at one point, "which individual points should be singled out from the continuous curve of tidal movements, and how absolute and relative changes can be assessed are historical constructs that have substantial impacts on how humans imagine and frame the environment."

Message in a Bottle: Ocean Dispatches from a Seabird Biologist

Hogan, H. (2023). Knopf Canada. Toronto, Canada. 304 pp. Hardcover: ISBN 9780385696265, CA\$32.95

I have read that the Anthropocene as an epoch can be defined, geologically at least, by the thin layer of radioactive isotopes from nuclear tests in the 1950s. I feel like the bits of plastic humans have spread far and wide would perhaps be a better marker. In her timely and lyrical book, *Message in a Bottle*, Holly Hogan shows just how far and wide the reach of plastics can be. A writer and seabird biologist, Hogan is a graceful and knowledgeable tour guide, bringing the reader along with her as she travels the globe to watch dovekeys, kittiwakes, North Atlantic right whales, and others. There is wonder here, and lots of information – some of it actionable – and sadness. "The ocean is slow to reveal its secrets," Hogan writes. "Its endless horizons and seemingly bottomless depths suggest an infinite capacity to hold. And to withhold. Plastic has been one of its well-kept secrets, mostly hidden below the surface and out of sight." But not for much longer.

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