

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### *A Year on the Wild Side*

Briony Penn

Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 1999. 178 pp. Illus. \$15.95 paper.

By Nancy J. Turner  
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**A** YEAR ON THE WILD SIDE is a compilation of selected weekly columns on the natural history of southwestern British Columbia, originally published in Victoria's *Monday Magazine* and the *Gulf Islands Driftwood*, and, through these media, enjoyed and discussed by many of us over the past few years.

In her book, Briony Penn – geographer, teacher, writer, and artist – epitomizes what natural history education should be for all of us: relevant, timely, engaging, practical, instructive, and memorable. As such, *A Year on the Wild Side* will be of interest to all educators, naturalists, and local geography buffs who want to learn more about their bioregion in a thoughtful and entertaining way. The book is organized as a monthly personal commentary and diary focusing on the land and waters of the “Salish Sea.” Already Penn’s designation – Salish Sea – is catching on among local naturalists. An admittedly “manufactured” place name, the Salish Sea is described as “the distinctive inland sea that empties into the Pacific,” extending from the Straits of Georgia and Juan de Fuca down to Puget Sound. It is, Penn declares, “one of the ecologically richest inland seas in the world” and deserves its own designation as much as does

the Mediterranean Sea (xii). It is also the traditional territory of several local Coast Salish peoples, and the name is thus a tribute to them and an acknowledgment of their long-term occupation of the area.

The contents of the book definitely qualify as “BC Studies.” Although the book is not written in an academic, scholarly mode, do not be fooled by the lively, chatty style. Penn bases her commentaries on a solid foundation of research, observation, and personal experience. The book ranges over the subjects of ecology, geography, history, anthropology, and (perhaps) psychology in an admirably interdisciplinary fashion.

The topics are as diverse as are the life forms and ecosystems of the Salish Sea. Several of the essays are about birds: murrelets, widgeons, herons, snowy owls, brants, hummingbirds, raptors, vultures, woodpeckers, and nighthawks. There are articles on river otters, seals, sea lions, orcas, bats, snakes, amphibians, slugs, butterflies, spiders, skunk cabbage, horsetails, garry oaks, maple leaves, and mushrooms. Each section embodies a story, a personal touch, a bit of humour, and an ecological lesson about the critical value and vulnerability of our local ecosystems, from garry oak meadows

to wetlands and estuaries. For example, Penn introduces one section with a poignant scene that depicts a dead mother giant Pacific octopus washed up on the beach, a creature few of us even know is an occupant of the Salish Sea. Through her whimsical storytelling, she educates us about the life cycle of the octopus and reminds us of the issues of pollution and conservation that are critical to our survival.

No review of this book would be complete without a commentary on Penn's illustrations. These are relatively simple but elegant hand-annotated pen-and-ink sketches, which Penn says were designed (in the newspaper versions) to be copied, coloured, and otherwise embellished by schoolchildren and anyone else wanting to enjoy them. This is interactive art, and it fits Penn's style to perfection. One of my favourites is her wonderful illustrated rendition of the Twelve Days of Christmas, complete with: 12

woodpeckers drumming, 11 otters sliding, 10 deer mice leaping, 9 eagles watching, 8 whales a-breaching, 7 widegeons swimming, 6 crossbills laying, 5 goldeneyes, 4 dark-eyed juncos, 3 Pacific loons, 2 buffleheads, and a ruffed grouse in a fir tree.

Although the book is entertaining, there is a serious undercurrent to the stories Penn tells. Despite the light-hearted tone, there are some ironic, disturbing, and outright heart-breaking aspects to these stories. For me, as another local observer who was raised in the vicinity of the Salish Sea, Penn touched on many of the topics that have been of deep concern: the alarming trends in growth and development of the region, the introduction of aggressive exotic species, pollution, and habitat loss.

This treasure of a book is not just another local nature guide. Its lessons are serious and should be heeded by all of us who care about the future of the Salish Sea.

### *Whales of the West Coast*

David A.E. Spalding

Madeira Park: Harbour, 1999. 211 pp. Illus., maps. \$18.95 paper.

By Mark Forsythe

*CBC Radio One Vancouver*

**A**FTER A SEVENTY-FIVE YEAR hiatus, Makah whaling harpoons again found their mark in 1999. Live television coverage of Native whalers in a dugout canoe chasing and killing a grey whale rendered news crews speechless. The Makah served notice they were reclaiming a cultural and spiritual

heritage dating back hundreds – if not thousands – of years. They argued that greys had been removed from the endangered species list and that their right to a food hunt was firmly entrenched in an 1855 treaty with the US government. Response from around the world was swift. Conservationists and animal rights activists