ForeWord Reviews

Bothered by My Green Conscience: How an SUV-Driving, Imported-Strawberry-Eating Urban Dweller Can Go Green

Franke James
New Society Publishers
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Franke James was in the middle of a workout when it struck her: “Do the hardest thing first before you change your mind.” For James, this meant giving up her SUV, digging up the driveway, and planting a lot of green things in place of the concrete. It’s an apt beginning for a book that takes us on a journey of the imagination; one that can be taken on foot. Along the way she introduces David Suzuki’s fierce optimism, the reactions of her family and friends (one of whom yells, “You guys are granola crunching, tree hugging whack jobs!”), and Malcolm Gladwell, who catches her attention at a gala when he says, “We ‘fetishize’ awareness and what really matters is action.” All of this sets her to thinking and changing what she can in her own urban Toronto life.

She also painted, took photos, and created a charming and very personal visual essay, made up of 144 color illustrations, depicting her thoughts on how to be a decent human while the earth goes on suffering the consequence of our bad habits, policies, and slow thinking. This is not a bummer book. The author in question does not employ a preachy or apocalyptic tone. This is not another little book-as-accessory for the green chic elite. Instead, James has searched her conscience, taken stock of the problem, noted the contradictions in her own behavior, and dreamed up some doable first-steps. All of this is documented in her down-to-earth, kid- and adult-friendly artistic style which manages to be engaging and cool where others can be redundant or simply too sober to capture a general audience.

The book was the winner of the 2010 Green Book Festival Award for the Graphic Novel and it’s easy to see why it caught the judges’ attention: James may just have landed on the perfect combination of earnestness and wit, gravity and self-effacing commentary. If an essay is, by definition, “an attempt” —not a guarantee or a promise that the problem will be resolved—then what better way to tangle with the subject of climate change. Her smart visual style is characterized by a hand-wrought whimsy that works swiftly and well to communicate even very big ideas. (April 2009) Holly Wren Spaulding

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