

Learning to Glow: A Nuclear Reader

John Bradley, Editor

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A book of essays on nuclear weapons, power and fallout of all sorts is not the place one might expect to find poetry, but the power of the images and language in this book transcend prose. Twenty-four authors contributed to this study of the effects on humanity, both physical and psychic, of atomic energy in peace and war—and the results are compelling.

The editor, himself a poet, has selected essays that raise awareness of the dangers humanity faces in its dance with nuclear power, and the terrible cost of that dance both for mankind and for the planet. The voices he has chosen to be heard are those that go unheard in dry and clinical news reports of meltdowns or “accidents,” or in documents on war and nuclear testing. They are instead very human and filled with pain: pain for the dead, the dying and the poisoning of the environment. There are, however, voices of hope and strength.

The essays range widely in subject matter. There is the largely ignored story of the young women doomed at work in Ottawa, Illinois, to die of cancer (“The Society of the Living Dead,” by Catherine Quigg) because of management’s lack of precautions in the radium dial factory. There is the detailed depiction of government’s callous disregard of Native American populations and other residents of the western United States who struggle with cancer rates several times the norm, because their homes are located near uranium mines or downwind from nuclear tests (“Tragedy at the Center of the Universe,” by Valerie Kuletz; “Coyote Learns to Glow,” by Richard Rawles). Government’s lies to the general population about the need for nuclear weapons, the safety of nuclear facilities and equipment and the risks of tests conducted on unsuspecting citizens are depicted in several essays, among them “Brighter than the Brightest Star,” by Karl Grossman, and “The Pentagon’s Radioactive Bullet,” by Bill Mesler.

For sheer beauty of prose and poignancy of subject matter, there is the opening essay, “At Play in the Paradise of Bombs,” by Scott Russell Sanders.

From Hiroshima and the horrors of annihilation to the insidious dangers of nuclear contamination from power plants, depleted uranium weapons and nuclear waste disposal, this Earth Day release is a worthy voice of warning.

MARLENE SATTER (May / June 2000)

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