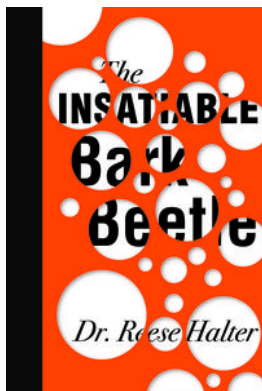


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Book Review: The Insatiable Bark Beetle



Dr. Reese Halter’s [The Insatiable Bark Beetle](#) (Rocky Mountain Books, 2011) concerns yet another terrible consequence of global warming. The bark beetle — an umbrella term for several species of beetle that are killing coniferous trees by the millions — used to die in winter, but recently the mercury hasn’t dipped low enough to significantly dent its populations.

Dense swarms are wiping out the forests of western North America, sending the landscape from green to red in the way cold and shadow spread when a cloud covers the sun. [Half of commercial woodlands in British Columbia have died](#), along with millions of acres in the contiguous US. The beetles are encroaching on the [4,000-year-old bristlecone pines of the high Sierra](#).

This would be a dreary read if it weren’t for Halter’s timeless, awestruck vision of nature. At his best moments he enlivens the dying forests, presenting them at the level of the animals. Jays swoop through the canopy, their elastic esophagi full of nuts. A dinosaur reposes in the shade. Woodrats commune in their midden, a burrow with designated latrine. And he describes how climate change gives delicate evolutionary relationships a case of the hiccups. Lillies in the Rocky Mountains are blooming two weeks early, and the bumble bees that pollinate them are stuck on the pre-warming schedule. Arctic phytoplankton is blooming early, too. The blue whales that migrate 4,000 miles to feast on it are struggling to catch up. We are surprised by these creatures, and worried for them.

It’s hard to see global warming. When I hear the phrase, my mind wanders to a computerized blue sky full of those bulbous molecules from chemistry textbooks, or to a smokestack with the letters “CO2” floating around. Halter, by peeking in on the affected communities without slotting them into a rigid diagram, hands off the crisis to the reader’s imagination, a vacuum where it can swirl and swell. We leave this book, as much a global-warming compendium as a bark-beetle narrative, wanting to warn the poor animals. “Swim North earlier to catch the plankton!” “Evacuate the midden before there’s a forest fire!” By throwing the earth into fresh relief, Halter reinvigorates our desire to save it.

-- Jake Abrahamson/ image courtesy of Rocky Mountain Books

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