

Author fields discussion with 'Green Washed' consumers



Courtesy of Ig Publishing

By Patrick Quinn
The Clackamas Print

Can we save the polar bears just by using our dollar differently?

Kendra Pierre-Louis, author of "Green Washed: Why We Can't Buy Our Way to a Green Planet," would respectfully disagree. Last Wednesday, Pierre-Louis appeared at a book signing at Powell's City of Books on Burnside, where she spoke briefly of her new book and its message before fielding questions from an eager and opinionated audience.

The subject of this 224 page economic manifesto can probably be gleaned from its subtitle. "Green Washed" deals with the recent emergence of the

"eco-friendly" market and the myriad of products and commodities within it: aluminum water bottles, certified organic produce, the Toyota Prius, etc. Many Americans, Oregonians very much included, see these products as perfect solutions to the pressing issue of pollution or climate change or whatever, but Pierre-Louis's book asks a different question, a sort of thesis that can be found right on the book jacket: "Although this green consumer movement certainly has many Americans consuming differently, it raises an important and rarely asked question: Is this consumption really any better for the planet?"

The answer, according to the author, is a definitive "no." At the signing, Pierre-Louis took time to discuss the hidden costs and impacts of many of America's most favored and trusted planet-saving products. Aluminum water bottles, for example, are usually made from virgin material, fresh aluminum that had to be mined, shipped, processed, shipped again, processed again into bottle form, and shipped a third time before finally reaching your local sporting goods store. With this in mind, it's

easier to see how the recent surge in the production of environmentally-sensitive things like the Klean Kanteen has become an environmental issue in and of itself. As the author sees it,

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b u y i n g . T h e r e a l p r o b l e m i s
t h e f a c t t h a t w e , a s i n d i v i d u a l s
a n d a s a c u l t u r e , a r e s t i l l
v i c i o u s l y a n d c o n s t a n t l y
c o n s u m i n g .

The previous statement, as Pierre-Louis would discover from the attendees in Powell's Pearl Room, is one that raises more questions than it provides answers, and perhaps one that diehard green consumers are not happy to

hear. After opening the floor for questions, the patrons in folding chairs quickly took on the appearance of high-school debate team members. Hands shot up eagerly, and faces that were gently smiling not 20 minutes prior were now sporting looks of disagreement and disapproval.

A woman seated in the back, having raised her hand approximately 0.6 seconds after hearing the word "questions," asked something to the tune of, "Well, what do you propose as a solution?"

This timeless classic of a question, presented to every critic of consumerism and supporter of environmentalism at some point in their lives, sparked something like a discussion that would carry on for the remainder of the event and meander through spheres of economy,

ecology and social justice. Pierre-Louis, admittedly nervous from having to speak in public in the first place, provided clear, logical answers to audience questions, and did so at a ferocious pace. But to call this exchange a question and answer period would be lackluster, and more importantly, only true for the

first couple of sentences; patrons would often swiftly and a little defensively provide rebuttals to whatever response had been given them.

Calling it a debate would imply a stoic formality, and the word "argument" is only a step away from "shouting match." Seeing the author field one barrage of questions after another, sometimes from individuals and other times from coalitions of two or three, was not unlike watching a fencing match. Each attacked swiftly and defended vehemently, but always stopped before any blood was drawn, which, in the end, turned out to be for the better; after running out of questions, members of the audience thanked Pierre-Louis for the riveting discussion and gradually took their leave without sticking around to buy a signed copy.

The subtle, competitive atmosphere that had found its way onto the third floor of Portland's largest bookstore had mostly evaporated, and while its arrival was sudden and quiet, it almost seemed inevitable. In a city with as many Prius taxis and New Seasons Markets as Portland, the suggestion that "buying green" isn't enough to fully assuage the guilt of today's conscious consumer is more than enough to warrant some discontent.

"Green Washed" is available for purchase at Powell's Books

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