

# GRAB BAG

BOOK SHELF // GLIMPSE // WILDLIFE // POP CULTURE // WORDS // Q&A // FOOD // FUN

## BOOKMONGER

### Look up for endless entertainment

When our daughter was just a tot, my husband would take her out every evening at sunset and they would scan the sky for what she called “pink cow’d’s.” She’s in grad school now, but my husband and I still try to take in the skyscape at sunset.

Unfortunately, that doesn’t mean I’ve become well-versed in clouds — once I get beyond cirrus and cumulus, I’m a dunderhead — which rhymes with thunderhead — which delivers us (at last! some of you are thinking) to the subject of this week’s book review: a hybrid natural history/memoir called “A Sideways Look at Clouds.”

Olympia-based author Maria Mudd Ruth has written more than a dozen books on natural history topics, but as she confesses in her prologue to this book, “I learned the names

of the clouds when I was forty-eight years old — too old, it seemed, to be learning something I should have memorized long ago with my multiplication tables and state capitals.”

Here’s somebody who is down-to-earth enough to talk to the 99.9 percent of us who walk underneath clouds all the time, but don’t have a clue about how they form, why they assume different shapes and different colors, and what makes them precipitate.

And really, in a region where clouds are pretty ubiquitous, shouldn’t we have at least a nodding acquaintance with our neighbors in the sky?

Ruth begins with a brief historical review of how the study of clouds developed. It wasn’t until the early 1800s that the Latin nomenclature for clouds was systematized and broadly



**“A Sideways Look at Clouds”**  
By Maria Mudd Ruth  
Mountaineers Books  
208 pp  
\$24.95

pitals. She visits museums to look at cloud paintings, then takes art lessons in how to paint clouds. She sits out on her front lawn to observe how clouds move and change over time.

Ruth writes about sun dogs and glories, and about clouds on other planets. She discusses thermals and relates the true story of one man’s harrowing parachute ride through a thermal.

When she gets into the necessary scientific explanations for things, she tries to make it fun: Mickey Mouse’s head as conceptual

adopted. Only two centuries later, technologies such as weather satellites, Doppler radar and so on are rendering even some of those terms passé.

Which is rather a shame. Consider some of the poetry of accepted variety names in the polysyllabic cloud lexicon — descriptors such as “spissatus” (thickened), “castellanus” (castle-like) and “flocus” (tufted) are just fun to roll off the tongue.

The author takes a multidisciplinary approach to learning about clouds. She swims in a fogbank, and tours an Iowa factory that creates research-verified “virtual skylights” that simulate real sky in hos-

model for a water molecule; a dance party as metaphor for understanding how warmed-up air expands; bumper cars as a way of envisioning the collision/coalescence process, and so on.

Some of the science was too much for me to want to spend time on, frankly, although I paid very careful attention to what causes clouds to turn pink at sunset.

“A Sideways Look at Clouds” makes looking up fun!

*The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at [bkmonger@nwlinc.com](mailto:bkmonger@nwlinc.com).*

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### Crossword Answer

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