

Fathoming the lives of whales

We may have saved the humpback whale, but what about the world they've returned to?

I am a born-and-raised Pacific Northwesterner, but in all my days, it wasn't until last fall that I finally had my first personal sighting of a whale, swimming wild and free. It was an orca in Puget Sound. Perhaps some of you have seen orcas before, or gray whales on their annual migration along the Pacific Coast, or maybe even the world's largest mammals, the blue whales, farther down the coast in California.

Whatever the species, it's a heart-pounding thrill, isn't it?

Naturalist Leigh Calvez, of Suquamish, Wash., captures that excitement and awe in her new book, "The Breath of a Whale."

Calvez has studied humpback whales from Massachusetts to Maui. She has led whale-watching tours around the world. And she

THIS WEEK'S BOOK

THE BREATH OF A WHALE

BY LEIGH CALVEZ
SASQUATCH BOOKS
240 PP
\$19.95

maintains a cetacean list the way other folks record birds. Through all of this, Calvez has developed an abiding dedication to the well-being of whales, their distinctive cultures and their habitats.

In the early pages of this book, she writes about the comeback of humpbacks down the coast in California.

"We have answered the rallying cry of the 1970s: we have saved the whales. But have we saved a place for them in the world they are coming back to?"

She spends the rest of the book sharing with us the many reasons why we should care about the answer to this question.

We learn about the independent research she was

doing on endangered humpback whales in Hawaii when the Navy began its low-frequency sonar testing, and her witnessing of the disruption it caused in the humpbacks' calving sanctuaries. (In the years following, the Natural Resources Defense Council successfully sued to keep the Navy out of the humpback whales' main breeding and calving grounds in Hawaii.)

The author also shares with us the growing body of evidence that humpbacks demonstrate interspecies altruism — they've been witnessed intervening on behalf of seals, sea lions, gray whales and even humans.

Calvez takes us along when she visits researchers studying blue whales off the coast of California.

She teaches us the distinctions between orcas and killer whales and false killer whales. She also recreates for us the story behind the dramatic repatriation of orphaned baby orca Springer, found swimming alone in central Puget

Sound, to her clan in the northern resident orcas, who primarily inhabit the waters off British Columbia.

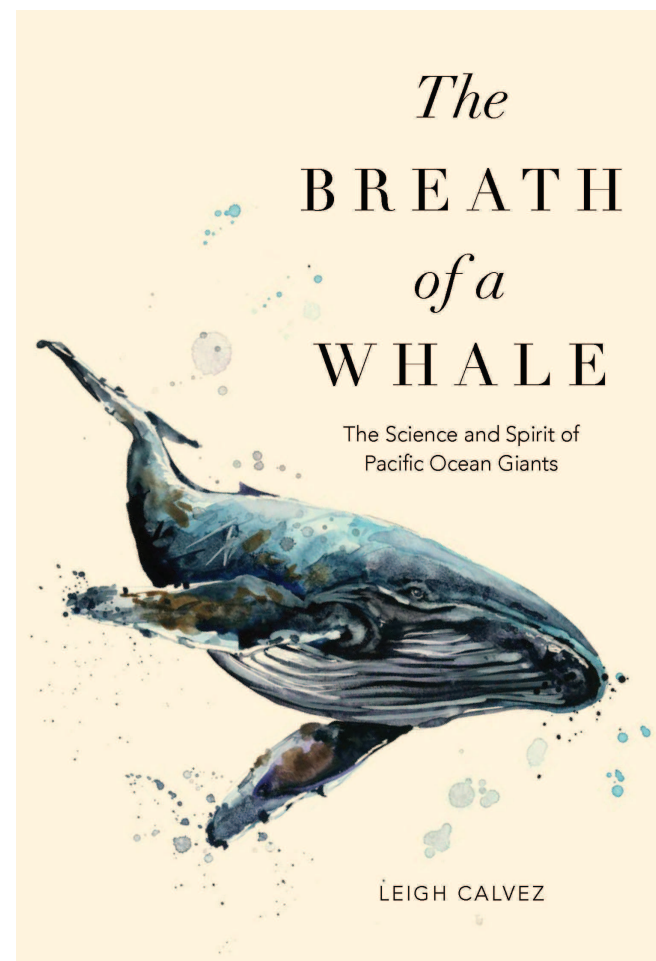
She talks about the fascinating changes in the food procurement patterns of gray whales.

And she introduced me to species of whales I'd never heard of before: the elusive beaked whales of Hawaii — Blainville's, Cuvier's, Longman's — and there may be a couple of other species as well.

Through all of this, Calvez threads her personal story of a catastrophic illness that sidelined her for a time, and draws lessons about the urgency of taking decisive, positive action to ensure a sustainable future for the whales.

And in doing so, she leads us readers on a whale of a tour.

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@nwlink.com.



Sasquatch Books

The cover of Leigh Calvez's 'The Breath of a Whale.'

Crossword Answers

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