

Mount St. Helens, 40 years after the blast

Book details research on volcano

It's hard to believe that Mount St. Helens erupted 40 years ago this week.

In his lively new book, "After the Blast," Seattle writer Eric Wagner delves into the fascinating research around the volcano. Geologists, hydrologists, biologists, botanists and others have probed, weighed, measured and counted, tracking the return of life in the post-eruptive landscape.

The eruption on May 18, 1980 turned hundreds of square miles of Washington state's South Cascades into an unrecognizable gray landscape of rock and ash. Just a few weeks later, three U.S. Forest Service scientists ventured into the blast zone by helicopter to make a preliminary assessment of the obliteration that had occurred.

Fred Swanson, Jerry Franklin and Jim Sedell operated under the assumption that it might take decades for life to respond to the scoured slopes and valleys surrounding the mountain. By documenting the destruction after a disturbance of this magnitude, they intended to establish a baseline to measure the slow recovery ahead.

But the moment they landed in the ash-covered landscape, they realized they were late to the party. Sprouts of fireweed, thistles and pearly everlasting were beginning to poke through the volcanic deposits. Insects skittered across the surface. There was even evidence that pocket gophers were pushing up from their subterranean tunnels, where they were protected from the eruption.

Franklin was amazed. "(A)ll of us smart ecologists realized we didn't have the correct working hypothesis."

It was clear that they had plenty to learn. Scientists of all kinds were interested in taking part.

Wagner writes about the wide range of individuals who have dedicated years, some-

This Week's Book

'After the Blast' by Eric Wagner

University of Washington Press — 248 pp
— \$29.95

times their entire careers, to the study of how life has rebounded in this landscape. He goes into detail about several specific research projects and the people who originated them.

Much of the research is ongoing, having been handed off to a new generation of scientists who are continuing to learn about the resilience of different life forms and the strategies they have for surviving and thriving.

The book also explores some of the tedium involved in the day-to-day operations: weighing biofilm (a layman might call it slime) in Spirit Lake, for example, or getting down on hands and knees to document the number of plant species that colonize different plots of land over time. Despite the tedious nature of these tasks, Wagner demonstrates that all of these kinds of work are important and engaging in their own way. Sometimes they even produce laugh-out-loud moments.

One of this book's takeaways is something we've also been seeing play out during the coronavirus pandemic, as wildlife makes incursions into territory often claimed by humans: the recognition that if you can just keep humans from mucking around too much, Mother Nature will move right back in.

This book is highly recommended.

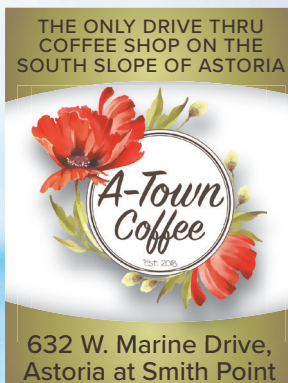
The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.

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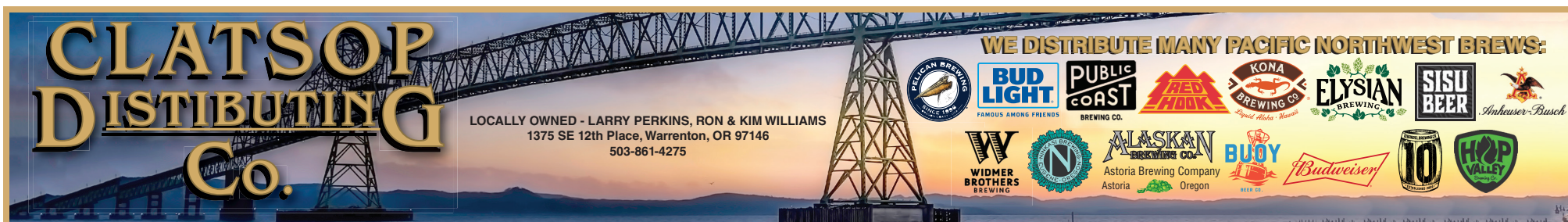
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