Staying Human in a Time of Climate Change: New Author on Science, Grief, ar
by Christopher Zumski Finke

For geographer and author M Jackson, knowing climate science isn't enough. We need to get our hearts involved too.

The Exit Glacier, in Seward, Alaska. Photo by David Estrada.

Author M Jackson's While Glaciers Slept: Being Human in a Time of Climate Change was released last week by Green Writers Press. In the book, Jackson's first, she examines climate change by combining personal stories with scientific exploration. As both a scientist and a writer by trade, Jackson studied climate change and how to communicate science through writing at the Environmental Science Graduate Program at the University of Montana.

"Climate change, like the loss of parents, necessitates an experience of grieving."

"I wanted to explore our capacity to experience personal loss—the loss of family, the loss of lovers, the loss of a local landscape, the loss of certainty in the weather—to grieve profoundly while simultaneously not giving in," Jackson says.

In the opening pages of While Glaciers Slept, Jackson explains that both her parents died of cancer within two years of one another while she was in her twenties. Her experiences of loss, and the despair that followed, is the central current of her book.

"Climate change, like the loss of parents, necessitates an experience of grieving," the 32-year-old author says. "That also includes picking up the pieces and moving forward into futures that are shapeable and malleable and hinged upon millions of individual imaginations."

Photo of M Jackson, courtesy of the author.

Jackson expertly pairs her loss, grief, and anger with the scientific exploration of our Earth and solar system. When she opens a chapter with learning of her father's cancer for the first time, readers end up in a discussion about the history of wind power as a human energy source (it starts in seventh century Afghanistan, for the record).

Bill McKibben, who wrote the introduction to While Glaciers Slept, draws on the duality of Jackson's book by asking if our big human brain "has come attached to a big enough heart to get us out of the trouble we're in." Jackson herself hopes blurring the distinction between the heart and the brain will help humans make it through this period.

"My heart tends to filter my mind."

The jacket of Jackson's book describes her as an adventurer, and the word seems to fit her well. As a trip leader with the National Geographic Student Expeditions, Jackson takes students on field assignments to study different cultures and the diversity of the natural world. Currently, she's heading to Iceland, and then Alaska, on a tour of lectures about climate change. Despite her busy schedule, Jackson has managed to find the time to also become a Ph.D. candidate in geography at the University of Oregon. Once her lecture tour is done, she will head back to Iceland for nine months of doctoral research on the effects of glacial loss on the Icelandic people.

In the midst of her adventuring, I chatted with Jackson over email about her book, the vulnerability of writing about loss, and how she remains hopeful when confronted by the challenge of climate change.

This interview has been lightly edited.

Christopher Zumski Finke: You could have written one book about climate change, and another one about how you've coped with the death of your parents. Instead, you combined them into a single book. Why?

M Jackson: After my mother died, I was numb, in shock, and having a difficult time engaging with the world. In many ways, I just turned off. It was too much to handle. But while my heart was in pieces and tucked down in the darkest basement, my mind kept telling me not to stay in that grief-stricken landscape for too long—or I might not come back. So I started writing—because, for me, writing makes me feel like I am participating in the world. I started writing about my mother.

But then my father died, and there I was, numb and in shock again. And my heart was not coming out of that dark basement. Eventually, when my mind piped up and started chatting, it drew analogies between what I was experiencing—the loss of my parents—and

what I was researching—climate change. The language for both is quite similar. This is what I focused on.

Photo by M Jackson.

Zumski Finke: Your book explores the loss you felt, and pairs it with climate change, energy solutions, and scientific discovery. Big heart and big brain, as Bill McKibben puts it in your book's intro. Are you a heart or head person?

Jackson: I am both a big heart and a big brain person, but I think my heart tends to filter my mind.

Zumski Finke: How does that dynamic influence your thinking about climate change?

Jackson: I think we can create the very best science out there about the problems of climate change, yet if we aren't filtering that science through our hearts, there remains—as we see today—a disengagement. People intellectually understand climate change; we know "the science" of it. But now, vitally, we need more heart.

Zumski Finke: I want to ask about the section of your book when you're brought into close contact with the woman driving the car that crashed into your mother and led to the amputation of her leg. In those pages you explore your impulse for violence, and your thoughts wander into cold, alien planets hidden in the cosmos. It's a beautiful piece of writing. What is it like writing, and sharing, such personal pieces of your experience?

Jackson: Climatic changes are experienced first through the human condition. We are living in this changing world together and subsequently are in many ways responsible to one another for our actions. That's a really big thing. How do we even start that move forward in a productive manner? If anything, climate change has shined a really bright light on the rampant inequities of the human condition on this planet. Why are we all not angry?

For me, I think that authentically sharing our personal experiences—the good and the bad and everything in the middle—is an excellent place to start, to move forward into our shared future. In the book, I tried to share my experience as I lived it. And there are times when I go back through the pages and certain things catch me. This was a hard book to write, and it makes me vulnerable in a way to the world. But then, we have to be vulnerable. Climate change is made up of millions people, human beings with human lives. My story is your story, and our story.

Some glaciers, like the Svínafellsjökull in Iceland, discharge such enormous volumes of meltwater that they build up large and often unstable glacial lakes at their terminuses. Photo by Federico Pardo.

Zumski Finke: Your book has garnered attention from climate change deniers and trolls. That started even before it was released. How are you handling that?

Jackson: Today, I'm largely ignoring them. I wasn't at first, and I found the negative attention—let's call it what it is: hate mail—incredibly hurtful. But that was in the beginning. The thing is, while my heart goes out to the people who think sending bullying, sexualized, and hateful letters is somehow helpful, I do not have time for them.

Climatic change is increasing on our shared planet. I'm interested in moving forward and working on collective and creative methods for living with existing climatic changes and ameliorating further impacts.

Zumski Finke: Are you optimistic about the future of combating climate change?

Jackson: I am not necessarily optimistic about combating climate change—I'm not sure that is the most helpful way to think about the changes that are and will be happening. I am optimistic about slowing and lessening our global greenhouse gas emissions, learning to live with present day climatic changes, and shaping our future and our society's place within that future.

Climate change is not an enemy to be vanquished; it is a phenomenon deeply tied to our daily lived existence. It is part of the conversation our mixed up, beautiful, contrary, and imaginative people must have about who we are as a people and where we want to go. I am optimistic about peoples' better selves, and I think right now is an optimistic, hopeful time where we can be bold together.

The Meade Glacier in July 2008. Note the crevasses forming where the ice scrapes the mountainsides. Photo by Elizabeth Ruff.

Zumski Finke: That's a nicely described vision for climate optimism. How do you manage to stay that way?

Jackson: For me, there isn't another option. I don't find terrifying messages of apocalyptic disaster all that helpful, nor the messages about every single thing that wasn't done perfectly right.

There is no fabled "solution" for climate change. Rather, there are a million and more creative ways to engage at multiple scales across the planet. What works in one place

might not translate to another, or up or down a scale of governance. What I have seen are hundreds of thousands of people quietly getting things rolling.

And so each morning, I get out of bed and get excited for the creative things I'll see that day—the wows and the unthinkables and the quiet smiles—and sometimes, frankly, I go to bed feeling a little down. But each day is different, and each morning is a hopeful one.

I've been to that dark place with little hope. That place doesn't help. My compass can't just spin and spin on darkness. My compass spins on hope, and points toward an exciting future.