

8-30-2016

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Recommended Citation

Granter, Gina M. (2016) "A World for My Daughter: An Ecologist's Search for Optimism by Alejandro Frid," *The Goose*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 57.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss1/57>

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Eyes Wide Open: Imagining the Way to a Non-Dystopian Future

A World for My Daughter: An Ecologist's Search for Optimism by ALEJANDRO FRID
Caitlin Press, 2015 \$24.95

Reviewed by GINA GRANTER

Early in *A World for My Daughter*, Alejandro Frid speaks of a camping trip on Yakobi Island, Alaska, with his wife, Gail. It was a tumultuous trip of contingencies, and during which the “weather gods were playing a north-south tug of war” and they “had no forecast” due to being in a blackout zone for radio (26). One might expect such an unpredictable time to be one least likely to generate a discussion about having a child, but that is what they did, for the first time after years of being together: “By the end of the trip,” Frid says to his daughter Twyla Bella, to whom his book is addressed, “there was no doubt in either of our minds: We will not lose sight of what we have seen. We will invite you here, to Earth” (26). This singular way of expressing an idea—in this case, a desire share the Earth and all its tumult and beauty with a child—is characteristic of Frid’s book, which finds unique angles from which its reader may view potential solutions for the ecological crises currently facing our planet.

As the title implies, the search for optimism is ongoing, but there is evidence enough in Frid’s book to justify staying the course. Frid is convinced of our potential to change the course of human-wrought environmental degradation, but his is not a placating message glossing over realities; as an ecologist, he is too immersed in evidence to see what is happening with anything other than clarity. In imagining the possibility of us one day looking back from a

better future upon our current time, Frid finds precedent in the abolition of slavery in the U.S., in an analogy so simple and so applicable it is astonishing that it is not regularly evoked in environmentalist discourse: that fossil fuels have a similar role—often noted as an indispensable one—in our economy as slavery did in the 18th century, and both are ethically fraught. Yet “[a]gainst unbelievable odds, regular citizens working within their democratic rights have, in many nations, fought the economic establishment and managed to abolish slavery, racism, gender inequality and other injustices, at least from a legal standpoint” (28). As Frid notes, legal protection is far from perfect, but it is an essential step that is urgently needed for many ecosystems, and one that the Harper government was not only failing to enact, but removing at every opportunity. Frid does not hold back in outlining the many ways in which the Conservative government muzzled scientists and enacted policies that have been incredibly damaging to Canada’s ecosystems. That Frid wrote his book during the Harper era, not knowing when the endpoint of that era would be, is a testament to his commitment to his search for optimism.

Frid admits to harbouring anger sometimes against the perpetrators of environmental injustice, of which there are many, but that “at the end of the day, I always land here: love for the Earth comes first, and from that love springs the motivation to act on the Earth’s behalf” (171-72). Beautiful passages describing the natural beauty Frid has witnessed in his life and work provide insight into his character and remind readers what is at stake if we do not act. It is in the empowerment of regular citizens to exercise their democratic rights, through voting, letters to elected

representatives, and protests that Frid finds the most potential for change.

Also key to Frid's search for optimism is the acknowledgement that, despite his own career as a scientist, "Scientific knowledge alone . . . [is] not about to kick-start the restructuring that we need so badly" (28). He insists upon the necessity of stories to our continued survival, and notes the horrific consequences of cutting people off from their stories, as the residential school system did to generations of aboriginal peoples in Canada. Frid is motivated not only by love for Earth but also for his fellow humans: environmental and social justice are bound up together, and the shared efforts on this front are another source of optimism. Frid examines the notion of good citizenship and occasionally civil disobedience, emphasizing a focus on the local, the power of the individual, and the strength of a collective motivated by a sense of love and justice to make changes in one's community, which in turn help change nations and, ultimately, the world.

For both scientists and for those who dedicate their lives to telling stories, it

may seem our future is tending towards dystopia, and the current preponderance and popularity of dystopian literature and film attests to this. *A World for My Daughter* is clear about the challenges ahead, but is convinced that we have the capacity to confront them. Frid is both a scientist and a storyteller, and the appeal of this book is in Frid's voice as a whole person, combining scientific knowledge with intimate reflection and autobiography addressed to his daughter. Frid's is a compassionate voice committed to doing his part to ensure that his daughter loves Earth and is motivated by love for it; in sharing his letters to her with his readers, he reminds us of both the Earth's beauty and our ability to maintain the forces essential to our physical and psychological survival.

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