

# In the Blast Zone

## *Catastrophe and Renewal on Mount St. Helens*

*edited by Charles Goodrich, Kathleen Dean Moore,  
Frederick J. Swanson*

*original line drawings by Ann Zwinger*



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## Foreword

"Mount St. Helens," in my boyhood imagination, was one of the "big mountains up in Washington State," a place—like Rainier and Adams and the peaks of the North Cascades—for serious climbers, for adventures of the body. In 1980, after I had left Oregon to attend college, St. Helens blew its top and made itself known across the nation. I was living in Philadelphia that spring and when my father came from Eugene to visit a few days following the eruption he mentioned that he'd observed ash floating some 30,000 feet in the air all the way to the East Coast.

I haven't been thinking much about Mount St. Helens during the past two decades, as I've moved from state to state, continent to continent. But it became clear to me, when I had the opportunity to read the manuscript of *In the Blast Zone: Catastrophe and Renewal on Mount St. Helens*, that many people *have* been researching and contemplating this special place for a very long time, since well before the eruption that made St. Helens a household name. What was once a place, at least as I understood it, for climbers and adventurers, has become a place for thinkers and dreamers, a source of ideas.

This collection of poetry and essays emerges from a July 2005 camping trip and educational event at Mount St. Helens, orchestrated by Oregon State University's Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word, that brought together many of the leading writers and ecologists of the American West, including newcomers to St. Helens and some who had been studying or informally observing "the Lady" for many decades. The resulting collection is a thorough and authoritative narrative of the mountain's famous eruption in 1980 and its ecological renewal over the course of two and a half decades. But many of the pieces collected here go well beyond the specificities of Mount St. Helens' story, exploring on a more fundamental and universal level the phenomenon of environmental change, guiding readers to think carefully about how we use such words as "catastrophe," "disturbance," "loss," and "recovery." One comes away from reading this manuscript with a powerfully transformed view of Mount St. Helens and volcanoes in general, carrying in one's imagination ideas of green moss and blue butterflies, birdsong and wind, ideas that have now begun to complicate the image of St. Helens as a stark post-eruption moonscape.

As an anthology, much of which is lyrical rather than analytical, this is not a scholarly volume exactly. And yet the more *literary* contributions to the book are impressively rigorous in their vivid descriptions and emotional truths, while the somewhat more analytical essays are authoritative and engaging in their consideration of topics such as “biological legacies” and the types of language used in describing and explaining landscape. Many of the writings here bear a clear, oft-repeated message: that the story of Mount St. Helens is one of change and *renewal*, despite the scale of the volcanic blast that captured the public imagination in 1980. In essence, then, this is an extremely hopeful work, one that suggests the fundamental durability of nature. The ideas about natural processes and the meaning of nature in human experience expressed in this collection are powerful and accessible enough to be of interest to a wide range of readers, from scientists to humanists, to the general public. As a scholar of environmental *literature*, I find this to be a rich, multi-voiced symposium, surprising in its diverse textures of language and its consistent focus on the theme of renewal. I read it myself with delight and fascination, taking particular pleasure in its elegant interdisciplinarity—its inclusion of statements from novelists, ecologists, poets, natural historians, philosophers, and geologists. The collection is organized in a way that highlights the diversity of voices and themes.

The 2005 gathering at St. Helens marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the momentous eruption and launched this book project. While only a handful of people were fortunate enough to participate in that gathering, the rest of us can contemplate the lessons of Mount St. Helens and savor the vibrant voices of those who were there by way of this book, which I hope will find its way into the hands of scholars and artists in all of the disciplines represented by the contributors (and then some), citizens of the Pacific Northwest, folks who had bits of volcanic ash from St. Helens land in their hair and on their cars back in '80, volcano freaks everywhere, and anyone who's fascinated with and concerned about patterns of catastrophe and renewal in nature and culture.

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