For my book this quarter, I read John Keeble’s *Into the Channel: The* Exxon Valdez *oil spill in the Prince William Sound.* The closest genre I can assign to it is investigative journalism. In the words of another reviewer, it is “a blend of memoir, strong opinions and much research” (Naske, 2000). Even this edition, greatly expanded upon ten years after the publication of the first book and the accident that spurred its writing, remains deeply rooted in the author’s close personal experiences of the spill that changed the Prince William sound forever.

John Keeble is not a local to the sound. He was one of the army of journalists and reporters that marched into the town of Valdez after its namesake tanker ran aground in March of 1989. The tanker had been carrying over 53 million gallons of crude oil, of which 11 million were spilled into the waters of the Prince William sound, although this number is hotly disputed. The oil, driven by the wind and the waves, dispersed into every part of the sound, bringing with it not only the toxic fumes but the corporate politics of the rescue operation, leaving behind untold millions of dead wildlife and communities torn asunder. Keeble investigates the root cause of the accident but also coolly reports on the lives of the people involved, from the captain of the ship to community members that spearheaded the cleanup effort, from Exxon officials looking to cover up to native peoples fighting for their way of life. John Keeble is not a local to the sound, but his patience and unreserved honesty quickly roots himself amongst those caught in the struggle.

I chose this book because man-made accidents fascinate me. I like to tease them apart like murder mysteries- whodunnit? What did we learn from it? I did not know very much about the spill of the *Exxon Valdez* or the resulting regulations that came from it. This book had been sitting on my shelf for a while, so now was the perfect time to give it a read.

One thing I was immediately shocked by, and impressed by in the book coverage of it, was the scale of the incompetence from Exxon that occurred *after* the accident, not during it. Keeble actually spends an entire chapter defending the captain of the *Exxon Valdez*, eponymously titled “The Imaginary Journey of Captain Joseph Hazelwood’. Urban legends circulating around Hazelwood say he was drunk or high on the bridge, and that he steered his ship more or less intentionally towards the reef. This was the version of the story I was familiar with before reading this book. However, this fourth chapter debunks those claims with evidence from Hazelwood’s trial (his alcohol content was only just above maritime regulations, and while it might have been a factor, it was not enough to be a cause) (p.38-39) and proposes a more accurate counter-claim from the Coast Guard’s report of the accident that highlights systemic factors within Exxon’s corporate environment- improper training, disregard for fatigue laws, and shortcomings of the Coast Guard’s radar system in the sound. To put it simply, the accident was an accident. What followed, however, was a crime. The local pipeline company who owned the tanker port that filled the *Exxon Valdez* was required to have a proper response to an oil spill within five hours. In eighteen hours, no response had been administered (p.60). Moreover, the oil sat calmly on the water for three entire days before it hit the shore as if waiting to be picked up. Corporate and political indecision stalled any rapid cleanup response until after the oil had been bashed upon the shorelines of the sound (p.65). These facts shocked and angered me. They shocked and angered the people of the sound. They shocked and angered Keeble, too, but he keeps his frustrations buried in the details of his memoirs in a masterful example of “show, don’t tell”. It is only in the latter chapters of the book that his prose gets more pointed and his anger seeps through, like oil weeping from rocks along the shoreline.

One thing I had been dreading, however, was that I knew the bulk of the book was focused on the cleanup. I wasn’t interested in how they cleaned the birds or sprayed off the beaches. I didn’t care about the otters. The exact destructive details of a disaster don’t catch my interest. However, Keeble revealed a completely different side to the disaster that I was not expecting- the human cost of Exxon’s cleanup attempts. The sound is not a pristine, uninhabited wilderness; many small towns dot its borders, funded by the fishing and oil industries, such as the towns of Valdez, Seldovia, Cordova, and Homer. Keeble dedicates many more words to the desecration of these towns than he does to the plight of any animal. The entirety of chapter 17, titled “No Road”, details the fallout of not only the spill but of the cleanup operation on the town of Cordova. It describes how the town was overrun with inflation caused by the corporate money coming in from Exxon, tossed lazily in the direction of the cleanup operation and ultimately funneled into the pockets of what Keeble refers to as “spillionares”. Greed over this money being dumped (figuratively) into the sound led to a city hall election that politically tore the town apart, resulting in a loss of community cohesion and the suicides of two prominent members (p268-270). This was compounded by the fact that in the years following the spill, the salmon runs failed, no doubt as a result of the botched cleanup operation, leaving many fishermen unsure of their livelihoods (p.270-274). Keeble’s personal interviews with the people affected by the disaster were moving. These were friendly, hospitable, and very kind people, as shown by the many ways they invited John Keeble into their homes and boats not just so that he could interview them, but so that he could see and understand their lives. Keeble’s prose is detailed and at times a bit dense, but it serves to highlight the beauty of the humans he meets along his journey for the truth.

There is another chapter in particular that I’d like to highlight. Another reviewer of this book said, “especially excellent is Keeble’s unique discussion on the “Truth About Oil” in Chapter 14” (Nickum, 1991), and I would like to sincerely agree. If I could recommend that you only read one chapter, it would be this one. Keeble masterfully mixes his search for a metaphor to describe the oil with the hard scientific facts about how oil behaves once spilled and its effects on the environment. It serves as an analysis of the role science played in the disaster as well- the uncertainty, the contradictions, the weaponization of data from all sides. It is, in my opinion, Keeble’s tour de force; his most perfect blend of nonfiction, memoir, and retrospection, packed within just twelve pages. It is quick, polished, honest, and trim in a way I found some other chapters to be lacking.

I have expounded on about what I thought Keeble did masterfully, but I have yet to talk about some of the book’s issues. Some of the chapters linger far too long in his musings and memoirs. Chapters 7 and 11 are a slog, and while Chapter 18 has some interesting points, it too is weighed down by too much description; some of the stories focused on feel redundant and repetitive to ones that come prior. This is a big book, totaling 334 sizable pages packed with long and complicated sentences, making it a difficult read at times. Keep your dictionary handy, and keep special notes of names and acronyms, as there are many of them and are easy to confuse.

I would rate this book a 7 out of 10. It is an all-comprehensive view of not just the disaster itself, but the impact on the entire culture of the Prince William sound. It is equally a fantastic view of the facts and the very human story at the heart of them, and Keeble draws some truly insightful points out from the tangle. However, the cost of admission is a lengthy word count and occasional loss of focus. I would not recommend this book to someone looking for the quick and dirty facts about the causes and legislative results of the *Exxon Valdez* spill. I would recommend this book to anyone wanting to know more about the threat oil poses, both in spills and in corporate greed, to the world, both natural and societal. This book, or at least certain chapters, would be a great required reading for an Environmental Pollution class, as its explanation of the damage of oil pollution goes far beyond the simple spitting of statistics.

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