

Water, trust and truth

AMY REISWIG

Andrew Nikiforuk writes about one woman's battle to protect her water from fracking and our lives from corporate lies.

No matter where you are on this planet, society needs a few key things in order to work. Water is one. Trust is another. When both become corrupted—actually going up in flames—for industrial profit, one has to wonder where we're headed, not just environmentally, but morally.

It's a question award-winning investigative journalist Andrew Nikiforuk has been examining for years in writing about the energy and resource sectors. His most recent book, *Slick Water: Fracking and One Insider's Stand Against the World's Most Powerful Industry* (Greystone Books and the David Suzuki Institute, 2015), traces the evolution of fracking and shines a light on one indomitable woman who, after losing both her water and her faith, decided that where she was headed was to court.

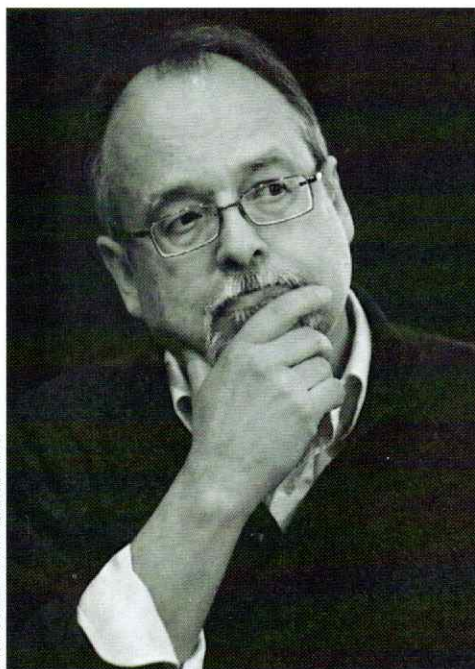
Nikiforuk is a dogged, diligent researcher and a man of obvious thoughtfulness and compassion (and attendant anger). By looking at the broad industrial history and the intimate, personal impacts of fracking, he tells a double story that will shock and awe as he digs into not just a problematic practice but the larger philosophical issues around what he believes is an essentially abusive extraction culture as well as what it takes, at a deep human level, to stand up to it.

In 2007, Alberta landowner and former oil patch consultant Jessica Ernst testified before the federal Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development in Ottawa, and as Nikiforuk reports, "One of the parliamentarians said the only time he had seen a toilet on fire was when his kids watched the movie *Home Alone*." But Ernst's water, in her toilet and taps, was no joke, and what she had to say was certainly no comedy—for any of us.

After fracking by energy giant Encana had contaminated the aquifer serving Ernst's property and that of her neighbours in the rural town of Rosebud, Alberta, her now-flammable water gave off a white fog, ran bits of black coal, and showed dissolved methane levels at 44,800 parts per million (when the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers considered a mere 1 part per million a hazard for water passing through an enclosed space). In a feat of industrial alchemy, her formerly safe water had become an unholy admixture of earth, air, and fire.

And in a cruel betrayal, a company Ernst had worked for ended up fracturing much more than the rock around her home. It broke up Ernst's community, divided around the benefits of the industry, and her sense of justice.

But it didn't touch her courage. In a groundbreaking \$33 million lawsuit (that finally, after nine years, reached the Supreme Court in January of this year), Ernst sued not just Encana but two Alberta government regulators: Alberta Environment and the Energy Resources



Andrew Nikiforuk

Conservation Board (ERCB). She charged that while Encana had fracked into an aquifer, the two regulators had failed to investigate—and failed in what Ernst saw as a duty of care to the public to protect the groundwater. They had also barred Ernst from communicating with them, thereby, she claimed, violating her Charter rights. How did a supposed "clean" energy industry get to this? Nikiforuk's book explores the answer.

Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, is a controversial extraction process that frees hard-to-get oil and gas by cracking rock with high-pressure injections of water, sand, and often non-publicly-disclosable combinations of chemicals. In order to understand the current processes and industry culture, Nikiforuk goes back to its origins, all the way to the 1850s. Through extensive research into industry documents, he presents the story of a gold rush mentality of excited science experimentation, including the use of torpedoes, hydrochloric acid, nitro-glycerin, napalm, kerosene, diesel oil and even

nuclear bombs to stimulate wells in the incessant drive to maximize energy production.

Nikiforuk also shows that industry operators (then and now) often simply don't quite understand the complexities of geology, even though some patent filers rather rose-colouredly referred to fracking practices as an "art." The book questions how artful it is when, in Hutchison, Kansas, in 2002, methane from an underground gas facility escaped a leaky well into natural rock fractures, travelled almost seven miles to surface in old salt wells in town and exploded, levelling two buildings. Or when, in 1985, a clothing store in the Fairfax District of L.A. "blew up into an inferno" that injured 23 people because of migrating gas from urban horizontal fracking and leaky abandoned gas wells.

By looking at the historical record of industry information and scientific papers around fracking technology, Nikiforuk reveals a litany of long-known problems that we're still dealing with today, like unpredictable and uncontrollable fracture dimensions and directions (frack jobs going "out of zone") or gases escaping out leaky wellbores, along uncontrolled frack lines or natural rock fractures and faults into residential areas or aquifers. And while it may have seemed to be news in March when a Canadian study concluded that fracking is behind quakes as large as magnitude 4.8 felt in western Canada, Nikiforuk's research indicates that earthquakes have been associated with fracking since the late 1970s. In 1978, the so-called stimulation of one 3000-foot-deep well triggered 70 earthquakes in just over six hours in Oklahoma. That state has been geo-engineered, he writes, into "a landscape more earthquake-prone than California."

It's an important issue for BC, home to some of the world's largest frack jobs in areas like the Montney and Horn River formations, the

PHOTO: DOUG PYPER PHOTOGRAPHICS

“WE’RE FLIES IN THE SPIDERWEB, and we don’t want to talk about the nature of the web. Are we in a cultural crisis over this? Yes, we are.” —Andrew Nikiforuk

latter already having experienced hundreds of quakes. In August 2015, Progress Energy (owned by Petronas) triggered a quake in the Fort St John area measuring 4.6—roughly the size of the one that rumbled through Victoria in December. As a result of the recent quake study, Andrew Weaver, Green Party MLA for Oak Bay-Gordon Head, called for a moratorium on horizontal fracking in BC, noting that Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia have already suspended it. Nikiforuk’s book is therefore timely reading for anyone interested in the debate.

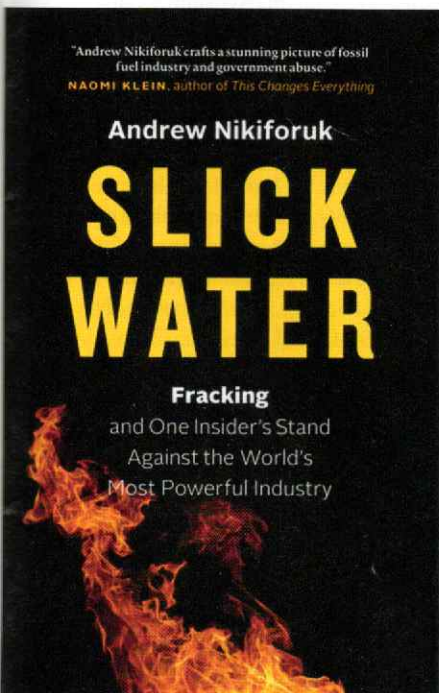
Sometimes accused of being unobjective, Nikiforuk says he started writing about the energy industry as a business journalist. A former Calgarian now living in Campbell River, BC, he was also an Alberta landowner and friends with other landowners, so he would regularly hear, he tells me, “real stories from real people” about how energy companies worked on the ground.

“Once you’ve heard the truth,” he says simply, “you can’t ignore it.” Whether in his National Magazine Award-winning articles, his column in the *Tyee*, or books that have won him the Governor General’s Award for Non-Fiction and the Rachel Carson Environment Book Award, and landed him as a finalist for the Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment, Nikiforuk has devoted decades to finding and sharing the truth of an industry that is, he says, very good at hiding things.

At its heart, *Slick Water* is about access to information—the manipulation or outright suppression of information germane to environmental, economic, and public health.

“When I started out as a reporter,” he recounts, “I didn’t encounter the level of lies and evasion, the constant evasion that I do now,” and he notes that there are approximately six PR people employed for every journalist. So whether it’s industry self-regulation, environmental assessors relying on industry-submitted data, or the ever-expanding corporate PR machine, part of what preoccupies Nikiforuk is the way the industry represents itself.

If we need trust for society to work, that has to include communication. When Calgary-based Talisman put out a colouring book featuring Terry the friendly Fracosaurus and showing escaping natural gas as happy-faced balloons, US comedian Stephen Colbert called it the fracking industry’s equivalent of Joe Camel. And when industry executives claim there are no proven cases of freshwater aquifer con-



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PHOTO: COLIN SMITH

Jessica Ernst

amination, Nikiforuk calls it “one of the biggest lies of the twenty-first century,” arguing that the information is simply buried by gag orders imposed on complainants when they settle out of court.

Nikiforuk's concern is not just with industrial impacts on the environment but on ourselves—the dirtying of the human landscape, of our moral character. “It's the same mechanism the Catholic church used to cover up abuse,” he tells me, clearly disgusted by the repeated process wherein allegations of environmental contamination are made against energy companies, often by rural landowners, then high-paid lawyers swoop in offering compensation in exchange for a confidentiality agreement, with the victim frequently intimidated into silence. The cycle of abuse is therefore allowed to go on with no public record of wrongdoing, he says. “It's absolutely sick and very effective.”

Thus, with clear admiration, Nikiforuk also tells a second story: How no amount of intimidation could silence Jessica Ernst.

DESCRIBED BY SOME AS the Joan of Arc of Alberta, Canada's Erin Brockovich and a public hero, Nikiforuk chronicles how Jessica Ernst has spent the last nine years trying to hold accountable those responsible for contaminating her water and trying to suppress her voice. She worked in the energy sector for nearly 30 years on risk mitigation, wildlife protection plans, and community consultation for some of the biggest players—Esso, Statoil, Chevron, and Encana—and so Nikiforuk calls hers an “unconventional true

story” because she's not an environmentalist or an activist but a former insider who, against tremendous pressure, refused to be a victim.

The book is therefore partly an exploration of her courage as a whistleblower and as a human being overcoming deep wounds in a search for justice for herself and others. In a testament to Nikiforuk's empathy, the oft-betrayed Ernst opens up to him about extremely personal life details. Molested by a school bus driver at age six and repeatedly raped by a family friend a few years later, her childhood sense of safety in the world was broken. But we learn how, as an adult, that suffering paradoxically fuelled her determination to stop what she saw as a new cycle of abuse. Though many friends told Ernst the lawsuit would only be painful, futile and ultimately financially ruinous, she said: “The main reason I can do this is that there is nothing anyone can do to me that hasn't already been done. They raped our aquifer...I couldn't stop the bus driver or Rex, but I can do something now.” For Ernst, the fight is worth the personal sacrifice because, as she puts it: “Money is nothing. My belongings are nothing. Water is everything. Truth is much more important.”

A finalist for the Writers' Trust of Canada 2015 Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing, *Slick Water* integrates facts and figures, the large-scale and the face-to-face, as well as economics and ethics that go beyond this one woman's story and even this one industry. Often touching on philosophy in his work, Nikiforuk here looks to Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* to explore

Offering sustainable beauty in the heart of Oak Bay



Fracking site in Alberta

how culture is being transformed, how we and our values are being transformed by the energy industry. As he tells me: "It's very important for readers to understand that the story of fracking is not the only story they're going to encounter in their lives" that revolves around technology and its impacts. "We're flies in the spiderweb, and we don't want to talk about the nature of the web. Are we in a cultural crisis over this?" he asks somberly. "Yes, we are."

While the Ernst case is centred in Alberta, Nikiforuk believes there's a universal importance to it. "She didn't expect to find justice," he writes. "Instead, she realized that her case had become something more profound." I would argue that Nikiforuk's book is also about something more profound than an industry exposé. It's a caution to everyone, globally, to consider where our energy dependence is leading and what we're each willing to sacrifice along the way—water, trust, truth. Prompting people to ask that kind of question is, in a sense, a step towards some justice for us all.

Fifteen percent of the book's royalties will be set aside to help fund Ernst's ongoing legal case.



Writer and musician Amy Reiswig works by day (and sometimes into the night) as an editor for the provincial government. Her writing has appeared in *Quill & Quire*, *The Malahat Review* and *The Walrus*.



Photo: Tony Bounsaill

Long-time hair stylist Jane Bruton recently created her own elegant boutique salon in the heart of Oak Bay Village. Its bay windows face the courtyard down the stairs from the Oaks Bistro at the corner of Monterey on Oak Bay Avenue. Graced with vintage white furnishings, a chandelier and always blooming orchid, it's a pleasant, peaceful oasis in which to consider a new cut or colour—or be introduced to a superb line of environmentally friendly hair products.

Jane's interest in creating a toxin-free environment for her clients and herself, along with doing what she can to save the planet, eventually led her to Davines. Founded by the Bollati Family in Parma, Italy in 1983, Davines has a commitment to 100 percent sustainability—without sacrificing effectiveness or beauty. Sold only in salons, Jane Hair is Davines' exclusive supplier in Oak Bay.

Davines describes sustainability as a "commitment to minimizing the impact on the environment, not compromising the quality or quantity of natural resources today or tomorrow." For the Bollati family, sustainability also implies "the effectiveness of our products and the safety of our customers, thanks to the privileged use of natural ingredients, enhanced with cutting-edge cosmetic technologies and an artisanal spirit."

"They are the best products I've ever used," attests Jane—who has used a lot of different products in her three decades as a stylist. Davines' shampoos are free of silicone, sulphates, parabens, PEG (polyethylene glycol), and artificial colours, all of which are in most shampoos. They leave hair feeling soft and silky; some of Jane's clients have reported their once itchy scalps aren't irritated anymore.

Jane is also thrilled with Davines' ammonia-free colours which use up to 98 percent natural ingredients. "Yet, it's the best colour I've ever worked with—it doesn't fade and covers grey well," reports Jane. The shine pigment in them contains ground quartz. Another ingredient is quinoa protein extract which increases colour absorption and ensures longevity

because it's similar to the proteins found in hair structure. Even people who in the past could not tolerate colour are finding it gentle enough to use, says Jane.

Styling products feel light but work well too, from oils and foams to a dry texturizer perfect for adding body to fine hair.

"The company really is genuine about sustainability," says Jane, explaining that besides not being tested on animals, "ingredients are sourced from 'Slow Food Presidia Farms' in Italy." These small-scale farms aim at protecting biodiversity and traditional methods of production.

Even the packaging pleases Jane—when plastic is used it is food grade so it can be repurposed. The company has made a carbon-neutral commitment, running its plants on renewable energy, and was one of the first Italian cosmetic brands to join the Zero Impact® project.

Davines encourages the stylists it works with to use re-purposed furnishings rather than go out and buy new ones, so Jane hair, with its big antique mirrors and vintage furnishings was a natural fit.

Though beauty is central to Davines philosophy, its take on it is refreshingly unconventional: "By creating 'beauty' we want to encourage people to take care of themselves, of the environment in which they live and work, and of the things they love." The beauty that inspires the company is based on appreciation for individuality and celebration of diversity.

Jane has been surprised at the number of people finding their way to her salon after hearing she carries the Davines line. Drop in to check out for yourself the wide range of Davines products at Jane Hair. Jane and her associate Cherie Pennington will be glad to help you.

Jane Hair

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