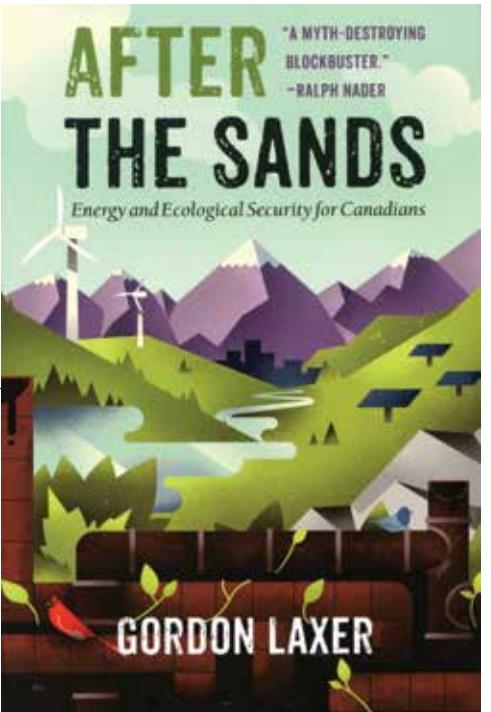


# BOOKSHELF

**After The Sands:**  
Energy and Ecological Security  
for Canadians

by Gordon Laxer  
DOUGLAS & MCINTYRE  
2015/\$24.95/239 PP.



Gordon Laxer raises the spectre of a global oil supply crisis, and asks a simple question: Are Canadians prepared? At a time when we seem to be suffering from too much oil, rather than too little, readers may wonder if Laxer has spent too much time breathing in exhaust fumes. In fact, his warning is very appropriate: Despite the recent upsurge in supplies—from previously untapped shale oil reserves in the US and from OPEC countries flooding the market—many energy analysts agree our days of oil abundance are numbered, with dramatic swings in prices along the way.

Laxer is former head of the Parkland Institute and a retired professor of political economy at the University of Alberta. He argues Canada is the least prepared developed country in the world. We export most of our fossil fuels but are dependent on imports of those same resources from elsewhere. Unlike virtually every other developed nation, we have no national energy plan to secure access to energy supplies among Canadians. Laxer reminds us Canada signed away its energy supplies to the US under the auspices of NAFTA—in which Canada is obligated to provide a proportion of our oil and gas supplies for sale to the US. An even larger reason for our lack of preparation may be bad memories of the 1980s recession—wrongly attributed in Alberta to Canada's last attempted national energy program—that have rendered politically toxic the very whisper of the topic of national energy sovereignty.

fund economic diversification. This isn't far-fetched: Canada is one of the last places on earth where access to oil deposits is for sale to the highest corporate bidder. The plan also requires conservation, the centrepiece of which is energy quotas—a form of rationing in every business and household. Underlying these steps would be support for a cultural shift away from materialism and toward sufficiency.

Laxer rightly acknowledges this grand formula won't be an easy political sell, due to the continuing influence of energy corporations. But this is by no means the only hurdle, leading to my two main reservations. Multiple, historically divisive social factions would need to be onside and buy into the long-term vision, requiring a degree of trust-building that would likely require generations to realize. Finally, the argument is based rather tenuously upon the prospects for a heavily constrained, ecologically benign capitalism, a notion some consider an oxymoron. Despite my reservations, I highly recommend this book to anyone who aspires to understand Canadian energy politics. Laxer understands our fossil fuels—from exploration to market—perhaps better than all but a few other Canadians, and he offers critical insight that should be included in energy decision-making today but isn't.

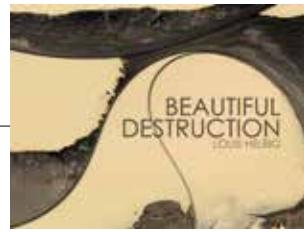
—Debra Davidson teaches environmental sociology at U of A.

After laying out this history, Laxer proposes a way forward, which—as the title suggests—includes phasing out oil sands production, along with fracked sources of oil and gas, in order to mitigate ecological and climate impacts. According to Laxer, Canada's energy sector doesn't really offer a lot of jobs, and our remaining conventional sources of oil and gas should be reserved for Canadians. Given that our current rate of consumption is higher than our rates of conventional oil production, Laxer argues we have about 10 years to kick the oil habit completely, during which consumption would need to be drastically reduced each year.

How would this be accomplished? Laxer suggests we exit from NAFTA. He advocates public ownership of resources, requiring the state to purchase leases held by private corporations, with the revenues used to

## Beautiful Destruction

by Louis Helbig (photographer)  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN BOOKS  
\$75/304 PP/2014



Louis Helbig took these stunning photos of the oil sands during several flights over tailings ponds and open pit mines around Fort McMurray between 2008 and 2013. The photos, collected in this massive volume—a coffee-table book that is nearly a coffee table—endeavour to show what is impossible to appreciate from the ground.

Obviously these photos invite comparison to Edward Burtynsky's. Burtynsky's work is characterized by patterns—the interplay of what we think of as man-made regularity with organic form—and the almost implausible immensity of scale. Helbig's work too seeks out the sublime, that terrifying grandeur in the organic beauty of an "unnatural" environment. Many photos deliberately confuse scale, representing the oil sands without visual cues to establish its vastness.

Interspersed are essays, by individuals across the political spectrum, on Alberta's natural resources. So we have the duelling rhetorics of Green Party leader Elizabeth May ("The importance of the oil sands is in their function as an intoxicant, hallucinogen and infectious disease agent, afflicting politicians with narrow-mindedness and suicidal tendencies") and Rick George, former president and CEO of Suncor ("The most appealing feature of the oil sands (when discovered) was the fact that they were there to be taken").

In one photo, a gorgeous iridescent black swirl on a sandy-coloured background is positioned above dirty black striations. One must look closer to see that the striations are a road and, yes, that speck is a bus on a road. The impressive, artistically contoured black blob is a tailings pond. Dr. John O'Connor, the Fort Chipewyan physician who has spoken out about the oil sands' impact on human health, points out in his essay that this sort of obfuscation is deliberate—even for the workers who are commuting on that bus, the tailings ponds are purposely far from sight. Images such as this make us question our perspective, question what we see and what we cannot see about our homegrown "beautiful destruction."

The many other voices in this book include filmmakers, journalists, researchers and doctors. For anyone with even a passing interest in oil and gas, however, most of these essays read as simplistic and mired in their respective perspectives. The written material could have better teased at the knot of hypocrisy that we all exhibit—a deep unease about the environmental repercussions of the oil sands while being dependent, if not on the petroleum industry, then on petroleum itself. That is what Helbig's photos do so well, and that is the primary reason to check out this book.

—Jay Smith is an Edmonton journalist and reviewer.

## 1/4 PAGE

3.437" x 4.625"

### FILE REQUIREMENTS

CMYK, High resolution (300 dpi)  
Convert all RGB, spot and Pantone  
colours to 4-colour process CMYK.

Other sizes are possible in this spread

## 1/4 PAGE

3.437" x 4.625"

### FILE REQUIREMENTS

CMYK, High resolution (300 dpi)  
Convert all RGB, spot and Pantone  
colours to 4-colour process CMYK.

Other sizes are possible in this spread

**Entropic**

by R.W. Gray  
NEWEST PRESS  
2015/\$18.95/200 PP.



**S**hort story collections have a lot in common with music albums. Both of them string together a series of self-contained works, often leaving it up to the reader or listener to trace connections between each bright point and draw their own constellations. R.W. Gray's *Entropic*—his second short story collection—is a chronicle of lovelorn aching hearts and sore regrets. As its title suggests, Gray's collection is all about things falling apart: relationships collapsing, identities disintegrating, the best laid plans crumbling into chaos. Most of these breakdowns don't seem too dramatic from the outside, but from the inside their consequences are on an appropriately cosmic scale.

In "Blink" a man finds his girlfriend's secret editing room, where she identifies all the unpleasant and unflattering moments in their relationship and cuts them out of his memory. In "Hands" a masseuse learns that she has the terrible power to transfer suffering from her patients into her sleeping boyfriend. In "Mirrorball," the collection's final story, two middle-aged

gay men meet a younger couple who are eerily similar to their earlier selves and who are following the exact same pattern of disintegration.

This last story is the most explicit about the collection's recurring theme—the inevitable entropy of all relationships—but each installment grapples with the idea in some way. There are several other recirculating motifs (queerness and queer characters, beauty and its price, an obsession with sleep) all of which bring this diverse set of stories into harmony.

The only scratch in the record is a story called "Sinai," where a backpacker in Egypt follows a mysterious woman through the desert. This story leaves the reader just as marooned as its protagonist, wandering across the beautifully described dunes with no idea what's driving us or why we're there. It's also the most mythological and unreal of the stories and in this case the fantasy overwhelms the characters.

Most of these stories take place in a off-kilter world, where magical coincidences and bizarre behaviour are accepted without question. From a beautiful man letting all of his acquaintances play with his comatose body to a prostitute prowling a rocky shoreline for corpses like a drowned angel, Gray's world is populated with unique characters. Although their circumstances are strange, their emotional experiences are completely understandable. Ultimately, *Entropic* succeeds when it lays the fantasy down as a bass line and uses it to support the treble notes of these queer, beautiful, exhausted, disintegrating people.

—Bruce Cinnamon is a fiction writer in Edmonton. ■

**1/2 HORIZONTAL**

7.125" x 4.625"

**FILE REQUIREMENTS**

CMYK, High resolution (300 dpi)  
Convert all RGB, spot and Pantone  
colours to 4-colour process CMYK.

Other sizes are possible in this spread