

Altar to an Erupting Sun: Chuck Collins' Compelling New Novel

BY SUSAN BONTHRON

Chuck Collins' *Altar to an Erupting Sun* begins in 2023 with an act of suicidal violence by a woman named Rae Kelliher. Seven years later, the aftermath of that event is viewed through the eyes of Rae's partner, Reggie Donovan, who is about to speak at her memorial gathering on the farm they shared with friends on Owl's Head Mountain in Guilford.

Preparing for her memorial, Reggie revisits Rae's journals with a few of her closest friends. Their collective reminiscences (and Rae's own) form the structure of the novel, beginning with Rae's life at Montague Farm in the early 1970s. Though Rae is a fictional character, her life is solidly based on real people, some of whom are still here with us, living in places you will recognize.

The stories that follow introduce us to a woman whose single act of violence runs counter to the principles she has lived by and acted on for her entire life. They also enable the reader to experience, with Rae, some of the most creative and powerful social movements of the last fifty years, many of which begin in or near our part of southern New England. Rae learns how to organize and train groups in nonviolent protest, connecting with people like Brian Willson, who opens her eyes to global injustice and the US government's role in it. She meets Wally and Juanita Nelson, influential peace activists dedicated to Civil Rights in the 1940s, who come to live off the grid in Pioneer Valley, refusing to support a war economy.

In Central America, Rae accompanies church groups who are there to witness and aid resistance groups and victims of US-backed regimes in Nicaragua and Ecuador. In Nicaragua she learns from an activist priest that they are there not so much to help with the cotton harvest as to "accompany" workers and witness their struggle. While there she meets and falls in love with Reggie, an American labor organizer.

In Ecuador's Betania Refugee Camp she meets Chepa, a tireless midwife who

Weeks Forest Carriage Trail Reflections

BY ANNE MONTGOMERY

If you head into Weeks Forest this spring, you may notice a few additions to the Carriage Trail, a meandering footpath along the Broad Brook. At Waypoint 3 (a numbered wooden post), you will cross over a rustic bridge spanning a perennially wet, eroded area. It was built by a crew from the Guilford Conservation Commission with donated materials and generous volunteer help. No more muddy feet!

Farther down the trail, near Waypoint 11, look for a mailbox nestled in the understory. It was installed last summer so that visitors could sit on the nearby bench and record their thoughts in the official "Weeks Forest Carriage Trail Register." This is a beautiful book, handmade by Susan Bonthron of Otter Pond Bindery.

Here are some journal entries:

"A magical piece of forest. One of my favorite places..."

"Summer solstice..what better place to welcome summer"

"My mind wanders with my feet..."

"It adds so much to our life here..."

"Amazing history..."

"What a gift to our community... cool and refreshing."

"The quiet and stillness a traveler seeks..."

"A serene walk in the woods while the snow gently falls..."

Many children's drawings adorn these



pages, and this message from a young explorer: "Dear forist I ingoyed your wak. I hope you like beeying a forist."

Students from Guilford Central School, homeschooling groups, families, skiers, and snowshoers all enjoy spending time under the majestic 150-year-old maples of Weeks Forest. People from many states and countries have left notes of thanks and appreciation. In only nine months, the trail register is almost full—a testament to the human need for peace, quiet, solitude, and beauty in our busy world.

The Carriage Trail begins on Carpenter Hill Road across from the historic Brick School House. A kiosk and self-guided trail brochure describes this fascinating parcel of land and its human and natural history. Please come visit! A new journal will soon be found in the box.

Chuck Collins' Novel, continued

finds solace in the altar she has built to honor her murdered husband and son. Building altars of remembrance and witness becomes central to Rae's political and spiritual awakening.

Rae's experiences in Central America fuel both her rage at the injustices suffered by the people she has met and her sense of responsibility to them. The contrast between their lives and the comparative luxury of her own is everywhere evident. At home in Boston, she and Reggie become dedicated to "face-to-face resilience," establishing mutual aid groups in their neighborhood, helping people fight evictions, learning about and resisting oil pipelines that endanger their neighbors. No matter where she lives, Rae connects with people. Living with

friends in a supportive community is fundamental to her. She holds them close.

She and Reggie transition to a cabin on Owls' Head that eventually becomes their shared farm community. But protesting the oil pipeline in Boston has opened her eyes to the oil industry's complicit role in climate change. Once open, she cannot close them. Her rage builds. When her personal circumstances change, she decides on a controversial action that poses the novel's central question: How far would you go to protect your family and the planet? As Rae once said to Reggie, "My problem, lover boy, is I don't forget what I've seen." No matter what you feel about Rae's final action, you will not forget this book. Read it!