

The Seattle Times

Winner of Nine Pulitzer Prizes

Books

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'Limber': essayist has a gift for the language of nature

Angela Pelster's new essay collection, "Limber," showcases her gift for language and her original view of the natural world.

By David B. Williams

Special to The Seattle Times

'Limber'

by Angela Pelster

Sarabande Books, 168 pp., \$15.95

As a naturalist, writer and book reviewer, I end up reading many books that explore the natural world. Most are pretty similar — well-written, thought-provoking, and filled with many facts and odd connections. I enjoy these books but they tend not to remain on my bookshelves, in part because they are so alike. Angela Pelster's book, "Limber," does not fit this mold. It is one of the quirkiest and most original books about the natural world that I have read in quite some time.

Consider her essay on mangoes. A paean to the fruit, its beauty and its color, the essay also has room for these elements: a nutritional facts chart, like the ones used on most packaged foods; the mango's use as a contraceptive; and the fact that nowhere in the Bible does it mention that Jesus ate mangoes. It also includes these wonderful lines. "What is this place where food grows on trees like gift-wrapped presents strung on a branch? How could this be? How could I ever be unhappy with these colors in piles around me."

This is not to say that I liked all of the 17 essays, but I appreciated her carefully crafted language and observations in stories ranging from the tale of The Tree That Owns Itself in the essay "Inheritance" to the naked Burmis Trees in "Burmis." To Pelster, squirrels are "North America's answer to the monkey" and a fig "steals the sun and rain for itself." Her sentences often force you to reread them, both to appreciate her style and her passion.

But "Limber" is not all peace and harmony. There is violence, decay, sadness and religion. Filled with precise, poetical and sparse language, the essays reveal not just the life of trees but how they connect us to the greater world around us.

Seattle author David B. Williams' latest book is "Cairns: Messengers in Stone" (Mountaineers Books).



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