



Gasp! The Swift and Terrible Beauty of Air

By Joe Sherman

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From a baby's first breath—that universal and fundamental entry into life outside the womb—air is taken for granted. Joe Sherman's *The Book of Air* is an entertaining investigation of air and the discoveries of how it works in the body and in our world.

Inhale, and learn about the difference between your aerobic capacity and Lance Armstrong's; exhale, and follow the observation and science of the atmosphere from Aristotle to Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen; hold your breath and investigate why over the last two centuries air has transformed from something marvelous into something menacing. In *The Book of Air*, Joe Sherman blends the history and myths of air, together with its environmental and physiological effects, into a rich and sometimes troubling account of what gives us our life force.

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Gasp! The Swift and Terrible Beauty of Air By Joe Sherman Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Writing in an informal, sometimes charming tone, Sherman (*In the Rings of Saturn*) offers a wide range of material about the air we breathe. He explains the way the body processes oxygen (and looks at why some babies have difficulty taking their first breath). Then he explores scientists' growing understanding of air through the centuries, from Aristotle, who believed that the Earth literally exhaled vapors that, when trapped below Earth's surface, became metals, to the 18th-century French chemist Lavoisier, who unseated phlogiston in favor of oxygen as the part of air that caused fire. But even as air was being studied, Sherman says, global forces were making it less breathable. The author describes the killer fogs that engulfed London in the 19th century due to the mass burning of coal; the Germans' use of chlorine gas at Ypres in WWI; and nuclear testing, which has devastated air quality in many areas of the world. Sherman also provides an overview of regulatory attempts to create a healthier environment, from the efforts of Victorian-era feminists who promoted pure air to the troubled history of the Clean Air Act in the U.S. In a thoughtful and engaging manner, and without writing like an environmental polemicist, Sherman sheds light on a substance that is becoming more and more opaque.

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Review

"Like his subject, Joe Sherman's prose is at turns calm or gusty, playful, hot, chilling, lucid, breezy, or furious as a hurricane. Mostly, *Gasp!* will make you think hard about the miracle of the air we breathe, how it came to be, and what we are doing to it... With *Gasp!*, Sherman... establishes himself as a first-rate writer of popular science... *Gasp!* is a tour de force, a wondrous romp through this magical substance we breathe." - Mark Pendergrast

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From reader reviews:

Carla Floyd:

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