

THE LOCAL SHELF

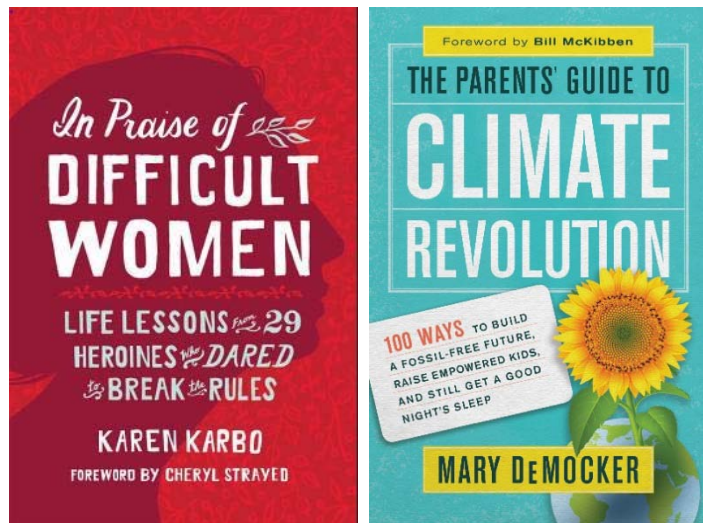
Capturing the spirit of 'difficult' women

BY BRIAN JUEMANN

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Karen Karbo has written books on Julia Child, Georgia O’Keeffe, Katharine Hepburn and Coco Chanel, and her bio treatments stand out because she’s got style. She relates not just the story but also the spirit of these one of a kind women.



With “In Praise of Difficult Women: Life Lessons from 29 Heroines Who Dared to Break the Rules,” Karbo gives the mini-bio treatment to an additional assemblage of pioneers.

Don’t let the brevity of the entries fool you into thinking these are wiki-style checklists. Even in brief, Karbo has a knack for the nuances and sidebars that leave the reader not just a carrier of new facts, but of fascination and admiration for her subjects.

As fellow Portlander Cheryl Strayed notes in the book’s foreword: “Through these perceptive and personal portraits, we get a portrait of Karen Karbo herself. I happen to know she’s also a woman who threw out the rule book of what it means to be female.”

Karbo’s collection of sisters-in-spirit profiles a few classic choices — Jane Goodall, Amelia Earhart, Gloria Steinem, Frida Kahlo — but much ground is covered with underappreciated and unconventional choices, some long gone, others making headlines and headway today.

Author and journalist Martha Gellhorn was, Karbo tells us, “drawn to the world of men in action. She was addicted to going and doing.” Gellhorn fibbed her way onto a hospital ship and crossed the English Channel — the first woman to hit the beach at Normandy. She disguised herself as a medic (and wore the role, carrying stretchers) to get the story and ended up a part of it.

In 1935, singer, writer, arranger, actress and choreographer Kay Thompson headlined musical programs on both CBS and NBC. Karbo anoints her “the mad scientist responsible for the DNA of the classic Hollywood musical.” Oh, and she’s also the author of the beloved classic “Eloise” children’s book series.

Rachel Maddow was the first openly gay Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. Laverne Cox is the first transgender woman to appear on the cover of a major magazine and the first nominated for an Emmy. Margaret Cho, the first Korean-American to headline a television show. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Angela Merkel — we know what they’ve been up to.

The very last entry in the book is the one I flipped to first and the perfect example of kinship between author and subject.

Karbo jokes that she always considered Carrie Fisher a distant cousin. She attended USC School of Cinematic Arts — as did “Star Wars” director George Lucas — just as “Star Wars” was securing its spot not just in film history but in to our cultural mythos. “We studied it as if it were a holy text.”

She never thought Fisher a brilliant actress but “smelled a whiff of smirk in her line readings. A kindred spirit.” Karbo honors her spirit cousin admirably.

As famous as she was, I am now 100 percent secure in stating that Fisher was and is highly underrated. Best-selling novelist. Best-selling memoirist. Blockbuster script doctor. Mental illness advocate. Princess bleeping Leia.

Lucas supposedly bypassed another actress who more traditionally fit the part of Leia because, as Karbo interprets, he recognized that Fisher “could be warm, tough, funny, and fierce, all at the same time.”

George, I’d like to introduce you to Karen. I think you’ll like her, too.

Local hero

The tagline on Mary DeMocker's website reads "Using the Arts to Re-Story Our Future." The Eugene artist/musician/activist's current art project happens to be in the book medium.

And "The Parents' Guide to Climate Revolution: 100 Ways to Build a Fossil-Free Future, Raise Empowered Kids, and Still Get a Good Night's Sleep" has some pretty fierce admirers.

Locally, the book boasts high-praise blurbs from Kitty Piercy (former Eugene mayor), Eugene author Peter Hoffmeister ("Let Them Be Eaten by Bears: A Fearless Guide to Taking Our Kids Into the Great Outdoors") and Corvallis author and environmental philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore ("Wild Comfort: The Solace of Nature," "Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril").

Moore calls the book "brilliant, honest, and funny," and it's her quote that introduces DeMocker's action-inspiring entreaty.

"It's not either/or, parent or save the Earth. The question is how your decisions as a parent can teach your children to love the thriving planet, and to understand that love is a way of acting in the world."

This book already is making an impression with big names on the national environmental scene, as well. Researcher and writer Richard Louv ("Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder") says, "This is a book for anyone, of any age, who believes in the power of human creativity, or anyone who needs a dose of hope."

And DeMocker's endorsement big badge: The foreword to "The Parent's Guide to Climate Revolution" comes from legendary environmental author and educator Bill McKibben, who touts the "technology of community — the knowledge about how to cooperate to get things done" as the key to this book's dynamism and to making a difference in the fight against climate change.

DeMocker's inspiration for this project started with a personal passion that turned into a neighborhood art installation with a very intentional political bent. Just the kind of action to which McKibben refers. When she learned that fracking companies were lobbying for an Oregon pipeline, she rallied local residents. "I got to know all 50 neighbors living on my block."

Their protest (transforming the block into a movie set-worthy condemned hazard site) made the local news and soon was picked up by statewide public radio, where the neighborhood story played for an extended period. The effort brought families and neighbors together and boosted spirits with a rush of empowerment.

DeMocker wishes for her book to be viewed as a “menu of possibilities,” rather than a to-do list, recognizing how quickly a list can become overwhelming. “The goal is to fit climate revolution into busy family life in ways that help us stay balanced and leave ample time for good sleep every night.”

And because she has an artist’s vision, DeMocker’s definition of climate is multimedia-dimensional, envisioning way beyond a layer of ozone.

“Each of us inhabits multiple climates — the climate of our individual body and its health; the climate of our home, relationships, neighborhood, school, and job; and our national political and cultural climate. We each have a right to feel safe within all of these climates.”

DeMocker will be at Tsunami Books for a book release party for “The Parents Guide to Climate Revolution,” at 7 p.m. April 19. Let’s try to top that 50-neighbor fracking turnout.

Brian Juenemann is the executive director of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association and a contributing editor for NWBookLovers.org.