



## AAC Publications

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### **Dammed if You Don't**

By Chris Kalman

**DAMMED IF YOU DON'T.** Chris Kalman, with illustrations by Craig Muderlak. Privately published, 2021. Hardcover, 170 pages, \$24.99.

An idyllic, hidden valley. A horde of climbers comes to despoil it. A misguided attempt to preserve the land, whatever that means. Chris Kalman's swift-moving novella treads familiar ground even as it explores a fantastical fictional river valley in Patagonia, surrounded by unclimbed peaks and populated by pumas, condors, and a novel species of salamander.

Kalman is at his best describing Seattle climbers John and Gary making a presumed first ascent up white granite, capturing the moves with prose that manages to feel familiar without cliché. The pair performs "a long and drawn-out game of hopscotch," the river below "oxbowed and goosenecked around white beaches."

The story interrogates how the Chile climbing trip of the American duo—one wealthy and white, one not-so-rich and native Coast Salish—launches a series of events that brings climber crowds and destructive tourists to this Shangri-La. That the story's protagonist turns out to be the white and rather clueless climber feels like an admirable challenge on Kalman's part, choosing to follow the rather unsympathetic philanthropist as he flails through the act of protecting the "unspoiled" landscape he introduced to the world. (Smartly, Kalman is quick to interrogate the very colonialist notion of unspoiled wilderness, though indigenous perspective is largely limited to Gary's brief appearance.)

At times it feels as though neither John, who undertakes a scheme to protect the imaginary Lahuenco from either a hydroelectric dam or overuse, nor the author himself, has any real affection for the climbing community. The story is littered with relentless allusions to selfie-takers, drum circle parties in Joshua Tree, and the Disneyfication of Yosemite Valley. But a real understanding of the power of climbing comes through, not only the sport's propensity for destruction of self and environment, but also its sheer ability to connect disparate people and ideas.

Kalman brings real pathos to the appearance and possible extinction of the strange salamander that inhabits the Lahuenco, an amphibian that seems bizarrely out of place in the remote mountains, but whose crawly nature is suited perfectly to the contradictory conditions of a Patagonian river valley. The endangered lizard-like creatures may be as rare as a climber who does not somehow destroy the rock he loves—but when sighted is just as spectacular.

— Allison Williams

Images



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