Book Proposal: ***Cows, Cans and Concrete***

BY THOMAS MULLER

Introduction

My six-year-old daughter asked me: “Where does electricity come from?”

“That’s a good question, Maya. Where do you think it comes from?”

The child pointed to a plastic interruption in the wall. “The light switch,” she said.

So began a quest. How could a writer/primary caregiver teach his two girls about the world they really live in? About the gargantuan systems supporting their everyday activities – and, by extension, about their impact on the planet? Every flick of a light switch, each pull of a soda-can tab has implications that ripple for tens, hundreds, even thousands of miles, up and down watersheds, across global supply chains, into the thin air they breathe. The “circle of life” they know from The Lion King is, in fact, a bewildering web of relationships and dependencies. It’s too big to explain with just words. We’d have

to go places. See things. Explore.

***Cows, Cans and Concrete*** is a travelogue of these adventures.

Let’s face it: in twenty-first century America, it’s easy to believe that food comes from the supermarket, or that a flushing toilet teleports the porcelain’s contents into the

Fourth Dimension. I just don’t want my daughters to believe it, and given the distractions

in their lives – TV, Nintendos, the iPad, skating, swimming, soccer – it’s an uphill battle.

Back in the day, we hunted and gathered. Now we dine on foods of opaque origins, commute via fuels from beneath distant sands, and compute with electrons from

power plants which we think little about.

In all, it’s a good thing. We live longer, we’re better fed, we watch movies on-demand, we tweet. But all this convenience and experiential diversity comes at a cost.

Our kids – and we ourselves, let’s be honest – don’t really understand what it takes to support our routines. Connections that were intuitive for millennia are frayed or worn away. Where does our food come from? Where does our light come from? Our water?

Our shelter? Where does our waste go? Where does our wastewater flow? My daughters ask these things. It’s really hard to answer them.

Oblivious to the massive scale of our sustaining infrastructures, we are ignorant of their consequences. We have lost perspective, and at a time when environmental degradation, population growth and resource depletion threaten the very systems upon which we’ve come to depend.

Heavy stuff. The book isn’t, though.

The plight of the polar bear is not the focus. The story stays close to home, which is the metro-Denver area. The stuffed warehouses, the million-gallon pools of sewage, the mountains of garbage – all these leave impressions much more powerful than explanations of accelerated melting of the Greenland ice sheet – impressions deep enough, the author hopes, to last a lifetime.

Without driving more than an hour in any direction, my girls and I go where few venture, despite it all hiding in plain sight – from the wastewater treatment plant to the

Target distribution center to the construction of a new neighborhood. In addition to these ubiquitous facilities, ***Cows, Cans and Concrete*** adds local flavor, introducing manufacturing through the lens of Colorado-based Ball Corp., and an appreciation for pet

food through a visit to the nearby Nestle Purina plant.

The 90,000-word story is part guidebook, part idea mill for parents, and part story

of a journalist and father trying to connect with his daughters.

*Cows, Cans and Concrete*, while rich with documentary research and expert interviews, is infused with the humor and humanity of the father-daughter trio doing the exploring.

Readers, pulled along by the adventure, are left with the knowledge to teach – and, better yet, show – their own kids what’s behind the lives we take for granted.

Market

*Cows, Cans and Concrete* mainly targets the parenting market, but also has a foothold in the environmental market.

- Parents will buy ***Cows, Cans and Concrete*** to help them teach their kids about some of the key local infrastructures behind modern life.

- Readers interested in the environment, science and nature will see the book

as an inventive take on the traditional environmental tome as well as a survey

course in energy, water and production infrastructures they recognize as

having major environmental impacts.

*Cows, Cans and Concrete* is written to appeal beyond these core markets, though.

It’s a family adventure. It’s a new twist on the theme of getting kids back to nature –visiting, instead, some of the most unnatural places on Earth. The book enlightens as well as entertains. ***Cows, Cans and Concrete*** is highly informative, combining first-person impressions with thorough reporting and research to provide context including the history and development of the various infrastructures and systems the girls and I visit.

On the Web, book-related resources will be audible and visual, with snippets from reporting as well as audio/video related to each outing posted to the book’s Web site and available for multimedia offerings in an eBook edition.

Aside from the present proposal, ***Cows, Cans and Concrete*** has potential spinoff opportunities ranging from television treatments and companion children’s books. With the characters and approach established, there will be rich opportunities for follow-up books.

It’s vital to note that ***Cows, Cans and Concrete*** has no political agenda, and it is not a preachy, anti-business tract. The book does examine impacts – as vivid as a towering landfill, as invisible as carbon dioxide pouring from smokestacks. Take, for example, the treatment of landfills, the subject of the included sample chapter.

Landfills are bad, leaking toxic garbage juice and wafting methane and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. But they’re also good, because without landfills, we would be back to our 17,000 or so festering, old-style dumps, which did far more damage. The same goes for cement plants, coal plants, pet food plants, aluminum can plants, cattle feedlots and other controversial (and less so) underpinnings of the world my daughters and I and millions of Americans live in.

*Cows, Cans and Concrete’s* principal goal is to tell a fun and interesting story.

But I also want to build a foundation for understanding the scale of the human project and

its influence on the biosphere, which should interest a broad cross-section of lay readers.

We’re all addicted to these huge, civilization-sustaining infrastructures, and are complicit

in their environmental impacts. There’s a collective sense that we’re asking too much of

the planet.

*Cows, Cans and Concrete* lays a foundation for comprehending the scale of

our collective consumption. It provides a backdrop against which to assess scientists’

assertions that we’re on an unsustainable course. Such perspective will help readers make

more informed – and, hopefully, more environmentally friendly – economic and political

decisions.

The story

The disconnect between our lives and our sustaining resources grows ever larger.

My daughters plow, plant and harvest, but on an iPad app called Farm Story. It’s about as close as they come to seeing where their food really comes from. The origins of their clothing, not to speak of their Polly Pocket dolls, remain a complete mystery.

*Cows, Cans and Concrete* begins with the “why” of the book, and then launches into 15 chapters, each its own short journey of discovery, at most an hour’s drive from

the author’s Denver home. While the focus may be local, this is not a regional title.

Similar adventures could unfold anywhere in the country, and the book will, the author hopes, spark them.

The introduction will clarify that ***Cows, Cans and Concrete’s*** selection of outings would be subtly different if the author lived elsewhere. In a coastal city, he and his daughters might have visited an industrial harbor or a fish processor. In the grain belt, they would have added a massive factory farm. In Detroit, they would have toured an auto plant. But the basics – a focus on our mostly hidden sources of food, water, power, shelter, waste, transportation and communication – would still be largely the same.

***Cows, Cans and Concrete’s*** adventures, spelled out in more detail in the included chapter-by-chapter outline, include visits to a coal-fired power plant; a wind-turbine blade production facility; an urban organic farm; a centralized cattle feeding operation; a dairy; a grocery distribution center; an aluminum-can manufacturing plant; water treatment plant; an oil refinery; a Target distribution facility; a Nestle Purina pet food plant; a landfill; solid-waste and electronics recycling centers; a wastewater-treatment plant; UPS and Burlington Northern Santa Fe distribution centers; a cement factory; a neighborhood-development construction project; and an Internet data center.

Each chapter includes the following elements:

- Context and importance (Why do we need it? What was life like without it?)

Scale (How pervasive/big are these infrastructures, locally and nationally?)

- Evolution (How did the process/service get to where it is today?)

- Technology (How does it work?)

- People (What kind of folks dedicate their working lives to these infrastructures?)

- Problems (What are the environmental and other impacts we might not view as positive?)

- Solutions

- Our role (And how we can help minimize the impacts on the environment and otherwise)

- The sometimes insightful, often humorous impressions of the two little girls at the center of the enterprise.

- “Simple Steps,” a bullet box at the end of each chapter outlining ways to start making a difference.

*Cows, Cans and Concrete* is rich in information about diverse fonts of modern comfort.

But layered over this is the richness of exploring with one’s children, from “a-ha” moments to the impatience of an eight-year-old who is beginning to think about boys.

This is a story collection, not a textbook, which will keep pages turning.

Competitive and Complementary Books

The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder

(336 pages, hardcover, Richard Louv, Algonquin Books, 2005, $24.95)

Narrowly defined, advocates unstructured outdoor play as necessary for proper development. More broadly examines the costs of insular, indoor childhoods.

How Stuff Works, (320 pages, hardcover, Marshall Brain, Wiley, 2001, $24.99)

The book that launched the Discovery Communications “HowStuffWorks” franchise.

The Story of Stuff (352 pages, hardcover, Annie Leonard, Free Press, 2010, $26)

A look at the origins and costs of the things we buy, based on rigorous research.

Advocates wholesale changes to consumer society.

Monkey Dancing: A Father, Two Kids, and a Journey To The Ends of the Earth

(384 pages, paperback, Daniel Glick, Public Affairs, 2004, $16.50)

An environmental writer takes his kids far afield to understand themselves and their place

in the world.

Field Notes from a Catastrophe (192 pages, hardcover, Elizabeth Kolbert, Bloomsbury,

2006, $22.95)

About human impacts, in the form of climate change, far afield in the Arctic.

Also worth noting are books by childhood nature educator David Sobel, including

Childhood and Nature, Beyond Ecophobia, and Place-based Education).

Promotion

The goal of the promotion campaign will be to share the key ideas behind Cows,

*Cans and Concrete* – and thus the book itself – with the widest-possible audience.

***Cows, Cans and Concrete*** promotion hooks:

• Presents a father-daughter adventure, written in a light, witty style, but delving

into topics of vital ecological, political and economic importance.

• Offers a twist on ‘back to nature’ books. In this case, it’s about gaining

perspective on the world through visits to places largely devoid of greenery,

wildlife or scenic beauty.

• Fosters the idea that during uncertain economic times, belt-tightening is both a

necessity and an environmental virtue, foremost because downstream

minnows of consumption require whales of raw-material and energy inputs.

• Provides readers an accessible means of brushing up on our sources of

sustenance.

• Educates readers – who in turn can educate their own kids – about the

infrastructures that sustain modern life.

To promote the book, the author will carry out the following campaign:

• Give at least 20 talks in Colorado in the year following publication at

bookstores, libraries, schools and universities and business groups such as

Rotary.

• Solicit via press releases and direct contact radio, TV and print interviews

locally and nationally.

• Give Cows, Cans and Concrete top billing on the author’s Web site, providing

photos, audio and video snippets, updates to the story, author-appearance

listings and reprinting reviews and giving readers a vehicle to purchase the

book.

• Create a series of videos for posting on YouTube, linked from the author’s

Cows, Cans and Concrete -specific Web pages, about the various outings

taken during the book’s creation.

• Create and maintain a Cows, Cans and Concrete fan page on Facebook.

• Tweet heavily on Cows, Cans and Concrete and related topics.

• Distribute business cards with the name, title and cover image of the book.

Pre-publication endorsements

Among the prepublication endorsements I will solicit include:

• Richard Louv, author, The Last Child in the Woods

• Annie Leonard, author, The Story of Stuff

• Hunter Lovins, co-author of Natural Capitalism

• Bill McKibben, author and co-founder of 350.org

• Frances Beinecke, president, Natural Resources Defense Council

• Pieter Tans, senior scientist, NOAA Earth System Research Laboratory

• David Orr, Author and distinguished professor of environmental studies and

politics, Oberlin College

Resources needed to complete the book

A to-be-determined, nominal sum for creating a small number of graphics

depicting such things as a Denver-area map showing where the various adventures took

place and how a water treatment plant works.