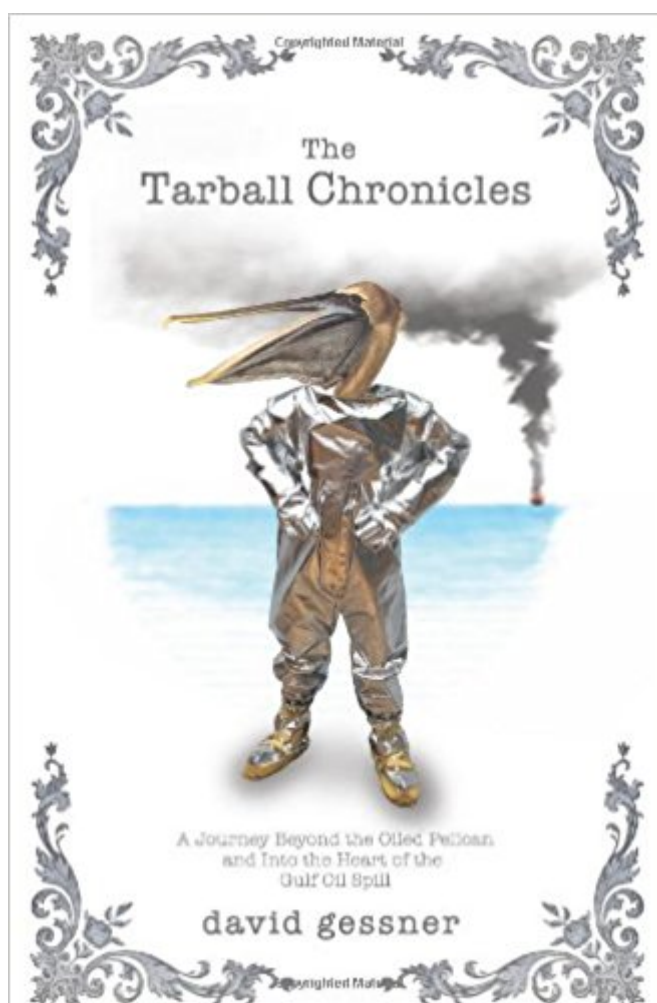


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# The Tarball Chronicles: A Journey Beyond The Oiled Pelican And Into The Heart Of The Gulf Oil Spill



## Synopsis

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill was the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history: over the course of three months, nearly five million barrels of crude oil gushed into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and washed up along our coast. Yet it was an avoidable environmental catastrophe preceded by myriad others, from Three-Mile Island to the Exxon Valdez. Traveling the shores of the Gulf from east to west with oceanographers, subsistence fisherman, seafood distributors, and other long-time Gulf residents, acclaimed author and environmental advocate David Gessner offers an affecting account of the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. With *The Tarball Chronicles* Gessner tells a story that extends beyond the archetypal oil-soaked pelican, beyond politics, beyond BP. Instead he explores the ecosystem of the Gulf as a complicated whole and focuses on the people whose lives and livelihoods have been jeopardized by the spill. He reintroduces this oil spill as a template for so many man-made disasters and the long-term consequences they pose for ecosystems and communities. From the compelling people and places Gessner encounters on his journey we learn not only the extensive consequences of our actions but also how to break a destructive cycle. Throughout, *The Tarball Chronicles* suggests we can make a change in the way we live and prevent future disasters if we are willing to fundamentally rethink our connections to the natural world. "This is a book about connections," Gessner writes, "and never have we needed to make connections like we do right now."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

• Anyone who wanted a first-hand look at the Gulf after the news cycle ended will find it here . . . brilliant. • Publishers Weekly (starred review)"If you read only one book about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill this year, it should be this one. If you plan not to read any books about it, make an exception for this blunt, funny, eye-opening quest to find the real stories behind the Gulf crisis." • Shelf Awareness• Expressive and adventurous. A profoundly personal inquiry into the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe unique in its hands-on immediacy and far-ranging ruminations. • Donna Seaman, Booklist• Brilliant• the best and most original writing coming out of the Gulf. • Scott Dodd, OnEarth magazine, Natural Resources Defense Council• David Gessner is on a roll. • Times-Picayune• Gessner has the heart and mind of an investigative journalist. . . . Not everyone will be pleased with this Jeremiah in our midst, but the word is a fire and a hammer, and Gessner delivers it well. • Mobile Press-Register• An expert naturalist, he not only observes but talks with people who are in the know• forceful, insightful, blood-and-guts people who will speak their minds (like David). There is grit and heartbreak and energy in just about everything he writes. • Clyde Edgerton, the author of Lunch at the Piccadilly and Walking Across Egypt• Vivid, funny, opinionated, poignant, and mold breaking• Gessner takes us deep into the environmental and personal tragedies of the spill. • Jim Campbell, the author of The Final Frontiersman• Plenty of people are writing about the BP oil disaster, but few indeed will be able to make us feel the reality of it like David Gessner can. The likelihood that his account will also be action-filled and darkly funny is pure bonus. • John Jeremiah Sullivan, author of Blood Horses• In this highly readable, firsthand account of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, David Gessner considers the catastrophe in the Gulf as a symptom of even bigger economic and cultural challenges that loom in our future. This excellent book is not judgmental, but thought provoking and well worth reading. • David Allen Sibley, author of The Sibley Guide to Birds

David Gessner is the author of seven books, including My Green Manifesto (Milkweed Editions, 2011), Soaring with Fidel (Beacon Press, 2008), Sick of Nature (Dartmouth Press, 2005), The Prophet of Dry Hill (Beacon Press, 2005), and Return of the Osprey (Ballantine Books, 2002), which was chosen by the Boston Globe as one of the top ten nonfiction books of the year. The winner of a Pushcart Prize as well as the John Burroughs Award for Best Natural History Essay, his work has also appeared in many magazines and journals including the New York Times Magazine, the Boston Globe, Outside, the Georgia Review, the Harvard Review, and Orion. He has taught environmental writing at Harvard, and is currently an assistant professor at the University of North

Carolina at Wilmington, where he edits the national literary journal, *Ecotone*. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

David Gessner gets out his magnifying glass and leads us through the grit of the Gulf Oil Spill. We meet REAL humans (locals) dealing with REAL issues. We fly in a helicopter. We zoom around on boats. We see tarballs and the robotic people hired to remove them. If there is an opposite to sugar-coating, this is it. As Gessner travels around and inserts himself into situations, he asks questions about our adaptability. About whether we, as a society, can and should do with less? Then he turns the question on its head and then... he resurrects it. Over and over again. This is the genius of Gessner. He is at his best here. A must read for anyone who cares about the Gulf, for anyone invested in a future at all.

Travel stories, personal anecdotes, scientific evidence, soul-searching questions, and environmental tourism all combine in David Gessner's beautifully written book, *The Tarball Chronicles*. Even the cover, featuring the image of a man's body, clad in protective gear, with the head of the infamous oiled pelican gives the reader a predictive look into the story held within the pages of Gessner's book. Much like the illustrative pelican/man, Gessner draws heavily on the idea of connectivity and how it is impossible to escape that web that binds us together with every other thing. One of the most prominent themes in *The Tarball Chronicles* is the expansion on a John Muir quote: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe" (157). Gessner argues that while we think we can outsmart nature, the reality is that we may fool her for a lifetime but she's coming to get us eventually, and she's coming back to haunt us right now" (63). In this book he shows evidence of this time and time again, tracing the damage of the oil spill path now just across the beaches of the gulf but into the depths of the marshes and through the stories of the people who are dealing with the consequences. In a poignant statement near the end of his book, we are reminded that the spider's web "takes the genius of time to weave it, but, as hard as it is to construct, its easy to rip apart" (255). In a similar fashion, Gessner weaves together the strands of his story to create a delicate, balanced web that demonstrates in a remarkable fashion the interconnectivity between humankind and nature "from the diving gannets down to the proliferation of periwinkles. Part of that web involves asking some hard questions, and Gessner does not shy away from not only asking those questions but admits that, at times, he does not have the answer either. He spends time challenging the idea of

what makes us human by engaging subjects like sacrifice, hypocrisy, insatiability, tradition and identity, the need to belong, and ambition. Gessner asks if it is impossible for us to be "happy with less," or if that is a sacrifice we are willing to make in order to "keep living the way we do" (279, 4). He argues that perhaps, instead of sacrificing, we should rework what it is we are looking for, to "refine and revise what we mean by 'more' and 'better'" (67). Or is it in the process of looking for this "more and better" that our desire to control and fix is an urge that we have to live with (39)? In a statement that reverberates throughout the book, Gessner points out that some of the things that were broken "had taken a million years or so to make" (39). Arguing against excess and fixing things means that Gessner is pointing us in the direction of doing less or changing our definition of what "more" could be. He quotes John Hay who "spoke of our need to 'marry' the places where we live, to spend a lifetime learning the land and people" (188). It stands within reason that in marrying a place and learning it, the desire to break and try to fix would lessen and, instead, one would seek to learn to live in harmony with the place. Gessner's book provides stories of individuals who have learned to do just that. Finally, Gessner's book is a call to action. He points out the hypocrisy in the oversight of BP during the oil spill clean up through interviews with those who are working in the interest of the natural world and not in the interests of the company (22). He highlights the insanity of watching big business continue to make the same mistakes and expect different results (51). Gessner also does not shy away from giving voice to environmentalists who have willingly embraced the capitalistic nature of the society here; who point out that it is possible to make money while not causing harm to the environment (66). He admits that things have become "muddled and complicated" when it comes to a "clear-cut definition of what it means to be environmental" (69). When it all comes down to it, Gessner points out that the "oiled pelican" is more of a symbol for humankind in that it is our attempt to distill complex issues into something simple or obvious (137). The Tarball Chronicles is definitely not that oiled pelican; rather, much like the image on the cover, it is something much more complex that deserves a serious amount of attention.

I am surprised that there is only one review of this book. I agree with the other one, but I want to add mine to encourage readers to buy it and read the book, or at least get it from their library and read it. Or ask their library to order it. I am a retired university scientist who has been involved with oil spills since the Exxon Valdez spill, and that includes the Deepwater Horizon blowout on the Gulf which is the main though not the only subject of this book. I am surprised that this book is not better known. I

didn't know about it until a friend loaned it to me, after picking it up at a library sale in Woods Hole Massachusetts. It is very fresh and personal and focuses on the people working on the spill affected by the spill, in Louisiana. But it also ties in the environmental situation of coastal wetlands generally, and does so in a very readable enjoyable way. The focus on the Cajuns and the Mississippi delta country reminds me a lot of Mike Tidwell's poignant 2007 book "Bayou Farewell". On the corporate drivers of the problems for the Mississippi delta, Alaska, and elsewhere, read Greg Palast's 2012 book "Vultures' Picnic".

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