

Easy Piece

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Richard Kim and Betsy Reed (eds.), *Going Rouge: Sarah Palin—An American Nightmare*, OR Press, 2009.

I recently had the pleasure of seeing the 1970 classic film *Five Easy Pieces*. In it the main character, Bobby Dupea, played by a seductively unhinged Jack Nicholson, abandons his refined, upper-class family in the Pacific Northwest for a life of trailer parks, bowling alleys, and oil-rigging in southern-more regions of the country, places recognized as belonging to the heartland or, as Sarah Palin would have it, “the real America.” Bobby works and plays hard but nothing seems right: A fortunate son, untouched by his generation’s unpopular war in its final losing days, thrashing around in a country that will always give a guy like him enough room to run. He’s an attractive hero. Anti-authority, unpretentious, talented, charismatic, true. The problem is, somehow, everyone else. He can’t say what’s wrong exactly, and when he makes a return trip home, he has trouble articulating to his father his reasons for leaving in the first place. Something stands between him and contentment, and all Bobby knows is that he can’t sit still and take it. It feels like he’s surrounded by mindless twits, and it fills him with rage. On that drive back home to Puget’s Sound, Bobby picks up a motor mouth would-be-hitchhiker on her way to Alaska. She wants to get away from society’s mountains of garbage, all those disposable things-on-top-of-things-and-more-things, and head for Alaska where everything is very white, very clean. By the end of the movie Bobby is heading in that direction, too.

When Sarah Palin was first introduced to us during the last presidential campaign the message of a global environmental crisis seemed to be finally getting through to the American people. The environment was a real issue in the campaign, ranking almost as high as the financial crisis. People were talking about a green economy, creating jobs that were good for both the environment and business. For 30 years Reagan’s Gospel of Plenty held sway with many in Washington, and environmentalists were caricatured as unimaginative and mean-spirited Chicken Littles and hand-wringing Calamity Janes, who prefer fretting, scrimping, and scrounging to allowing Americans the natural bounty granted them by birthright. The conventional wisdom could finally settle on these facts: we need to conserve our natural resources for the benefit of everyone; we’re producing more waste than spaces to contain it; and a lot of what’s being let into our food, water, and air isn’t doing us much good. The major candidates got it, even John McCain for a moment. Perhaps this grim message was starting to get through a bit too well, because just in the nick of time came Sarah Palin, glittering, charismatic, and folksy. By appearances, a literal straight-shooter.

She arrived out of the Great Big Alaskan White to tell the lower-48 that there was more here. More land, more space, more oil, more caribou. It was all so simple, man. Life couldn’t be more easy. Richard Kim and Betsy Reed, senior editors at *The Nation*, and editors of this collection of essays on the former governor of Alaska, have put together in one place more than anyone needs to know about Ms. Palin: the drowning polar bears, the weird petro-politics, the toxic dumping. Not much on Palin’s fondness for gunning down animals from the air, but that might have been, well, overkill.

In his essay, “Palin’s Petropolitics,” *The Nation*’s defense correspondent Michael T. Klare says Palin is “leery of efforts to promote renewable sources of energy and other petroleum

alternatives.” She has argued against “providing subsidies for alternative energy sources claiming that domestic sources of oil and gas—many located in Alaska—can satisfy the nation’s needs for a long time to come.” It’s a seductive idea, that there’ll always be enough cheap oil. Think about all that spilt oil from the recent disaster in the Gulf, which we have been told has been totally cleaned—gone—never mind the fishermen claiming to see globs of chemically “dispersed” oil making its way back to the surface. As some of the contributors to *Going Rouge* have pointed out, nothing will shake Palin’s belief in the Gospel of Plenty. People have the right to have dominion over all the earth. God will provide. She has taken on environmentalists in her home state over the issues of clean air and water, blocking nearly every environmentally friendly petition that came her way.

Sheila Kaplan’s and Marilyn Berlin Snell’s contribution “Northern Exposure: Sarah Palin’s Toxic Paradise” mentions that Alaska is most vulnerable to some of the worst environmental pollution in the country because the state depends so heavily on the exploitation of its natural resources in oil and mining. They enumerate the costs of this to the people of Alaska, most notably the Inuit whose diet is heavy on fish, seals, and whales, and to itinerant oil workers who exceed the state’s already high rate of birth defects and developmental disorders. Something one might expect Palin would be sensitive to given her experiences with a special needs child. But as we find out, Palin herself allowed toxic-dumping at Cook Inlet, the only fishery in the country where dumping is allowed.

Do *Going Rouge*’s contributors think Palin believes the things she says? The answer matters little, and, in fact, they devote a few chapters to repeat everyone’s favorite Palinisms. Meanwhile, Palin is living up to her maverick label, having quit the governorship mid-stream to go on tour and make money. She is, in a way, one of the feminist movement’s successes, as Amy Alexander (“Sarah’s Steel Ones”) and Katha Pollitt (“Sayonara, Sarah”) grudgingly acknowledge. As the Right continues to borrow from the Left, it’s possible to see in Palin a feminist, a bobo, an all-together righteous traveler, and not just because of the hippy names for the kids and the hip-hop shout-outs to all the fans in the audience. She’s got the tropes: authentic, down with the people, and channeling their rage. Or, at least she knows how to fake it, and knows enough to know little else matters.

We can’t hitchhike our way up to Alaska, so she’s bringing Alaska to us, “the good people in [their] small towns” (Thomas Frank’s “The GOP Loves the Heartland to Death”). 1970 was a very important year for the environmentalist movement, certainly. It was the year of the first Earth Day. The detachment of previously mentioned malcontent Bobby Dupea would have been understandable back then, given people’s disappointment in the war, the economy, and government. But the earth movement was one way a person could resist the romance of running away to start over and instead get real about cleaning up the mess. We’re living out the consequences of carelessly allowing the neoliberal nihilists to do as they want. My problem with *Going Rouge* is not that it takes Sarah Palin seriously or that it takes her for a joke. I just can’t help thinking, for her, there’s no bad publicity.