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Press Kit

Your Crocodile has Arrived
More True Stories from a Curious Traveler

Laurie McAndish King

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Advance Praise for *Your Crocodile has Arrived*

“Wonderful evocative writing, irresistible narrative voice”

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“A perfect little gem, filled with sharp and observant writing.”

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About the author:

Laurie McAndish King grew up in rural Iowa, studied philosophy and science at Cornell College, and has traveled to forty countries. She observes with an eye for natural science and writes with a philosopher’s heart and mind. King’s award-winning essays and photography have appeared in *Smithsonian* magazine, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Best Women’s Travel Writing*, *The Sun* literary journal, and other magazines, newspapers and literary anthologies. Her writing earned a Lowell Thomas Gold Award, travel writing’s most prestigious honor. King’s first collection of travel stories, *Lost, Kidnapped, Eaten Alive! True Stories from a Curious Traveler*, was published in 2014. She has a master’s degree in education and way more experience than was really necessary in an advertising agency.

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Your Crocodile has Arrived: More True Stories from a Curious Traveler

An entertaining and illuminating look at some of the world's quirkiest places, creatures, and activities.

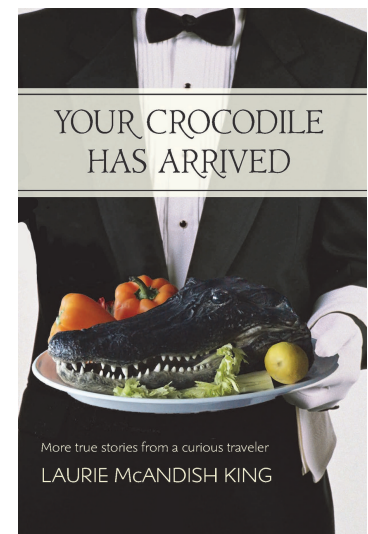
Whether your taste runs to chocolate or crocodiles, ancient relics or flying saucers, you're certain to enjoy these twenty-one true stories. To be sure there is adventure, whimsy, and a marvelous cast of characters: gypsies, pirates, mermaids, shaman. But much as you will laugh at chewing—and chewing—the crocodile dinner special, you will also carry the sadness of the West Indian leatherneck turtle valiantly laying her eggs against all odds; the anguished captive elephant in Sri Lanka, one leg blown off by a landmine; the enduring poignancy of Chinese detainees' poems scratched on the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Center in San Francisco. To see and portray beauty and sorrow in the same lens is the author's gift.

King writes with curiosity, wit and insight, transporting readers to faraway places in this collection of odd adventures, including:

- A pilgrimage to see a 2,500-year-old tooth.
- Receiving a full-body chocolate massage.
- Viewing the world's largest earthworms—some as much as twenty feet long.
- Trapping a raptor—and in turn being captured by the hawk's fearsome talons.
- Participating in a shamanic ayahuasca ritual.
- Learning the secrets of alien spaceship propulsion—from an Ivy-League astrophysicist.

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Excerpt from *Your Crocodile has Arrived* by Laurie McAndish King
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(Preface and Chapter One)

Preface

Stories about disappearing landscapes, ancient relics and invisible energies have always captivated me. Pickled body parts are even better. Readers often find these themes surprising, or even disturbing; several have asked why I write about such odd topics. Nature or nurture, environment or epigenetics; either way, my fascination with these peculiar forms of nature stretches back to my childhood—or earlier.

The first oddity I remember was at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. We lived nearby when I was a preschooler, and Dad often took my brother, John, and me to the museum. Once inside the cool, dark building I'd run straight for my favorite exhibit, a gigantic replica of a human heart designed so visitors could step inside the ventricles and have a look around. The heart's walls pulsed fiery red and the blood vessels showed up prominently so that the inside resembled a Jack-o-Lantern, its glowing walls laced with stringy threads. The beating heart's *thrump-thrump, thrump-thrump* provided an unforgettable soundtrack.

I loved that big heart, and dubbed it “the Pumpkin Eater” for reasons any four-year-old would understand. Many years later, still fascinated by both anatomy and the thrill of walk-through exhibits, I felt right at home viewing the preserved body parts described in the story “The Cabinet of Curiosities” and crawling through the worm tunnel in “The Giant Worms of Gippsland.”

There were other early influences. Every summer Mom and Dad took us on camping trips to national parks. We loaded up the four-door Rambler with a heavy-duty army-surplus tent, four sleeping bags, and a green Coleman two-burner stove. For meals, my parents packed several dozen cans of baked beans, SPAM, and powdered Tang (“the drink of the astronauts”). Then we drove off for two weeks of long-distance adventure.

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After days stuck in a crowded, stuffy car (and unable to escape the odor of baked beans), we'd finally arrive and the fun would begin. John and I would tumble out of the back seat to marvel at the stinky, bubbling hot springs of Yellowstone, or the Everglades' fearsome alligators. At Dinosaur National Monument one entire wall of the visitors' center was made of glass; behind it, real archaeologists chiseled away the rock to reveal fossilized dinosaur bones—million-year-old miracles. That was the year I became fascinated with evolution, an obsession that led, eventually, to the stories you'll find in these pages about endangered elephants, tenacious sea turtles, and flightless birds.

Mom's interests in culture and anthropology were influential, too. Once our family drove to the Tama Indian Reservation to see the annual Indian Powwow and I returned home wearing a beaded belt with the word "Iowa" spelled across the back. I kept that belt long after I'd outgrown it, as a colorful reminder of people who lived in tents and worshipped gods I'd never heard of before. The Amana Colonies in eastern Iowa, founded in 1856 by German settlers, were another opportunity to visit people whose culture and religion were markedly different from our own. Communal colonies, rain dances, beaded artifacts—of course they excited my young imagination! And no wonder I love writing—years later—about gypsies and immigrants, religious relics and Cornish history.

Ephemeral themes continue to captivate me; they feel like part of my DNA. Maybe they were part of my parents' DNA, and their parents' as well, passed along in a twisted ribbon of mystery that stretches across generations. Or maybe the excitement of walking through the interior of the beating human heart—my "Pumpkin Eater"—was imprinted on my childhood psyche the way ducklings imprint on whatever is first offered to them as a parent figure.

Either way, these particular interests have also provided a stark reminder of the pace at which we're losing national—and international—treasures. The National Park Service predicts that, based on current trends, all the active glaciers will be gone from Glacier National Park in less than fifteen years' time. I see the same thing wherever I go: loss, from the giant earthworms of Gippsland, to Trinidad's leatherback turtles, to the few remaining kiwis in New Zealand.

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Yet, I'm hopeful. I return from every trip ready to write tales that dive deep into the intricacies of remarkable experiences. These true accounts—of magical places, the wonders of nature, and the people who work so hard to preserve them—are stories I love and want to share. I hope you enjoy them, too.

—Laurie McAndish King

Chapter One

Fear of Not Flying

AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

*The trouble is, if you don't risk anything,
you risk even more.*

— Erica Jong

All five toes of my right foot hang out over the edge of the Sky Tower's narrow exterior walkway, 630 feet above the city of Auckland. There is no guardrail. There is nothing at all to hold onto—nothing but thin air. I try to remember why I am here. *Did I need an adrenalin rush? Was I trying to prove something? Had I come for the view?*

The truth is, I had stopped by the iconic Sky Tower on a lark, intending to ride its glass-bottomed elevator to the top of the building, enjoy the view and a cocktail, maybe even indulge in a few small plates at Peter Gordon's award-winning Sugar Club restaurant, famous for fresh, seasonal cuisine. But curiosity got the best of me.

Signs in the lobby recommended the SkyWalk, promising "Life on the Edge." Posters in the elevator egged me on, assuring "An Unbeatable Rush." A promotional brochure instructed: "Report to Mission Control 15 minutes before your scheduled SkyWalk." Mission Control! It sounded so exciting—how could I resist? It also sounded suspiciously NASA-like. I wondered what the technical difference was between a sky

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walk and a space walk. *Well, why not find out? I thought. I'm on vacation. What is travel for if not exploration, testing boundaries, and trying something new?*

Five other tourists join me at the Sky Tower registration desk, which has the bright, understaffed feel of an airport car-rental counter. Do I really want to participate if the company is understaffed? There isn't time to contemplate, as I've arrived just in time for the last sky walk of the day. The other tourists are all middle-aged and do not look particularly athletic. This gives me courage. *If they can do it, I can do it.*

I don't feel that way about our guide. Her name is Sandra and of course she can do it—she's twenty-something. I remember when I was young and unafraid. Sandra has the kind of matter-of-fact attitude toward altitude that suggests she hangs out on the top of tall buildings all the time—which, apparently, she does.

"I love being high," Sandra announces. This makes me nervous. "I spend a lot of time alone on the walkway," she continues. "It's my favorite thing to do besides leading tours. The sunsets are spectacular."

Sandra talks a lot. Maybe she's nervous? Or maybe she's trying to distract us, to keep us from freaking out as we think about how high up we are, how windy it's likely to be outside and how easy it would be to lose our balance.

"I grew up in a small town on the South Island," Sandra continues. "There wasn't much to do, except hang out with my pet dog. She was a collie, but she died a few years ago. I always wanted to travel, to see the world. I applied to be a flight attendant. I really wanted that job; it was my dream job. But I didn't get it." Sandra chatters on, but is vague about the reason she was rejected for the flight attendant position. "This job turned out to be even better!" she insists.

I don't exactly trust Sandra. Why was she so vague about the reason for rejection? Perhaps she simply doesn't know. But she seems like an ideal flight attendant: competent, friendly, attractive. Maybe the airline rejected her for some psychological reason. *What if she has some sort of altitude-related personality disorder?*

Sandra continues her chitchat as she leads us to the staging area, which is lined with lockers. They are bright and clean. All of Auckland is bright and clean. Everything goes into the lockers. No cameras, no hats, no glasses without straps. We stash our bags and pull on the orange jumpsuits SkyWalk provides. Back home in the United States,

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these would have made us look like a gang of convicts. *Why jumpsuits?* I wonder. None of us is planning to jump. *And why orange?* Is it some kind of psychological ploy to make us feel incarcerated, ensuring obedient behavior?

That is probably not the reason; I, for one, am planning to do *exactly* as Sandra directs. Perhaps the color will make it easier for earth-bound viewers to see us—miniscule orange particles against Auckland’s bright blue sky—as they crane their necks from below.

We step into our body harnesses, and Sandra fastidiously checks and re-checks every clasp. She doesn’t talk when she is checking them; she concentrates. I’m both surprised and relieved.

But I must look worried. “You will be fine,” Sandra assures me, beginning her chatter again. “SkyWalk has an impeccable safety record.”

I wonder what that means, exactly. Why not just say, *No one has ever been injured or even come close*, if that is the case? I also wonder why I am just now thinking about the safety record of an operation that will, momentarily, have my very life in its hands.

As we head for the door, Sandra double-checks our carabiners. Then she invites us to follow her out onto a walkway that’s *maybe* four feet wide. We trail along, reluctant. The wind is surprisingly strong up here.

Is the safety-check now complete? Should I be checking all the carabiners, too? Should I follow the lines of rope, at least with my eyes, until I know where every single one begins and ends? Should I personally inspect each of the cables? I know there is a principle of diminishing returns at work in this mental safety review, but I’m not sure when to stop.

From this height the traffic below is clearly visible, but it is silent. The street sounds—the engine belches and children’s shouts and general cacophony of the city—all have been replaced by a quiet roar that is probably the result of my fear. The view, a spectacular 360° panorama, stretches for more than one hundred miles: southwest all the way to the Waitakere Ranges; northeast across the shimmering Hauraki Gulf to Great Barrier Island.

Rising a total of 1076 feet, Auckland’s Sky Tower is the tallest freestanding

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structure in the southern hemisphere, and it gives northern hemisphere buildings a run for their money, too. The Statue of Liberty, by way of comparison, stands a mere 305 feet tall, and the Seattle Space Needle pushes only 605 feet into that city's cloudy skies. The Eiffel Tower tops out at 986 feet. Auckland's Sky Tower is a world-class high.

A long needle juts up from the top of the concrete central tower, making the edifice look like a cross between an enormous jousting lance and a steampunk spaceship. The Sky Tower glows in the afternoon light, the slanting sun turning to vanilla on its pale concrete surface. Two-thirds of the way up, concentric steel structures ring the core—these support the walkway we will use. The floor of the walkway—if one could call it a floor—is made of see-through metal grating. Below, far below, is the street.

To be clear, we *are* safe—even if it doesn't feel that way. The full-body harnesses connect us via two independent safety lines to a thick overhead cable. Nevertheless, my stomach is doing flip-flops and my breathing is shallow. My mind has turned to mush. The phrase “fear of flying” begins to run through it, recalling Erica Jong's 1973 feminist treatise on sexual liberation—or at least sexual liberties. But this is not the time for nostalgic fantasies and, anyway, fear of flying is not my problem. Fear of *not* flying is the issue at hand. Or should I say at *foot*?

Oh, yes—all five toes of my right foot hang out over the edge of the walkway. My toes are just the beginning. Sandra urges us to ever more daring feats. She is acclimating us, bit by bit, to life on the edge. “OK, now try putting the toes of *both* your feet over the edge,” Sandra instructs. That is the scariest part, the toes of both feet, while we are facing outward. I can do it, but not for very long. After five excruciating seconds I slide my toes back in, one foot at a time. I think I am the bravest person in the group, because no one else does it for that long.

Sandra isn't finished with us. “Turn around so you're facing in toward the tower, and then relax and lean back,” she recommends.

“You've got to be kidding!” someone squeaks from behind me.

I am not ready for this. I look down. The people are very, very small—almost too small to see. It is another universe down there; it is not my world. Up here I have the sound of Sandra's voice, clear and calm. Up here I have the cool air rushing against my face and hands. Up here I have the bulk of my jumpsuit, the tension of straps around my

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legs and across my chest, the knot at the top of my stomach, the metallic taste in my mouth. Up here I have my fear—and not much more.

Sandra perseveres. “Just ‘sit’ into your body harness and then lean back. The harness will hold you. Trust me.”

At first I am certain this will be impossible, but then an odd emotion overtakes me. Suddenly I feel competitive. Now that I have proven myself by standing with my toes over the edge for a full five seconds—longer than anyone else—I feel quite courageous. And I feel the need to maintain my new position of high-altitude leadership. What if one of the others *is* able to lean back out over the city? What if someone else leans out *before I do*?

I step quickly to the outside of the walkway, turn my back to the city, inch my heels over the edge and hang them off. Then, slowly, I sit down into my harness ... straighten my legs ... and lean out.

I feel so alive, so free!

I *own* the city below. The sparkling harbor dotted with sailboats, the bright grassy parks, the condos with their rooftop swimming pools—they are all mine. Somehow the expansiveness of the view has created an expansiveness in my being. I love this life in the sky, and want to stay up here forever.

But of course, I can’t. Our little group has been living on the edge for half an hour, and it’s time to wrap up the expedition and return to our regular lives. I have the feeling, though, that my regular life will never be quite the same. Something in me is bigger and stronger and braver than before.

And now I understand Sandra’s love of heights—a love that was previously unimaginable to me. I get why she thinks this the best job ever, why she hangs out here alone after work. “Sandra,” I begin. “Do you know if there are any tour guide positions available here at the Sky Tower?”