

IN PRINT

WATER, INC.

By Varda Burstyn, Verso Books, \$25

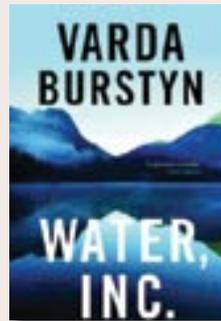
Reviewed by **Martin Steinpress** — *Brown and Caldwell*

Record drought. Water shortages. A multi-billion dollar scheme. Environmental devastation. Eco-terrorism. And transboundary issues. What if sex and murder are added? Shouldn't a novel billed as "Chinatown for the 21st Century" appeal to the water professional, if not the general public?

This suspenseful political tale begins with an extended drought in the Midwest that leads a corporate consortium to hatch a scheme for a multi-billion dollar pipeline to import water from northern Quebec. As in real life, the technical challenges are minor compared to the political issues. To avoid opposition, stealth is used to fast-track the project before the public becomes aware of it. Government bureaucrats on both sides of the border are paid off and it looks like the project will be a slam dunk. But an insider with a conscience gets wind of it and alerts a rebel environmentalist, who then mobilizes the opposition. A frantic, deadly battle to stop the project follows.

A scenario that at first glance seems like a prescription for great fiction isn't as satisfying as expected. In this reviewer's opinion, one reason is the author's exaggerations and fabrications. Making the water project so shockingly huge seems as much designed to alarm the reader as to provide good fiction. Throughout the book, numerous studies and statistics cited by the leading characters are impossible to verify; an example is a study cited by the (non-existent) "American Geological Study." It's the opposite problem of the nonfiction book, *A Million Little Pieces*, whose author created a work of fiction, was advised by his publisher that his was more saleable as nonfiction, and was ultimately accused of fabrications. In the case of *Water, Inc.*, a work of fiction, is it acceptable to play fast and loose with statistics?

The author seems so intent on condemning big business that she uses her environmentalist characters to rail against not just water importation and pollution, but also bottled water, agribusiness, pesticides, genetic engineering, and of course, the United States government.



One U.S. politician says, "Governments now exist to facilitate the private sector. We're their pimps, not their regulators." Whether or not you agree with the Canadian author's politics, the strident tone doesn't make for great fiction.

Burstyn's primary intent seems to be stirring the public's interest and alarm over the environment in general and privatization of water in particular. The threat to Canada's natural resources by the thirsty, powerful, and wealthy United States is especially feared. The author's previous non-fiction publications on the environment, science, artificial reproduction and genetic engineering (which can be found at www.vardaburstyn.com) have not had sufficient effect, so she has now turned to fiction to try to convince a skeptical public of a world environmental crisis. Since the book's publication in early 2005, it hasn't created much more than a small ripple. And water professionals probably get their fill of excitement in real-life water projects anyway.

Contact Martin Steinpress at msteinpress@brwn Caldwell.com.



Hydrogeology of the upper and middle Verde River watersheds, central Arizona, by K.W. Blasch, J.P. Hoffmann, L.F. Graser, J.R. Bryson, and A.L. Flint.

<http://pubs.usgs.gov/sir/2005/5198/>

Hydrologic requirements of and consumptive ground-water use by riparian vegetation along the San Pedro River, Arizona.

<http://pubs.usgs.gov/sir/2005/5163/>

Trends in streamflow of the San Pedro River, southeastern Arizona, and regional trends in precipitation and streamflow in southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico, by B.E. Thomas and D.R. Pool.

<http://pubs.usgs.gov/pp/pp1712/>

County-level estimates of nutrient inputs to the land surface of the conterminous United States, 1982-2001, by B.C. Ruddy, D.L. Lorenz, and D.K. Mueller.

<http://pubs.usgs.gov/sir/2006/5012/>

