

## BOOK REVIEW

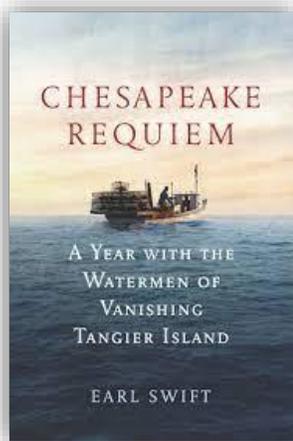
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# Chesapeake Requiem: A Year with the Watermen of Vanishing Tangier Island

*By Earl Swift*

Reviewed by Jeremy McNabb

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The world is changing. In some places, this is more evident than others. Tangier Island, a small crabbing and fishing community at the turbulent south end of the Chesapeake Bay, is literally disappearing. Its culture, religious practices, economy, even its local accent are, in many ways, older than the United States itself. Earl Swift, the author of *Chesapeake Requiem*, spent a year living on the island, crabbing with the watermen, attending the island's two churches, and working with its people. In this homey ethnography, Swift attempts to record a unique community that may not be with us much longer, and also to listen in on the conversations about what, if anything, can be done to prevent the island's seemingly inevitable submergence in the Chesapeake Bay.

Swift begins the book with a geography lesson. Dozens of islands once dotted the Chesapeake Bay, many of them populated. One by one, they have changed from town, to deserted island, to marshland, to bay. A few of these communities exist only as a lingering beach with a few remaining, but abandoned

buildings. Sometimes, Swift hauntingly points out, when you are boating through the shallows of the Chesapeake, you are also boating through deeply and permanently flooded cemeteries.

The inhabitants of Tangier Island, mostly political conservatives, reject the idea of man-made climate change, but they know better than most that *something* is happening to their home. There is just not as much island as there used to be.

How does one get what one needs on an island so far removed from the mainland? Swift, and the town's mayor, Ooker Eskridge, talk through the obstacles to doing the things that most of us consider everyday life. There is no bridge to Tangier Island, and though ferry rides are common enough—twice a day in good weather—trips to the mainland are carefully planned. The handful of vehicles on the island are barely used, with most residents opting for bicycles and golf carts. But for such a humble place, the watermen of the island can boast a disproportionately significant contribution to the mainland economy, each waterman bringing in more than half a million crabs per year. If you have eaten blue crab on the East Coast, there is a chance it came through Tangier.

The island has shaped the religion of the Tangier residents, too. There are two churches, one United Methodist and the other non-denominational, where the people of Tangier get married and where the watermen who are lost in stormy waters are memorialized.

Tangier's religion is almost entirely Christian, but with an eschatological twist that is all their own. Christians on the island see their vanishing home as evidence of the End Times—that Jesus Christ's return is near. When the island finally goes under, some of them think, the Lord will come back.

In some ways, the town is a lingering theocracy—it is a dry (alcohol-free) island and some of the laws go back to Revolutionary days. A cross painted on the

water tower—government property—has been protested by visitors and the occasional resident, but it is well-known that if the town is forced to paint over it, it will reappear before just a few sunrises. This close tie between community and religion, in a country where such symbiosis is often discouraged, is one of the more fascinating aspects of the book. A whole chapter is devoted to the topic, and I would have enjoyed even more.

One of the other problems facing the island, if one wanted to call it a problem, is the selflessness of the aging community. Many of them, sensing that the island won't be around much longer, do not push too hard for their children to stay to carry on the family businesses. Whether crabbing or running a restaurant or inn, the parents of Tangier Island's increasingly small graduating classes often urge their children to go elsewhere—first to college, then to find a home on the mainland.

If the residents of Tangier Island are given hope that their island can be saved, those promises often only lead to frustration. The elders of the town can tick off the rescue proposals that have been brought to their town by non-profits, state, and federal authorities. Each one begins with a lengthy study of the island, its economy, its wildlife, and the effect it has on the rest of the Chesapeake Bay. Each time, these studies result in a need for more studies, until the cost of saving the island eventually overtakes the money allotted for the project. It is impossible not to feel their frustration.

Ethnographies often lack the heart-pounding excitement and mournful losses that memoirs and thrillers have, but Swift finds a way to make us care about this community of people whose lives seem, in many ways, very different from our own. From church infighting to search parties desperately hunting the Bay for missing friends, their losses can be earnestly felt. Their frustrations may draw you into an anger of your own.

Tangier Island is an incomparable place, more than just another green dot on a field of blue. Our nation's history is threaded through this tiny community, and if its shores are allowed to disappear, part of us will go away with it.



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