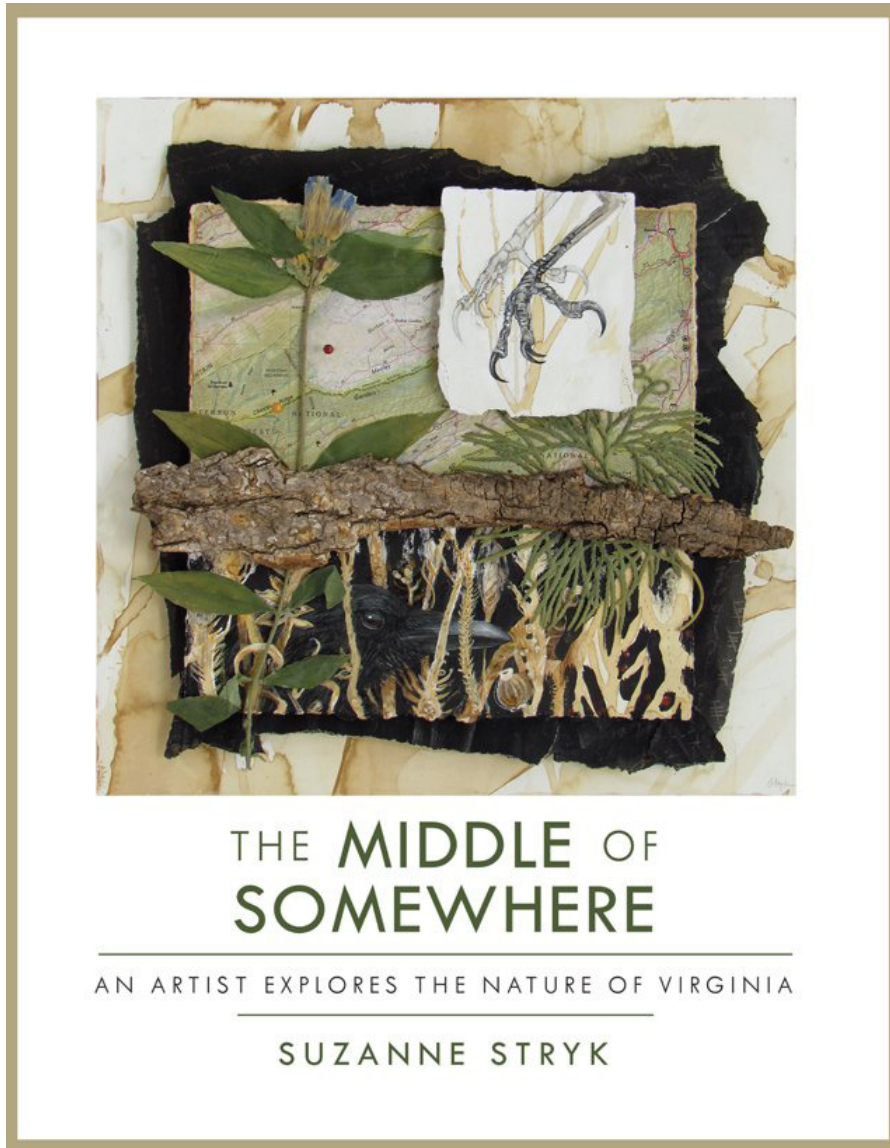


## Big Little Lives

Artist and writer Suzanne Stryk's new book delves into Virginia's natural features and creatures, large and small | Images courtesy Trinity University Press

by Harry Kollatz Jr.  
March 25, 2022



***Suzanne Stryk's "The Middle of Somewhere" will have a virtual release event on Tuesday, March 29.***

Midway into Suzanne Stryk's "[The Middle of Somewhere](#)" (Trinity University Press, \$27.95), the artist and writer wonders, "If children can learn Disney

characters by heart... why not aquatic invertebrates?" She's on the banks of Big Laurel Creek on Whitetop Mountain, "watching a bug in a bucket with a little kid" alongside students on a field trip led by a biology professor. The professor points out tiny water pennies, critters who'll mature into beetles, and how their presence indicates healthy waters.

When reached by phone, Stryk ponders aloud, "I don't know why it is that I'm so intrigued by these things. Or, to put it another way, I don't know why other people aren't," punctuated with a laugh. "You don't have to show me a lion or a grand scene to impress me." In a chapter of her new book titled "On the Road," she is more intent on scraping insects off car grilles at a Blue Ridge Parkway overlook than enjoying the panorama.

Her mission from 2011 through 2013 became the book, an elegant and often luscious tour of Virginia's natural environment that is by turns travelogue; memoir; portable exhibition; reflections on culture and history; and observations of fish, fowl, fossils and artifacts. The art that introduces readers into each chapter is created from topographical and tourist maps, paintings, leaves, insects, rocks, bones, and ephemera. "This merger of the factual with the evocative plucks a chord deep inside me," she says.

Stryk moved from Illinois to Virginia in 1991 and soon read Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia," a natural and cultural history. The book's material resonated with her, along with a youthful appreciation of Meriwether Lewis and George Rogers Clark and their Corps of Discovery, which Jefferson dispatched to explore the West. Her enjoyment of the outdoors and innate artistic curiosity led her in 2010 to embark on her own tour of the state in response to Jefferson — and the complications of his legacy. Stryk, with a grant from the Virginia Commission for the Arts, created a body of work and ultimately, the book.

**Richmond magazine: Tell us about "The Natural History of an Art Museum," part of your book in which you sketch the animals you spot portrayed in the work at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The pool around the cafe with Chihuly's "Reeds" is undergoing maintenance, and the fish have been removed.**

**Suzanne Stryk:** Funny you should mention that. I wrote so much about my experience at the VMFA it could have made a short book. I had to cut parts out to suit the length of the other chapters in *Somewhere*, but in that original text I walk around the reflecting pool, even sketch damselflies mating over the water.

I hope they do return the fish and let life thrive there. It's my belief that the entire atmosphere of a place is the experience. During that VMFA visit, I even sketched a guard's barn owl tattoo. These experiences illustrate what I mention in the preface about being "sidetracked by design"— I'm a tangent goer-offer (is that a word?) which often leads me to make unexpected discoveries.

**RM:** In your section about visiting the Great Dismal Swamp, you reflect on Thomas Jefferson, and his observation that “The earth belongs in usufruct to the living.” The unusual word means to use for benefit but without harm. This resonates deep into your project about not only the contradictory nature of that particular man, but also we as a species.

**Stryk:** Indeed, which is one reason I think Jefferson is not less important to know now, but more important. His statement concerns utilizing natural resources with the understanding that we should leave a healthy earth for future generations. What a paradox he was—a visionary biocentric thinker yet he continued to own people. He was flawed. A combination of altruism and selfishness. And if we're honest, we all are to some degree. Maybe art is necessary to grapple with the imperfect in life—like that Japanese practice [kintsugi] where they fill the cracks of a vessel with gold that accentuates the brokenness, making the piece richer because it reveals its history.

**RM:** Your writing acknowledges both the resilience and fragility of life's balance. In “How the Past Returns,” you write about, among other things, the 450 million-year endurance of the horseshoe crab and medical properties of its blue blood. You depict a future in which the ocean has claimed a Holiday Inn and sea creatures making their home there, reminiscent of images of the Titanic wreck.

**Stryk:** Describing that imaginary scenario, I intentionally wanted to present climate change in a way that people hadn't heard before. Throughout, I didn't avoid reality, but neither did I want to be too pessimistic. For ultimately it's our

love for the living world that will make a difference. Besides, facts and statistics don't move people as much as a story. That's why in every chapter I explore issues with scenes and characters—both human and other-than-human—rather than scientific facts alone.

**RM:** In "The Dragon," you kayak through Dragon Run Swamp along the Piankatank River, sketching the dragonflies, tree frogs and the glowing eyes of fishing spiders, but a bald eagle doesn't show up. And your able guide, Teta Kain, tells you eagles reuse their nests and you'll have to return. And this makes you wonder about the sensation of, "Oh, there'll always be another spring, another dashing dragonfly, another eagle." But these days we're in a season of uncertainty, wondering what the next spring may bring, or whether there'll even be a next spring.

**Stryk:** Very true. My comment at the end of "The Dragon" chapter about "another spring" suggests that animals have hope, too. Yet on another level, as you point out, it refers to the uncertainty of our world.

And regarding my own personal "next spring," I really felt that in my sixties if I ever wanted to write a book I had to take the plunge. I think [astrophysicist] Neil deGrasse Tyson said that death is important to get us to make the most of our lives. I know people who put off something they want to accomplish, and for any number of reasons they wait until it's too late.

**RM:** In the chapter "Lost and Found," a scene in miniature captures the present human predicament. Along your way to Appomattox you see vehicles, one with Obama/Biden stickers and another with a Confederate flag — "Redneck and Proud" — and come upon two anglers, one with a groomed mustache and wearing a bandana, the other head shaved with a skull tattooed at the base of his own. They're catching smallmouth bass, but one remarks they're too full of pollution to eat; the other fries them up.

**Stryk:** If there's one takeaway from the book, other than the idea of small lives making a big difference, it's that we have to think about the quality of life on earth.