

*Donna O'Meara studies and photographs volcanoes. Read the selection to find out how she became interested in volcanoes and answer the questions that follow.*

from ***Into the Volcano***

BY **DONNA O'MEARA**

***Some Like It Hot***

1 **H**awaii's Kilauea volcano rumbles under my feet with thunder I feel in my stomach. The air reeks of burning metal. A towering dark steam cloud looms over me. Without warning, a football-sized chunk of gooey lava drops out of the cloud and plops onto the ground near me. I duck and run as more hissing red chunks splatter everywhere. These "lava bombs" could crush a skull as if it were an eggshell. What on Earth am I doing here, on the world's most active volcano?

2 **T**here were no volcanoes where I grew up. Our family lived in a quiet, little town in rural New England where the cows outnumbered the people. I was the eldest of three children and spent my childhood exploring the forests and fields.

3 My favorite pastime was sitting safe and dry on our porch watching violent summer thunderstorms rage through the Connecticut River Valley. Our springer spaniel, Dinney, would cower under my chair in fright, but the louder the thunder and brighter the lightning, the more thrilled I was.

4 In school I loved earth science and biology, but my guidance counselor suggested I take typing classes and become a secretary. That didn't interest me. Fortunately, I was artistic, so instead I majored in creative arts—painting, photography and writing. To this day I still can't type.

- 5 In the 1970s I moved to Boston and worked for magazine and book publishers. But something was missing in my life. Although getting out into the countryside helped, I finally decided I had to make some changes. I wanted to learn about the earth and the sky and the stars, where they all came from and where they were going.
- 6 At age 32, I went back to college. My teacher, Stephen James O'Meara, opened my eyes to science when he described how our solar system was shaped by geological forces. One of the most dynamic forces, Steve said, was volcanism. I pictured Earth, with its 1500 or more volcanoes spewing lava, as it spun dizzily around our sun.
- 7 Steve studied volcanoes to learn how planets formed and to search for clues that might help predict when a volcano will erupt here on Earth. So far, no single scientific method can accurately predict deadly eruptions. Any new discoveries would be important scientifically and could save lives.
- 8 Steve's daring tales of exploring erupting volcanoes held me spellbound. When he passed around a piece of rough, hardened lava, I held it tight, closed my eyes and imagined myself climbing an erupting volcano in an exotic foreign country. Now that sounded like a good job for me!
- 9 Weeks after class ended, Steve and I had dinner. He described how he'd once jumped over a moving lava flow to save his life. I could barely believe what I was hearing. Asleep that night I dreamed of volcanoes.
- 10 On December 23, 1986, around noon, my office phone rang. It was Steve.
- 11 "Donna, have you ever seen an erupting volcano?"
- 12 No, of course I hadn't.
- 13 "I'm on my way to Kilauea and need a field assistant."
- 14 "Kilauea, Hawaii? When do we leave?"
- 15 I said "aloha" to my magazine boss and was on a plane to Hawaii before sunset that same night.

### *My First Volcano*

- 16 **A**t noon on December 24, 1986, Steve and I strapped ourselves into a helicopter without doors and bounced on air drafts over a sizzling Hawaiian lava lake.
- 17 The lake had formed when a new vent, called Kupaianaha, had burst open on the east side of Kilauea volcano. A vent is an opening through which a volcano erupts lava and ash from inside the Earth.

18 Lava oozed out of the vent, filling a huge depression to overflowing and creating a lava lake. The lava gushing into the lake from the vent caused sloshing waves.

19 As our pilot tilted the chopper to give us a better view, I clutched at the seat cushion for fear I would slide across the smooth leather and right out the open door. Below us a red lake the size of two football fields bubbled like a pot of oatmeal. Only this wasn't oatmeal. It was burning hot molten lava.

20 The chopper whirled down to the edge of the sizzling lake. Hot, glowing rock oozed from the earth like toothpaste out of a cracked tube. The helicopter cabin got hotter, and a burnt metal smell filled the air. Our pilot expertly dodged chunks of spatter the volcano flung at us. We landed on the ground with a soft thump.

21 Steve and the pilot jumped out and ducked the rotors, leaving the engine running for a fast getaway. I thought about the gasoline in the engine near this heat.



*Helicopters take volcano hunters where the action is. This one approaches a smoking crater. It's similar to the one we took to see the lava lake — only our chopper didn't have doors!*



*Fresh lava smells like burning metal. Here, it wipes out a road. I didn't know then that molten lava can be 1150°C (2100°F) when it erupts out of the earth.*



I watched as Steve walked right up to the creeping lava flow—and survived. The scientist in me said “Hey, isn’t this what you went back to school for?” The artist in me had to admit the lake was strangely beautiful. Glowing pinkish-orange lava was creeping along, hissing and popping as if it were alive. This was the opportunity I had been waiting for my whole life. I grabbed my camera and jumped out of the chopper. I felt heat through the soles of my sneakers. I changed lenses and started shooting.

## ***Explosive Facts***

**Name of volcano:** Kilauea

**Location:** Hawaii, U.S.A.

**Status:** active

**Type:** shield volcano

**Height:** 1222 m (4009 ft.)

**Known people killed:** about 120