

Eating Dirt

Charlotte Gill

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Taut, commanding words expose the sheer guts of a tree planter, whose job is nothing less than putting the earth back together.

What type of person makes for a tree planter? A nurturer, a caregiver, a tree-hugger may first come to mind, but the hard truth of it is that rain or shine or snow, a tree planter must trudge through the soil of any given climate—from Brazil to Alaska—and know the species of tree by the feel as she reaches into the satchel of a hundred seedlings on her back. She must “bend, plant, stand up, move on,” for hours on end, weeks on end, season after season. To be a tree planter, it takes guts.

Charlotte Gill cuts to the bone with words so taut and commanding they expose the toughness required to march through life in the forestry business. Though illustrating the gnarly work and unforgiving earth in *Eating Dirt*, her dizzying prose beats with an undercurrent of tender-hearted care for, and a drive to protect, the land that sustains us.

She writes of the labor: “I push into my shovel as if it were a heavy door. A square of earth breaks open at my feet and sighs a moldy breath. I bend at the waist and slide the roots down the back of my spade. ... I tuck them in with a punch of my fist. I haven’t stood up and I’m already walking.”

She writes of the people with whom she works, eats, and rests: “Some of us have known each other for years, since the days of pimples and cowlicks. Every year we bumble into each other’s lives. ... We’ve known each other through all kinds of vicissitudes. Through long hair and short hair. Through boom and bust. Through girlfriends and boyfriends, through spouses and children and divorce. All these circumstances somehow figure from a distance, like a moon hugs the oceans of a planet.”

And she writes—with vigor and wisdom and matter-of-factness—of the resilient ecology of Earth: “In the wake of the glaciers, trees edged north from their warmer southern havens. ... Forests are ecosystems in perpetual motion, though their shifts, to the human eye, are imperceptibly small. If it were possible to capture these movements in a thousand years of time-lapse photography, we’d see that forests are always adapting—growing and shrinking, mixing in composition, moistening and drying out. ... The Earth’s crust is on the move, always slowly, but sometimes with great upheaval.”

The people become allies, grunting and sweating as they work side by side, and celebrating with a hard-earned drink after a long day of planting, the layered smudges of dirt on their skin stains of pride. The landscape becomes home, and readers share in Gill’s appreciation for all of it: the treacherous skies of an oncoming storm equally as much as the symbiotic harmony between a tree’s roots and an expansive underground fungus.

But more than anything, *Eating Dirt* reveals the perseverance of those laboring to put the earth back together, walking through the ravaged land in the wake of tree cutters, asserting that one day their growing green will catch up to and offset the destruction—maybe even one day surpass it.

AIMEE JODOIN (July 23, 2013)