

Nature and Madness

Paul Shepard

University of Georgia Press (April 1998)

\$24.95 (200pp)

978-0-8203-1980-3

Why do men persist in destroying their habitat? In *Nature and Madness*, Paul Shepard offers a trenchant and well-argued philosophical response that even he acknowledges doesn't fully explain the problem. It's not just greed that leads men to tear down forests and rip up the land in search of riches, though that plays a role. Nor is it the Anglo-European-American devotion to increasing efficiency, though that also drives people to leap before they look.

Rather, Shepard observes, man causes environmental havoc because of our inherent immaturity. We simply haven't grown up enough to handle our responsibilities to things wild. Adults bent on degrading nature behave like infants who smash and grab because that is what's easiest and feels good. Maturity, after all, is supposed to convey to adults a measure of restraint, thoughtfulness, and self-awareness. When it comes to natural systems, most adults act like three-year-olds throwing tantrums.

By any measure, Shepard's thesis is novel and compelling. *Nature and Madness* is the most readable of a trilogy of books on philosophy and the environment that this former Claremont College professor produced between 1973 and 1982. They raise the sort of knife-edged questions about the poor treatment people reserve for themselves and the world that aren't much discussed these days. For that reason, the University of Georgia Press has reissued the set, which includes *The Tender Carnivore and The Sacred Game* (1973), and *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence* (1978).

When he died from cancer in 1996 at the age of 71, Shepard left a legion of prominent admirers. Among them was the naturalist and author Terry Tempest Williams, who celebrated the author's ability to explain how "the wildness of spirit is not only something to be retrieved and honored but the very essence of humanity." Peter Matthiessen called Shepard "A clear thinker who is also a lucid and exhilarating writer." *Nature and Madness* is worthwhile because it is one of the very few works that tries to explain the pathology of our shoddy treatment of earth.

KEITH SCHNEIDER (May / June 1998)

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