

Self-Portrait with Dogwood

Christopher Merrill

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An intertwining of personal, natural, and political history reveals an eager, sensitive mind.

That a tree could be called “central to the march of civilization” came as no surprise to poet and essayist Christopher Merrill who, as a nine-year-old boy recovering from eye surgery, began to learn “the language of trees” while perched in the branches of a dogwood. His ode to this small, flowering nesting tree with a lifespan similar in length to that of a human not only praises it for its usefulness to man and beast, but for the manner in which the tree always seemed to appear to him at the turning points of his life.

For Merrill, who writes that he “served his literary apprenticeship under the sign of the dogwood,” physical work in the garden and landscape has always provided “a vital counterpoint” to his work as a poet, essayist, war correspondent, editor, and translator, and as director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. His memoir, written as he was nearing his sixtieth year, traces the delicate, interactive web of creation that links humans and nature, illuminating how vital each small being, each plant, each person is to the whole. In travels across the globe, even to war zones where scenes of the depth of man’s depravity were seared into his soul, Merrill also found the wonder of humanity’s ability to love, to heal, and to connect; the dogwood serves both as a metaphor for this and, in its decline, as an “an augur of our fate” should we fail to honor these connections.

Nature writing “gives voice to the things of the earth,” writes Merrill, and “helps us understand the place of humankind in the great chain of being.” His intertwining of personal, natural, and political history reveals an eager, sensitive mind that can find the threads of wisdom even written in the rough bark of a dogwood tree.

Planting any tree is an expression of faith in a future we might not live to see. Christopher Merrill has declared this faith in surrounding his home with beautiful flowering dogwood trees; in *Self-Portrait with Dogwood*, he plants them also in our hearts.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March/April 2017)

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