



## ★ Sign Here If You Exist: And Other Essays

**Jill Sisson Quinn**

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Naturalist Jill Sisson Quinn's essay collection *Sign Here If You Exist* concerns connection and change in relation to both the self and the world at large.

As an environmental educator in Wisconsin, Quinn taught that everything is connected in ecosystems: issues like wolf hunting affect more than just one species. Thinking long term—as in, in terms of ice ages, geological formations, and evolution—is a way to “increase our field of view,” she writes. Bridging history and the future, however, remains tricky. So Quinn expresses regret at losing the prospect of an afterlife along with her childhood Christian faith, while adopting a baby leads her to interrogate notions of belonging and inheritance.

The book's metaphors are derived from biology and religion, the two major influences in Quinn's life. Stones from the Lake Superior shore lead her into a personal discussion of sexual fluidity in “Metamorphic.” In “Seeking Resemblance,” the “kinning” process of building a family via adoption is likened to transubstantiation. “Trespassers” frames its examination of self versus the other around the microbiome, while “Begetting” contrasts salamander breeding with the Bible's genealogies. In this framework, myths embody moral lessons, but do not have the literal explaining power of science.

Quinn's gentle, profound observations, which often arise from time spent hiking on trails or watching wildlife, draw organic, convincing links between the natural world and her own life. Whether she's studying wasps and reptiles or musing on family and faith, she knits her subjects together with meticulous attention. “Since I had begun looking for one thing, I began to see everything else,” she writes. That universal vision accounts for the essays' resonance.

Putting self and nature under the microscope, *Sign Here If You Exist* illuminates both.

REBECCA FOSTER (September / October 2020)

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