

To Everything on Earth: New Writing on Fate Community and Nature

Diane Hueter Warner

Kurt Caswell

Susan Leigh Tomlinson

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In his artful contribution to this compelling collection of essays, naturalist David Lukas asks, what should the role of a naturalist be? Is it enough to merely guide visitors, like tourists through the natural world, pointing out flora and fauna along the way? Or does the naturalist have an obligation to help shift our perception of nature from a force alien to us, to that which is an extension of our own family? Rather than focus on the grim reality that we are negatively and radically altering our planet, this compilation of thirteen personal essays examines the corollary: that by coming to know the natural world using our senses, our minds and our spirit, not as tourists, but as participants, nature can heal us, mentally and physically, as individuals and as part of a greater community.

In these essays, thirteen acclaimed writers from a variety of backgrounds lead us on pilgrimages that cross both interior and exterior landscapes toward a greater spiritual end, offering encouraging answers to troubling questions. There is the story of a woman suffering from debilitating panic attacks who finds solace in the perseverance of forests scarred by wild fire.

Jordan Fisher Smith tells of his life as a park ranger on land crippled by industrial conflict. In one acerbic incident, Smith struggles to find the good in saving the life of a brutal man who has very nearly killed his own child. He writes, "If you're lucky, you get assigned to people who seem worth saving and land and waters whose situation is not hopeless. If not, you save them anyway. And maybe in time, saving them will make them worth it."

In her poetic essay, "Angler Girl," we sojourn with Susan Leigh Tomlinson as she takes a beginner's fly fishing class in an urban landscape where there is no longer any water to fish. On making the final cast at her last class she writes, "My experience with the reverent art of presenting a fly to a stream may never get any more real than a bit of yarn and a purple Hula-Hoop. It makes hitting the target perfectly a final time tonight both critical and meaningless. I sling the fly out into the drifting autumn wind, watching as the line unfolds on the sunset in front of me—a tender curl of light, a streak of uncommon grace."

These essays tell epic stories: journeys toward a richer understanding of people and place, despite a sometimes overwhelming sense of futility. As he works out the answer to his own question, Lukas writes that the naturalist's duty is "to tell stories that put people's lives in order, stories that work for the age you live in—stories that properly honor the realms of logic, heart, and right relations." This compilation does just that, gently nudging the reader toward a more graceful communion with world and creature. (January) Jen Sperry Steinorth (January / February 2010)

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