

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature**, by J. Drew Lanham. 2017. Milkweed Editions, 240 pp. ISBN: 978-1-57131-350-8.

As I read *The Home Place* I felt honored to hear the story of another black birder. Statements like "Nature was often the first and last thing on my mind, morning to night" and "I felt closer to flight by bringing the birds closer to my earthbound existence" could have been peeled directly out of my mind. But on another level, the statement "Responses in forest and field are not born of any preconceived notions of what 'should be.' They lie only in the fact that *I am*." went straight to my heart.

Physically, I liked that the book was in hard cover, well constructed. The 8 1/4" x 5 3/4" was a nice size, and the 240 pages alluded to the book's being a fairly quick read. The vanilla pages were perfect. The cover jacket showed pictures that felt familiar, family pics: taken possibly by a non-photographer relative, old black and whites, portraits with the top of the head cut off, old Polaroids. Very similar to my own family portraits.

But there is a picture of what appears to be a Carolina Wren down in the lower left corner as kind of a tip-off that there is probably more to this book than the typical family memoir. Dr. Lanham started out giving reasons as to how and why he got into nature writing, beyond his role as distinguished professor of wildlife ecology at Clemson University. One of my favorites is "Heart and mind cannot be exclusive of one another in the fight to save anything."

The reading was easy. And as I read, I loved the way Lanham interwove nature, birds and plants, into almost every situation. He gave a very rich and diagnostic description of the physical region of South Carolina that he calls home. Just the thing a good naturalist would do. Lanham described with vivid detail many of the things that made him who he is. His vignettes of the members of his family are intriguing, and his love for his "Mamatha" is palpable. As Lanham describes his personal development he moves through a number of places and periods, ups and downs, lefts and rights, that are amazing in and of themselves. Nevertheless, there is a base theme of nature and rich black dirt throughout that glues the whole story together nicely.

But Lanham's story wasn't all biscuits and molasses. Getting out into nature is no mean feat for anyone, there are any number of things one must consider. But when you add on the racial history of this country it can become a gauntlet.

"Courage faces fear and thereby masters it. Cowardice represses fear and is thereby mastered by it. Courageous men never lose the zest for living even though their life situation is zestless; cowardly men, overwhelmed by the uncertainties of life, lose the will to live. We must constantly build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear."—Martin Luther King

To me this is the only way our country is going to move forward. The number of people of color who dare to love nature full-time, is thin at best, with good reason. For a long time I perceived I was alone in my pursuit and appreciation of nature. This book is the encouragement I wish I had in my early years. A person of color writing a very good book like this is a big deal for me. I applaud you Joseph Drew Lanham, as a wordsmith, ornithologist, and African-American who followed his path with courage.

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**American Birds: A Literary Companion**, edited by Andrew Rubenfeld and Terry Tempest Williams. 2020. Library of America, distributed by Penguin Random House. 285 pp., encompassing 83 selected poems, journal entries, memoirs, short stories, essays, and travel accounts by 75 writers. ISBN: 978-1-59853-655-3.

The joy of watching birds in their natural environs has never found sole expression in moments of quiet, self-contained exhilaration. For all its characterization as a mash-up of solitary intellectual activity and a sport of personal bests, birding as a pastime has never been exclusionary or arcane. Who among us—serious birder or casual observer—hasn't turned a memorable moment in the field into a relatable tale of discovery and exuberance? Some have gone even further, communicating their ecstasy with the aid of the paintbrush, the camera, or the pen.

It is the last instrument that has been wielded to exquisite effect in a new book edited by Andrew Rubenfeld and Terry Tempest Williams, aptly titled *American Birds: A Literary Companion*. Comprising works from an impressive medley of sources, this volume captures the vibrancy of New World avifauna as it has inspired, affected, and awed wordsmiths of every stripe over the span of more than two centuries.

Personal observation and firsthand accounts provide the impetus for this compilation. The prefatory "Three American Indian Songs About Birds" embark the reader on a literary odyssey that continues with a sampling of essays, monographs, poems, journal entries, and book excerpts. All share an overarching theme: the celebration of Nearctic birds; that is, those birds whose place of habitation is (or once was) the North American continent.

The results of this endeavor are distinctive, vivid, and inspiring. Meriwether Lewis, writing in his journal about the woodpecker that would later bear his name, transports us to an age when the continent west of the Mississippi was just becoming known to the outside world, when a crisply written description of a bird could both educate and aspire to the loftiest of sight records: that which was new to science. Barry Lopez, embracing a more conversational tone in his essay "The Raven," not only describes that species to a fault, but deftly differentiates it from its corvid cousin, the American Crow.

It's not just the birds themselves, but their strong connection to iconic places in the American landscape that especially resonated with me. I warmed all over again to a chapter from Mary Winn's "Red-tails in Love," her adoring chronicle of a pair of hawks that attained near-celebrity status when they took to nesting on a high-rise facing Manhattan's Central Park. Equally stirring was Pamela Uschuk's 2006 poem "Snow Goose Migration at Tule Lake," in which she limns an image of "the iris-eyed dawn and the slow blind buffalo of fog," followed by "the thermonuclear flash of snow geese, huge white confetti ... across Shasta's silk peak." Anyone who has visited Tule Lake in winter knows exactly what she means.

These are but a minuscule sampling of the rich cross section of material contained in this anthology. Men and women of letters predominate, but there are personages from other walks of life, too. Some, like John James Audubon, Theodore Roosevelt, Roger Tory Peterson, or Rachel Carson need no introduction; others, such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Florence A. Merriam—two early champions of bird conservation—are less renowned. All are handsomely represented in this text.

Delightful surprises abound. Who knew that Carl Sandburg devoted a poem to the subject of the Purple Martin? Or that Emily Dickinson's prodigious output included an ode to the Bobolink? We also learn that long before "moon-watching" became a trend among today's birders, Walt Whitman listened with relish to the nocturnal calls of migrants overhead, and that the late novelist Ursula Le Guin took respite from her science fiction writing to wax poetically about a Cactus Wren, whose "small quicksilver trill ... has no messages for men."

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There are some regrettable omissions, to be sure. I missed the inclusion of anything by Scott Weidensaul, one of today's most prolific and talented writers on the subjects of birds and birding. The redoubtable Arthur Cleveland Bent receives only brief mention—a snippet from his life histories as cited by another author. The book is also bereft of the oft overlooked publications of Ralph Hoffman. I still cling to my tattered, out-of-print 1927 edition of Hoffman's *Birds of the Pacific States* for its singularly precise and colorful species accounts. Perhaps there were obstacles to securing copyrights to one or more of the above. Or maybe the amount of suitable material mined for this project was so daunting, it was simply impossible to give every worthy entry its due.

Elisions aside, the editors have chosen well. Their painstaking efforts have served up a gathering of literary excellence stunning in its variety and appeal. Ms. Williams, herself a writer of considerable accomplishment, didn't allow modesty to keep her from adding a sample from her own wonderful oeuvre. On the face of it, her essay "The Peregrine" is a paean to the falcon that lends its name to the title. Read further into this opus, though, and she turns the occasion of watching flocks of reviled European Starlings from the vantage of the Salt Lake City dump into a moment of rapture. Only an artist of her special gifts could pull this off.

The timeliness of this anthology, three years in the making, is almost preternatural. Rubenford and Williams have demonstrated that the enthusiasm for birdwatching in this country is one that transcends race, ethnicity, and class. Witness that in this single volume, one can read the portraiture of a dipper by Scottish-born naturalist John Muir, a rumination on crows by African-American poet Cornelius Eady, and an observational riff on hummingbirds ("arcing their bodies in grim determination to find what is good") by Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes. True to the spirit of its title, *American Birds: A Literary Companion* affirms not only the diversity of bird life in this great land, but that of the people who capture its essence in words.

I can think of no better antidote to these discordant times. "Everyone is a bird-watcher, but there are two kinds of birdwatchers: those who know what they are and those who haven't yet realized it," writes Jonathan Rosen, who realized it from a very young age while growing up in New York. This sumptuous collection is testimony to his words, and a most treasured addition to one's library.

David Koepfel