



Let's Talk About It!

BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES

Changing Places Reflections on the Natural World Guide

Prepare to be captivated by this survey of American Nature Writing in the 20th Century, which encompasses perspectives from a junkyard to a greenhouse and from the Blue Ridge Mountains to Wisconsin.

This kit contains 30 copies of each the following items:

A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold

The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World, Michael Pollan

Ecology of a Cracker Childhood, Janisse Ray

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard

A Sand County Almanac

Synopsis

Written by Aldo Leopold, this book is a set of informal essays during his long years of observation. His beautiful descriptions span from scenery at his farm in each month of a year, to comparisons of other states throughout the year. He implores people to better understand land ethic: our moral responsibility to the natural world.

Discussion Questions

1. *The Good Oak*: Leopold worries people no longer truly know where heat or food comes from. Take a moment to consider everything required to get your food to you from conception to your table. What is required for each of those to work? Do you agree that there could actually be a “spiritual danger” in not knowing the source of your food and energy? Why or why not?
2. *Axe in Hand*: How has the land where you live changed within your lifetime? Are there decisions you have made that have become your “signatures” on the land?
3. In *Marshland Elegy*, Leopold writes: “A sense of time lies thick and heavy on such a place.” Have you ever had an experience where time seems to stand still, or where you experience something that you can imagine having happened time and again over the course of history?

4. *Thinking Like a Mountain*: American politicians are often criticized for changing their minds or positions on issues. However, it is critical for scientists to be able to do the same, sometimes referred to as a “paradigm shift.” Can you think about a time when you learned more about a subject and were able to consciously change your mind about something?
5. *The Outlook*: Leopold suggests that a land ethic can never really be written, rather it evolves over time through society’s thinking and actions. Has your thinking about right and wrong ever changed?

The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s Eye View of the World

Synopsis

Everyone learns about the mutually beneficial dance of honeybees and flowers: The bee collects nectar and pollen to make honey and, in the process, spreads the flowers’ genes far and wide. In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan ingeniously demonstrates how people and domesticated plants have formed a similarly reciprocal relationship. He masterfully links four fundamental human desires—sweetness, beauty, intoxication, and control—with the plants that satisfy them: the apple, the tulip, marijuana, and the potato. In telling the stories of four familiar species, Pollan illustrates how the plants have evolved to satisfy humankind’s most basic yearnings. And just as we’ve benefited from these plants, we have also done well by them. So who is really domesticating whom?

Discussion Questions

1. *The Apple*: Explain Pollan’s assertion that both Chapman and the apple “have been sweetened beyond recognition. Figures of tart wildness, both have been thoroughly domesticated...in both cases a cheap, fake sweetness has been substituted for the real thing.” (7) Who/what else have we done this to? Why?
2. *The Tulip*: What do psychiatrists think of patients who are indifferent toward flowers? How long have people valued flowers as beautiful? Why did Jews and early Christians discourage devotion to flowers? (66) Where are flowers not loved? What might explain this?
3. *Marijuana*: What two stories have been used to support the Western cannabis taboos? What is the message of each? (172-173) What other cautionary tales do we tell ourselves as a society?
4. *The Potato*: Consider Pollan’s questions, “Are these genetically modified potatoes a good idea, either to plant or to eat? Whose desire do they gratify?” (The customer? The farmer? A corporation? A government?) “What might they tell us about the future of the relationship between plants and people?” (187)
5. How is Pollan’s description of his late-August garden a warning against biotechnology? What language does he use to convey the folly of attempting to order nature?

Ecology of a Cracker Childhood

Synopsis

Ray grew up in a junkyard along U.S. Highway 1, hidden from Florida-bound travelers by hulks of old cars. In language at once colloquial, elegiac, and informative, Ray redeems her home and her

people, while also cataloging the source of her childhood hope: the Edenic longleaf pine forests, where orchids grow amid wiregrass at the feet of widely spaced, lofty trees. Today, the forests exist in fragments, cherished and threatened, and the South of her youth is gradually being overtaken by golf courses and suburban development. From the memories of a childhood marked by extreme poverty, mental illness, and restrictive fundamentalist Christian rules, Janisse Ray crafted a “heartfelt and refreshing” memoir that has inspired thousands to embrace their beginnings, no matter how humble, and to fight for the places they love.

Discussion Questions

1. In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* Ray alternates memoir with natural history. Did you find this effective? What benefits/limitations does this way of communication impose?
2. At the end of the “Iron Man” chapter, Ray asks, “Of what use to humanity... is a man who cannot see beyond his own hurt?” What has she learned from her grandfather? What do we realize she expects of humanity?
3. Ray eloquently describes being in an old-growth forest. She drinks it “like water,” she feels “mortality’s roving hands grapple with air,” she sees her “place as human in a natural order more grand, whole and functional than [she’s] ever witnessed,” and is “humbled, not frightened.” Why does she feel that she “no longer [has] to worry about what happens to souls”? (p. 69)
4. How do faith and intellect equally influence Ray’s life as she grows up? How does the conflict or juxtaposition of these two ways of looking at the world shape her appreciation of her personal ecology?
5. While Ray never sees a longleaf pine until adulthood, she describes the “opening of her heart” when, as a child, she does a school project on carnivorous plants. Was there a time in your own life from which you can trace a similar development of understanding?

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Synopsis

In the summer, Dillard stalks muskrats in the creek and contemplates wave mechanics; in the fall, she watches a monarch butterfly migration and dreams of Arctic caribou. She tries to con a coot; she collects pond water and examines it under a microscope. She unties a snake skin, witnesses a flood, and plays King of the Meadow with a field of grasshoppers. The result is an exhilarating tale of nature and its seasons. This personal narrative highlights one year's exploration on foot in the Virginia region through which Tinker Creek runs.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Dillard choose to structure the book by season? What does she communicate by structuring the book this way?
2. Why is Dillard willing to sit still for hours to see muskrats? Is the fact that she has to sit still part of why they're compelling?

3. Which way of seeing God makes more sense to you—the via positiva or the via negativa?
4. Is nature really monstrous? Are some animals more monstrous than others?
5. Why does Dillard choose to focus more on bugs than any other creatures?

Questions for this guide are provided courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, Penguin Random House, Milkweed.org, and Shmoop.com