

Our Earth, Our Ethics



Why Am I Reading This?

In the 21st century, we are challenged by momentous environmental issues. Serious interest not only in the natural environment, but also in our proper relationship to it, has long antedated our present anxiety over greenhouse gas emissions, the hole in the ozone layer, and global warming. We may find ourselves dismayed as much as we are enlightened by what we read here. And then, after we have read and discussed the issues, what ought we to do? Will talking about it, the presumed goal of these library programs, lead to anything? We have introduced several titles with the West particularly in mind, but every community will have its own concerns when it comes to such matters as land use, air pollution, declining species (like the Atlantic cod and salmon), and water.

Book List:

- [A Sand County Almanac](#), by Aldo Leopold (1949) (pg. 8)
- [Desert Solitaire](#), by Edward Abbey (1968) (pg. 4)
- [Indian Creek Chronicles](#), by Pete Fromm (1993) (pg. 6)
- [Pilgrim at Tinker Creek](#), by Annie Dillard (1974) (pg. 10)
- [Prodigal Summer](#) by Barbara Kingsolver (2001) (pg. 12)
- [The Botany of Desire](#), by Michael Pollan (2002) (pg. 2)
- [The Solace of Open Spaces](#), by Gretel Ehrlich (1985) (pg. 14)
- [Who Owns the West?](#) by William Kittredge (1987) (pg. 16)

Book Summaries and Discussion Questions

The Botany of Desire

Subtitled “A Plant’s-Eye View of the World,” Michael Pollan’s bestselling book has been described by one reviewer as a “don’t-wanna-put-it-down unspooling of the socio-political, economic and historical forces that led to the cultivation of four crops.” It may surprise us to discover that any kind of discourse focusing on the subjects of apples, tulips, marijuana, and potatoes would be likely to rivet our attention (with the possible exception of pot), but that proves to be the case here because the author is part botanist, part ordinary backyard gardener, part historian, and part journalist. In his introduction, Pollan tells us he reversed the notion that we elect to plant this or that crop and posits the question, “Did I choose to plant these potatoes, or did the potato make me do it?” (xv) He decided both statements are true, and he explains that his book “is as much about the human desires that connect us to these plants as it is about the plants themselves.” (xvii) Accordingly, he constructs each of his four chapters around a specified “desire”: the apple for sweetness, the tulip for beauty, marijuana for intoxication, and the potato for control. The desires upon which Pollan bases his book are variously interpreted. For example, he observes that the introduction of the potato into Ireland from the New World at the end of the sixteenth century gave the Irish, whose land was not hospitable to grain crops, “a welcome measure of control over their lives” (200). Meanwhile, however, Pollan narrates his experiences planting a new “genetically engineered” potato from Monsanto in his own garden—a different kind of “control” altogether.

Author Information

Michael Pollan was born in 1955 and grew up on Long Island. He received his B.A. from Bennington College and studied at Oxford University before completing his master’s degree in English at Columbia University in 1981. His father is the well-known attorney and financial and life consultant, Stephen M. Pollan, author with Mark Levine of such books as *Fire Your Boss* and *It’s All in Your Head: Thinking Your Way to Happiness*. His sister is actress Tracy Pollan. Michael Pollan’s books include *A Place of My Own* (1997), which recounts his building of a “one-room outbuilding” to use as his study (the ten-page index makes good reading in its own right), and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006), a critique of modern agribusiness, which the New York Times names one of the five best nonfiction books of the year. A contributing writer to the New York Times Magazine since 1987, Pollan’s essays have appeared in *Best American Science Writing* (2004) and *Best American Essays* (1990, 2003). He is married to painter Judith Belzer; they have one son.

Discussion Questions for *The Botany of Desire*

1. Very likely each reader will prefer one of the four chapters of this book to all of the others. Which one do you like best, and why? Do you find yourself trusting Pollan's science throughout this book, or do you find it more credible in one chapter than in the others? From which of the chapters do you think you learned the most?
2. Is this book of much interest to the non-botanist and non-gardener? Probably a botanist or gardener will feel more comfortable with this book, just as a fly fisherman (or any angler, for that matter) would with Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*. But what might you argue in "in" this book for nearly everyone?
3. Some readers will doubtless think the chapter on marijuana is Pollan's riskiest in several respects. For example, he makes political assertions that are sure to offend some readers, and he appears to approve of a controlled, and at least technically illegal, substance. In an interview, however, he shied away from expressing support for its legalization. Do you think he shows that he knows enough about this controversial subject to take a firmer stance on it? Should he have opted for some safer "desire"?
4. What do you make of Pollan's frequent return to the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian poles or modes of human nature or thought processes? The terms come to us from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy From the Spirit of Music* (1872), sometimes called simply "the Birth of Tragedy." You might find it useful to investigate this subject. Do you think this dichotomy is of much relevance, or do you think it amounts to an oversimplification?
5. The fourth chapter of Pollan's book, part of which took him to huge potato farms in southern Idaho, may be the most troublesome. At one point he eats potatoes and asks himself whether the genetically engineered spuds or the ones treated with dangerous chemicals (organophosphates) would be the more hazardous to his health. Why does this perplexing question arise? What alternative does there appear to be?
6. What would you say Pollan accomplishes in his half-dozen or so pages of epilogue? Does this book strike you as "important" in some ways, or simply as "of interest"? Do you detect an ethical stance toward the environment in this book? Certain other books in this series deal with wilderness, but this one does not, or at least it does not do so directly. Does that make it less pertinent to the issues of this theme, or in some ways even more pertinent?

Desert Solitaire

In some ways it is regrettable that most readers will begin this book with Edward Abbey's brief introduction instead of with the simple and somehow poignant opening sentence of the text proper: "This is the most beautiful place on earth." By this he means the canyon lands near Moab, Utah, where he worked as a seasonal park ranger for a couple of years in the late 1950s. Similar to most of the naturalists whose writing we meet in this series, Abbey celebrates the flora and fauna he encounters in the desert, but he is probably the most openly political in his message, lashing out in a chapter he calls a "polemic" against the dangers of Industrial Tourism and the "earnest engineers" who support construction and development as "intrinsic goods," even in national parks. "No more new roads in national parks," Abbey bluntly asserts. He comments on the uranium boom, on "cowboys and Indians," and in the chapter entitled "Water," he reminds us of Wallace Stegner's frequently quoted remark that "Aridity, more than anything else, gives the western landscape its character." The city, Abbey warns, "can be made to function as a concentration camp. At times angry and at times passionate, Abbey dashes back and forth between diatribe and poetry. Wilderness, he insists, "is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread" (169). In the longest chapter Abbey joins a friend in an excursion down the Colorado River, a place he senses is "doomed." Accused by one visitor of being opposed to civilization and humanity, Abbey writes, "Naturally I was flattered." Renowned naturalist Edwin Way Teale, in a review for the New York Times, admired the philosophy and humor of the book, which he described as "passionately felt" and "deeply poetic."

Author Information

Probably the most widely recognized maverick among America's environmental activist writers, Edward Abbey was born in Indiana, Pennsylvania, in 1927. At age seventeen he hitchhiked across the country and fell in love with the Four Corners area (Colorado, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico). After serving in the army, he attended college at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and at the University of New Mexico, where he received his Master's Degree in philosophy. For some fifteen years he worked part-time as a ranger and fire lookout in various national parks, but the two summers he spent at Arches National Monument, which gave rise to his first book of nonfiction, *Desert Solitaire*, in 1968 were momentous. By that time Abbey had already written three novels, one of which, *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), was filmed starring Kirk Douglas in 1962. A made-for-television movie of his third *Fire on the Mountain* (1962) was shot in 1981 starring Buddy Ebsen and Ron Howard. His most widely read novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), is said to have given rise to the Earth First! Organization, which has been connected with various types of eco-sabotage inspired by that book. Abbey authored more than a dozen books of nonfiction and a collection of poems. He died in 1989.

Discussion Questions for *Desert Solitaire*

1. Edward Abbey has been connected at times with the un-humanist poet Robinson Jeffers, who declared in one poem that except for the penalties, he'd sooner kill a man than hurt a hawk. Do you see serious evidence of misanthropy in *Desert Solitaire*? Do you think Abbey presents himself favorably, or as a cranky and eccentric malcontent?
2. In the chapter entitled "Episodes and Visions" (and elsewhere in the book) Abbey lashes out at what he calls "civilization." Do you think his charges are just? Could it be that he is exaggerating his outrage for effect? Where does his argument with civilization seem most explicit and perhaps most valid?
3. With any social critic we always inquire, sooner or later, whether he or she offers solutions. Do you think Abbey directly or indirectly includes solutions in his agenda, and if so, what are their nature? If you detect no workable solutions, directly stated or implied, does that compromise the strength of the book, so far as you're concerned?
4. Abbey appears to be aware that readers might find his attraction to the desert to be esthetic and passionate, but perhaps not "religious," for he says perhaps rather defensively in "Down the River," "I am not an atheist but an earthiest" (184). What do you take to be his point here? Do you find his attitudes toward organized religion, and particularly toward Mormons, to be problematic?
5. Although *Desert Solitaire* is constructed in chapters, each one might be considered as an independent, stand-alone essay. It would not be necessary to read all of the chapters to see where he is coming from, and you might prefer to pick and choose. Which chapters do you most enjoy? Are you most satisfied when Abbey presents himself at ease in the natural world, or when he seems mostly intent on telling a story, or when he lashes out against the "outside" world?
6. Two aspects of Abbey's book that sometimes get overlooked are his occasionally vividly descriptive or lyrical ("poetic") prose and his comic sensibility. Where do you find evidence of these two important features of his writing?

Indian Creek Chronicles

Named a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Book of the Year when it was published, Pete Fromm's account of his seven months in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness of the Idaho panhandle reads at times like the story of the mountain man he played at being when he signed up to keep watch over a couple of million salmon eggs at the remote hatchery. When Fromm came to the University of Montana from his native Wisconsin to major in wildlife biology and to participate on the swimming team, his roommate, who had worked as a seasonal ranger, introduced him to books like A.B. Guthrie, Jr.'s *The Big Sky*, and before he knew it, Fromm fell in love with the mystique of Jim Bridger and Jeremiah Johnson. At age twenty he accepted a job with Idaho Fish and Game on the very "romantic whim" the warden warns against, but he soon proves himself a capable outdoorsman. Fromm splices his narrative, which reads much like a novel, with self-deprecating humor, but in fact he proves equal to the challenges of isolation and intense cold. He turns out to be an excellent shot, supplementing his diet with rabbit, grouse, and finally an illegally bagged moose. About midway through the book Fromm observes .

Author Information

Born in 1958 and raised in Shorewood, Wisconsin, Pete Fromm majored in wildlife biology at the University of Montana, where he attended on a swimming scholarship, graduating with honors in 1981. He worked for several years as a seasonal ranger for the National Parks Service. An avid reader, Fromm says in an interview (2001) that he stumbled into a couple of creative writing courses while at UM and began writing full-time in 1990 after his first publication. Attracted to Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, Fromm notes that he was struck by "the stunningly literate line," "Nick liked to open cans." His wife, Rose Powers, is a mechanical engineer. His first book, *Tall Uncut* (1992), was a collection of short stories about "hunting and fishing, of long car trips through open landscape." Most of his subsequent books have been collections of short stories usually involving the out of doors, including *King of the Mountain* (1994), *Dry Rain* (1997), *Blood Knot* (1998), and *Night Swimming* (2000). Two of his recent novels, however, have drawn particular attention. *How All This Started* (2000) joined *Indian Creek Chronicles* as a winner of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association award, and *As Cool As I Am* (2003), a coming-of-age novel set in Great Falls, Montana, where Fromm currently lives, has been praised as a "beautiful and evocative" tale of young womanhood narrated in a voice that is "provocative, gritty, erotic, hilarious and genuine."

Discussion Questions for Indian Creek Chronicles

1. Described by the publishers as “a rousing tale of self-sufficiency” and “a modern-day *Walden*,” *Indian Creek Chronicles* may strike you as neither of the above. He is given provisions, after all, and the connections with Thoreau’s classic may be more contrastive than comparative. The fame of Thoreau’s classic resides in his insights and meditations. When do we see what is on young Fromm’s mind? Does he strike you as being very thoughtful at all? Do you think we as readers are expected to criticize or judge his behavior?
2. The subtitle of this book is “A Winter Alone in the Wilderness,” but Pete Fromm often appears beleaguered by wardens checking up on him, outfitters and hunters, and college chums. Moreover, he has the companionship of his “little rat-like dog” Boone. So how “alone” is the narrator? How does he handle his sense of isolation? What role is played by the books his parents and sister send with him?
3. What problems does Fromm have to confront when it comes to his romantic fantasy of living like a mountain man? He succeeds in trapping a snowshoe hare, for example, but then what? How does the moose he kills fit in here? Why does he show himself thinking of it as poaching in the context of the mountain lion hunt (112)?
4. If Gretel Ehrlich’s memoir *The Solace of Open Spaces* is “gendered female,” Pete Fromm’s is surely “gendered male.” What similarities and differences do you detect in these encounters with nature? Does either strike you as likely to appeal exclusively to one set of readers rather than another? Put another way, do you think men are more likely to enjoy Gretel Ehrlich than women are to enjoy Pete Fromm?
5. What does Pete Fromm learn from his months in the wilderness about how humans should relate to the natural world? Does he make these lessons explicit, or are we as readers expected to read between the lines of what appears to be mostly an adventure story? What are we to make, for example, of the deer and bobcat episode in Chapter Sixteen?
6. After carefully reviewing the final chapter (and the epilogue) of this book, what are your thoughts? What range of images, events, and people does Fromm leave us with? Why does he leave his dog with the bear hunters? His job guarding the salmon eggs connects Fromm with an important role in conservation, but how aware of that has he been throughout his stay?
7. The theme essay cites Wendell Berry, who argues that our biological as well as our cultural roots are in nature. Could you make the case that Fromm’s book supports the notion that our cultural roots are found in nature? Where do you see evidence of that in *Chronicles*?
8. What are the key concerns of this particular community regarding clean air and water, land use, declining species, and other issues relating to *Our Earth, Our Ethics*?
9. Did the concept of a land ethic enter into young Fromm’s decision to go to Indian Creek? How do his experiences change him and his view of the natural world?
10. What other changes do we see in Fromm over the course of his sojourn?
11. How did the author’s self-deprecating humor affect this story and your response to it?

A Sand County Almanac

Aldo Leopold suggests that the best definitions of a conservationist are written not with a pen, but with an axe: “A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land” (68). After this Leopold speculates on why, when he comes upon the choice of the white pine or the red birch, he will always cut the birch, concluding that “I love all trees, but I am in love with pines” (70). While it would not be especially fair to say that if you like this sort of sentiment, then *A Sand County Almanac* is for you, it would not be altogether wrong. As he notes in his forward, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.” This concoction of rambling meditations on the natural world was first published a year after Leopold’s death, and they range from the personal observations keyed to the months of the year to the philosophical, or some would say political, in the last quarter of the book, when he addresses such issues as the esthetics of conservation, wilderness, and “the land ethic.” Consider the following ethical advice Leopold offers near the end of his book: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tend otherwise.” (224-5). Or maybe this sort of passage appeals to you more: “Pines, like people, are choosy about their associates” (86). Or consider this almost casual observation in the small essay entitled “Thinking Like a Mountain,” when Leopold reflects on killing a wolf: “I was young then, and full of trigger-itch” (130). Whatever your preference, this important book deserves to be read closely and carefully.

Author Information

As Robert Finch observes in his introduction to the 1987 edition of *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold was both “a trained scientist” and “a schooled humanist,” and he possessed a “strong poetic sensibility.” Born in Burlington, Iowa, in 1887, Leopold received his master’s degree in forestry from Yale University in 1909 and joined the U.S. Forest Service. First posted to the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico in 1911, he devised a handbook for forest service officers and became active in promoting enforcement of game laws and development of game refuges. He became Associate Director of the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1924, but in 1928 he left the Forest Service to work independently, and in 1933 was appointed to the chair in Game Management at the University of Wisconsin, a position he held for the rest of his life. In 1935 he purchased 120 acres of an abandoned farm on the Wisconsin River which was to become his retreat and personal nature preserve. While he lived with his wife and two sons in Madison, he restored the land and worked out of an old chicken coop he called “the Shack.” Leopold authored a classic text, *Game Management* (1933), which remains in print, and more than 350 scientific and policy-related articles. He died of a heart attack in 1948 while fighting a grass fire that threatened his Sand County farm. Leopold is widely recognized as the “Father of Wildlife Conservation.”

Discussion Questions for *A Sand County Almanac*

1. As Leopold explains in his foreword, the three sections of *A Sand County Almanac* vary considerably in nature, from the seasonally arranged “shack sketches” of the first part, to the “episodes” drawn from his own life over forty years in various parts of the country, to the more “philosophical questions” of Part III. Which of these sections appeals most to you, and why, or in what ways?
2. At this writing Leopold’s book is nearly sixty years old. Does it seem dated to you, or are the issues and his perspective on them still relevant? Do you think he would agree with the slogan coined some years ago, “Wilderness: Land of Many Uses”? Or does that suggest a system of conservation based mainly on “economic motives” (including recreation)?
3. As we see in Part I, Aldo Leopold enjoyed fishing and hunting, and he celebrates the idea of raising one’s own food by gardening and of cutting one’s own wood for warmth. But are these realistic goals? Conservationists are sometimes seen as idealists promoting the life of the pastoral idyll. Does Leopold seem to qualify?
4. Can you identify two or three passages that strike you as particularly “poetic”? What features might be said to typify such moments in this book? Do they read especially well out loud? Do you tend to value such moments, or to slip past them and head for something that has more story elements or material of more political punch or philosophical weight?
5. “Wilderness,” Leopold writes, “is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization” (188). Some would maintain that taming the wilderness and making use of it reflects the height of human achievement. Doubtless Leopold would disagree, and in fact he warns that “Wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow” (199). What are the uses of wilderness? You might want to consult some details of the Wilderness Act, which was signed into law in the fall of 1964. Does it seem to you that wilderness is sufficiently protected, at least in the U.S., or should more be done?
6. Obviously Leopold hoped to further the ideas of an “ecological conscience” and of a community-based “land ethic.” Does it seem to you that the United States, and perhaps even the world, is moving in that direction? What evidence do you see to support that view? What hurdles apparently still remain? Does Leopold appear to offer any practical ways of achieving his goals?

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Surely the most spiritual and meditative of the books in this series, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction. Her solitary "Pilgrimage" along the creek that borders her property in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia, does not resemble that of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, who appear to have been more attracted to communal recreation than to serious reflection on nature and the understanding of the self. But in the free play of her mind over what she sees and investigates, Dillard does enjoy a sort of recreation. Whether we read the book as religious or mystical, perhaps even specifically Christian, may not matter. Certainly she is as likely to cite Thoreau, the Koran, or Pliny as she is to quote the Bible. Very much of this book reflects what Dillard *sees*, what she teaches herself to discern in the world around her; she regards herself not as a scientist, but as an "explorer." The second chapter is entitled "Seeing." Reflecting on the praying mantis and other insects, she notes, "Fish gotta swim and bird gotta fly; insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another" (63). But just twenty pages later we encounter a very different voice: "What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object" (82). Although she uses various kinds of humor throughout, Dillard concludes, "Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest" (270). One must either "ignore it, or see," she observes. Some books may be read casually; this one requests to be read carefully.

Author Information

Born Meta Ann Doak in 1945 to affluent parents in Pittsburgh, Annie Dillard recorded her girlhood experiences in *An American Childhood* (1987). Her parents were tolerant and open-minded, but she proved rebellious in high school. Dillard prospered at Hollins College (B.A., 1967), where she studied English, creative writing, and religion. She married one of her writing teachers, R.H.W. (Richard) Dillard, who has authored more than half a dozen books of poetry. They later divorced, and she has since remarried and is the mother of a daughter born in 1984. She received her master's degree at Hollins in 1968, writing a thesis on Henry David Thoreau, whose thinking and writing has profoundly influenced her work. Dillard began writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* while recovering from a nearly fatal case of pneumonia in 1971. Following receipt of the Pulitzer Prize in 1975, Dillard taught for three years at Western Washington University. She taught subsequently at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where she is an emeritus professor of creative writing. Her dozen published books include *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (1974), poems; *Holy the Firm* (1977), narrative nonfiction; *Living by Fiction* (1982), which she describes as "unlicensed literary theory"; *The Living* (1992), an epic novel set in the Pacific Northwest; and most recently, a novel set on Cape Cod, *The Maytrees* (2007), which has been praised for its "stark and lyrical awareness of the profundity of the physical world."

Discussion Questions for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

1. At one point Dillard writes, "I am . . . passionately interested in where I am" (128). Does it seem to you that this is what she asks of us as readers? Do you think she succeeds in that aim? Where in this book do you find that your interests in where you are and what lies about to be most fully aroused? That is, where does Dillard succeed in making you want to put down her book, take a walk outside, and look about you?
2. In the chapter entitled "Intricacy" Dillard asserts, "That there are so many details seems to be the most important and visible fact about the creation" (129). "It's all in the details," we sometimes say, jokingly. This book is teeming with intricate details. What might be the drawback in that? What are the advantages?
3. One might say this book is dominated by verbs of seeing (see/saw, look, watch, notice) and by the opposite nouns (Scene, view, eye, light). "It's all a matter of keeping my eyes open," she observes early in her book (17). Can you locate two or three passages where such language predominates? What do you suppose is Dillard's intention? How does she get from the visual to the visionary?
4. In her chapter on fecundity Dillard asks herself (and us) what it is about that subject that "so appalls." She has just awakened from a nightmare that involved mating Luna moths and a bed full of fish swarming "in a viscid slime" (160). Many episodes in this book involve procreation and they appear to be at least equally balanced by scenes of death, like the memorable one early on in which a giant water bug devours a frog. What do you think she is getting at here?
5. Does it seem to you that Dillard emphasizes the beauty in nature, or something else (not necessarily its opposite)? In *A River Runs Through It* Norman Maclean describes the brown trout as "being beautiful by being partly ugly." Where do you think you might see evidence of that sort of attitude in this book?
6. What are, for you, the most memorable episodes in this book? Do they possess any features in common? Do you find yourself drawn more, for example, to the episodes involving insects, or trees, or birds, or maybe muskrats? In short, when Dillard is writing at her best, as you see it, what sort of thing is she saying? What is she seeing or thinking about?

Prodigal Summer

Barbara Kingsolver, a writer praised for her "extravagantly gifted narrative voice" (*New York Times Book Review*), has created with this novel a hymn to wildness that celebrates the prodigal spirit of human nature, and of nature itself.

Prodigal Summer weaves together three stories of human love within a larger tapestry of lives inhabiting the forested mountains and struggling small farms of southern Appalachia. At the heart of these intertwined narratives is a den of coyotes that have recently migrated into the region. Deanna Wolfe, a reclusive wildlife biologist, watches the forest from her outpost in an isolated mountain cabin where she is caught off-guard by Eddie Bondo, a young hunter who comes to invade her most private spaces and confound her self-assured, solitary life. On a farm several miles down the mountain, another web of lives unfolds as Lusa Maluf Landowski, a bookish city girl turned farmer's wife, finds herself unexpectedly marooned in a strange place where she must declare or lose her attachment to the land. And a few more miles down the road, a pair of elderly, feuding neighbors tend their respective farms and wrangle about God, pesticides, and the complexities of a world neither of them expected.

Author Information

Born in 1955 in Annapolis, Maryland, Barbara Kingsolver grew up in rural Kentucky raised by parents described in her website as "tolerant of nature study" but "intolerant of television." Although she entered DePauw University on a piano scholarship, Kingsolver graduated with a degree in biology in 1977, after which she traveled in Europe, moving to Tucson, where she earned her master's degree in ecology and evolutionary biology in 1982 from the University of Arizona. She spent about four years as a science writer for the university and a couple of years as a freelance journalist before her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, was published in 1988 and was praised for being both "funny" and "inspiring." In an interview Kingsolver declared she has "a commitment to accessibility" and an implied "contract with the reader" to entertain. At the same time, she is an active environmentalist and is committed to literature as "a tool for social change." Her other novels include *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), and *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998). Her books of nonfiction include *Small Wonder* (2002) and her most recent title, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007), which she wrote with her husband, Steven L. Hopp, a professor of environmental sciences, and her nineteen-year-old daughter Camille. After 25 years in Tucson, she has moved with her family, including daughter Lily, to a farm in southwestern Virginia. In 1997 she was presented the Bellwether Prize for Fiction in support of social change.

Discussion Questions for Prodigal Summer

1. What's the point of the poem "prothalamium" as prologue? [prothalamium: a song or poem celebrating an upcoming wedding]
2. Conversely, what is the purpose of the coyote epilogue?
3. Discuss the characters:
Deanna, the lone woman of the woods

Eddie Bondo, the man who appears out of nowhere with his animal attraction (is there a predator/prey relationship between Eddie and Deanna? Or is their relationship an example of ecological mutualism, where both individuals benefit?)

Lusa Maluf Landowski, the moth lady and widow and outsider (why do you think Kingsolver made this character of such mixed ethnic and religious heritage?)

Cole Widener: What does Deanna begin to learn about Cole only after his death?

Nannie Rawley, the old eccentric who buys salamanders to set them free and refuses to use pesticides on her weeds or apple trees

Garnett Sheldon Walker III, the cantankerous old widower and chestnut tree preservationist

Little Rickie, the nephew with a crush on Jusa

Mary Edna and the other sisters

Jewell; how she and Lusa form an alliance that's critical to both of them. Discuss how their roles as helpmates reverse with time

4. What are some of the ways the author ties characters from different chapters together, weaving a web of the people in this place called Zebulon County?
5. What's this book about? Eating, procreating and dying? "Eating and reproducing, that's the most of what God's creation is all about" (Nannie, 277).
6. How did you respond to the author using Deanna, Lusa and Nannie to reiterate environmental concepts: Don't use pesticides, learn to love bugs, don't shoot coyotes, the importance of biodiversity, etc.?
7. Where do you find the most humor in this story? Why do you suppose the author did that?
8. Why is Deanna so angry when Eddie Bondo first returns and, especially, to *her* secret hollow log?
9. What is Eddie's role in this story? Perhaps it's a literary device: the appearance out of nowhere of a stranger foretelling change coming to the community. Does his behavior mimic that of a male coyote—coming to fulfill his biological role and then disappearing again?

The Solace of Open Spaces

In his famous canonical poem, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” William Wordsworth expressed his confidence in the healing powers of nature. But the scenery on the banks of the river Wye in 1798 appears to have been far more attractive than that of north central Wyoming where, during the six-month long winters, Gretel Ehrlich observes on the opening page, “The landscape hardens into a dungeon of space.” Yet as the title of the book indicates, she found “solace” in the wind-swept landscape near the Big Horn Mountains when she arrived in 1976 to shoot a film. After the death of her Welsh lover, Ehrlich returned to Wyoming to grieve and to rebuild her life. In the dozen essays that constitute this short book, Ehrlich reflects on the toughness it takes to live in the harsh solitude, some of which she experiences by going on drives with sheep herders. “Living with animals,” Ehrlich writes in reference not only to sheep and cows, but also to horses and dogs, “makes us redefine our ideas about intelligence” (64). More than most other writers in this series, Ehrlich balances her attention between the landscape and the people she meets, and she recounts her courtship with Press Stephens, who ran a small sheep ranch and to whom she was briefly married. Throughout the book we are aware of Ehrlich’s powers as the poet of this “unaccountably libidinous place.” For some readers, however, the most appealing moments may be those that appear in the form of aphorisms, the vulnerable (because they are so naked and open to attack), epigrammatic assertions that dominate the title essay; for example, “In all this open space, values crystallize quickly” (10). To the extent that this book amounts to a “gendered” account, it bears comparison (and notably, contrast) with Pete Fromm’s *Indian Creek Chronicles*.

Author Information

Born in 1946 on a horse ranch near Santa Barbara, California, Gretel Ehrlich attended Bennington College and took courses at the UCLA Film School and at the New School for Social Research in New York City. She has been twice married and divorced. Her first two books were collections of poetry published by small presses, but the publication of *The Solace of Open Spaces* in 1985 brought her writing to the attention of a broad audience. Her nonfiction has been published in such anthologies as *Best American Essays*, *Best Spiritual Writing*, and *The Nature Reader*. Her novel, *Heart Mountain*, centered on the Japanese internment camp in Wyoming during World War II, appeared in 1987 and was praised for its “beautifully crafted prose.” In 1991 Ehrlich was struck by lightning while at her ranch in Wyoming and was severely injured. While undergoing treatment in California, she worked on *A Match to the Heart* (1994), which deals with her struggle toward full recovery. Since then, Ehrlich has traveled and written extensively. Gretel Ehrlich is currently at work on a new novel. She divides her time between California and Wyoming.

Discussion Questions *The Solace of Open Spaces*

1. The West has evolved, some might say, into the kind of place Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* has implied it would: a place of solace, healing, and retirement. What do you consider to be the up and down sides of that state of affairs, assuming you agree with the premise? What contributions, if any, do you suppose have been made by this sort of book, or by books like Ivan Doig's memoir, *This House of Sky* (1978), or Mark Spragg's *Where Rivers Change Direction* (1999)? Do you think the West, particularly the northern Rockies area, represents the last chance in the U.S. for people to deal wisely with the earth?
2. In the twenty years that have passed since the publication of Ehrlich's essays, Wyoming has been opened to increased development of various minerals, coal, and oil and gas. Does her lack of reference to that phenomenon compromise the value of this book? How do we balance this sort of well-written personal (perhaps "literary") response to place with the more fact-driven journalistic accounts that are driven by a clear premise or agenda?
3. Ehrlich's essays on Wyoming have been described as sensuous to the point of being sexual or erotic (note, for example, the last two or three pages). In fact, her own romantic relationships become part of the story in this book. Does this make the essays more appealing to you, or do you think she becomes too intimate, too personal, in her approach?
4. Connected with #3, does Ehrlich's approach seem to you to be distinctly "feminine," and if so, do you consider that to be problematic? One commentator has written, "Her desire to blur boundaries between self/body and the natural world is timely and of interest to critics." Do you think it is better to regard nature as an extension of self, or as "other"?
5. Ehrlich's connection with Wyoming may be more personal, even psychological, than environmental. She does not promote herself as a naturalist or ecologist. So why would we include this book in our examination of this theme? Does she advance any ethical view here, directly or indirectly? What are her most important and valid thoughts about open space?
6. Examine a few of the aphoristic one-liners in this book, like "The solitude in which westerners live makes them quiet" (6) or "Everything in nature invites us constantly to be what we are" (84). The title essay runs rife with them. Are some of these quotable assertions, for a variety of reasons, becoming less valid now than they once were?

Who Owns the West?

What appears in the table of contents to be a collection of three central essays framed by a prologue and epilogue was originally published piecemeal in no fewer than sixteen different periodicals ranging in nature from major commercial magazines like *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and *Time* to literary magazines like *Antaeus* and *Ploughshares* and to *Audubon* and the German magazine *Geo*. In the essays of *Owning It All* (1987) and in his memoir, *Hole in the Sky* (1992) Kittredge argued that he and his family, who ran a successful agribusiness in south central Oregon, “ended with a landscape organized like a machine for growing crops and fattening cattle, . . . a dreamland gone wrong.” He rehearses that story in “Heaven in Earth,” the first part of this book, arguing that “We have lived like children, taking and taking for generations, and now that childhood is over.” Part Two, “Lost Cowboys and Other Westerners,” is partitioned into four more-or-less distinct essays that run from ten to twenty pages in length. Those familiar with Kittredge’s nonfiction will know to expect something of a ramble. One moment he is at a reception in the Charlie Russell Museum in Great Falls, and the next he is reflecting on his boyhood in Oregon, and the next he is visiting his friend and fellow writer John Rember in Stanley, Idaho. In the third part, “Departures,” Kittredge travels all over Montana, identifying himself as one of those who came “Seeking to redefine themselves in a new life.”

Author Information

Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1932, Kittredge graduated from Klamath Falls High School and entered Oregon State University in 1949. He married at age nineteen, and following graduation from OSU in 1954 with a degree in general agriculture, he enlisted in the Air Force. He worked on the family ranch until 1967, and then, following his divorce, he remarried and entered the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa. He received his MFA in 1969 and began his teaching career at the University of Montana, where he became friends with poet Richard Hugo. His first two books, *The Van Gogh Field* (1978) and *We Are Not in This Together* (1984), are short story collections. Beginning with *Owning It All* in 1987, Kittredge shifted his focus to nonfiction driven by personal reflections and political pronouncements. His memoir, *Hole in the Sky* (1992), released by a major commercial publisher, vaulted him into national prominence as a spokesman for environmental issues in the contemporary West. In addition to *Who Owns the West?* (1996), his titles include *Taking Care* (1999) and his most ambitious effort on the subject, *The Nature of Generosity* (2000). Now retired from teaching, Kittredge’s most recent books are *The Best Short Stories of William Kittredge* (2003) and a novel, *The Willow Field* (2006). In the early 1980s he co-authored the Cord series of genre Westerns with Steven M. Krauzer. He has edited *The Portable Western Reader* (1997), and with his long-time partner Annick Smith, *The Last Best Place* (1991), a monumental anthology of Montana writing.

Discussion Questions for Who Owns the West?

1. Throughout his career as a writer and teacher, William Kittredge has committed himself to what he calls “The Politics of Storytelling,” which involves, as he sees it, the rejection of outdated Western myths and the definition new stories that involve a cure for “anomie” (lack of purpose and loss of ethical values). Can you sum up the myths of the Old West that concern him? What sort of cure does he perceive? That is, what sort of stories does he think should define the New West?
2. Does Kittredge strike you as more of an idealist about the current state of the West and of the natural environment than some writers with whom you are familiar, or less? Reflect in particular here on the third section of Part Three (pages 114-143). Does it strike you that Idaho, like Montana, “is becoming an out-West theme park”?
3. Despite his title, as a rule throughout this book Kittredge tends to focus on Montana; for example, “Montana is a place where independence and minding your own business tend to be regarded as prime virtues” (108). Do you think this view applies equally well to Idaho? Or do you regard Montana as different from some reason?
4. Especially in the four essays that comprise the second part of this book, Kittredge tends to ramble, perhaps to the point of becoming what some critics might call “self-indulgent.” Do you think that is the case here? What relevance might the first-person memories and reflections have for his apparent thesis? Does he tend to present himself favorably, or otherwise?
5. Review the brief prologue, “White People in Paradise,” and the more fully developed essay that constitutes the epilogue, “Doing Good Work Together: The Politics of Storytelling.” What does he have to say about the rage some people feel over their powerlessness and apparent disenfranchisement? Is that rage at all justified? Does he suggest any response other than defining new stories?
6. Where do you think Kittredge’s writing is most effective, or at least from your perspective most appealing? Consider such moments as his shooting at the badger (104-105), his reflections on the death of Louis L’Amour and the Western writing (73-77), and his observations at the end of the third essay of Part One (32-35).