

The Botany of Desire by Michael Pollan

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

Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, 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 named 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). In *The Botany of Desire* (2001) Pollan blends history, botany, philosophy, mythology, and poetry with an appealing dash of humor. He is married to painter Judith Belzer; they have one son.

Discussion Questions

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 is "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?