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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

From your book review editor — In the future, this column will largely review books that do not easily fit the common categories in academic collection management policies. Often the column will review books that are overlooked in other library review media, which may include topics such as art and gardening, natural history and historical fiction, contemporary issues and poetry. Backlist titles that deserve another life will also be given review consideration. If you have a title to review or one to submit for review, please send it to — Book Review Editor, *Against the Grain*, 11 Orlando Avenue, Ardsley, NY 10502. Any questions should be directed to Barry Fast at 212-924-1601 or email at ABCBARRY@ATTMAIL.COM Thanks. — BF

Saving The World A Quarter-Acre At a Time: Two Books for the '90s.

Book Reviews
by **Ellen Duranceau** (MIT)

Pollan, Michael. *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*. Laurel (Dell), 1991, 0440-50440-6. 304p.

Stein, Sara. *Noah's Garden*. Houghton Mifflin. 1993, 0395653738, 294 p.

Given the perilous state of Planet Earth, there are few questions facing us as important as how we should treat her. Two recent books build an answer to this question by taking us along on the personal journeys of two gardeners who, in working on and listening to their land, have created a new metaphysics of suburban gardening. After reading these books, you will find it impossible to look at that swath of green lawn in front of your house in quite the same way again, and you might just find yourself believing that there is hope for us to be better partners with our Earth through the simple act of tending our gardens.

In *Second Nature*, Michael Pollan, editor of *Harper's Magazine*, invites us to follow as he seeks his rightful place in nature. He finds this place in the garden,

which he conceives of as a mediator or "middle ground" located between nature and culture. In thinking of the garden in this way, he attempts to break down the ingrained American "habit of seeing nature and culture as irreconcilably opposed." Pollan convinces us that a choice between nature or "wilderness" as Americans have been taught to think of it, and culture, or civilization, is a "false choice." He does so with an argument that is an entertaining mixture of personal history, philosophy, sociology, and practical gardening advice, interwoven in a highly readable, serious, yet lighthearted and optimistic book that will appeal to a wide range of readers, including gardeners, landscape designers and historians, ecologists, naturalists, sociologists, and perhaps even philosophers.

The optimism in Pollan's book emerges from his belief that through the garden as he conceives of it we can "provide for our needs and desires without diminishing nature." The first step in achieving this equilibrium is to alter the metaphors we use to think, speak, and write about nature, since these metaphors shape the way we see and therefore act upon nature. Pollan demonstrates the kind of mental shift that is necessary by modifying the metaphors he uses to describe his own gardening during the course of the book. At the outset, he uses warfare imagery, describing his own early skirmishes on his five acres in Connecticut as drawn-out battles between himself and weeds. As his vision of the garden develops, he leaves behind the battle imagery, adopting instead the garden as the central metaphor for how we can coexist with — rather than resist — nature.

Pollan's idea of the garden is built on the premise that man and nature are not locked in a zero-sum game; in the gardener's ethic he develops, the gardener accepts man's interdependence with other forms of life, his own place as an inherent part of nature, and the inevitability that his own actions will influence nature, yet he refuses to assume that man's impact will always be negative. This new gardener holds that there are "kinds and degrees of human intervention," that there are better and worse

ways to develop land: we do not always need to choose between paradise and a parking lot. To find the better ways, the gardener must take his cue from nature, studying her for ideas and identifying local answers to landscaping problems (for example, abolishing lawn in arid areas of Arizona).

En route to (and in delightful digressions from) these revelations about the garden and about nature, Pollan treats the reader to a humorous sociopolitical analysis of garden catalogs, a brief overview of the history of American landscape design and rose hybridization, a discussion of why even wilderness areas like Yellowstone must be "gardenized," a treatise on the metaphysics of weeding, and his personal gardening history. This book is in some ways, then, an odd amalgam of practical and philosophical advice, but it is an amalgam that works. Pollan's tone may be good-natured and lighthearted, but his purpose is sincere and his vision of man living in partnership with nature is one we cannot afford to ignore.

Stein's book, *Noah's Garden*, offers a message similar to Pollan's. Like Pollan, Stein lives on a large piece of land in the Northeast (six acres, in a town called Pound Ridge, NY, in Westchester County). And, like Pollan, Stein argues that from the seventeenth century onwards humans have altered the North American landscape drastically, reducing biodiversity and impoverishing the environment. Stein, like Pollan, proposes a philosophy for gardening with, rather than against, nature. She then takes us further into the practical aspects of achieving this goal, presenting a plan for the transformation of suburbia that would bring native flora and fauna back to our barren, lawn-encased, and chemically-dependent developments.

Stein (who has written before about her property in *My Weeds: a Gardener's Botany*) uses her own journey from traditional gardener to habitat creator to frame her narrative, and this personal approach keeps the book moving swiftly, even in technical passages concerning the local ecology. Hers is a more detailed, specific, and in some ways tech-

nical book than Pollan's, but it is not burdensomely so. Stein makes her case by showing exactly what she did to recreate her own landscape, and the reader will follow her avidly as she describes the progress she has made in over a decade of work, transforming her land into a home for wildlife and native plants that have all but disappeared from settled areas in the Northeast. Her narrative is all the more convincing because she began her journey with the enthusiasms of a traditional gardener, focusing on ornamental shrubs, broad sweeping lawn, and neat, orderly plantings. Only when her "success" resulted in the loss of toads, frogs, fireflies, pheasants, butterflies, chipmunks, and other wildlife did she begin to wonder if her efforts had been misplaced. Her description of the arrival of a bluebird after an absence of forty years is enough to convince us her new vision is the truer one.

Stein's book is also convincing because she quickly cuts to the heart of the issue: it is all very well to create a sanctuary on six acres, but "what is one to do on a quarter-acre lot?" Stein's answer fills her book, but is essentially that we should plant native species, emphasize berrying shrubs and trees from more than one stage of forest succession, and lay out our mini-landscapes such that we have thick plantings along the back and sides of our properties, which, like pieces of a puzzle, could work in conjunction with other similar plots to create a new landscape. This new landscape would support wildlife and a variety of plants by giving them a corridor or backbone in suburbia on which to thrive, creating an interconnected suburban ecosystem which could become "the rich, new landscape; [in which] . . . the new kind of gardener . . . asks not whether he should plant this ornament or another but which patch is missing from his community, how he can provide it, and how animals will move from his patch to the next."

For Stein, this new backbone of ecological diversity in suburbia is "the ark", and her vision, like Pollan's, is optimistic, almost utopian. And yet, one of the exciting things about the book is that her goals seem practical and possible to achieve. Stein doesn't spend much time telling us how to get entire communities to cooperate in seeing her vision become reality (although she briefly outlines tax incentives and fashion pressure as possible motivators), but she does, by beginning with a single reader, show how

each of us can make a difference in the world, even on a quarter acre. This message, like Pollan's, is one of hope, and, more importantly, one that offers the reader a definite course of positive action. As Stein points out, we can hardly rail against the razing of rain forests when we are not nurturing our own backyards.

We have moved too far from the original "wilderness" to regain it now; we have changed our land irrevocably. But Pollan and Stein, by taking us on their personal journeys, offer us a new way to live with the bits of nature that remain, a way of seeing gardening as a means of

reclaiming land lost to misguided straining after the wrong goals. If we were all to heed these fresh, clear voices, if we were all to plant our quarter acres with native species, we might just make this world a better place for ourselves and for other creatures. These are books that could make a difference, books that tell all of us — from serious naturalists to the most casual gardeners and homeowners — that we can meet nature halfway. In an age of cynicism and pessimism, these are books that give us hope that it is not too late. ☞

Short Takes On the ALA: The Publishers' Perspective

by **Mark Sexton** (Mark Sexton Associates, Pelham, N.Y.)

Most publishers viewed this year's ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans as decidedly upbeat, often contrasting it with the latest ABA in Miami Beach. "Traffic was definitely better than at ABA," said **Dara Touma** of **M.E. Sharpe, Inc.**, "and we even wrote some orders—a definite bonus for this show."

Many others expressed their pleasure at both the volume and the quality of the traffic. Science publisher **W.H. Freeman** launched its new line of *Scientific American Books For Young Readers* with the aid of an unusual give-away, a romantic cruise for two on a schooner in the Caribbean. Publisher **Jacqueline Ball** and marketing director **Mary Albi** said they were "totally pleased with the contacts made and the information gathered at ALA."

The unitary exhibition area contributed to good traffic flow, so that even most of the late signups on the edges of the area drew a decent number of librarians, in contrast to the hard-to-find small press area at ABA. Editor/publisher **John Derrick** of *What to Buy for Business*, a monthly consumer guide for small business, drew useful feedback from many of his subscribers and was also able to promote a new book for reference collections, *The Office Equipment Adviser*.

Newcomer **Doug Price**, Executive Director of the **Evangelical Christian Publishers Association** was very happy with the reception his publishers received in their first joint appearance. "We'll

definitely be back again in light of the warm reception we received from many librarians," he said.

Foreign publishers were on hand in substantial numbers, including British, French, German and Spanish-language houses from both Spain and Latin America. Not surprisingly, the Hispanic publishers were among the busiest of the foreigners, including Mexico's **Fondo de Cultura Economica** which has established a base in San Diego to conduct a sustained campaign for U.S. business. Also present were numerous Canadian houses, either in the Canada display or on their own like **Tundra Books** and **Self-Counsel Press**. The latter is thoroughly planted on U.S. soil with an office in Bellingham, Washington and a solid customer base in both the trade and library markets. Marketing Manager **Pat Touchie** said their traffic has increased each year for the last four and was "practically without a letup through the whole meeting."

New Orleans also won out over Miami Beach in the quality and value of the restaurants, the relative ease of getting around, and the general satisfaction with hotels serving the conference. The bad news is that ALA goes to Miami Beach next year, but perhaps the quality will have improved with one more year to develop South Beach and refurbish old hotels that were in terrible shape for this year's ABA. ☞