

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gordon L. Miller, ed. *Nature's Fading Chorus: Classic and Contemporary Writings on Amphibians*. Washington DC: Island Press, 2000. x + 249 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55963-794-7.

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So often when we talk about nature we envision a dramatic landscape of waterfalls and towering mountains, and during time spent in the wild we seek a glimpse of an elk or bear, the shadow of a wolf in the forest, or eagles soaring majestically above forests of dark conifers. All the while, little eyes watch quietly from the edges of creeks and wetlands, from under rotting logs or the sides of trees, while peepers sing the song of returning spring and remind us that nature always remains more complex and interesting than we ever seem to understand. *Nature's Fading Chorus*, a collection of writings on amphibians edited by Gordon L. Miller and published by Island Press, educates the reader on the historical record of amphibians, the ancient and continuing human fascination with these creatures, and their ecological importance even as they undergo a deepening crisis of disappearance and deformities.

The scale of *Nature's Fading Chorus* is ambitious, surveying the writing and knowledge of amphibians from antiquity to the increasingly grim story of decline and deformity in modern times. This book is successful due to the selection of interesting and informative pieces as well as helpful introductions providing historical background and scientific explanations for the periods from which the passages were chosen. The selections demonstrate an evolving and increasingly sophisticated knowledge of amphibians over time, while showing that interest and affection for these frogs, toads, and salamanders has remained a constant throughout human history.

The book is organized into five sections, beginning with ancient writings on amphibians by Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, and later more scientific voices. Particularly fascinating was the belief of Aristotle and several other ancient writers that salamanders were so impervious to

flames and heat that they could actually extinguish fires. Thomas Brown, in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* of 1646, demonstrating the scientific love for direct observation in his refutation of this traditional belief, states quite simply and convincingly that when salamanders are placed in flames they "dieth immediately therein"(p. 29).

The second section is titled "Reclaiming Paradise: Pioneering Nature Writers," and includes pieces from classic naturalists such as William Bartram and Henry David Thoreau. These pieces reveal the naturalists' talent for observation and artful, introspective writing along with a tendency to anthropomorphize nature. Thoreau writes, "are not the wood frogs philosophers who walk in these groves? Methinks I imbibe a cool, composed, frog-like philosophy when I behold them"(p. 51). W.H. Hudson provides a compelling story of a toad's slow journey across a country lane in a passage from "The Book of a Naturalist." Keeping a close eye on this toad's dusty odyssey while chasing off possible predators, Hudson described the traveler's quest: "the toad was still there, still traveling, painfully crawling a few inches, then sitting up and gazing with his yellow eyes over the forty yards of that weary *via dolorosa* which still had to be got over before he could bathe and make himself young forever in that river of life"(p. 61).

Section three is subtitled "The Scientific Essayists," as if implying a certain boring objective analysis, but instead contains some of the more delightful essays in the collection. The section begins with passages from Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *The Origin of Species* and ends with an essay by David Scott, published in 1998. Scott's "A Breeding Congress" displays a jaunty prose style that is both informative and entertaining. He reveals a certain playfulness on the part of his fellow her-

petologists when he writes that in the describing sexual behavior of salamanders a prominent salamander expert “actually managed to have the term ‘spermatophore play’ published in a respected scientific journal”(p. 107). Scott also describes the sexual dance of marbled male salamanders as similar to “a waltz with a touch of slam dancing”(p. 107).

The fourth section of the book provides some of the most enjoyable reading, accessible to even the casual student of nature. Joseph Wood Krutch’s elegant language in “The Day of The Peepers” captures the joy of spring’s rebirth and the peepers’ early announcement of winter’s inevitable ebb. “But the peeper seems to realize, rather better than we, the significance of his resurrection, and I wonder if there is any other phenomenon in the heavens above or in the earth beneath which so simply and so definitely announces that life is resurgent again”(p. 131). One of the most interesting and powerful images from Annie Dillard’s powerful *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is collected here. The story of the giant water bug sucking frogs dry has remained one of the most powerful images from my long-ago reading of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and I felt a certain gratification at discovering that powerful description of nature in grim action between the covers of this book.

The final section of *Nature’s Fading Chorus* is the most scientific and technical, and also the most chilling. These essays detail the disappearances of frogs and the increasing occurrence of abnormalities among frog populations. The discovery by a group of Minnesota schoolchildren of frog deformities in 1995 brought the amphibian crisis into the media spotlight. Herpetologists had perceived certain problems before this now legendary story, particularly the mysterious disappearances of amphibians from seemingly healthy ecosystems around the world. This concluding section of the book includes passages from papers examining different causes for the observed amphibian disappearances and deformities.

What emerges throughout this section is that a vari-

ety of factors are contributing to current problems. While a Stanford herpetologist discovered that trematode parasites provided an explanation for some frog deformities, other problems are not so easily explained. A reading of the essays in the final section reveals that the spread of disease is particularly problematic for amphibian populations around the world. According to Virginia Morrell in “Are Pathogens Felling Frogs,” the chytrid fungus is suspected in the massive die-offs of frogs, toads, and salamanders in Australia, the United States, and Central America as well. The disappearance of amphibians, often quite disturbing in its suddenness, along with the widespread increase in deformities, serves as a quiet reminder that the ecology of the planet is under severe stress and the complete ramifications of pollution, development, loss of wetlands and other habitats, as well as the increase in ultraviolet radiation, still remain beyond our complete comprehension.

*Nature’s Fading Chorus* offers something for a variety of readers. The amphibian lover will be entertained by the different interpretations of salamanders’ and frogs’ natures over several hundred years, not to mention the powerful writing and descriptions of amphibian behavior and characteristics. Even the casual student of nature and writing can take much from this book. The fact that the book ends on such a depressing note is a forceful reminder of the ecological crisis that faces us these days.

Reading this book brought back old memories of long hours wading in creeks in pursuit of leopard frogs and warm spring days lying on a wooden dock raptly watching breeding rough-skinned newts floating suspended in a beaver pond. Maybe once I finish this review I’ll find an old pair of shoes for wading, and with hopeful heart seek out a pair of yellow amphibian eyes gazing at me from a murky pond.

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