
Reviewed by Madison Stump-Smith (Bowling Green State University)

Published on H-Environment (July, 2022)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

The land marks people in a multitude of ways, as Alison Townsend makes clear in *The Green Hour: A Natural History of Home*. This collection of personal meditations on memory, place, personal history, and trauma is full of vulnerability, authenticity, and lessons important in the ever-accelerating socio-environmental conditions of the Anthropocene. It is a personal history of Townsend’s many moves and transformations in relation to the environment, as well as a tribute to the memory and legacy of her mother. Townsend finds her family history and loss reflected and transformed in her relationship with the land, but one that has taken several decades of close observation and contemplation to develop.

The grief and the need for healing after the loss of Townsend’s mother is the main catalyst of the book. Townsend catalogs the several times she moved as a young girl and an adult, some of which were motivated by school or career changes, others by loss and grief, and still others by the desire to have an adventurous summer at a small pond in Vermont. The text can read as one narrative of Townsend healing from trauma through her contemplation and observations of nature. It can also read as twenty-five separate short memoir essays that show the joy and excitement brought on by watching small changes in nature.

*The Green Hour* is a thought-provoking exploration about personal memory and nature. Townsend finds her memories of her mother changing over time. She could not remember the physical size of her mother. When memories were clouded by time and familiar stories, photographs and written documents pull Townsend to personal history and spark her memory. But the memories steeped in immersion in the natural environment are the most powerful to spark her healing. The planting of violets and pansies with her mother as a child bring back the details: the smell and feel of soil in the garden. She is transported back to childhood springs with her mother as she plants the garden at her home outside of Madison, Wisconsin. She gives agency to the plants to transport her to experiences far in her past. Her narrative
speaks to the value of nature for memory, healing, and personal fulfillment. As the environment changes and memories become all humanity has of previous conditions, observation, contemplation, and nature writing are an invaluable source of personal growth and historical documentation. While Townsend has decades of observation collected in *The Green Hour*, any novice nature writer can foster their own connections by mirroring her process.

Beyond examining human impact on landscapes, Townsend shows how landscapes change humans. In exploring her backyard environment after a move to Wisconsin, she learns to observe and connect to the physical space she now inhabits. There is no better way to heal from grief, trauma, and a perpetually in-motion culture than to sit and watch the flowers, swans, and cranes outside the back window. For Townsend, home expands beyond the four walls of her built house to include the living beings, moving water, and changing seasons in her backyard. She learns that everything is connected and that any human change, whether positive or negative, has an impact on the surrounding environment. A striking study of the various ways humans can learn from nature, this work of nature writing is of the same scope as those by Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* [1974]), Kathleen Dean Moore (*Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water* [1995]), and Terry Tempest Williams (*The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America’s National Parks* [2016]). Townsend has shared a powerful narrative, steeped in emotion, healing, and vulnerability, one that resonates with a wide readership.

Townsend’s story is needed more than ever. Environmental studies, humanities, and histories aim to discover the reciprocal relationship between humans and their natural surroundings, as well as their blurry boundaries. The Anthropocene complicates this goal. It is difficult to connect to a natural environment when conditions are changing so quickly, generating what some scholars name “nature deficit disorder,” a term first coined in Richard Louv’s 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Townsend shows readers effective ways to connect to their beyond-human environment, including the simple task of watching the land change with the seasons or the diurnal cycle, watching for the “green hour” of illumination by the sun.

For me, Townsend’s book reveals insights into rootedness in the land and the ways the connection to the natural world is inseparable from emotions and memory that define us. It is almost impossible to resist thinking how future historians will see this book in their narratives about our times. The field notes of the observations in her backyard from New York to Oregon to Wisconsin are a description of our contemporary environment and a script of how people in the early twenty-first century process socio-cultural-environmental conditions. In accessible and poetic prose, Townsend appeals to a general audience. She engages her readers into becoming citizen environmental scientists and humanists. It is a call for slowing down and steeping oneself in contemplation in this accelerated and highly contested stage of the Anthropocene.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57716

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.