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John Hess’s *A Perfectly Ordinary Place: An Intimate View of Life on Brawley Creek* is a coffee table-sized book that brings together science, art, and literature to illustrate the passage of different time scales through Brawley Creek, Missouri. The author admits that Brawley Creek is not a universally remarkable place; however, through the alchemy of attention, affection, and connection that he has felt for this place for the last four decades, readers can begin to understand his larger points. Hess notes that “there is a big difference between a generic trail and a treasured place, and the gap between them points to the difference between place as a location and Place as a consolidation of every aspect of the location: history, ecology, and culture” (p. vii). By exploring the Place-ness of Brawley Creek, readers can also consider the historical, ecological, and cultural treasures that can be found in their own backyards. Considering the ecological processes through biological knowledge, illustrative photography, and poetic prose, this book considers big, existential questions that the natural world poses to us that we sometimes ignore to focus either on the lost past or already-lost, apocalyptic, and anthropocentric future.

To accomplish this, *A Perfectly Ordinary Paradise* walks readers through time and space, seasons and scale, to think about time and connections. The book is split into four parts: “Timeless,” which considers and questions time; “Linear Time,” which dives into the long geological history, the present state of the creek, and the ways in which forests show time; “Circular Time,” which unpacks how the seasons of winter, spring, summer, early fall, and late fall manifest and reveal themselves on Brawley Creek; and “The Forest and the Trees,” which returns to contemplate the use of seeing the present as it is. By moving through different scopes, species, and scales, Hess presents a celebration not just of Brawley Creek, but of nature more broadly. He uses what he refers to as “the little infinity” of Brawley Creek to understand the bigger infinities of the world. In so doing, he tries to bridge binary thinking of humanities/science and nature/culture by being interdisciplin-
ary, poetically and scientifically walking readers through this changing system.

I initially did not agree with the premise of this book. Certainly, the attempt to provide sweeping ecological considerations of space, place, and time through an examination of one specific location is not new in environmental history. This is with good reason: many of these histories are metaphorically and literally rooted in specific places. But the method that I was less convinced of was the text’s focus on the present. In not quite looking backward and assuredly not looking forward, focusing on the present seemed to me at best a missed opportunity, and at worst an undercutting of the historical analysis of anthropocentrism, which has set the planet and humans toward specific political and material futures. But, much like moss on a rock, it grew on me. I had no need to worry as neither the case, and it was refreshing to only focus on the present and on a specific Place. The focus made me contemplative of my presence in my present in the Places that are important to me.

My favorite part of this book is its photography. The images are beautiful, delightfully shot and edited, and I agree with Hess that the photos’ edits get closer to portraying the truth of what he is writing. He freely admits that many of the images were edited in post-production, explaining: “‘Photoshopped’ is often used to imply that the images aren’t trustworthy, but in this book, it means that I have adjusted the raw photographs to make them clearer and sharper, and to present accurately the colors as I experienced them when I took the picture” (p. vii). These images, which include such stunning shots of flora and fauna, insects and fungi, made me, an avid amateur nature photographer, wonder how some of the pictures were taken. Hess could easily publish a short book with nature photography and editing tips. While all of the images are beautiful, some additional editing might have enhanced the last few chapters of the book, where images tend to overwhelm or repeat the information presented.

There were aspects of the book that distracted from my overall good experience of it. But these were mostly typos and general formatting issues that stuck out to me as I read. Also, there were some metaphors and references that were not completely fleshed out in the text, and I needed to find the reference to make sure I understood the point Hess was making. For example, there is a reference to Gertrude Stein’s writing about roses that did not immediately register in my brain (it was her quote “Rose is a rose is a rose,” from her 1913 poem, “Sacred Emily”). Regardless of these small complaints, this book would be a pleasant experience for many different kinds of readers. Those who live in or love Missouri would very much appreciate adding this book to their collection. Those who love to think interdisciplinarily about ecosystems in the present and nature as it currently is would value this book’s wisdom and wit. And certainly, especially for those who love nature photography books, the size and quality of pictures would make this an excellent display copy for a coffee table.