

**Review: Fauna and Flora, Earth and Sky: Brushes with Nature's
Wisdom**

by Trudy Dittmar

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Trudy Dittmar. *Fauna and Flora, Earth and Sky: Brushes with Nature's Wisdom*. Sightline Books, Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2003. 236 pp. ISBN 0-87745-872-3 (hardcover). US\$29.95

Nature is available to all of us. Observing and enjoying it and its mysteries is an instinctive attitude. Similarly, writing of nature and wilderness is an innate stance, a great attraction that has been luring beginners and experienced writers for centuries.

Contemporary authors of nature, inheritors of a rich tradition, often seek after the symbolic or factual use of the natural world to make assumptions about the human-nature relationship and the role of environmental issues in the community imagination. Although this literary space appears as a niche, it is exploited to discuss almost everything. The wide spreading of nature writing constructs bridges with other disciplines, like ecology, socio-cultural theory, art, and history. Cross-fertilization ensues that critics envisage a new, unified knowledge.

All of these features can be found in this book-the first by Trudy Dittmar-a collection of decidedly elegant essays that communicate familiarity and complex feeling with nature. In the prologue the author states her directives: observation of the natural world, description of natural sciences, and consideration of the interplay of these with human life.

In the text the threads of personal stories and the observations of animals, plants and landscapes, combine with scientific remarks-at an educational level-of nature and environment. Based in reflection with a broad perspective, the writing moves through varied geography, from the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming (chapter 1, "Prong Horn") to the mountain town of Leadville in Colorado (chapter 5, "Going to Rainbow") and the Pine Barrens of New Jersey (chapter 8, "Still Point").

Humanity is not at the center of the discourse. On the contrary the text warns us not to adopt that point of view: "we were anthropomorphizing like crazy, projecting elements of human melodrama onto the scene" (p. 7). Watching pronghorn bucks fighting for the harem, or a glacial pond with salamanders (chapter 6, "Paedomorph Pools and Other Blighted Bounties"),

suggest reflection on immortality and the limits of a lifestyle based on commodification.

The natural scenery evokes resonance with the author's life as a woman: the lights of the blue sky are a metaphor for romantic affairs when Dittmar likens the "fast and flashy" men she loved with meteors, lightning, and stars (chapter 10, "Men and the Blue Lights of Nature"). In Dittmar's writing, the universal appeal of nature and its simplicity contrast with passion. Rhetoric and extravagance are avoided, even when the stories deal with the appearing idiocy of cows (chapter 2, "Cows, Arrogance, the Nature of Things"), or the sense of violated privacy after examining the intimate parts of dead animals, such as a porcupine and a deer (chapter 7, "Cache").

Although mirroring very personal experiences, *Fauna and Flora, Earth and Sky* is successful in handing down the spiritual values of nature and the richness available through understanding and adopting the natural world as a source of inspiration. Due to this book, Trudy Dittmar received a Whiting Writers' Award in October 2003. This award is presented annually to ten "emerging writers of exceptional talent and promise."

<http://www.whitingfoundation.org/whiting_2003.html>

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