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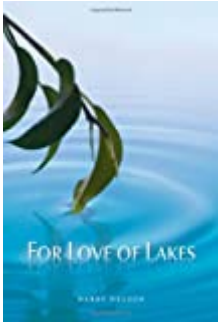

Darby Nelson. *For Love of Lakes.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011. 224 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61186-021-4.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

Author Darby Nelson shares his love of lakes with readers in a language rich in poetic description and filled with fascinating lake facts. *For Love of Lakes* is his journey that immerses us as well.

In his own words: âI resolved to undertake a journey of exploration to investigate the relationship between people and lakesâ (p. 3). With his journey of personal exploration we feel we are exploring right alongside him, and are now invested in the future of these lakes. The book is peppered with some lively drawings of sea creatures and plant life that we are both familiar with and yet seem alien as he describes them more fully to us.

Nelson has written the most difficult kind of book there is, however. He tries to be relevant and current, scientific, and poetic, yet knows that everything could be changed tomorrow. What he relates is a series of snapshots and reflections as personal as the nick of a razor on a groggy morning. These difficulties makes me wonder who his intended readers are. Sometimes he writes so distinctly of such mundane topics that perhaps only someone who has never seen a lake might appreciate this.

Nelson wonders why humans admire the view of lakes so much without realizing whatâs happening underneath the surface–in both a critical and yet admiring tone. He gives us a series of chapters joined only by his own experiences, each devoted to a different topic, in which he tries to answer a number of questions along the way.

But along the way I found questions of my own that remained unanswered at the end. This was perhaps deliberate on Nelsonâs part–and of course, we all know that no book can ever be all-encompassing.

My own research on tribal environmentalism was enlivened here by his references to Native American treatment of lakes. In my research, I learned that Indians recognized that overpopulation was part of their problem, and when they recognized degradation–water making them sick or lack of wildlife where once before it flourished–they moved on to allow the area to regenerate. They would have recognized, as we do today, that lakes are part of what we would call âthe commons,â something that we all share equally. The problem with the commons is that no one ever really feels the ownership, or responsibility, that comes with it. Itâs like throwing trash out your window. Should we believe the side of the road belongs to everybody and somebody else will take care of it? Yet with proper regulation, the commons

donât have to be a tragedy. One example would be the acequia irrigation systems in arid New Mexico. One of Nelsonâs complaints in this book is this lack of proper regulation for lakes.

He finds elements like phosphorus are important, except when thereâs too much of it. He also explains why cold water fish such as lake trout cannot survive in the deeper waters in the summer. They die off because they canât evolve fast enough. When Nelson, an aquatic ecologist, catches his trout he feels poorly enough about its future that he has to let it go.

He wants us to understand lakes from the inside, and avoids giving controversial reasons for their decline, such as overpopulation, or solutions, such as complete edge monitoring or restrictions placed on living along the commons. Can we remove from humans their love of lake views? This is not one of his questions.

Jarring at first to this writer is the authorâs use of both past and present tense. I spent some time trying to figure out why. His use of present tense reveals something interesting at the end of the chapter and reflects a journey to find answers, while writing in past tense allows him to give information as he goes.

Covered topics include: childhood memories, why Nelson became an aquatic ecologist, discussions of various aspects of Henry Thoreauâs work, individual lake personality, geology, invasive species, tulliga and trout fishing, ice fishing, canoeing, glacier effects, sulfur and bad air effects, and ancient human lake patterns–there is a new way of looking at lakes in every chapter. While a couple of the chapters seem incomplete, most are dynamically fleshed out and satisfying.

I was less fascinated by Nelsonâs relationship with Thoreau, which he discusses at the beginning and again at the end. But other readers more familiar with Thoreau (as I wish I were) might enjoy the way he framed his book with this relationship. My favorite chapter was âDark House,â where Nelson shares his love for ice spear fishing northern pike as a family tradition. The dark house is the ice house and water is the light. He demonstrates symbolically how perception matters, with reflections on how âmental tendencies appear often to nudge reason aside and shape perceptions in ways that produce behaviors with unintended consequencesâ (p. 242).

I sometimes had to go beyond his text for answers. I never got a good grasp of what limnology is. So after reading I pulled out an encyclopedia and learned that it is âthe scientific study of lakes, streams, ponds, and other bodies of fresh water.â[1] That Nelson assumed his readers would know this suggests that he expected them to be of a certain scientific bent, which I am not. But I didnât mind being taken along for the ride.

Another question Nelson asks is how to improve the lake to please everyone. But is that a valid question? He makes a point in nearly every chapter of introducing us to a lakeâs individual personality. It might be more valid to ask how we can help the lake retain itself, whether people like it or not. Nellie Lake in Ontario is a good example. Coal and smelting plants killed this lake and Nelson takes us on a tour to see if life is coming back after it was hit with so much acid.

He notes a scolding of children by their mothers as well–âpee before entering the waterâ (p. 227). But humans always have. Itâs a natural instinct. Population makes the difference in that respect–too many people âpeeing in waterâ leads to trouble. Nelson never relates what he finds as being related to overpopulation, although he does indicate recognition that all living things pollute. I wanted him to tell me what ideal clarity is–if both lack of clarity and too much clarity are bad. How is there hope for balance in nature when humans never do anything with balance in mind? We are not taught to live in harmony with nature. So where is balance? I did not learn that here.

The book has an extensive bibliography but no index. The point is to follow Nelsonâs journey from start to finish without worrying what you might find along the way.

The question of why humans love a scenic lake view remained unanswered for me as well, perhaps deliberately. When it comes to fresh water, I suspect itâs the security. We all need water to drink. Nelson tells the story about how the Homo sapiens in our ancient past won out over the Australopithecines because Homo sapiens controlled the water. He makes it sound as if they controlled the water for the view, when even early humans knew they needed water to drink. A similar extinction pattern I was aware of was that of the Neanderthal population, who were either destroyed by or absorbed into the Homo sapien population. So his reference here sent me on another quest.

I found several sources that denied this âbeing absorbedâ theory; one author noted that the Neanderthal die-out was gradual, that they began to inbreed, with the main cause of extinction being climate change. Some do not accept the idea that the two distinct groups even met,

while others feel thereâs good reason to accept the interbreeding/absorption idea. Another believed Homo sapiens survived because of their variable diet, while Neanderthals needed (or wanted) big game, so their die-out came symbiotically. Another believed that though they coexisted, their territories hardly overlapped. In fact, there are about as many ideas about why Neanderthals disappeared as there are researchers. The point Iâm making here is that we have to be prepared to accept each theory for what it is–something unproven. Nelson cites one source here and notes that Australopithecines did not typically live by lakes (p. 26). One source is not enough on which to base a claim of fact. Fighting over water sources as a necessary ingredient for survival is certainly one possibility, but one thatâs not been proven.

Homo sapiens didnât win the view, although this is a pretty theory–we won the right to survive. And our continued fascination with the view of water is more likely related to this ancient recognition of the necessity of water to survival. We take it for granted today–but buying land on the waterfront is a kind of reassurance for an unknown future.

Ultimately, thatâs the message Nelson shares here. Get personal with your lakes, and letâs keep winning the right to survive. âAbsent understanding, our love of lakes must ever remain unconsummatedâ (p. 242).

Overall, I realized that our love of nature stems from our experiences as children. I played in the woods behind my house and so love trees, especially the biggest. All children need to be given some chance to bond with nature–not just experience it.

Given an uncertain future and the possibility that all humans will run short of fresh drinking water, this book can help us try not to take lakes for granted. The authorâs journey uncovers a world well worth reading about.

Note

[1]. âLimnology,â *World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: World Book, 1988).

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