

Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum

Community Read

DISCUSSION GUIDE

(This guide is adapted with permission from the Longwood Gardens Community Reads Discussion Guide.)

The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature

By J. Drew Lanham

Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum Community Read, June-July 2021

The Community Read is designed to encourage reading for pleasure and start a conversation. Focusing on literature about gardens, plants, and the natural world, we are featuring an exceptional book (paired with a similarly themed younger readers' book) through a variety of programs, discussions, with the **Ypsilanti District Library**. For more information about the Community Read, go to <https://www.ypsilibrary.org/2021/05/nature-cr/>

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **How important is it to help children connect with nature?**
2. **Why are birds an important part of our world and its many ecologies?**
3. **How has racism, at times, shaped Lanham's experiences with nature in a discouraging and negative way?**
4. **How can family dynamics encourage or discourage interactions with nature?**

Chapter: FLOCK

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think the author uses the word "Colored" in the book's subtitle, instead of Black or African American? What significance does the word *colored* hold to him? Why is it important to him to qualify who he is when describing his "love affair with nature?"
2. How much do you think Lanham's life with his family on the Home Place influenced his career choice of ornithologist, wildlife ecologist and professor? Could he have followed the same path if he did not have the daily interactions with nature that fueled his passion and imagination?

Quotes to Spark Discussion

- “I believe the best way to begin reconnecting humanity’s heart, mind, and soul to nature is for us to share our individual stories.” (Me, An Introduction, p. 7)
- “Sometimes we learn how to be by observing people we don’t want to be like.” (p.93)

Chapter: FLEDGLING

Discussion Questions

1. Is it surprising that the author, a man of science, had such an active imagination as a child? Is there something about birds that fuels the imagination?
2. Lanham says of the family’s cows: “[They] were so much more than stress and labor to Daddy. They were a release from things that he could not control, four-legged confessors. He loved those cows.” (p. 122) Why are interactions with nature therapeutic for so many?
3. Why do you think the author relates water so strongly with his father? What role did his father play in his life?

Quotes to Spark Discussion

- “Somehow my color often casts my love affair with nature in shadow. Being who and what I am doesn’t fit the common calculus. I am the rare bird, the oddity: appreciated by some for my different perspective and discounted by others as an unnecessary nuisance, an unusually colored fish out of water. But in all my time wandering I’ve yet to have a wild creature question my identity. Not a single cardinal or ovenbird has ever paused in dawn-song declaration to ask the reason for my being.” (p. 4)
- “I’ve expanded the walls of my spiritual existence beyond the pews and pulpit to include longleaf savannas, salt marshes, cove forests, and tall-grass prairie. The miracles for me are in migratory journeys and moonlit nights. Nature seems worthy of worship” (p. 96)

Chapter: FLIGHT

Discussion Questions

1. Who are some of the Teachers Lanham references? What are the gifts/lessons they offer him as a student, son, father, or human?

2. Specific birds are mentioned throughout this book. What are some that you can recall? How does Lanham use birds in his writing to create place or convey a message?
3. Racism and its legacy cast a long shadow over Lanham's life. Might you name a few of these examples? Is Lanham hopeful for the future? What signs of hope does he offer? What work must be done?

Quotes to Spark Discussion

"The wild things and places belong to all of us. So while I can't fix the bigger problems of race in the United States—can't suggest a means by which I, and others like me, will always feel safe—I can prescribe a solution in my own small corner. Get more of people of color 'out there.' Turn oddities into commonplace. The presence of more black birders, wildlife biologists, hunters, hikers, and fisherfolk will say to others that we, too, appreciate the warble of a summer tanager, the incredible instincts of a whitetail buck, and the sound of the wind in the tall pines. Our responsibility is to pass something on to those coming after. As young people of color reconnect with what so many of their ancestors knew—that our connections to the land run deep, like the taproots of mighty oaks; that the land renews and sustains us—maybe things will begin to change." (p. 157)

"I don't expect everyone to feel the same way that I do about the land. For so many of us, the scars are still too fresh. Fields of cotton stretching to the horizon—land worked, sweated, and suffered over for the profit of others probably don't engender warm feeling among most black people. But the land, in spite of its history, still holds hope for making good on the promises we thought it could, especially if we can reconnect to it." (p. 181)

"Trying to do what's best by nature is a guessing game with long-term stakes. Good decisions mean that the soil and water will prosper. The wild things will prosper. In that natural prospering all of us will become wealthier in richer dawn choruses and endless golden sunsets. The investment is called legacy. If I can see, feel, touch, and smell these things once more on a piece of land I call my own, I'll be home again. So maybe there is hope. Home, after all, is more than a place on the map. It's a place in the heart." (p. 212)

SELECTED QUOTES

- “The years have melted, softened, much that I once saw as black and white, morphing it into shades of gray. My good is Aldo Leopold’s good; an ethic of inclusion, promoting the wholeness of nature and treating the land and the wild things that live on it as fellow citizens to be respected and nurtured.” (The Bluebird of Enlightenment chapter, p. 142)
- “I think about land a lot. In fact, I am possessed by it. I think about the lay of the land, how it came to be, what natural forces have changed it, what human forces have mangled it, how concrete and asphalt doom it. I think about the promise it holds for the future and what history it preserves from the past.” (Thinking chapter, p. 177)
- “Suddenly I realized that I did have heroes in my family: the survivors who had lived through the most inhumane conditions and had yet produced farmers and teachers and college professors.” (Digging chapter, p. 198)

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