



John McPhee. *Annals of the Former World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998)



Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Knopf, 1999)



Brad Leithauser. *Darlington's Fall: A Novel in Verse* (New York: Knopf, 2002)



Terry Tempest Williams. *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (New York: Pantheon, 2001)



Edward O. Wilson. *The Future of Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002)

Five on Nature

By James L. Hayward

Through memoir, poetic fiction, essay, and exposition, five accomplished writers examine the sublime, the puzzling, the powerful, the weird, the majestic, and the magical of nature.

In *Annals of the Former World*, journalist John McPhee has assembled five earlier works into a thick but personal memoir of visits to landforms and roadcuts along Interstate Highway 80. Local phenomena serve as launch sites for planetary perspectives. "The poles," begins McPhee, "have wandered. The equator has apparently moved. The continents, perched on their plates, are thought to have been carried so very far and to be going in so many directions that it seems an act of almost pure hubris to assert that some landmark of our world is fixed..."

Plate tectonics provides the subtext for an epic narrative of earth and human history writ large, of lithic and mental processes that shape what we see and think. *Annals of the Former World* is at once the majestic tale of a rocky planet and the intimate sketch of some of those who people it. This book won McPhee a Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1999.

Darlington's Fall: A Novel in Verse probes the question of meaning through the life of Russel Darlington, a quixotic boy-naturalist-turned-natural-history-museum-curator. In the face of great adversity, this kind but tragic figure gradually comes to terms with the benign indifference of a Darwinian

world. He eventually finds personal, if not universal, resolution to the problem of theodicy when he risks falling into the life of a woman he secretly has loved for years.

In this intricately patterned tale, poet, professor, and Guggenheim Fellow Brad Leithauser weaves a brilliantly layered but accessible story in the once-popular genre of narrative verse. For most people, wading through a poem several hundred pages long would require an act of courage. Not so with this piece. The reader moves effortlessly from one stanza to another; rhythm and rhyme are barely evident at the conscious level, but move the text along with uncommon elegance and grace.

In *For the Time Being*, writer-naturalist and Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard probes the paradoxes of birth, suffering, and death. Dillard's quirky curiosity and penetrating vision fascinate and perturb. Each chapter stitches together ten crazy-quilt patterns: birth, sand, China, clouds, numbers, Israel, encounters, thinker, evil, now. Her technique underscores her point: Life begs understanding.

Bird-headed dwarfs, buried clay soldiers, English clouds, aerial detritus—all

things teach us what we'll never know. Dillard writes of the enigmatic Divine and, with Augustine, asks: "What wonder is it that you do not understand? If you do understand, then it is not God." Dillard finds meaning through doing: "God decants the universe of time in a stream," she writes, "and our best hope is, by our own awareness, to step into the stream and serve, empty as flumes, to keep it moving." Brilliantly disturbing, *For the Time Being* challenges our most basic assumptions.

"Red is the most joyful and dreadful thing in the Universe," wrote G. K. Chesterton. "It is the fiercest note, the highest light." Biologist and writer Terry Tempest Williams knows red...the red rock upon which she lives, the red passion she feels for the Utah desert...the red rage she feels toward those who desecrate this land.

In *Red*, Williams shares passionate encounters with the rocks, the water, and the petroglyphs of Utah's Redrock Wilderness. "I want to keep my worlds wild," she writes. She succeeds. This is a book of erotic love, of fiery determination to hang on to what remains of the Utah wilderness and of the spiritual renewal that springs from such a place. This is the most personal, passionate writing ever by the acclaimed Mormon-born author of *Refuge* and *Leap*.

For more than a half century, Edward O. Wilson has prodded, moved, and reshaped the science of ecology. Now this elder statesman of science turns his attention to caring for a planet he has helped us understand. *The Future of Life* is a realistic but hopeful look at the state of the earth and our eventual environmental legacy. Wilson's prologue, "A Letter to Thoreau," is itself worth the book's modest price.

In the seven artfully crafted chapters that follow, Wilson contemplates the miracles of life, ponders its current troubles, assesses its worth, offers a realistic approach to environmental stewardship, and moves the reader to celebrate its wonders. "A civilization able to envision God and to embark on the colonization of space," he opines, "will surely find a way to save the integrity of this planet and the magnificent life it harbors."

For anyone who loves the creation, this is a great-hearted book by a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and "prophet for the earth."

James L. Hayward is a professor in the Biology Department at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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