

Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum

Ypsilanti District Library

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 conversations. Focusing on literature about gardens, plants, and the natural world, we are featuring an exceptional book (paired with a similarly themed younger readers' book, *Ruby's Birds*) 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 positive interactions with nature?**

ME: AN INTRODUCTION

Drew Lanham opens *The Home Place* with the line "I am a man in love with nature." This love has direct influence on his career and hobbies: ornithologist, wildlife ecologist, professor, birder, and hunter. The passion comes to him through his ancestry and family roots. His goal in sharing his story is the hope that "somehow I might move others to find themselves magnified in nature, whomever and wherever they might be." (p. 6)

Chapter: FLOCK

In this section, Lanham introduces us to the land and people of his Home Place, his family's rural property in the town of Edgefield in the western South Carolina piedmont. Lanham describes the ecology and geography of the region, and lovingly details the property itself. The Home Place includes his family home ("The Ranch") and a separate home for his beloved grandmother, Mamatha ("The Ramshackle") – where he spent most of his time growing up. His hard-working parents cultivated acres of fruit and vegetables to feed the family and to sell, as well as raising beef cattle to supplement their teachers' incomes. Mamatha had a use for almost every wild plant growing outside her door, and still cooked and heated with wood gathered by Drew and his father from the Home Place. Young Drew, after completing his chores, could walk for hours exploring the wildness of the Home Place, without having to explain where he'd been. In his explorations, he learned about the seasons and the flora and fauna of his home and created memories which, he says, "continue to haunt me pleasantly."

Lanham's family is inextricably tied to his memories of the Home Place. Mamatha, his paternal grandmother, needed someone around after her husband died, and Drew was "loaned" to her to help around the house and keep her from loneliness. She was very spiritual, believed in the supernatural, and prepared her own potions and herbal remedies to administer with incantations when treating illness. Hoover, Lanham's father (a respected middle school earth science teacher), looms large in his memory as "some sort of superhuman being" who took care of things at the Home Place because it had to be done for his family, and done the right way. His mother Willie May (a biology teacher) was "equally adept at the finer points of fetal pig dissection and at canning peaches, pears, and peas." Lanham and his three siblings have essentially, and much to his regret, lost their strong connection to the Home Place land. He has vowed to continue the passionate love of wild things that he learned on the Home Place as a religion of sorts, because "nature seems worthy of worship."

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

In this section, Lanham touches on influential events of his youth. He always had a fascination with flight, and would launch himself from ladders, trees, roofs, and haystacks in an attempt to defy gravity like the birds, butterflies, bats, and airplanes that he admired. He noticed birds from a young age, and they were always present in life on the Home Place. After getting his first field guide in second grade, the budding ornithologist and birder studied them and began to know their names: “even if I couldn’t fly like them, I could watch them and imagine life on the wing.”

The gift of a BB gun taught him that creatures’ lives shouldn’t be taken just for the experience of doing so, after he regrettably killed a sparrow for sport. His childhood love for cowboy movies fueled his imagination when he was tending his family’s herd of cows, even though it was disappointing to him that he was a teenager before he knew that there had been cowboys that looked like him. In the poignant chapter “Life’s Spring,” Lanham parallels the spring that provided water to the Home Place with the loss of his father at a young age due to his increasingly weak heart. The spring, the lifeblood of the property, could no longer support the Home Place without Hoover to tend to it, and must be replaced by a well.

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.” 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

This section begins with an internal revelation by Lanham that sets up a trajectory/journey of self-discovery beyond his professional pursuit of science. Lanham writes about his own emotional journey. He celebrates his teachers—living, dead, literary, scientific, and nonhuman—that offer life lessons along the way to be a good student, good son, good father, good scientist, good teacher, and good writer. Lanham admits to his nature as “hoop jumper” both personally and professionally. He faces challenges in a series rather than as a ‘big plan’ to be achieved. Lanham follows his heart to expand his world and understanding. He challenges himself and thereby create new hoops to enrich his journey. One example is his interest in hunting as an adult. From these challenges he discovers new meaning (jawbone of a slain deer represents much more, for example).

As part of his journey, Lanham consciously decides to embrace caring into his professional work in an act he calls “embracing a new religion.” Encounters with the preeminent thinker E.O. Wilson and exploring his own thoughts about his past in a writer’s workshop help to point the way. Lanham more deeply examines his personal and family history that has been shaped by racism and its legacy; his own immediate family; and the birds, plants, and ecology of his native South Carolina land. This reflection on history yields a lesson on the potential (and hope) that a connection to land and nature represents for others more broadly. What might this connection to the land be? To discover for himself, Lanham digs metaphorically through both evidence and memory. Genealogy reveals a path with frustrating dead ends, unforeseen connections, and the painful truths about slavery. Because of this journey Lanham realizes that one’s own family were indeed heroic. They offer him a patchwork legacy to both family and the land to draw upon personally and professionally. Lanham closes by considering how he might combine this legacy with that of one of his teachers, Aldo Leopold, to manage 120 acres that still is held by his family.

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? What bird or birds are you familiar with?
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

- “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)
- “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)

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