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Books that Matter

by Ellen Finnie Duranceau (MIT Libraries)

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Column Editor's Note: This column is the first in an irregular series of short reviews of books that matter: books that deserve to be devoured and discussed. — DV

First, two books about plants. It's easy to take plants for granted or even to make the assumption that books about plants are dry and narrow, but these books are not like those brussel sprouts you choked down as a kid "because they were good for you." These books entertain and educate while they blast the assumption most people have about plants as the passive backdrop for more interesting activities of humans and other animals. These books offer an important reminder that plant life is inextricably bound up with human life; we depend on plants for the air we breathe and the nutrition that keeps us alive.

Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire* (NY: Random House, 2001) challenges us to think from a plant's perspective. In a kind of social history of plants, he describes how particular plants have succeeded on a grand scale when they have managed to capture the attention and interest of human beings; the book is divided into four sections, each one covering a plant that has co-evolved with human beings to meet human needs: the apple, the tulip, marijuana, and the potato.

His broader subject, as he acknowledges it, is the "complex reciprocal relationship between the human and natural world." To the extent that human beings forget that they are, whether they are aware of it or not, part of that complex reciprocal relationship, **Pollan's** analysis is an antidote to much that ails us in our urbanized, industrialized, technology-driven American life. **Pollan** selected his four plants because they "represent four important classes of domesticated plants (a fruit, a flower, a drug plant, and a staple food)," but also to correspond with four central human desires, demonstrating his belief that "human desires form a part of natural history in the same way the hummingbird's love of red does, or the ant's taste for the aphid's honeydew." So his book, he says, is "a natural history of the four human desires these plants evolved to stir and gratify."

The fascinating tales he weaves include the true story of **Johnny Appleseed** (which he demonstrates has been heavily sanitized for mass consumption); the tulip trading craze of 17th century Holland; marijuana's role in the deeply human desire to use psychoactive plants to alter consciousness; and the perils of genetic engineering, including a call to imagine a new agricultural future

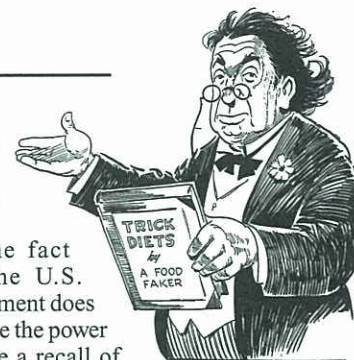
— a future necessary to protect us from the agricultural biotechnology that has introduced foods into the food chain without even a partial understanding of the potential consequences, and launched a brave new farming world, in which farmers lease rights to certain crops and are forbidden from planting its seeds the next year, as an infringement of intellectual property. (Yes, this is eerily reflective of the locking down of scholarly information in the digital realm.)

Pollan says that his aim in writing *The Botany of Desire* is to "put us back in the great reciprocal web that is life on Earth." In this, he succeeds brilliantly; human beings need to be reminded that they are not above the rest of "nature" but part of it, and **Pollan's** clever turning of the tables provides that reminder in a narrative that will interest those intrigued by sociology, psychology, plants, evolution, and history, as well as those concerned about the future of food.

The second book about plants is *Tales of Shaman's Apprentice: An Ethnobotanist Searches for New Medicines in The Amazon Rain Forest* by **Mark J. Plotkin** (NY: Penguin Books, 1993).

Plotkin's book opens a window into the world of the Amazon rain forest, where indigenous people use plants as medicine. His book also tracks the decline of cultures untouched by Western influence until just a few decades ago. **Plotkin's** adventures seeking out plants and learning to trust and be trusted by the tribes in the Amazon is a riveting anthropological study that reminds us of how imperative it is for us to protect all life on Earth.

As engrossing as **Pollan** and **Plotkin's** books are, if you read only one book in 2003, it should be *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* by **Eric Schlosser** (NY: Houghton Mifflin 2001 / 2002 version with afterword). In a searing, heavily researched (and footnoted) study, **Schlosser** investigates the full range of sociocultural fallout from our growing reliance on fast food, from unfair labor practices, unsafe food, ballooning problems with obesity, devastation of the environment, loss of the family farm, and the harm to society resulting from the greed of agribusiness, continuing on through the destruction of the American landscape and the dramatic impact on the entire planet — with foreign countries accounting for most of the latest growth in fast food chains. **Schlosser** reveals vast amounts of detailed and truly shocking information that every American should know, such as the despicable ways farm animals are raised and slaughtered by large farming conglomerates,



and the fact that the U.S. government does not have the power to force a recall of tainted meat — thanks to the lobbying of corporate interests.

There is some very limited good news in this book: some farmers are fighting the agribusiness tsunami; **McDonalds** and other fast food businesses have experienced a plateau in growth; and consumers — yup, that's you and me and our friends and relations — can make a difference by choosing not to eat at **McDonalds**, **Burger King**, and the rest. Read *Fast Food Nation*, weep, and then take action to change our world while there is still time.

After reading any one of these books, let alone all three, you'll need a dose of **Jan Karon's** *At Home in Mitford* (NY: Penguin Books 1994). **Mitford** offers a retreat and reprieve from our chaotic world, which seems awash in deep, terrifying, and intractable problems. This first book in her best-selling **Mitford** series focuses on the characters populating a small rural town (based on a town in North Carolina), and centers on **Father Tim**, an endearing 60-ish Episcopalian minister trying to do the right thing by his flock. In this first book, **Father Tim** faces the challenges of becoming a parent to a lost dog and a lost boy, and coping with failing health, romantic interest in his new neighbor, and mysterious occurrences at his church, as well as smoothing over a wide range of troubles among his congregants. The book unfolds with artful character development and an eye for the telling detail and good humor as well as touching portraits of humanity, offering the reader a slice of real, if slightly idealized life, lived as life should be.

Religious affiliations or beliefs aside, this is a great read. I purchased the entire set of six novels based on how wonderful I felt reading this first one. Finding hope and feeling good about people are byproducts of this book; relocating those elusive qualities matters as much as unearthing the dark and scary truths revealed by **Pollan** and **Schlosser** or the losses shown to us by **Plotkin**.

This is what books like these, books that matter, do for us — they illuminate the full range of humanity and incite us to be our best selves.

Happy Reading,

Your book lover. 