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Branches Over Ripples: A Waterside Journal by Brian Bartlett

Reviewed by **JENNA BUTLER**

Gaspereau, 2017 \$29.95

When we're forced to turn away from the routines and activities we most hold dear, it's then that other options show us their promise, if we're lucky, and this is certainly the case for Brian Bartlett in his latest book, *Branches Over Ripples: A Waterside Journal*. While managing a troublesome left knee, one that will someday require invasive surgery, Bartlett finds himself slowly rebuilding his capacity to hike and creating for himself a new project that becomes completely engrossing along the way.

For the space of two years over the course of the book, Bartlett settles himself down by various bodies of water within range of his home—rivers, lakes, waterfalls, streams, and more—and engages in a sort of writing he has never done before, richly situated in immediate place and grounded in the moment in which he finds himself. Extending beyond simple journal entries, these pieces become deep contemplations of place and human interaction with environment.

In his earlier collection *Ringling Here & There: A Nature Calendar*, Bartlett, an accomplished and much-published poet, crafted 366 brief prose entries that tracked the landscape around him through the seasons. *Branches Over Ripples* takes this concept in a different direction, offering lengthier, more involved prose segments located closer to home. This writing *en plein air* affords his work great energy and immediacy, while also presenting a challenge: how to *be* in these spaces as a writer, navigating not only the landscape but those others encountering him in it. It's a book about the twin acts of participating and witnessing: Bartlett simultaneously seeks out natural spaces for quiet contemplation, witnesses the world around him, and is regarded warily by others who encounter him on his hikes (sometimes with a bit of consternation):

Some strangers react dramatically to the sight of someone sitting near a body of water and writing or just gazing around with pen and open journal in hand (many minutes passing between or within the paragraphs and sentences). A few minutes ago, concealed by rocks and boulders, two women walking a spaniel turned the corner. Interrupting herself mid-sentence, one of them looked over and called out in a startled voice, "Oh I'm sorry!" as if talking by the lake wasn't within her rights, or as if she felt guilty at having thrown my train of thought off the rails. (57)

It's an intriguing exploration of the mirrored processes of observing and being observed, and just as Bartlett comments knowledgeably on his surroundings, he is perplexed and intrigued—and sometimes frustrated—by the human element of the landscape that occasionally observes him in return.

Again, although initially appearing akin to a sequence of journal entries in style, Bartlett's brief pieces in *Branches Over Ripples* are nuanced and multivalent: they link ecological study to music, to his own home life, to literature and theatre, and to community. He is equally as likely to mull over the name of a specific bird as he is to link such commentary to the larger moral issues of writing about the land:

The first full day in Great Village last month, the *Chronicle Herald* featured a cover story on species depletion. Each time I sit by some body of water to write, I wait for what feels like the best time to cite details from the article I scratched down in the back of this journal, yet week after week the time hasn't seemed ripe. Now and then I feel a prick of conscience that these hours of outdoor exploration and writing are self-indulgent, hedonistic, too cut off from the deprivations and traumas Earth faces. (117)

His writing is wry and intelligent, omnivorously shifting from deeper philosophical and political contemplation to a sudden obsession with an unknown bird that has only just now crossed his field of vision, and thus the book walks us in and out of time, too, from the immediacy of Bartlett's waterside writing to the lengthier and more in-depth contemplations that underpin each entry.

This sort of nature writing—anchored lightly in the moment, yet roaming broadly and with a ravenous sort of curiosity—makes *Branches Over Ripples* so much more than just one additional wilderness journal. Along with Bartlett, we find that the world of the waterways is just as cryptic as the world of human beings. It is rich and heady, spirited and perplexing, and requires a constant rigorous attention. Like Bartlett's earlier publications, this too is a gift of naming, of finding precisely the right word for the light, for that bird, or for the quality of its call. A thoughtful and beautifully written book, *Branches Over Ripples: A Waterside Journal* will have you thinking carefully about our intimacy with place and our questionable comfort, when walking in nature, with the mirrored gaze of seeing/being seen.

JENNA BUTLER is the award-winning author of three books of poetry, *Seldom Seen Road, Wells, and Aphelion*; a collection of ecological essays, *A Profession of Hope: Farming on the Edge of the Grizzly Trail*; and the Arctic travelogue *Magnetic North: Sea Voyage to Svalbard*. Her newest book, *Revery: A Year of Bees*, essays about beekeeping, climate grief, and trauma recovery, is out with Wolsak and Wynn in October 2020. A professor of creative writing and eco-criticism at Red Deer College, Butler runs an off-grid organic farm in Alberta's north country.