

BOOK REVIEWS

Earth Perfect? Nature, Utopia and the Garden

Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs (Editors) Black Dog Publishing, London, 2012, 305pp, ISBN 978190731750
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A yearning for nature, and modern Western societies' nature deficit, is a current topic of discussion in the media. It is apt timing for this beautifully illustrated volume of eclectic essays exploring 'humanity's attempt to carve out an ideal place in nature': the search and creation of a perfect earth.

Co-authored and edited by Annette Giesecke (University of Delaware) and Naomi Jacobs (University of Maine), the essays bring together experts from law, architecture, literature, science, and geography, each reflecting on the relationship between the garden and humanity by considering humanity's search for utopia. The publication was the result of audience appreciation for the co-authors' work during a meeting of the Society for Utopian Studies in North Carolina, and it has met with such positive response that it became the basis for a conference held in 2013 and a second edited collection titled *The Good Gardner*, which was scheduled for release in early 2015.

Organised into six chapters, there are three essays dedicated to each section, exploring the ideas of 'being in nature', 'inscribing the garden', 'green/house', 'the garden politic', 'economies of the garden', and 'how then shall we garden?' They have been carefully selected and are easy to read, while also prompting the reader to consider the wider theme for the collection. Many questions are raised as the essays progress. What is our ideal garden? How do we address the problems of our environment by gardening? Can gardens serve utopian ends? How can we sustain a harmonious life in nature? By highlighting that the concerns are 'far from new' (p. 13), the essays tell the story of the past, present and future through case studies, including the ancient Roman gardens, the role of botanic gardens, zoos as a romanticised paradise, and a revealing account of the 2010 BP oil spill from the Bitta-Blue farm.

The co-authors set the scene in their introduction, explaining their perspective on gardening, nature and utopian dreaming by giving a historical overview that weaves together their observations from the past with modern sociological evidence. This fascinating technique of weaving together the past with the present continues through the essays and is a refreshing way to consider the relationship between humanity and nature.

The first essay, entitled 'Gardens and the Way of Things', is a rich exploration by David E. Cooper on the virtues of gardening and their relationship to nature. Leading the reader on a walk through the history of gardens and the changes in style over time, the author poses questions to further understand the relationship between people and the natural world. The illustrations in this essay are highly visceral, and this essay gives the reader a frame to commence their walk through the rest of the compilation.

Later in the book, Donald Dunham gives an in-depth discussion about the relationship between nature and architecture. His writing style conveys a sense of narrative,

and he gives an excellent account and definition of his view of architecture. Weaving in poignant quotations from practitioners and poets helps to give a sense of the ongoing debate regarding this topic. Towards the end of the essay, Dunham draws examples from a wide variety of projects, including well-known works such as Villa Savoye. Other examples illustrate the blurring that occurs between nature and architecture. To conclude, he considers what it is like to live with and to be nature. Considering these ideas from a wider lens is part of the appeal of this collection.

In the final chapter, Irus Braverman's essay on 'Zootopia', coined for the piece, explores the intertwined relationship between zoos and nature. It is fascinating to consider the zoo as a theme park and as a protected garden where order is celebrated, as well as an oasis, a place to escape. This essay is a fascinating reflection on the human relationship with zoos. The author gives a clear history, with insight into the landscaping design changes that have occurred. The term *zootopia* is likely to be one that will be discussed in more detail in years to come as the world continues to seek greater connection to nature.

All of the contributing authors write using accessible and clear language, drawing from a wide range of sources that make their perspectives unique and informative. The illustrations and images enhance and complement the text and are visually stunning. Their inclusion is fitting and necessary, helping the reader to identify with each essayist's key messages.

Another important feature of this publication is the book design itself. Given the size and length of the essays, the design makes the text more manageable and easier to read. The essays each include detailed notes at their conclusion. These elements enhance the material and give the reader greater understanding.

With such a wide appeal and highly esteemed contributors, the book will delight and inspire. It encourages readers to return to it often and find something new in the writing and images. This publication is an extremely useful and beautiful addition to the library of anyone who, as the co-author's write in their dedication, 'are lovers of nature' (p. 4).

Reviewer Biography

Miranda Mason is a dynamic educator whose multitude of experiences contributes to her future focused style of teaching and love of learning and the natural environment. She is passionate about making learning engaging, relevant and purposeful by utilising technology and teaching students how to be flexible, adaptive thinkers, prepared to meet the requirements of their time. Miranda has written numerous publications supporting teachers to explore environmental challenges in their classrooms. She holds a postgraduate qualification in Student Guidance and Counselling.