

BOOKS ET AL.

HUMANS AND NATURE

Fields of dreams

By Sandra Knapp

In a simple construct, writer and nature lover Tim Dee shows how our landscapes profoundly affect who and what we are. His at-times poetic paean to human-altered landscapes in Britain, Ukraine, Zambia, and the United States explores the meaning of the relationship between humans and the world they have altered, created, and in large part seemingly destroyed. Baba Dioum, the Senegalese conservationist, noted, “In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what

Last Stand (drenched in blood from a changing way of life): four fields of grass, exhibiting four very different stories of human interactions with landscapes. With great subtlety Dee introduces another theme of four into the story, the passing of the seasons in his own personal field, a fen in Norfolk. His journey, and ours, comes to an end as he notes, “There are no right angles in the seasons, but there are corners and there came a day one late August when I could see round one on the fen and watch the year turning.” Dee writes with an honesty that is both refreshing and astonishing—his starting point is that “much of my happiness has come from being outside,” something all field biologists have in common.

Much of what we today know about ecosystems is built upon the observations of our predecessors, such as Leonard Blomefield, a 19th century naturalist who kept (he called himself his works’ keeper, not its author) a meticulous record of the happen-



Field of reeds, Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire.

we have been taught.” Dee, however, shows clearly that teaching isn’t all that matters—actually experiencing makes a big difference as well. In these days when school field trips are curtailed and natural history teaching is on the wane, *Four Fields* offers a plea for a closer look at nature, not in a scientific sense, but from the heart.

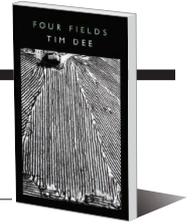
Woven through with literary and historical references, the book takes readers on a journey from the fens of East Anglia (much altered by an almost continuous loop of people’s practices), to the wild grasslands of eastern Africa (inhabited by people since humans evolved), to the sterile fields around Chernobyl (where nature has been put on hold), to the rolling hills of Custer’s

ings in the Norfolk fens between 1820 and 1831. Blomefield recorded first blossom, cessation of blackbird song, the sight of the last swifts, everything. Dee reckons that a walk with him would have been “like walking with a recording angel who could channel the song of the earth.” The fens—low, flat, flooded areas in East Anglia—are an extraordinary habitat, one long subject to alteration by people. They have been drained, planted, flooded, and mined for peat. More recently, one in particular, Wicken Fen, has been preserved as it might have been before human interference. But Wicken Fen shows how such interference is in fact part of the natural way of things in the fens: left to itself, trees invade and destroy its open grassy boggy character. So management is necessary; human hands have been part of this landscape for so long that without them, it would not exist.

Four Fields

Tim Dee

Jonathan Cape, 2013. 288 pp.



We often think of human alteration of habitats as a peculiarly European, Old World sort of thing. But humans have been almost everywhere—the “terra preta” (black earth) of apparently virgin Amazon forests is a signature of past human activity. We are a part of the diversity of life on Earth and have had an effect everywhere, not just in fields.

Dee’s four fields, and the many side journeys that he makes along the way through the year, all reveal different ways in which people have interacted with the land: The grasslands of Custer’s Last Stand in Montana now farmed by descendants of those who defeated him and the eeriness of the dead land around the Chernobyl reactor in Ukraine both reflect the essentially ephemeral nature of humans and of nature itself. Both are ever-changing, and sometimes the obvious is not easy to see.

For a bird enthusiast, Dee is remarkably observant about other organisms. His praise and understanding of John Ray’s compendium of the plants of the Cambridge (England) area written in the 18th century are both accurate and inspiring. In fact, the breadth of knowledge he displays about not only natural history but also literature and history could well be intimidating. I haven’t read many books that refer to, among many others, Darwin, Tolstoy, Keats, Dante, and Shakespeare or whose author doesn’t “know any sexier lines in literature” than those from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that describe the “last day of creation when animals crawl out of the soil into life.” But just relax and relish the ride.

Four Fields is an intensely personal book about our interactions with the world around us. Dee reminds us that truly seeing requires more than a glance; careful observation takes time. He also reminds us that the landscapes we inhabit are dynamic—much managed by humans but always changing over time, through seasons, and among places. Above all, his book reminds us that there is much to celebrate in the seemingly ordinary. Nature is endlessly fascinating and will well reward those who take the time to observe the world around them and to see themselves as part of it.

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