

Outstanding in his fields



Four Fields by Tim Dee

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FIELDS OF DREAMS
A checkerboard of wheat
fields in the US

Tim Dee has a passionate love for fields with grass growing in them. In his new book, he has chosen four of them that he knows in different parts of the globe — in the green plains of East Africa, the prairies of Montana, the wrecked world around the nuclear plant of Chernobyl, and the English Fenlands, among whose fields and marshes he lives. But the individual fields are really just jumping-off points for his forays into the wider country around them. All the places he writes about have history and wildlife, and he has fascinating tales to tell about both.

In Kenya, Dee, a BBC radio producer, goes to “the grassiest place you’ve ever seen”, the flat lands of the Masai Mara, where wildebeest feed and then move on in vast hordes to follow the rains. In Africa, he also goes to Zambia, where he strays into the trees and sees a remarkable bird, the honeyguide, which leads humans by its calls to a bee’s nest in a tree hole. When the human digs the honeycomb out, the bird

hopes to get a few scraps of it. In Montana, he is absorbed by the war between the American pioneers and the Sioux. Grass still covers the battlefields, but the rest of the prairie is now farmland. It was fences, he says, that really drove out the Indians — and along with them all the rest of the marvellous grass. Near Chernobyl we find him in the grass collecting grasshoppers that a Danish scientist will test for radioactivity. There is still wildlife in this deserted, deadly place, from swallows to black grouse to moose, but he grieves that it is all sick, and often deformed.

Back in the Cambridgeshire fens, he contemplates the land with happiness. He knows that the ancient swamps had to be drained and given over to farmland, and

north “with their black eye-stripes like compass needles all looking the same way” is good, and the “jam of blackbird song” will pass — the song is fruity, after all. But a little egret like “a nervous white towel” in the sky strains, I think, too hard. Here and there one can scarcely see the foliage for the verbiage.

But all this springs from Dee’s intense desire to convey his feelings about grass, the level lands where it grows, and the life, both natural and human, that accompanies it — and he succeeds mightily in doing that.

Derwent May



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only occasionally feels a spasm of bitterness at some things that are there now. He still finds the ghosts of the past everywhere — in the birds that are still there, in the buried peat on which new grass is now grown to make turf for garden lawns. Haymaking in summer sends his thoughts to a famous mower — Tolstoy, who liked scything in his fields as much as he liked making love to the peasant girls around him.

His book is at times overwritten, with too high a density of literary and historical allusions, and especially of bird similes and metaphors. Wheatears facing