

OTHER

Boundary Layer: Exploring the Genius Between Worlds

By Kem Luther. 2016. Oregon State University Press, 121 The Valley Library, Corvallis, OR, USA, 97331-4501. 240 pages, 19.95 USD, Paper, 11.99 USD, E-book.

Boundary Layer: Exploring the Genius Between Worlds is, in essence, an ecological travelogue that also combines philosophical reflection on the dynamics between people and nature. The series of eight essays varies in focus from biological (e.g., moss, fungi and lichens), ecological (e.g., dune systems, plant associations and parks) to human constructs of nature (e.g., land ethic, the human biome and classification). Each essay tells multiple stories but uses a single ‘boundary layer’ (as described below) as its narrative focus.

The author explains his fascination with the boundary layer, both physical and conceptual, as a space that is neither one thing nor the next; it is a place that defines its own rules and should be valued accordingly. It is where things act upon each other and instability is constant.

He describes these areas of high dynamism for each of his essays. They can be natural, such as the mutualism between fungi/algae or mycorrhizae and tree roots, or the shifts in dune ecosystems. Such delineations can also be constructed, such as what is ‘wild’ versus not, and classification systems, such as British Columbia’s biogeoclimatic zones. All visited sites are in British Columbia, with many on Vancouver Island where the author now lives.

The book is more than a naturalist study, travel description or philosophical introspective, as the author often gives as much space to describing his companions on nature excursions as he does to ecological examinations. His fascination with the drive of naturalists is interestingly contrasted with the ecology that each studies. Their history, motivation and personal idiosyncrasies are all committed to paper. He also draws out the importance of the European plant sociology schools, brought to Canada by Vladimir Josef Krajina of Czecho-

slovakia, who used these “methods to organize the ecosystems of Canada’s West Coast” (p. 59). This story is told against a landscape of shifting 20th century politics.

The author endeavours to present each essay from a scientific and humanities perspective. His way of explaining interrelationships between things as well as basic biology is engaging. The first person, journalistic style of writing is accessible through most of the book until the last essay, which delves deeply into philosophical constructs of nature. To account for his shift in language, this essay would have better been divided into two pieces focussing on wilderness reserves for preservation and the changing construct of nature. It is in this last chapter that his graduate training in analytic philosophy and Hegel’s writings is evident.

The book includes black and white photos in each chapter, alongside some line drawings and diagrams. These are not always well explained or integrated into the text layout. There is a detailed list of works cited and index. It is a very portable book and the division into essays means a reader can start and stop at will. For me, the first essays, which focus more on defined biological and ecological interactions, are the strongest. I enjoyed the author’s explanations of how things work and his weaving of the people sharing nature with him into his narrative. Not every essay followed this pattern as tightly. I also liked the amount of history included in each chapter to frame the understanding of the ecology. This combination helped provide a much more rounded narrative than other nature essays that I have read. Supplementary content, including bios of Luther’s ‘companions into nature’, can be found at www.stegnon.com.

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