

OTHER

Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief

Edited by Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman. 2017. McGill-Queen's University Press. 332 pages, 37.95 CAD, Paper, 110.00 CAD, Cloth.

I went out of my usual comfort zone to review this book, feeling that it might be too intellectual for me, but wanting to extend myself a bit. The subject is grief and mourning for environmental change and I have had a share of that, so I felt somewhat qualified. Pamela Banting opines on the cover that, "while scholarly in nature, it [the book] is accessible to general readers who might be struggling with ... environmental loss, geographical displacement and activist burnout". There can't be many thinking people who don't qualify in one or more of those categories.

The material in the eleven main chapters covers a huge range of topics, from the fairly obvious (in this context) – mourning in different traditional societies (Chapter 2, Menning) and the ramifications of the decline of sparrows in the United Kingdom (Chapter 4, Whale and Ginn) – to the much less obvious: the way that extinction affects natural soundscapes (Chapter 1, Krause), the role of art in ecological grieving (Chapter 8, Barr), and podcasting environmental grief (Chapter 9, Mark and Battista). A thread that seems to hold many of the chapters together is the idea that grieving is a necessary process in the context of loss, that some sort of catharsis will help us to move on from the source of our grief. The problem with environmental grief is that it seems endless. We are besieged by bad news at every turn: coral bleaching, melting permafrost, species extinctions, particulates in the air, plastic in the ocean: the bombardment never relents. As Arundhati Roy says, in *The God of Small Things*: "...the less it mattered, the less it mattered. It was never important enough. Because Worse Things had happened... Worse Things kept happening".

Krause's chapter on natural soundscapes added another grief for me. Krause suggests that these soundscapes form the basis for human music, surely our greatest achievement and one that impinges very little on the environment. If the gradual fading of nature's sounds – the songs of birds, whales, and frogs, everywhere much diminished, the wind in the trees, the bubbling of free streams, already everywhere channeled and impounded, and the lapping and crashing of the ocean waves, soon to be tamed by wave-power installations – impinges on our ability to create and sustain music, the loss for all of us will be catastrophic.

A much more relevant subject is the role of public grieving via ceremonies, songs, monuments, blogs, and art installations in helping to raise awareness and hence change behaviour towards an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. Most of the chapters touch on this topic, and the authors describe many ingenious ways in which consciousness is being raised, but it is hard not to recognise that after several decades of increasingly shrill warnings, nothing much seems to change.

Who will enjoy reading this book, apart from the obvious audience of similarly interested academics? Actually, enjoy is not the right word here. It is impossible not to be touched by sadness when reading many of the chapters. Perhaps the act of reading the book can become part of our grieving process? I think it will appeal to those who appreciate the sweet sorrow of melancholia, and have some useful and perhaps counterintuitive lessons for those involved, professionally or by avocation, in conservation messaging. However, don't pick it up for a light read. Both in terms of content and of style, this is very heavy going.

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