Review of *Essays to My Daughter: On Our Relationship with the Natural World*


Reviewed by

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*Essays to My Daughter* (2023) is the semi-biographic retirement project of an experienced academic, educator, father, philosopher, naturalist, and river rat. Through a series of essays, Dr. Steven Simpson uses his life experience to elaborate on themes within environmental education, outdoor recreation, and environmental philosophy. His use of personal narratives is more than just a writing method; it is a philosophical stance and model of one of the central messages of the book. As Simpson states, “The purpose of this book is to point out that each individual has a personal environmental philosophy intertwined with his or her individual experiences in nature, but it takes a bit of conscious reflection to get it out” (p. 3). To facilitate these personal journeys, Simpson avoids making conclusions and instead lays some thoughtful ideas and questions in front of the reader. He invites us to interrogate these provocations against our own experiences. The weaknesses of *Essays to My Daughter* are in the concepts Simpson dismisses or bypasses, not in the inquiries he probes.

The organization of the book is thoughtful but loose. Individual essays are written so that they can be studied independently. However, there is also an intentional progression that adds depth. This organizational style is reflective of the authors that Simpson most frequently references including Henry Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold. Simpson's project is inspired by these writers, and his book is a stylized continuation of their literary traditions.

Simpson's essays are broken up into three parts. The first is named *The Pond and the Shack*, which is a reference to those Places most influential to the legacy of Thoreau and Leopold. Here, Simpson uses personal narratives to highlight the ways writers have enhanced his experience with the natural world. Simpson builds to a message about reading: “When we read good nature writing, it usually is not so much a fresh idea as a confirmation of an insight we’ve developed on our own” (p. 42).

Part II, named *Sketches Here and There*, is a series of stories about the different ways Simpson connects to places. This section explores the remarkable moments that are often related to repetitive, mundane, or modest contexts. Some stories serve as reminders to the reader to “value the unusual, but not necessarily the rare, events in nature” (p. 47). Others ask us to remember “that special things occur when we spend enough time in the natural world” (p. 47).
These narratives would serve as quality examples to anyone studying or teaching Yi-Fu Tuan, David Sobel, David Gruenwald, or other scholars of Place. However, what distinguishes Simpson from these academics is his lack of conclusivity. For instance, rather than argue that time in the outdoors leads to pro-environmental attitudes, Simpson states: “the strongest definitive statement I dare to make now is that people who played in nature as children continue to play in nature as adults” (p. 50). This cheeky non-conclusion exemplifies Simpson’s skill. The reader is left reflecting on the value of play for both children and adults.

Part III has significant merit for reflective inquiry. Simpson titles this section Continuums because all but the final essays explore a tension between two conceptualizations of the self. For example, in Chapter 19, Simpson contrasts the sojourner, who encounters new places along a journey, from the homcomer, who finds meaning in longstanding connection to a place. This dichotomy resonates with the field of outdoor education, in which expeditionary learning is placed under the same banner as local environmental education. While Simpson is not the first person to point out these oppositions (e.g., Watchow & Brown, 2011) he reduces anxiety about choosing the best stance. He places no value on any side of these continuums. Instead the import lies in knowing how one has moved along them and where one is headed. Any person who wishes to bring self-reflection into their classroom or into their environmental philosophy may find value in these continuums.

Despite these insights, the book makes at least one questionable claim. Simpson’s account of the history of environmental education frames sustainability education as the placeless modern alternative to what Simpson calls “old-school nature-based education” (p. 79). Simpson is correct in asserting that sustainability education often lacks a focus on cultural and personal connections to nature. Likewise nature study has been an educational movement for over a century (Kohlstedt, 2005). However, it is misleading to assert that sustainability education is a new kind of education that is replacing nature-based education. The term Education for Sustainable Development was first codified in 1992 and can be traced to the origins of modern environmental education in the 1960s and 70s (Wals & Kieft, 2010). Conversely, place-based education was first offered as a critique to environmental education in the mid-1990s (Sobel, 1996). One could argue that calls for connection to nature, at least at local levels, is a more recent movement than sustainability.

This oversimplification of history gains significance when located in one of the book’s major motifs; Simpson coming to terms with aging. The notion that Simpson is part of an older generation of outdoor educators is significant to many of his narratives. While it is important to discuss generational rifts and the wisdom that is often lost over time, Simpson occasionally uses this narrative to dismiss recent discourse and movements. For instance, Simpson’s take on “wilderness” is wholly uncritical of the concept despite that we are more than two decades into scholarship problematizing the social construction of wilderness for its racist, ableist, sexist, and sometimes genocidal applications (Callicott & Nelson, 1998; Cronon, 1995; Spence, 1999). Instead, Simpson upholds 1990s era wilderness ethics à la the Watermans (Waterman & Waterman, 1993).

Yet my critique is not merely an accusation of omission. Simpson occasionally indicates that he is aware of how modern audiences might respond to his work, but chooses not to engage with them. For example, he describes how his friends critique his most prized texts: “they tell me the list is too American or too white or too heavy with the transcendentalists. Women, but not so much men, notice that if not for O Pioneers!, I’d have no women authors” (p 39). This self-awareness could have been an important moment to add nuance to the discussion. We are in an era when the mainstream environmental movement is publicly grappling with the racism and classism of its foundations. Many of us environmental educators would be interested in hearing from folks who are aware of these problems but still find some value in the old white guard of environmental philosophy. However, Simpson’s engagement with whiteness ends abruptly after this sentence. As stated previously, Simpson is an excellent question-asker. I am
left disappointed that he takes no time to ask himself or his audience what recent critiques mean for his relationship to the writers who have added so much meaning to his life.

Educators and lovers of nature-writing should be weary of Simpson’s approach to social and generational conflict. Still, this does not detract from the value and artistry of his book. There is ample merit to it as a tool for inquiry and self-reflection. Moreover, many readers will find this a touching and enjoyable read.

References


