Books

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This book has received acclaim from every reviewer that I have read. I must dissent. As an autobiography, it is splendid; as a local history, it is vivid; as a dissertation on nineteenth-century Naturphilosophie, I guess it is a good place to begin. But as a book about nature and gardening, Second Nature is almost worthless.

Michael Pollan is an uncommonly good writer. Though many people have learned to write clearly and succinctly, only a few can paint with words like Pollan. His writing makes the reader feel like a hungry guest at a gourmet dinner, on the one hand wanting to wolf the insights but at the same time wanting to savor the metaphors.

In his first chapter, “Two Gardens,” Pollan’s autobiographical account of his early gardening days reminded me of Russell Baker’s wonderful Growing Up. Pollan tells us about his gardening mentor, a grandfather who, upon semiretirement, developed a vegetable garden that single-handedly could have supported a farm stand. How the crafty old businessman would disarm his negotiating opponents with bushels of fresh produce is the stuff of dramatic comedy. And the scene of his non-gardening father in his underwear—his usual leisure outfit—tinkering with a permanently defective sprinkler system made me laugh out loud. I wish that this part of the book had never ended.

But, alas, end it did. And when Pollan turned his attention from autobiography to gardening—actual dirt gardening—my delight in the book turned to disappointment.

It takes years to become a good naturalist; it takes even more years to become a good gardener. Unfortunately, Pollan has not yet served his time. It shows all through the book. His many references suggest that he has read widely on gardens and gardeners, but reading about gardens is not the same as doing gardens. Pollan just plain lacks first-hand experience. The gardening discussions are so naive and simple-minded that they killed whatever enthusiasm I might have otherwise had for the book. Shall I weed my garden? Shall I build a fence around my vegetable garden to keep the woodchuck out? Shall I plant a willow in the meadow? Oh, come on.

Pollan gets into even bigger trouble when he tries to give us practical gardening Advice. For one of the many examples, read the following:

Watch the way [an experienced gardener] handles seedlings. Compared to the novice who treats his young plants gingerly, the experienced gardener seems almost rough with them.

Who are these experienced gardeners he’s been watching, and what seedlings have they been almost rough with? If he is referring to coarse and husky young tomatoes or zinnias, maybe they can stand being slammed around. But use that same treatment on tiny and fragile primula or gentian seedlings and see how many of those survive. Again it comes back to experience: Pollan either has not transplanted enough different kinds of seedlings, or he has not met enough experienced gardeners. Or both.
Pollan has a chapter he calls "Planting a Tree." After an extended and uplifting philosophical discussion—ranging from oaks in Germany to cypresses in California, from William James and the Puritans to Zeus himself—what species does he finally choose to bring shady pleasure to future generations in rural Connecticut? A Norway maple. A Norway maple. What a gift! In the pantheon of bad trees, the Norway maple is right up there with the strangler fig. Coarse leaves, greedy roots, gloomy shade, and seedlings everywhere: what more could anyone want? Sadly but surely, a number of other gardening novices will now follow Pollan's example and also plant this dreadful tree to shade their houses.

In his chapter "Weeds Are Us"—whatever that means—Pollan admits to having read too much Emerson. Though he seems finally to reject Ralph Waldo Emerson's old canard about weeds being plants whose virtues no one has yet discovered, he typically dwells upon it far too long. Even if such horticultural terrors as poison ivy, goutweed, or Campanula rapunculoides eventually turn out to be saviors of the world, they will still be noxious weeds to anyone who has the misfortune of finding them in the garden.

And nowhere in this weedy threnody does he mention the value of mulch, that great natural weed-suppressing weapon. Of course, no mention either of the controversial but wonderful weed fighter, Roundup® and Surfan.® At least I don't think there was; when I went to the index to see if I had missed them, I found that the publisher neglected to include an index.

In another chapter, Pollan tells us that Nature abhors a garden. Nonsense. Nature only abhors some gardens. And from Pollan's description of his own gardens, I suspect they would be at the top of Nature's hate list! Vegetable gardens are unnatural; perennial borders are unnatural; orchards are unnatural; rose gardens are extremely unnatural.

When you get right down to it, almost any human intervention on the land—merely moving a spadeful of earth—could be considered an unnatural act, yet there are plenty of gardeners and gardening styles that try to work with Nature, not against it. Wildflower meadows, woodland gardens, the new ornamental grass gardens, naturalistic tree and shrub plantings at places like the Arnold Arboretum—all of these gardening styles seem hardly to bother Nature, much less enrage her. You can tell Nature doesn't mind them because well-executed gardens in each of these styles stay beautiful with only a minimum of upkeep.

My quarrel is not with Pollan's choice of subject matter. Any gardening book can focus more on the philosophical than the practical. But I don't think a discussion of such lofty ideas as whether or not God is a gardener, how to honor the past landscape, or what Thoreau really thought about his bean patch can compensate for a lack of experience in the discussion of weeds, carrots, and compost. In natural history and gardening, hours in the library don't take the place of hours in the field or in the dirt. And I always have believed that people should first become authorities on a subject before they write a book about it.

So why all the hype over Second Nature? Why all the gushing reviews? As a colleague pointed out, it is ironic indeed, when there are so many gardeners and naturalists with important things to say who never get the chance, that a neophyte like Michael Pollan gets a huge chance and then says almost nothing important. A book jacket endorsement proclaims, "You don't have to be a gardener to love Second Nature." That may be the answer to its popularity.

Perhaps if you are a person for whom nature and gardening happen on country weekends sometime between tennis and cocktails, you may find this book fascinating. But if you're a serious gardener or naturalist, you'll probably want to pass it by.