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Finding Hope in Creative Non-Fiction

***Coming of Age at the End of Nature: A Generation Faces Living on a Changed Planet* edited by JULIE DUNLAP AND SUSAN A. COHEN**
Trinity UP, 2016 $18.95

Reviewed by **MATTHEW ZANTINGH**

Julie Dunlap and Susan A. Cohen open their collection *Coming of Age at the End of Nature* with the following questions: "How has growing up in a mutable physical, biological, and social world shaped the lives and thoughts of today's young adults? What do members of this generation have to say about their challenges, hopes, fears, and sources of resilience for the unpredictable future?" (xi). The 22 short essays collected in the volume attempt to lay out cogent responses to these questions. As might be guessed from their title, Dunlap and Cohen's philosophical framework draws heavily from Bill McKibben's assertion of the death of nature in his 1989 book *The End of Nature* and his later work in his 2010 book *Eaarth*. While I am not necessarily on board with adopting McKibben's analysis whole-scale, I think the editors' decision to collect essays from a new generation of writers for whom climate change is a reality they have always known is a provocative one. These are the people who will inherit the complex and shifting world that the 20th century's thirst for fossil fuels and cheap goods has created.

Dunlap and Cohen should be praised for their desire to make space for new voices in environmental writing, and there are some excellent pieces in the collection, but I am not certain that their chosen format works to full effect. *Coming of Age at the End of Nature* is a slight volume at just over 200 pages long with the average essay being only four to eight pages long. There are a few longer exceptions and it was not surprising that these tended to be stronger, but for the most part the pieces tend to be extremely brief. While I do not want to foreclose the possibility of a writer saying something meaningful in a few hundred words, many of the essays in this volume seem to find their feet just before they end. For instance, Elizabeth Cooke's otherwise strong piece, "Why Haiti?" explores her complex reactions to doing disaster relief and environmental work in that impoverished Caribbean nation. She evokes Haiti's complex mix of Roman Catholicism, colonial dependency, and the United States' ambivalent relationship to Central America, but I finished with far more questions at the close than I started. Perhaps this is the intent of short environmental non-fiction, but I felt somewhat short-changed.

Part of my reaction stems from the question of audience for this collection. While Dunlap and Cohen want to give space to a new generation of writers, I kept asking myself who will read this volume. My guess is that readers of *Orion* and *Sage* will be the primary consumers as several of these pieces have appeared in those magazines while the short biographies of each reader also reveal a strong tendency towards such environmental non-fiction journals and magazines. At the same time, I cannot help but wonder whether the pieces in this collection are not just preaching to the choir. Will these short essays attract a new audience, one that might help generate productive action towards mitigating global climate change? It is on this question that I am left uncertain. Perhaps they will. But some of the more traditional nature writing pieces which tend to paint a wilderness-will-

save-humanity picture seem unlikely to convince an apathetic or hostile public, and even less so in only a few pages.

At the same time, I found myself excited by some of the stronger pieces in the collection. Amaris Ketcham's "Urban Foraging" explores a developing subculture, which uses the natural resources of cities so that fruit trees, "weeds," and other urban greenery become not just aesthetic objects but sources of sustenance. Ben Goldfarb's "Rebuild or Retreat" ruminates on whether it is wise to rebuild hurricane and storm devastated neighbourhoods that are likely to be struck again as storms increase in strength and frequency with warmer ocean temperatures. He wants to help the poor and devastated recover dignity and life, but he also wonders at what cost such restoration work happens. Two other essays explore the complicated postcolonial politics of environmental practice. Alycia Parnell's "Sunset at Mile 16" illustrates the ambivalence of working in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, identifying invasive species while growing uncomfortably aware of the presence of Mexicans travelling north in search of better lives. The tension between a desire to experience the beauty of the desert ecosystems and the crushing injustice of national borders is acute yet productive here. Finally, Ben Cromwell's "Diseases of Affluence" describes his uneasy sense of being stuck in the excessively consumeristic trappings of having a newborn in the US while being aware of the poverty and lack he and his partner left behind after completing Peace Corps work in Kiribati. These essays all explore the complicated contexts that inform American environmentalism today. They are clear-sighted about the contradictions inherent in many environmental politics, and do not offer easy solutions or miraculous cures. Instead, they collectively yearn for a place of justice even as it is unclear what that might look like or how to get there.

Two other essays also stood out, but for different reasons. Megan Kimble's "The Wager for Rain" is a fascinating probe into the pseudo-science of cloud-seeding and the future prospects of water-starved states like Arizona and Nevada. Her essay refuses to prioritize natural or pristine water over "artificial" water and helped me think about water cycles in my own prairie location. She also makes an interesting turn at the end of her piece, connecting cloud-seeding to rain dances in an evocative gesture. In a similar way, Emily Schosid's "Could Mopping Save the World?" details her stay at the Lama Foundation, a spiritual and sustainable community in northern New Mexico. Schosid was fresh out of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and her bafflement at the community's approach to place and life is evident throughout. Yet by the end of her piece, she comes to appreciate the spiritual wisdom on offer there even if she sees a need to help them with green technology. Why I found these two essays intriguing is that both return spirituality to discussions of environmentalism and climate change. At times, religion and spirituality have been kept at bay by environmentalists, often with good reason, but both Kimble and Schosid explore it with a commendable level of humility and intrigue. If religion has been responsible for parts of the predicament, it may also play key roles in any solution.

While I think the quality of the pieces was varied, there were a number of original and provocative essays that make this collection valuable in terms of thinking about the new generation of environmentalists and nature writers. The

collection falls into the creative nonfiction category and leans heavily towards autobiography. It may be light on nuance and complexity at times, but I believe this is a result of the length of essays the editors sought. Some of these pieces might be well suited for lower level environmental humanities classes which attract students from across the disciplines. I should note that, with the exception of two pieces, these essays are rooted in the United States, which may limit the appeal of the volume. And the collection itself is an interesting read that might reinvigorate those feeling jaded in the Trump era of American culture.

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