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Brigette Bernagozzi

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Into the Forest

The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature by DAVID GEORGE HASKELL
Viking, 2012 \$27.50

Reviewed by **BRIGETTE BERNAGOZZI**

When was the last time you closely examined the lichens in your own backyard? While most people would probably answer that they have never done so, David George Haskell befriends lichens on a regular basis. In fact, he is partial to just about any creature or plant that has left its mark in the square meter of Tennessee forest he has claimed for his research.

In his account of the natural world, *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature*, Haskell shines the light of inquiry upon the most everyday things, rendering them intricate and mysterious. He depicts lichens as intimate creatures filled with beauty, for instance: "Even here, in a tree-filled mandala in Tennessee, every rock, trunk, and twig is crusted with lichen. Like a farmer tending her apple trees and her field of corn, a lichen is a melding of lives . . . The quietude and outer simplicity of the lichens hides the complexity of their inner lives."

Adopting as a central metaphor for his book the Tibetan monks' colorful sand mandalas—lovely endeavors of spiritual artistry that are erased by the artists, once completed—Haskell meditates upon his small plot of old-growth forest throughout the course of a year. His chapters are structured around the months of the year, beginning with January; each month claims at least three separate chapters with catchy one and two-word titles—"Partnerships," "Ripples," "Sunrise Birds."

Each chapter typically begins with a narrow focus on Haskell's chosen patch of land, before expanding outward to discover more of the world than its title suggests. Even the most discerning reader might not expect the chapter called "Footprints" to meditate upon such a wide variety of topics as deer tracks, microbial partnerships, the gaps in scientific understanding that distort humankind's grasp of natural history, the early lives of mastodons, and the extinction of the early species of its time. Yet Haskell, a professor of biology, blends such diverse topics seamlessly, and as a result, each chapter blooms with unlikely surprises.

As he offers his observations and theories about the natural world, Haskell relies upon the overarching metaphor of the mandala that recurs throughout the book—this is how he consistently refers to the patch of forest he is studying—yet he also draws upon smaller-scale metaphors and personification. These techniques help to make the forest come alive for the reader; according to Haskell's creative visions, the horsehair worm becomes a pirate, chemically altering the brain of the cricket whose body he plunders. The cricket, in turn, is then transformed from a landlubber into "a suicidal diver seeking puddles or streams."

Haskell preaches from his environmental pulpit now and again, as when he laments the ways in which a widespread human presence has made life increasingly difficult for some animal species. Yet such complaints feel authentic and heartfelt, rather than dogmatic or condescending. Most often, his agenda seems to be that of the impassioned scientific observer, though he draws frequent commonalities between humankind and the world of plant life, as well, to remind us of our kinship with other

living systems and species. Amidst an exploration of the surprisingly varied history of human DNA, he writes: “We are Russian dolls, our lives made possible by other lives within us. But whereas dolls can be taken apart, our cellular and genetic helpers cannot be separated from us, nor we from them. We are lichens on a grand scale.”

On the whole, Haskell proves a skilled and knowledgeable guide with an unusual take on the natural world. As the author himself defines the exploratory spirit at the heart of the book:

For Saint John of the Cross, Saint Francis of Assisi, or Lady Julian of Norwich, a dungeon, a cave, or a tiny hazelnut could all serve as lenses through which to experience the ultimate reality. This book is a biologist’s response to the challenge of the Tibetan mandala, of Blake’s poems . . . Can the whole forest be seen through a small contemplative window of leaves, rocks, and water?

Ultimately, he presents a blend of science and awe that draws partly from his background in biology and partly from the tradition of the Tibetan monks whose mandalas he so admires, with some literature and mysticism thrown in for good measure.

The Forest Unseen was a finalist for this year’s Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction and the winner of several environmental writing awards. Readers will find, however, that beyond the inevitable large-scale prestige that comes with such national acclaim, the practice of seeing the world with new eyes has its own worthwhile rewards.

The Tennessee forest sings with diversity and wildness, and perhaps there is no better time to join in the song.

BRIGETTE BERNAGOZZI has been published in *Coal Hill Review*, *The Fourth River*, and *Weave Magazine*. She resides in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she teaches writing to international students.