American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau (Library of America)

A Great Read For Today's World

As America and the world grapple with the consequences of global environmental change, writer and activist Bill McKibben offers this unprecedented, provocative, and timely anthology, gathering the best and most significant American environmental writing from the last two centuries.

Classics of the environmental imagination—the essays of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and John Burroughs; Aldo Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac; Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring—are set against the inspiring story of an emerging activist movement, as revealed by newly uncovered reports of pioneering campaigns for conservation, passages from landmark legal opinions and legislation, and searing protest speeches. Here are some of America’s greatest and most impassioned writers, taking a turn toward nature and recognizing the fragility of our situation on earth and the urgency of the search for a sustainable way of life. Thought-provoking essays on overpopulation, consumerism, energy policy, and the nature of “nature” join ecologists’ memoirs and intimate sketches of the habitats of endangered species. The anthology includes a detailed chronology of the environmental movement and American environmental history, as well as an 80-page color portfolio of illustrations.

Features:
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My Personal Review:
In wildness is the preservation of the world, wrote Henry David Thoreau in his groundbreaking book, Walden. With Thoreau as a starting point, Bill McKibben has assembled the finest, most comprehensive anthology of
American environmental writing one could hope to find. The combined work of 101 authors, running almost 1,000 pages, American Earth chronicles the changing landscape of environmentalism from Thoreau to Teddy Roosevelt to Al Gore, with 98 more thrown in for good measure.

This one volume provides a rich orientation to the world of environmental writing which McKibben contends is Americas single most distinctive contribution to the worlds literature. If Walden is the book everyone claims to revere but few have actually read, American Earth offers an accessible door into not only Walden, but 100 more works of significance in the annals of environmentalism. McKibben, himself the groundbreaking author of The End of Nature, the first account of global warmings consequences, selects each author with the care of a conductor assembling a fine orchestra. Some voices speak of spiritual bonds connecting humankind and nature, others tell true stories of real ecological tragedies, and some are historical markers along the environmental movements journey from the fringes into mainstream America.

McKibben calls upon Thoreau to set the stage for this anthology -- I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover I had not lived. He continues with the likes of Walt Whitman, P. T. Barnum (raging against billboards), and features the classic writing of John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club.

His list of contributors ranges from the designer of Central Park in NYC (Frederick Law Olmsted), to an American author and journalist (Theodore Dreiser), to another writer of the depression (John Steinbeck). Books you may have read are excerpted, such as Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities; and, Rachel Carsons, Silent Spring, the classic that influenced Al Gore and resulted in a ban on DDT.

You may not agree with all the pieces included. Lynn Whites essay, The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis lays the blame (in 1967) for the environmental problems of the US on the Christian worldview. Or, at least the popular Christian worldview that saw the world as mans plaything, to use or use up as he chose. White concludes his essay with the life of St. Francis of Assisi, and nominates Francis as patron saint of environmentalists because of Francis teaching on humility and his love for all of Gods creation. The activist Cesar Chavez is also included, but on the lighter side is Woody Guthries This Land is Your Land, which was set to the tune of an old Baptist hymn, When The Worlds on Fire -- more appropriate than even Guthrie might have thought when he chose it.

If you want to get up to speed in Environmentalism 101, McKibbens American Earth is the book you need. A comprehensive survey of literature on environmentalism, the book contains scores of great quotes, real life stories, like The Fog by Berton Roueche, and contemporary voices like Michael Pollan and Barbara Kingsolver. My newly discovered friend,
Wendell Berry, is included, as are all of the other great names in the movement -- the Nearings, Buckminster Fuller, Scott Russell Sanders, Al Gore, and Paul Hawken, plus many more.

I have several of the books referenced by McKibben, including his Deep Economy, and a comparable library would run hundreds of dollars. You'll find yourself doing what I have done -- pulling out American Earth to read another essay or chapter or poem in America's great chronicle of all things environmental.

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