Saving Graces Short Guide

Saving Graces by Roger B. Swain

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Overview

Saving Graces consists of twenty-four short essays about the natural world.

Each is an invitation to look at seemingly ordinary aspects of life with fresh eyes, as if seeing horse chestnuts, trees, or bees for the first time. This may be the book's greatest strength: It recaptures childlike wonder at the world, where everything is fascinating and marvelous. For seasoned naturalists, Saving Graces could be a call for them to remember why they became naturalists in the first place; for young readers, it is an invitation to experience the world in new and interesting ways, and it invites them to celebrate life.

Swain draws on his own experiences as a young adult to show how the natural world worked its magic on him even when he was not thinking about it, and in so doing not only explains why he became a biologist, but how young adults may find wonders for themselves not far from home.

About the Author

R oger Bartlett Swain was born on February 5, 1949, to C. Gardner Swain and Marguerite (nee Stay) Swain in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He attended Harvard University, receiving his B.A. in 1971, his M.A. in 1972, and his Ph.D. in 1977. In 1978, he joined the staff of Horticulture magazine, where he serves as science editor. He married professor Elizabeth Ward in 1979, and they presently live in Newton Highlands, in a rural area from which they can see housing developments spreading out slowly in their direction. Swain has become an important figure in efforts to preserve natural areas in his region. He is perhaps best known as a regular on the PBS series The Victory Garden.

Setting

The settings of the essays vary from rural to urban, but most emphasize a world that exists right on the edge of urban America. A New Englander, Swain writes about the region he knows best—that near Massachusetts, and he often places his focus on his home in Newton Highlands. His essays provide a general picture of his home: It is in the countryside, once far from urban areas but now within sight of housing developments. Nearby are hills populated by trees and berry bushes. A stone fence built when the land had been cleared for farming rings Swain's property, but the fence now stretches among trees which have grown up since the farmers of the previous century left for better soil in the western territories. The trees and other plant life on Swain's land serve as symbols of nature's ability to renew itself, even while its bounty is exploited by humanity.

Swain is not a knee-jerk advocate of natural purity. He describes how he cuts down trees for use as firewood or other purposes, such as woodworking in "And to Tooth Work." His vision of the natural world is one in which human beings and nature provide for each other. He chops down trees, which allows berry bushes and other plant life to thrive in the sunlight the trees had denied him. The trees return, but other areas are harvested, allowing the bushes to thrive anew. Swain seems to see nature's ability to renew itself all around him. Intelligent management and an understanding of how the natural world works allow people to reap nature's bounty while allowing wildlife to thrive, providing wonders for both young and grownup observers. This sounds the loudest unhappy note of the essays: People seem to be losing their appreciation of the natural world and in the process are losing the benefits the natural world can provide them. For instance, in "Blue Birdfood," Swain notes how spreading housing developments are destroying the habitat for wild blueberry bushes, which had until recently provided a bountiful harvest for both people and birds.

Social Sensitivity

Swain is plainly unhappy with the way many Americans treat the natural world, and he is concerned about people losing touch with what the natural world has to offer. When he notes that housing developments are slowly sprawling out toward where he lives, he is not only saddened by the loss of wildlife habitat—he is also sad that people may soon no longer be able to harvest wild blueberries for themselves, thus losing a tangible, physical interaction with nature. He is not so much against development as he is for preservation. He himself chops down trees, but he makes sure that enough trees survive that they still may thrive; meanwhile, he can look forward to enjoying trees in the future, and bushes and other smaller plants have the sunshine they need so that they, too, may Saving Graces 3957 thrive. Thus, the overall effect of Saving Graces is to suggest that human beings can take an active part in nurturing nature.

Literary Qualities

The essays are brief ones, with each focusing on a creature or plant. This makes them quick reads and accessible to slow readers as well as advanced ones. Their beautiful descriptions may be their most memorable quality: A low tide at noon has calmed the bay, where sandpipers rest on a spur of damp beach. A herring gull pecking at something backs off reluctantly at my approach.

Bucketless, I am collecting shells in the crown of my hat, discarding earlier specimens when I find something better.

This captivating passage opens "Hermit Crabs." In a small space Swain captures a scene and the action in it.

"Wasps and Wolves" begins, "Gray wolves once howled on Atlantic beaches. Colonists, huddled in huts on the edge of the New World, listened to the chorus of wind, wave, and wolf and were afraid." This time, in a small space, Swain captures the drama of a scene. Throughout Saving Graces, sharply drawn images bring ideas and topics to life. In each essay, Swain explores people's attitudes toward wildlife and explains the significance of the wildlife to modern people.

Themes and Characters

Swain himself is his own main character in Saving Graces. He appears mostly as a boy experiencing the wonders of the natural world, but he also appears as a grownup who shares his life with nature. He is joined by his wife, some other young people, birds, bees, trees, and bushes; the essays focus primarily on his interactions with plants and animals. For instance, the bees become characters in their own right as Swain describes their habits: No honeybee ever broke down a fence—or needed one in the first place. Bees forage miles away from the hive in all directions, freely trespassing on neighboring land in search of food and water.

(Being virtually indistinguishable from one another, they have builtin alibis.) Unusually provident beasts, honeybees are not content with procuring their daily bread, but go on gathering against a rainy day or a long winter.

As characters, the bees serve well as examples of how nature disregards human borders. The bees are not anthropomorphized; they plainly live very differently from people, but it is this difference that Swain seems to enjoy.

The theme that runs throughout the essays in Saving Graces is that nature can enrich the everyday lives of people; indeed, nature does so even when people do not realize it. Swain has a keen eye for telling details. The opening essay, "Horse Chestnuts", is a marvelous example of how details can hold significant meaning for those who note them. "In my suit-jacket pocket are a couple of horse chestnuts, picked up months ago on a back street," he begins. From those chestnuts, Swain remembers his childhood, when he also picked up chestnuts, and then notes how they serve as "my talisman. In the rarified atmosphere of world responsibility, I find that they work a simple magic, reminding me what it is exactly that I have grown up to care for." The horse chestnuts are reminders of his links to the natural world. The essays as a group serve to remind their readers of their many often unnoticed links to nature and the ways of wildlife.

Topics for Discussion

1. In "To Smell," Swain says that when he was a teen-ager, he and friends would "bicycle in the dark with no flashlight"; he used his sense of smell for navigation. Have you ever used a sense other than sight to find your way someplace? How did you do it?

2. Swain suggests many ways a person can experience the wonders of nature without going far from home. Can you apply any of his suggestions to where you live?

3. In "The Onion Braider," Swain describes a man's love for growing onions. This seemingly simple activity seems to have large implications for Swain. What is the point Swain wishes to make?

4. Horse chestnuts do not grow everywhere. Is there something you have gathered that could substitute for horse chestnuts? (For the present writer, it is acorns.)

5. What do you learn about the lives of hermit crabs from the essay "Hermit Crabs"?

6. Swain seems to want his readers to enjoy his essays and possibly to enhance their appreciation of the natural world. Does he succeed on either count with you?

7. Does "Wasps and Wolves" make you change any of your thinking about wasps?

8. In "Wild Eyes," Swain remarks that news of a moose being spotted in someone's yard, a bear appearing on a road, or a whale blundering into a harbor "recalls me from my wise cynicism about the declining state of the wilderness." These seem like minor events; is Swain grasping at straws?

9. In "Weather," Swain discusses what is meant by "bad weather," suggesting that it is not necessarily bad. Is there any kind of weather that most people call bad but that you enjoy?

Perhaps you like the way automobile headlights in the fog look like dragon's eyes, the feel of fresh, cold air in the throat, or how rain seems to create mysterious oceans on the ground, complete with shorelines and islands.

10. Each of Swain's essays is brief; most are full of information. Is Swain's approach in these essays a good way to teach people facts about nature? If you think so, how might your textbooks be revised to make them more interesting, the way Swain's essays are?

11. Are Swain's essays too short? If so, what is missing from them?

12. In "Walking Boundaries," Swain seems to own a large parcel of land— much larger than most city lots. Could Swain be out-of-touch with how city people must live, or is Swain making a meaningful call on city people to recognize the role of nature in their lives?

13. "If we are even half-serious about having wildlife close at hand," declares Swain in "Room for Bats," "we should be making room for bats." How well does he convince you of this?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Swain notes that America's expanding population is swallowing up rural areas, sometimes destroying natural wonders. Explain how the needs of Americans for housing and marketplaces can be met without destroying the natural world.

2. Note how in "Tree Dreams" Swain uses the wood of his bed to draw himself into the natural world. Examine some of the wood furniture in your house—the legs of a couch, chairs, table tops, or your own bed, perhaps—and figure out what kind of wood it is. Then find out where that kind of wood might have come from—for instance California, Oregon, or Maine.

3. In "Dime-Store Turtles", Swain remarks, "In our eagerness to be protected, once again we seem to have cut ourselves off from nature." Is he right?

How can people balance the need to protect themselves from diseases and pests with people's need to know about and experience the natural world?

4. Swain uses bees in "Deadstock" to show how nature defies human-made boundaries. Can nature really defy such boundaries, or can people hem in nature, making boundaries it cannot cross? Describe how human boundaries interact with nature. Boundaries could be city limits, fences, roads, or other sorts of limits.

5. In "Harnessing the Bogs", Swain says, "Someday I want a great-grandchild to stand in my footsteps, ankledeep in dark bog water. And I want her to find that the place hasn't changed an inch." Is this possible? Is there any way to prevent from happening to the peat bogs what has happened to petroleum fields? Why or why not?

6. In "Just Water", Swain notes the increasing pollution of America's water. He asserts that being able to drink the water is an aspect of liberty. Is he exaggerating? Should water pollution be a major concern for people? Once, America's water was the safest to drink in the world, and it was a source of pride for Americans, who knew that contamination had made some countries' water unfit to drink. Now much of America's water is contaminated. Is there anything that can be done to prevent further contamination? Can already contaminated water be reclaimed? What, if anything, are people doing about America's water?

7. Throughout Saving Graces, Swain alludes to classical mythology, Ancient Rome, Ancient Egypt, China, and other important cultural sources. What effect do these allusions have on his essays?

Do they enhance what he has to say?

8. "Our way of life is threatening our survival," says Swain in "Recycling." Is this true?

9. In "The Boathouse", Swain asserts that "all of us share in the world's crowding." Do we? What of his remark that how many children they should have is a matter that

should remain private for each couple? Is he contradicting himself? What, if anything, should be done about overpopulation?

For Further Reference

Lipton, Laura. Review. Library Journal 116 (October 1, 1991): 138. Admires Swain's "poetic prose" and recommends Saving Graces to "nature lovers and country-living enthusiasts."

Werner, Louis. Review. Christian Science Monitor (November 14,1991): 11.

A complimentary review of Saving Graces, noting that Swain often encourages his readers to "recapture something lost from their own childhood—a curiosity about nature, perhaps, or confidence in the future—in order to live better by it again."

Related Titles

Earthly Pleasures: Tales from a Biolo gist's Garden and Field Days: Journal of an Itinerant Biologist both concern themselves with people's interaction with nature. Like Saving Graces, the essays in Field Days are contemplative and invite readers to enjoy the natural world as part of their everyday lives.

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