

Book Review

Billinghurst, Jane. *The Armchair Book of Gardens: A Miscellany*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Greystone Books, 2011.

ABSTRACT

Billinghurst has created a beautiful botanical collage of illustration, poetry and prose about the history and significance of gardening. Acknowledging gardens not only as places of sensuous pleasures but as a way of viewing the world, gardens as ecological sites is largely missed from the miscellany. Drawing on gardens as a worldview, gardening is considered as a way of fostering an ecological identity in relation to how it may remind us of our embeddedness in the more-than-human world.

REVIEW

Jane Billinghurst combines artwork, poetry and prose to create an international snapshot of gardens and their role in aesthetic, spiritual, and social life. It is a visually stunning and immersive miscellany full of botanical splendor. Billinghurst acknowledges the varied roles of gardens and their multitude of meanings. "Gardens," she writes, "these places of social comment, aesthetic satisfaction, and emotional and spiritual connection, are also places where we quite simply *live*" (5).

The book features excerpts from a wide variety of writers, including Flaubert, Goethe, Proust, Tom Stoppard, A. A. Milne, Thoreau, Michael Ondaatje, Rousseau and Ji Cheng, among many others, and a host of beautiful botanical artwork. Also featured is an excerpt from Michael Pollan's *Second Nature* (1997) which exemplifies the tension inherent in gardening: the back and forth between controlling nature and nurturing growth, preserving the land and forming hospitable growing conditions. These tensions highlight different views of nature, one that sees humans as embedded in nature and another that sees nature as 'other,' which humans need to tame.

Billinghurst delights in the joy of gardens without really examining their current ecological role. Local food growing and permaculture have been identified as tools for a more resilient society, but not all gardening is ecologically sustainable. Ornamental gardening, which is considered with reverence in the book, may use plants not appropriate to the climate and/or that require large amounts of water and chemical fertilizer. Billinghurst describes gardens as a way of seeing the world but does not elaborate on what that worldview might be. Implicitly, the book seems to offer a romantic look at gardens, which could be considered anthropocentric and may miss some of the value of gardening today. It overlooks considerations of gardening as a means to grow food, connect to the land, relieve stress, build community, and as a strategy for sustainability. This book lyrically reflects on gardens as respite from the city, as pleasure dome, as muse, and as nature's culture, but today gardens can be much more than that; they can be sites of ecological resilience.

Perhaps gardening, getting our hands in the soil, attending to subtle changes in season and working out what plants need to thrive, may foster an ecological identity, as Arne Naess describes it. These acts may remind us that we are part of the complex nest of relations that make up the earth. Billinghamurst describes gardens as places where the senses are alert, calling attention to the cyclical rhythm of growth and renewal. Does being in the garden simply exercise a sense of control over nature or does it connect one to the act of growing and consequently remind us of our ecological situatedness?

There is a class and culture critique of gardening that is not addressed in the book. Gardens could be considered an entitlement of the elite, as not all of us enjoy an expansive back garden teeming with flora and fauna (and easy access to parks and green spaces is far from equitable). Some city dwellers are lucky if they have a concrete slab on which to place a few potted plants. However, Billinghamurst captures and highlights the pleasure of being in a garden, whether it be public or private, which could be read as advocating for widening access to gardens and creating more of them. Time spent immersed in the sensuous, flourishing living world is valuable and may be vital for the development of an ecological identity.