

*Things Where They Are Supposed to Be:
The Work of Sarah Lloyd*

Life in the Shadows is the first time that Sarah Lloyd, who has written so extensively about other places, tells us of her own. She has often mentioned Black Sugarloaf, where she lives with her partner Ron, in her “home” journal, the Central Field Naturalists Newsletter. I read that publication in my home in northern New Hampshire some 2 million miles, 17 continents, and countless species away. I’m always delighted by Sarah’s descriptions of her new bug and bird acquaintances, and eager for updates on their continued (I hope) well-being. The book you now hold is something else entirely. Sarah has spent a great deal of her life explaining to us, in exacting detail, what belongs where and why, writing in a prose which is as corporeal as the dolerite of her daily walks. Finally, in *Life in the Shadows*, we learn the where and why of her.

I first encountered Sarah’s writings in the “sniffin” journal, and I was immediately struck by the clarity of her language and purpose. The ideas seemed to have the rare quality of being much more important than they at first appeared. Sentences and phrases leapt out at me unexpectedly and inexplicably. Descriptions of dusky robins, raspy crickets, jumping spiders and woolly teatrees hinted at other, less tangible matters. A naturalist’s concerns are, by nature, quotidian (or to paraphrase her, what *should* be quotidian). As a great naturalist *writer*, she never betrayed the subject at hand, no matter how small, weedy, or faintly disgusting. And yet, somehow, wasn’t *just* about bugs and critters.

Scientists search for truth but they demand credit. Sarah, adamantly not a scientist, aims higher. She strives for less credit than she deserves. She can’t claim the survival of an individual platypus or devil on her resume. An ornithologist might have the luxury of making an avocation of conservation, activism and other perpetual losing battles. For Sarah, it’s a full-time job (and we won’t mention the wages). An unavoidable tragedy for naturalists is the failure to protect the things they love can be their most frequent “accomplishment.”

Unlike many of her more famous peers —Darwin, Thoreau, Dillard— there’s a plainspoken Shaker simplicity in Sarah’s writing. Never explicitly metaphysical, or openly poetic, and she keeps herself in the margins, inhabiting her prose like a liminal being. As the Shakers say, “she is what she seems to be, seems to be what she is”: she walks slowly in the woods, pays considerable attention, photographs things and writes about them later. Not incidentally, the other thing she does is to try and ensure that those things are still around the next time she goes for a walk. The quality of her writing and photography is an homage to her subjects. She doesn’t insult them by writing badly, or too much. She obstinately refrains from distracting us from the matter at hand. Metallic flies, ovipositors (ugh), alien-looking red braconid wasps, various fungal communities, botched bluetongues, psyllids & lerps & pardoalotes — all are treated with equality, equanimity, empathy and an ecstatic undercurrent. Existence itself is cause for celebration, but she wastes little time cheering. She is a disciplined writer who knows that the phrase “life in a dogwood log” is more than enough poetry where these things are concerned.

I’ve known Sarah for a long time now, and have collaborated with her in various ways. Yet the quality and nature of her attention remains unfathomable to me. It’s a bit like the guy in the circus who juggles 10 tennis racquets: it’s clearly possible but I can’t imagine how a normal human does it. Sarah sees, hears and intuits the world in a way unlike anyone I’ve ever known. But she’s not juggling tennis racquets just because she can, though I suppose like any twitcher she enjoys the virtuosity of it, the untainted pleasure of recognition and knowing. Her abilities are tempered by her conviction that to know and not do is not to know, that awareness without action is, in the end, collection.

She is dogged about protecting her beloved Tasmania, and, by extension, everywhere else. She’s as relentless in her opposition to wildlife destruction as she is insistent about jamming on the brakes of a speeding car upon seeing a bittern, or tracking a far-off and hermetic sapsucker for hours in a cold, rainy Berkshire forest (I speak from personal experience). A few months ago, I heard a guy talking about an upcoming featherweight boxing match. Describing one of the fighters, he said: “If there’s one hundred and ten

pounds I don't want to be hit by, that's it!" This seemed an apt description of Sarah Lloyd.

But all that tenacity and punching power is in the service of three simple things: describing; preserving; and understanding the natural world. Not the world of humans, or of buildings, or of works of art or music, but a fragile, endangered environment she seamlessly and courteously inhabits. Each day is a new fight for Sarah, against more powerful opponents who want to cut, log, develop, destroy, fence, till, graze, pave and in general, degrade. Maybe she knows, somewhere deep inside, that this particular match is fixed: she can't win. But I feel sorry for anyone who climbs in the ring with her: in this game Sarah is the superior team, the hometown favorite. She's our last line of defense, defending us, sadly, from ourselves.

Sarah has chosen a difficult path as a naturalist: to self-produce and publish her own works. Each new book documents a specific site and ecosystem (mostly Tasmanian). Maybe she's influenced by in this by Ron, a composer of exceptionally fascinating, difficult, inventive (and beautiful) music who is more than familiar with the requisite obstinacy of making experimental, uncompromising art. Or maybe she just realizes that, in this day and age, not many publishers can afford to take a risk on a book like this one: the natural encyclopedia of a postage stamp-sized mountain in one of the remotest places on earth. Yet she has remained prolific. Her "complete works," if I count the CFNN essays (many of which are anthologized in her book *The Silent Cicada*), take up as much space on my shelf as the four volumes of Darwin, and considerably more than Judith Wright, another singular, hermetic Australian "naturalist" to whom Sarah's life and work invite comparison.

BSL may be nominally penumbral, but Sarah's work is luminous. Elsewhere, she wrote: "When in a completely foreign environment, it is difficult to know just which species are native and which are introduced and weedy." That's true of writers and artists, especially the weedy part. Sarah's work has a weedy strength and vigor and it threatens the cultivated plants nearby. But it's endemic and indigenous.

Like Wright's, Sarah's work will no doubt establish itself, grow, bloom, and propagate. It will become widely known (and soon, I hope). But that's not really her goal. By retaining close control of her work, crafting it as a passionate luthier does each new instrument, she gains the freedom of unfettered innovation (as in, for example, the wonderful Tufte-inspired bird-song map in this book, or in her recent "distributed recording" project).

I've heard Sarah say that as a naturalist, she belongs to no group, race, nation, ideology, religion or club. Maybe she is only of that spot in the woods where, at that moment, she stands, observes, and listens. That seems to me — as someone who lives with, uh, people — like a lonely place to be. But maybe if you've got the kind of neighbors she has — her beloved pink robins and Bassian thrushes and roommate ants — and you take as good care of them as she does, it's not so bad. Black Sugarloaf is not an easy place to get to, nor should it be. Thanks to Sarah for finally letting us visit it, through her compassionate and sagacious vision, in this beautiful book.

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