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LIVING

Six books for summer reading

No poolside page-turners here, so dive in for a deeper look at nature's future

If you're anything like me, you probably already have a pile of books beside your bed that you still haven't found time to read. However, in the off chance you might be looking for some new reading material, I thought I'd suggest some of my favourite books from the past year or so. Unfortunately, these are not the big, fat, juicy page-turners that you might typically take along on a trip to the beach. But, if you're looking for something a little more challenging, something to read on the back deck as you ponder the strange call of a nearby cicada, you should find the following titles deeply satisfying.

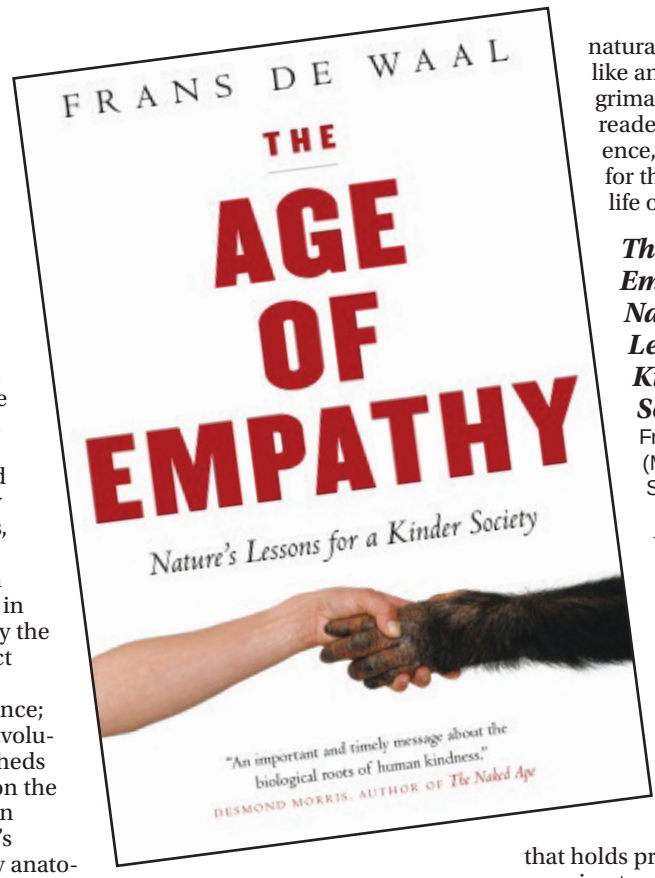
Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Richard Dawkins' and E.O. Wilson's books on evolution are particularly rewarding. Although they demand a little effort to get through, the payoff is a much more meaningful understanding of how and why living organisms have come to look and behave the way they do. In this the International Year of Biodiversity, it is more important than ever to truly understand how it is that our planet has engendered so many different species. Only by understanding the process of evolution can you truly gain a deep appreciation for the beauty, ingenuity, and value of the millions of different species with which we share the Earth. Frans de Waal's book explains how empathy itself is largely a product of evolution and that it is shared by many non-human primates, as well. Richard Louv explains how children these days have lost – or never had – a true connection to the natural world and how damaging this can be not only for the children themselves but also for the future of the conservation movement. Finally, Bill McKibben provides a sobering look at how climate change has already changed many of the key features of the planet we live on and that a drastically different way of life is our only option for the future.

The Greatest Show on Earth

By Richard Dawkins (Free Press, 2009)

Richard Dawkins provides no less than a spellbinding account of how it is that the organisms that call this planet home have come to be the way they are. He shows us that signs of evolution by natural or artificial selection are everywhere we look, be it the friendliness and body shape of the family dog or the height of the trees in the backyard. Dawkins explains how the evidence for evolution can be found in the record left by fossils, all of which occur in exactly the correct time sequence; how evolution sheds light on the human being's quirky anatomy such as our problematic backs and bizarre eyeball design; and how "the genetic code is universal, and all but identical across animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, Achaea and viruses." Understanding evolution confers a deep intellectual and even spiritual satisfaction to the experience of observing nature. It allows us ask why a plant or animal is the way it is and to know that a reasonable answer to the question exists – even if researchers have not yet sorted out all the details. I'm confident that you'll come away from this book convinced that evolution is, indeed, the Greatest Show on Earth.



The Ancestor's Tale

By Richard Dawkins (Phoenix, 2004)

Another of Dawkin's many books on evolution, *The Ancestor's Tale* is a pilgrimage back to the beginning of life. It is essentially a "backwards history" in which we, modern human beings, are the pilgrims who travel back in time to visit our ancestors. In elegant, witty prose and superb illustrations, we begin by meeting Cro-Magnon Man, an earlier race of Homo sapiens, and then go on to meet the common ancestor we share with chimpanzees. Think of this ancestor as your 250,000-greats-grandparent! Moving further back into time, we meet the common ancestors we share with gorillas, orangutans, and eventually fish, plants, and bacteria. This book is a testimony to the "sublime grandeur of the natural world" and, like any true pilgrimage, will fill the reader with reverence, a reverence for the true story of life on this planet.

The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society

Frans de Waal (McClelland and Stewart, 2009)

Frans de Waal also writes about evolution, but this time with regard to the evolution of empathy and its survival value as the social glue that holds primate and even many non-primate communities together. Using numerous anecdotes from his own work with chimpanzees and the research of scientists who deal with other kinds of non-human primates, De Wall describes how these animals co-operate, reconcile, and even have a sense of fairness. For example, a recent baboon study in Kenya showed that females with the best social ties have the most surviving young. Even whales have long been known to come to the assistance of an injured companion. In fact, this behaviour is so predictable that whalers used to take advantage of it.

Like Richard Dawkins, de Waal opens the door to a much deeper understanding of ourselves as empathetic beings by explaining the biological origins and evolutionary advantages of this kind of behaviour. In a nutshell, we are empathetic animals because we have "the backing of a long evolutionary history."

The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth

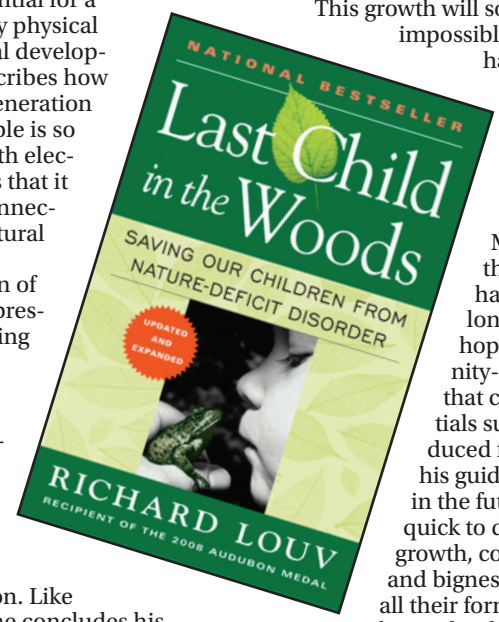
By E.O. Wilson (W.W. Norton, 2006)

E.O. Wilson is arguably the greatest biologist of our generation. In T*he Creation* he makes an appeal to the religious right to join forces with biologists in all-out effort to protect what remains of the "Creation" – the world's rapidly decaying biodiversity. Although a self-professed secular humanist, Wilson is essentially asking for a truce between science and religion and "to put aside the metaphysical issues that have made up the culture wars and address the great issue of the decline of the creation in a mutually respectful way." Wilson is clear, however, that he sees evolution as irrefutable fact and that he sees no hope for compromise with ideas such as intelligent design by which evolution is somehow guided by a supernatural intelligence. I particularly enjoyed the chapter entitled How to Raise a Naturalist, which explains how best to cultivate a naturalist's intelligence, curiosity and sense of awe in every child.

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder

By Richard Louv (Algonquin Books, 2008)

In this landmark work, Richard Louv presents cutting-edge studies that show that direct exposure to nature is essential for a child's healthy physical and emotional development. He describes how the present generation of young people is so consumed with electronic devices that it has lost its connection to the natural world. In the newest edition of the book, he presents the growing body of evidence linking the lack of nature in children's lives to the rise in obesity, attention disorders, and depression. Like E.O. Wilson, he concludes his book by presenting 100 actions to bring nature back into our lives and the lives of our children. These actions apply not only to parents, grandparents and educators but also to policy-makers and urban designers. He points out, however, that "the most important goal is for our children, in their everyday lives, to experience joy and wonder, sometimes in solitude – for them to create their own nature experiences."



Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet

By Bill McKibben (Knopf Canada, 2010)

According to Bill McKibben, the extreme weather events that we are hearing about on an almost daily basis are proof that we have waited too long to address climate change and that massive disruption is not only unavoidable but already under way. In other words, climate change is not a threat; it is a reality. He explains in detail how the generally climate-friendly planet that modern civilization evolved upon is suddenly melting, drying, acidifying, flooding, burning, and losing biodiversity in ways that no human has ever seen.

McKibben is convinced that we've essentially created a planet so fundamentally different from the old one that it requires a new name. He calls it Eaarth. He describes how we'll never be able to afford to repair all of the damage that is constantly being visited upon Eaarth. Think of the billions already spent on only partially repairing New Orleans. In addition, trillions of dollars will be needed to rebuild North America's collapsing urban infrastructure and to transform our energy systems as we attempt to move away from fossil fuels. The catch, however, is that the money can only become available through even more economic growth. This growth will soon prove to be impossible because our planet has already been so badly damaged and degraded, and we've already essentially run out of cheap, easily-accessible oil.

McGibben comes to the conclusion that old habits won't work any longer and that our only hope is to build community-based economies that concentrate on essentials such as locally-produced food and energy. In his guiding principles for life in the future, McGibben is quick to discard ideas such as growth, consumer lifestyles, and bigness and complexity in all their forms. And, to make sure the reader doesn't become overly optimistic, the author reminds us regularly that both the threats and solutions he describes in the book are a best-case scenario. Still, I came away from reading Eaarth strangely pleased to hear someone finally acknowledge that climate change is already here and here to stay. Like evolution, it is a fact of daily life, the reality of which we no longer need to waste time and energy arguing. I was also buoyed by the message of hope for a world where community matters, where connections to the land are infinitesimally stronger, where scale is manageable and, like the cliché says, "small is beautiful."

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year in the Kawarthas. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drewmonkman.com.