"Water Water Everywhere, but..." Review of Cynthia Barnett's Books

Brad Stocker, Miami Friends Meeting

SOMETIMES IT MAKES MORE SENSE to review an author than a book. This is the case with Cynthia Barnett, an environmental journalist who has spent years studying water. Rarely have I read more than one book of non-fiction by the same author. Now Cynthia Barnett falls into this small group alongside Thomas Barry, E.O. Wilson, and Bill Bryson. Ms. Barnett has written three books with the central theme of water running through them all: Rain: A Natural and Cultural History, Blue Revolution: Unmaking America's Water Crisis, and Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S. She does what many in science fields fail to do: she writes intriguing and interesting narratives about hard subjects in ways that non-scientists enjoy.

While Mirage specifies Florida in the title, it is important to notice that it also speaks to the entire eastern part of the U.S. Most of us are familiar with the droughts and water issues, even water wars, of the land west of the Mississippi, but are far less familiar with the same issues in the east. We have been fed the myth that there is an unlimited abundance of water in the east. That lie, as it has been for all other of Earth's resources, has only recently come into full light. Do not be fooled into believing that this book is not relevant because you live outside of Florida. It uses the west's water situation as models of what the east should and should not do.

Blue Revolution's title invokes notions that many hold forth as essential to real and necessary change. Though Ms. Barnett's blue revolution is a far softer one than some would wish, it is nevertheless one that deserves careful discernment. Not only does the book trace the history of water, power, and life as they are inextricably linked, it also highlights the need for a strong water ethic. She shows that where a bioregion has instituted a sound water ethic, there is a positive turnaround in the humans' relationship to water.

I found that Rain is my favorite and the most entertaining. As always, she writes with knowledge and wit. The book is another look at humans' connection to water through a primary source. As precipitation does, the stories within cross the false borders of political boundaries. She travels to the wettest town in the world at the edges of India to find it is suffering from climate change's impact on its fame. She visits a location that is renowned for capturing the essential aroma of rain and discovers that aromas are very cultural and personal. The small tidbits of information she weaves craftily into the whole are in themselves fascinating but also serve well as conversation openers. The one I have taken to gatherings is that the image of a raindrop that we have become accustomed to seeing is contrary to reality. The thinner part of a real raindrop is at the bottom not the top.

I highly recommend Cynthia Barnett as an author who teaches without pain and in so doing invites us to learn more. Whether you read one or all of her books, I am sure that you will discover information and facts that are new to you and that you will have well spent your time.

Brad Stocker, Ed.D., an educator for many years, is currently most concerned with earthcare and earth literacy. His family is bilingual/bicultural and he and his wife, Tere Campos, write, play, and care for their elders and grandchildren.
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