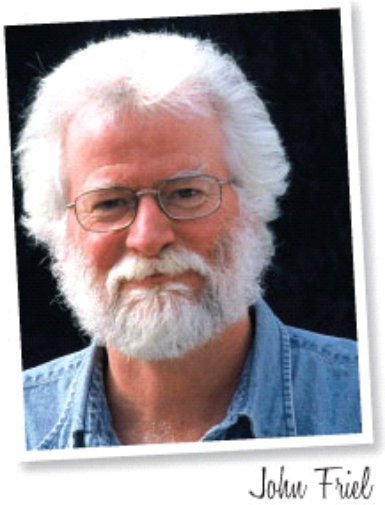
greenPROFIT

Friel World

6/1/2020

A Tarnished Silver Lining

John Friel



Lately, I find myself with more time to read than usual. You know why, so let's not dwell on that.

This weird situation has only reinforced a decades-long personal tendency: Fiction has lost its appeal. With real life so strange already, why invent? Luckily, there is much fine, creative nonfiction available, including some relevant to the green industries.

It says here, all these books could benefit from a little literary liposuction. Each could shed a dozen or more pages, snip by snip, and emerge a tauter, more readable and no less charming book.

"Our Life in Gardens"

Near the beginning, authors Joe Eck and the late Wayne Winterrowd observe, "Gardeners, like lovers, often form lifelong relationships of great intensity." Eck and Winterrowd were educators, designers and absolutely bonkers gardeners. Their famous Vermont garden, North Hill, was a labor of love where they found ways to make favorite tender plants thrive where they'd never even survive without extraordinary measures.

Agapanthus and a beloved bay tree received the most intensive of intensive care, with carefully tweaked temperatures, root pruning and occasional division via hatchet. My eyes widened.

Spoiled by decades in wholesale hort, I think of plants in multiples: Something didn't overwinter? Meh. Thousands more where it came from. My sole "relationship of great intensity," plant-wise, is with my night-blooming cactus, a tropical epiphyte. Benign neglect in an unheated sunroom has seen it through many Pennsylvania winters, a laid-back regimen that pales beside the heroics these two lavished on their objects of ardor.

"The Species Seekers"

Richard Conniff plays tour guide through a couple of centuries, with forays into prehistory and insights into how scientific exploration once captured the popular imagination.

Could any modern politician serve simultaneously as Vice President of the United States and President of the American Philosophical Society, devoted to natural science, as Jefferson did? Would a military leader lend men and tools to help an enemy officer excavate a mastodon, as Washington did before the Revolution was fully settled?

How would you RSVP for a party where the entertainment, shockingly, was to plunge your arm into a tank containing an electric eel?

The big names—Linnaeus, Darwin, Banks, Audubon—fill many pages, naturally. Linnaeus dreamed of a self-sufficient Sweden farming rice, coffee and spices, free from international trade. As he and other naturalists eventually learned, “You couldn’t simply pluck a species out of one climate and reliably expect it to grow in another.”

We’ve built a global industry on evading that law. Eck and Winterrowd flouted it with gleeful impunity.

Conniff describes explorations gone awry, as many did. Their small, overcrowded wooden ships were floating pestilence incubators. Samuel Johnson likened sea voyages to being in jail, “with the chance of being drowned.”

Finally, in “Farther Afield,” the late garden writer and philosophy professor Allen Lacy confirms that botany is not for sissies. “Plant explorers have risked their lives in order that we all might garden more abundantly,” he wrote. Lacy was no purist where nativity was concerned: “... the garden (is) a sort of United Nations, where plants from all over grow in perfect harmony.”

That sentiment evokes the Delosperma my employer sells, the work of a Japanese breeder in South America employed by a Dutch company to develop hybrids of a South African genus for North American markets.

It seems timely to remember that crossing boundaries and cultures enriches us all. With so many threats from overseas—Emerald Ash Borer, Spotted Lanternfly and the current cloud whose tarnished silver lining is more reading time—jingoistic turf-defending is an unfortunate reflex action. Please, let’s resist it. **GP**

John Friel is marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers and a freelance writer.