[Review of the book Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America]

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This book might better have been titled Reading Nature at the Mall or The Natural History of the Plastic Pink Flamingo and Other Essays, which would more accurately convey its content and style. The volume consists of five essays, the first two on turn-of-the-century environmental topics (extinction of the passenger pigeon and the campaign to remove bird feathers from women’s hats) and the remaining three on twentieth-century mass culture (plastic pink flamingo, the Nature Company, and “nature” in some popular television programs and advertising during the 1990s). Jennifer Price’s personal essays are reflections on how affluent, middle-class baby boomers like the author construct their conception of Nature: the contradictions, tensions, and challenges inherent in their attempts to find meaning and authenticity in their environments.

The common theme that unites the volume posits that our writings about and our cultural representations of Nature tell us more about ourselves than some independent entity outside human culture. Price imaginatively discusses why we are drawn to such places as the Nature Company in upscale malls but feel uneasy about making purchases there. Although she draws heavily from historians like Richard White and William Cronon, as well as numerous sources in cultural studies, the essays are written for a popular audience and do not attempt to break new ground intellectually. Her notes reflect a respectable job of background research but also reveal that the literature used is dated (particularly in the history of science). There is, for example, no mention of Mark Barrow’s work on the history of ornithology or Gregg Mitman’s discussions of nature films.

Who will find this book of interest? Aside from brief sections on the history of the plastic pink flamingo, most of the essays are derivative. The first-person narrative style creates an informal tone that makes it accessible and the sort of book one could take on a seaside vacation or read during a few quiet afternoons of late summer. Historians of science will find the overuse of such terms as “meaning” and “Place” a bit tedious, and those who are not affluent, middle-class baby boomers who love television and shopping may not always relate to the author’s opinions on marketing strategies in American malls or the 1990s series Dr. Quinn. Overall, however, anyone who enjoys reading magazines such as Harper’s will find Flight Maps engaging and informative.


Margaret D. Lowman. Life in the Treetops: Adventures of a Woman in Field Biology. Foreword by Robert D. Ballard. xvi + 219 pp., frontis., illus., apps., figs., index. New Haven, Conn./London: Yale University Press, 1999. $27.50.

Although not a traditional history of science, Margaret Lowman’s book will be of particular interest to historians of the field sciences, twentieth-century ecology, and science and gender and is an excellent book to use for courses in these areas. One of the founders of canopy biology, Lowman wrote Life in the Treetops for a nonscientific audience in an autobiographical style that communicates her excitement about her research, growing concern with rainforest conservation, and the problems she faced as a woman scientist.

The structure of Lowman’s book enables the reader to see the evolution of the techniques of canopy access, research questions, and experimentation as she and others moved from solo to cooperative group research. She developed single-rope climbing in Australia (using a cherry picker to lift her when she was pregnant), then helped build canopy walkways and platforms at Williams College in Massachusetts and in Belize. She joined a French project team in Cameroon that pioneered the use of a canopy raft and sled carried by a dirigible, and in Panama she conducted research from a Smithsonian canopy crane (a modified construction crane). As a botanist, she has focused on herbivory (by insects) in canopies.

Biologists call tree canopies the last biological frontiers, because it was not until the mid 1970s that researchers found reliable and safe ways to reach canopies of trees more than 100 feet high. In the 1980s biologists coined the term “biodiversity” and concluded that tropical rainforests held the greatest terrestrial species diversity and that this diversity was most marked in the canopy (Mark Moffett, The High Frontier: Exploring the Tropical Rainforest Canopy [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993]). The study of canopy biology thus provides, as Lowman notes, a strong rationale for rain forest conservation.