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Love and Loss in a Post-Wild World:
Review of Emma Marris' *Rambunctious Garden*

We stood at the edge of the Carson National Forest. From there we could see across and above, to the aspens of the valley just beginning to turn to their autumn gold and to the craggy peaks of the nearest range. Bill told us the names of the mountains and I practiced them under my breath. I wanted to know them, wanted to be near them, wanted never to have to look away. It was a kind of sight I'd never seen before. Growing up in the city, I took in whatever nature I could from the street trees and city parks.

But for Bill, this boundary between forest and valley was home. A writer and introspective soul, he treaded the line between the two worlds with careful intention. For an outsider like me, such distinctions of the land were imperceptible. One minute we were walking the perimeter of Bill's property, the next we were crossing onto national public lands. Back and forth we weaved, or so he told us, between those lines written into the earth.

Bill walks this part of the forest every day and has for decades. With such an intimate knowledge of a place, one begins to perceive the little things. Bill stopped then, at a small clearing in the woods, reached out for a nearby Ponderosa, and pressed his thumb into a familiar knot. And then he told us. The forest has changed, he said. The land is sick. Like so many others across the globe, this place is threatened by warming

temperatures and erratic seasons and a host of consequences that accompany such climate change—fire, insects, erosion, harm to the watershed and to the people, plants, and animals that depend on it—the list goes on.

Bill told us these things and then he waited. He let our minds wander through the trees and out towards those far-off peaks. Did we think about the Ponderosas any differently? Did we hold them closer, dearer? Or did we think of our own special places? Could we picture what they might look like in twenty years, and could we love that picture? And if we held these places tight, close, was that a good thing? What would we do if that thing that we had held most closely were to be lost completely? What would we do then?

Bill spoke.

“Should you love the sick forest as much as you love the pristine one?”

His words were piercing and unapologetic and uncomfortably so.

“Where does your heart go?”

He paused, a piercing silence.

“You can love it and you can see it go. Then what do you love?”

He turned to look each of us in the eyes.

“Can you love the ashes?”

The question haunts me. Can you love the ashes? I’ve gone over it time and time again but I can’t seem to find an answer in that memory, of Bill and I out on the edge of the forest, toeing the brink of change.

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Like Bill, science writer Emma Marris sees loss, or impending loss, on every horizon. But she doesn't see environmental loss as a question of love, rather, of inevitability. In her debut book, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*, Marris asks not how we will feel about the loss of our special places, but how we will rebuild our world amidst such loss. Her work is a proposal for reconceptualization—in both the terms we use to think about nature and the ways in which we interact with it.

Marris argues that we need to stop putting nature on a pedestal, stop thinking of the natural world as some untouchable, untouched thing found only in small slivers of designated land. Instead, she asks us to understand nature through an inclusive lens, to name as nature the grass growing up alongside a busy highway, Sandhill cranes stopping to rest overnight in an agricultural field, and the bees pollinating parking-strip plants. She tells us nature is the here and the now and the everything; the whole and the broken and the pieced-together. The old way of thinking—nature as the domain of the pristine—well, forget Muir and Emerson—Marris writes that the pristine is a construction of our dreams. “We imagine a place, somewhere distant, wild and free,” she writes, “a place with no people and no roads and no fences and no power lines, untouched by humanity’s great grubby hands, unchanging except for the season’s turn.” She argues that this traditional view of nature is limiting. Her book instead takes readers along on a global search for a new, forward-looking conservation strategy, one that is realistic about the inevitable tide of change, yet still finds a nature of value among the ashes.

For Marris, deconstructing nature’s pedestal means examining conservation practices rooted in both centuries-old traditions and contemporary truisms. Bringing

these ideas into question is a task she compares with breaking down religious tenets, or as she explains, disbanding the “cult of pristine wilderness.” The provocative quality of this argument thus requires her readers to have their feathers ruffled by such an assertion. By my best guess, that makes her target audience the average American liberal—someone who’s probably been to a national park, has seen the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, and maybe even dabbles in gardening themselves.

In this way, Marris challenges the status quo. She finds the experts, asks each the tough questions. She wonders, Where is the line between the natural and the constructed? What should conservation look like in a climate-changing world? What are the ethics of human intervention and how do we know if we’ve gone too far? Her answers indeed push up against conservation norms—using some plants and animals as proxies to fill in for losses, rebuilding ecosystems to fulfill certain needs, and artificially expanding species ranges as a preventative measure for their survival, to name a few of her proposals.

Still, her investigation does not quite dig deep enough, and as a result she leaves out key critiques of current-day conservationism essential to any evaluation of the field. Her conclusions are neither simple nor cohesive. Most problematic of her plan for conservation overhaul are the inevitable compromises involved—because in her new world, there are winners and there are losers.



One of Marris’ most controversial ideas is that protecting native plants and animals shouldn’t always be the foremost goal of conservation practices. She asserts, “The faith that native ecosystems are better than changed ecosystems is so pervasive

in fields like ecology that it has become an unquestioned assumption.” Yet accepting the replacement of native ecosystems means choosing to preserve some species at the cost of others. And the costs she’s talking about aren’t just blows, they’re permanent losses. It’s a sticky situation and she doesn’t skirt around the possible implications. “So though one species may be going extinct, the measures that could save it might endanger other ecosystems,” she explains. But in the case of the *Torreya taxifolia*, a rare tree found only in a 40-mile stretch of Florida, she makes the call: “Weep if you like, but let the florida torreya go.”

With the torreya, as with the other ‘losers’ of her book, Marris justifies such loss through a framework of scientific logic, quantifying the value of species by measuring them up against others. Marris relies so heavily on the pragmatism of science that she loses track of the personal, spiritual, and the inexpressible. Yet when it comes to connection to the earth, there is no such thing as an objective, let alone universal, perspective. Rarely do her pro-con lists prioritize the social and cultural importance of species and their ecosystems, and thus she fails to acknowledge that the existence value of a species is different depending on who you ask. For example, I’ll point to one of Marris’ own—the heck cattle, once chosen by the Nazis as a ‘winner’ species. Marris says of their breeding program: “They had their own motivations.” Yes, they truly did. They thought the cattle resembled the ancient auroch, and that the auroch symbolized the glory of an Aryan past. Conservation decisions are biased, sometimes extremely so. Just because these biases aren’t always seen by the public eye doesn’t mean they don’t persist.

In neglecting to detail the 'who' behind conservation decisions, Marris brushes over the ways in which power dictates environmental decisions, so often benefiting those with a voice while leaving the brunt of compromises to fall upon marginalized populations. Looking closely at a Hawaiian forest as a setting in which multiple conservation agendas could be simultaneously achieved, Marris proposes that "[some] sections might be semiweeded into quasi-gardens where Hawaiians can gather plants of cultural importance to make leis, canoes, and so on." She continues on to list other possible strategies for the forest without stopping to recognize that for some Hawaiians, such plants may hold a value that goes beyond what can be explained in the hasty phrase "cultural importance." She does not interview any Hawaiians to check her assumptions nor does she detail the complexity of such "cultural importance." Thus she assigns value to certain species, ecosystems, and management practices without acknowledging the privilege of her own authority.

Still, Marris' neglect for species and ecosystems' cultural existence value is nothing we haven't seen before. She references the dirty history of conservation herself, in her discussion of the early formation of Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks. In both cases, Indigenous tribes were forcibly removed from the land they had historically inhabited and laid claim to.

If we go along with Marris and break the bubble of the 'pristine dream,' we must also recognize that our designations of land are, too, constructions. In the United States, as in many other countries, calling a place a national forest, monument, or park describes only its current status as an area set aside for its natural value. What is concealed in these designations is a recognition of the violence involved in their making.

We cannot forget that this country was founded on stolen land. For many of us, current settlement is only possible at the cost of past and present Indigenous lives.

Loss is not a new concept for the American landscape. But it is undeniable that the current crises of extinction and climate change are unprecedented. The question remains—what will we do about it? Marris lays out a handful of approaches that could be applied and altered to meet the needs of the real world; but in the end, she isn't the one making all the conservation decisions. The utility of her examples thus are the way in which they pick apart at the idea of a 'right' and 'wrong' way to do conservation. As it stands today, conservation hasn't stopped us from experiencing loss yet, and it doesn't promise to slow the losses anytime soon.

So, can we love the ashes? Can we love the sick forest as much as the pristine? Marris says yes, we can. If we can extract ourselves from the illusion of a perfect nature, then our love has room for more. But Marris also says that although our forests may be sick, we haven't reached the ashes yet. Her brave new world of conservation calls for a stitching together of that which has not yet been lost, a unified front for resiliency. She calls it "conservation everywhere."