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BOOKS

Balancing apathy and dogmatism

Environmental author finds perennial paradise between control and wild abandon

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

Taking a middle-of-the-road approach to environmental issues has made David Oates a bit of a radical.

In his new book, *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature*, Oates follows an occasionally biographical trail through a personal wilderness. He successfully keeps the forest-for-the-trees environmental activists on one side and the effluent river of commerce on the other. But the path of practical consumption is a lonely one in an all-or-nothing society that has come to believe its own myth of Paradise Lost.

"It definitely is my lifelong commitment to ask questions about how does it feel to be in nature? Do we belong there? How do we belong there?" says Oates, 53, a gay English professor at Clark College in Vancouver, Wash., who lives with his partner in Southeast Portland.

Drawing together his once-compartmentalized spheres of religion, sexuality, environmentalism and scholarship, Oates examines the intersection of nature and culture by focusing on how "the misapplied myth of Eden has mired Americans in a hopeless 'Paradise Lost' mentality that belies the true ever-present wildness in our lives."

I'm convinced that our public debate (and private struggle) over the environment are locked into an unresolvable cycle of use versus preservation because they are founded on the cultural myth of Paradise Lost, reinforced by an unexamined nostalgia. A remembered perfection; an inevitable decay—this thought pattern has already broken the world into two opposites: nature/wilderness/Eden and human/civilized/fallen.

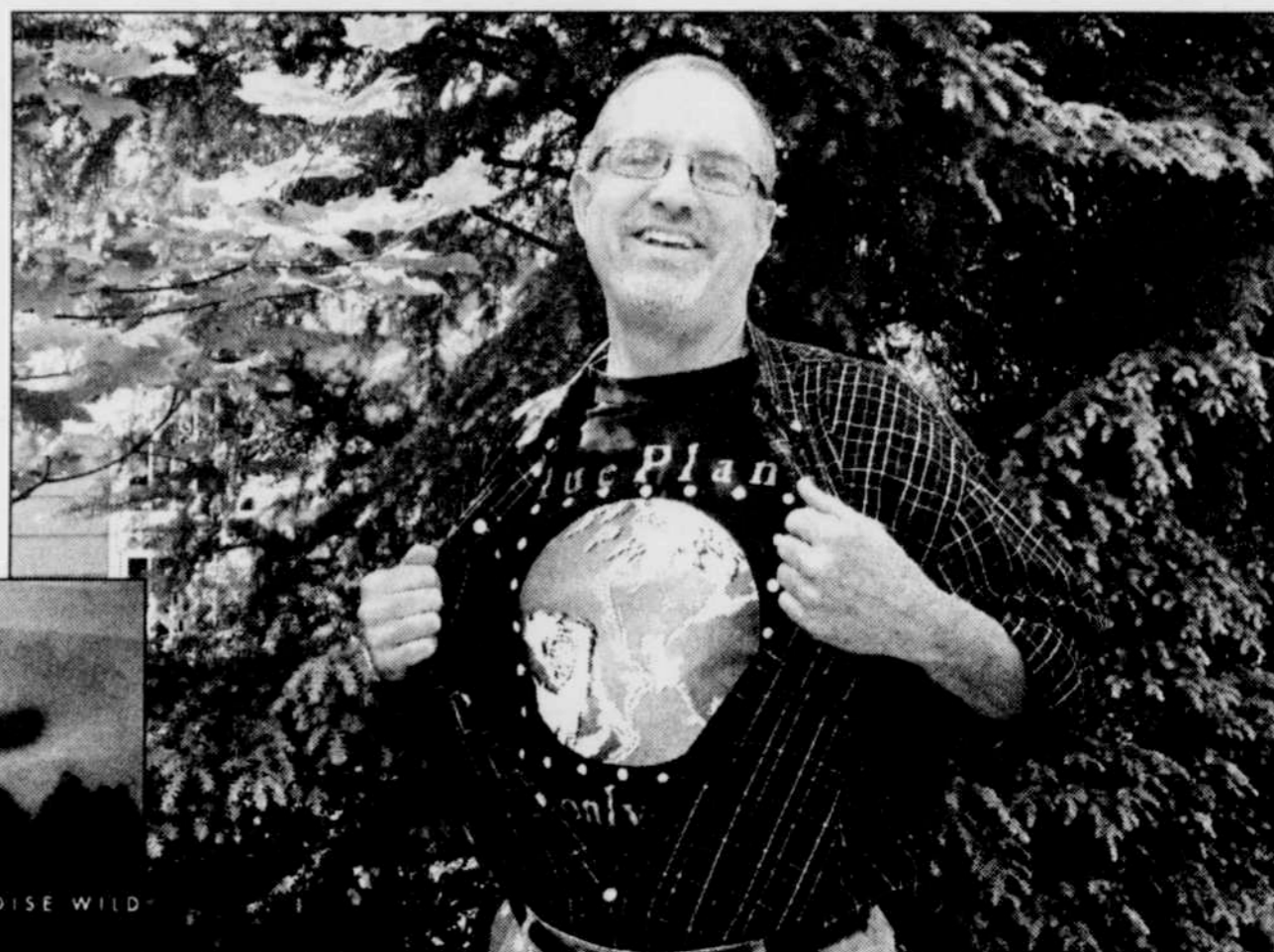
Oates' book responds to other environmental writers and thinkers who held a "not very productive and not very realistic set of beliefs, mythologies, projected desires that didn't correspond to the reality that I knew, and that wasn't getting us anywhere as environmentalists." The goal, he says, is to do a better job of realistically planting the human animal within nature.

The reasoning is simple. People will continue to consume and dispose, drink and piss. But no longer should they romantically grieve the loss of nature, nor should they repeatedly cry wolf when, in fact, nature continues, ever onward, changes notwithstanding.

Utility is now linked with destruction, as if to use something you had to despoil it. Preservation is linked with purity, as if to preserve something you had to hermetically seal it. To follow that model is to create a world split equally between toxic waste dumps and museums. And there is not a whole lot of life in either place.

"We have to think productively about how to do those things and not just put up some sort of childish obstacle and say, 'No, I shall be pure of these uses of nature,'" comments Oates. "At some point you need to turn a corner and say: 'OK, here we are in the world. We're living on it. It chews us, and we chew it. Our real choice is how to do it. Which trees to take and which ones to leave.'"

For extreme environmentalists, giving any ground, even one tree, can be giving too much. Oates sees a sustainable compromise as more of a comprehensive plan rather than backing off



Author and professor David Oates really throws himself into his work. His new book is *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature*.

or giving in. He suggests, for example, that just as much energy be put into practical and sustainable tree harvesting as is invested in protecting trees that shouldn't be touched.

Nature is not the opposite of culture. It is at least as full of change as of stasis, as full of danger as of solace. We need to embrace both.

"I'm more interested in the how than just saying 'no.' How are we going to go about this?" questions Oates. "I really do think it's going to take an army of environmentalists with chain saws to drive [forestry giants like] Weyerhaeuser from the hills. I want them on the run; I think they're the devil. I think it's corporate greed creating clear-cuts."

But, he continues, "We're not going to get them out of the forest until we have a workable alternative.... What happens when these kids with chain saws go across the hills is they say: 'We have a better way to do this. We know how to love the forest, and we recognize that loving the forest and using the forest are not opposites.'"

There is middle ground between control-all engineerism and don't-touch romanticism.

Throughout *Paradise Wild*, Oates introduces stories from his private life to illustrate not only his mountain-climbing journey to this realization but also humanity's intimate connection to an innate, pervasive wildness. This is particularly evident in his renouncing fundamentalist religion in order to reconcile queer sexuality—a type of wilderness in itself.

There's a sly but unmistakable connection between queerness and wilderness, buggers and tree-huggers.... Nature itself is always capable of bursting our bubble, breaking through, insisting there's more.... Gay people do the same thing...insisting that real people and real sexuality are strange, multi-form, exciting, unprogrammed and capable of infinite surprise. Just like nature.... Those who go outside in any sense are likely to discover the queerness of the world.

And so went Oates, who grew up in suburban Los Angeles and attended an evangelical college in Santa Barbara. Passionate about his faith, he thought at the time his sexuality was a problem to solve.

"I felt like my soul was at risk the whole time, that no amount of belief or practice was enough to cleanse me of something that couldn't be eradicated. I prayed for about 10 years for Jesus to change me into a straight man. It cost me a lot of tears and a lot of sleepless nights and some severe distortions in my personality trying to hold together a facade of a correct straight person and at the same time intensely aware that it wasn't true."

A turning point came when he opened up to a classmate who was surprisingly compassionate. "That little tiny chink of human kindness was such a big deal," the author recalls, having expected immediate rejection and hostility. Then as soon as he left that environment, everything began to change.

Fundamentalism in the environmental movement, like in religion, he claims, "is a powerful force against the work of thinking and feeling more clearly."

But if religion gave Oates an understanding of the environmentalist movement, it was sex that drove him to the mountains to see with immediacy what it meant to be a man within nature, while observing how sexuality and the environment validate each other.

Sex is wild. Literally. A little wilderness right in your pajamas! Sex keeps on escaping the cage, running wild in the streets, eating the suburban poodles, messing up the smoothly running and too-scripted system of Girl, Boy, Marriage, Death. And the numb consumerism that sometimes goes with it.

To oppose these orthodoxies is buggery. Queerness. I say: Let's claim the badge gladly. Let's be queer for the woods. ♪

DAVID OATES will conduct a "Wild Writers Seminar" later this summer. For details visit www.davidootes.info.