

A Worm's World

For the earthworm, every day is Earth Day. By Bobbie Willis

THE EARTH MOVED BY AMY STEWART. ALGONQUIN BOOKS, CHAPEL HILL. 2004. HARDCOVER, \$23.95.

Author Amy Stewart grew up in Arlington, Tex., worlds away from any inspiration of green-thumb gardeners or lush gardens. It was, she says, only when she moved as an adult to Santa Cruz, Calif., that she discovered gardening for herself. "This is one of the best climates in the country — well, next to Eugene — where *everything* grows," she says. "Having a little land and a little time made all the difference. This is what got me into gardening."

Stewart translated this discovery into her first book, *From the Ground Up: The Story of a First Gardener* (Algonquin Books, 2001). And from within that first garden experience comes her latest book, *The Earth Moved: On the Remarkable Achievements of Earthworms*, where she explores the underground reaches of the simple earthworm.

Stewart says, "The more I gardened, the more I started to pay attention to the soil, as much as if not more than to the plants. It became really clear that earthworms were a sign of soil fertility." Her fascination with earthworms grew when she moved from

Santa Cruz to Eureka, where she discovered an entirely different kind of earthworm in the soil.

In *The Earth Moved* Stewart writes, "The first inhabitant of the soil to capture my attention was an earthworm. I am a gardener, after all; I can't miss the fact that gardeners and earthworms work in tandem, tilling the soil, feeding the plants. ... I thought they might have a few surprises in store for me, so I began investigating their habits. I soon realized that they held the key to most of what was happening below ground."

Stewart begins her investigation with the late-in-life, though characteristically meticulous, study of worms by scientist Charles Darwin. From this jumping off point, she explores the worms in her own backyard compost bin, the worms eating Minnesota (non-indigenous European worms are eating layers and layers of duff in Minnesota forests, making it almost impossible for undergrowth to take root), and even the legendary giant worms — three feet and longer — of Oregon, Washington and Australia. She explains that worms are natural tillers of soil, that they are "ruminators; they sift through whatever sur-

rounds them, they turn it over, explore it, move through it." She describes how worms turn plant matter into rich soil by writing, "Functionally, worms really do one thing: they digest." The digested plant matter, called castings, serves as wonderful stuff for the garden.

Stewart has a great voice for this kind of natural history writing. It is factual and well informed, but in a backyard scientist kind of way. We as readers follow along easily, partly out of curiosity, partly out of something like neighborliness, as Stewart discovers and shares the microcosm of earthworms and bacteria and fungi in their underground community.

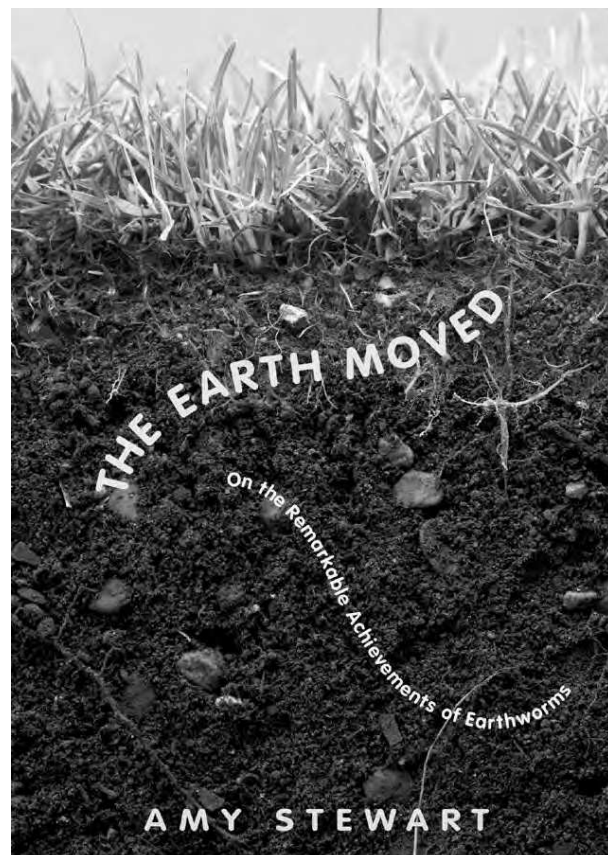
This kind of writing, Stewart says, fits into a bigger sense of environmentalism in that it makes one really look at and think about one's surroundings. "When you realize that soil is full of living creatures, billions of living creatures," she says, "when you think about your soil as an ecosystem, you start to think twice about what you put into it."

In the end, Stewart helps us to see a thing

up close, a thing that all along has been right under our nose, or rather right under our toes. She says the most surprising thing she discovered, and adopted as the book's subtitle, was "thinking of earthworms in terms of their accomplishments." In this book, Stewart discovers not only the worm and its subterranean world, but also a deep respect to match her fascination for how these simple creatures connect to our own sustenance and well being. **EW**



Amy Stewart



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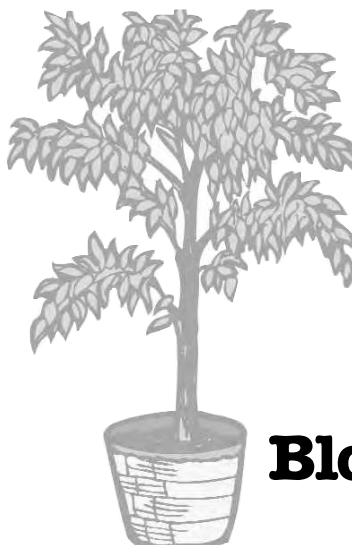
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