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READING NATURE

The Name Game

Tom Murphy

I have talked about my frustration about needing to learn the names of the wildflowers all over again each year as they bloom on schedule. They return to the fields and woods like old friends whose names I can't remember, though they are on the tip of my tongue. Being able to identify the plants, insects, and birds by name seems like such a fundamental way to pay attention to nature.

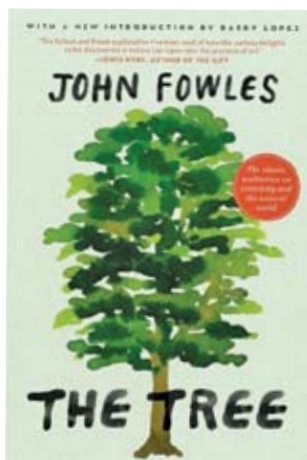
So you can imagine my surprise at statements like this one in John Fowles' brief book *The Tree*: "Even the simplest knowledge of the names and habits of flowers and trees . . . removes us a step from total reality towards anthropocentrism; that is, it acts mentally as an equivalent of the camera viewfinder." "Anthropocentrism" (based on the same Greek word as "anthropology," the study of people) means seeing everything from the point of view of how it affects people. The camera viewfinder is a good analogy; try making a frame by putting your thumbs against your index fingers and looking through it. So much of what you see is left out of the frame.

First published in 1979 along with photographs of trees (Ecco is coming out with a new edition this year), this collection of recollections and reflections, which begins in Fowles' father's garden and ends in one of the few remaining patches of old-growth forest in England, has been republished a few times without the photos. At the end of this month a new paperback edition will appear with an introduction by the contemporary nature writer Barry

Lopez. I enjoy reading this book again from time to time because of what it says about creativity.

Fowles contrasts the scientific and artistic relationship to nature, comparing the scientific to the domesticated, which he associates with his father's highly-managed, suburban garden, especially his very successful fruit growing. Outside that garden, Fowles developed a love for wild nature. He sees a close connection between art and the wild. For him the most important element of art is not the art object, which can be analyzed and controlled, but the actual process of creating it, which is inside the artist, wild and free and eluding capture.

Does Fowles mean that science is evil and we should wander the forest in blissful ignorance? Hardly. Though he was already famous as a novelist (Remember *The French Lieutenant's Woman*?), for many years he was curator of the Lyme Regis Museum, which emphasized geology, in his hometown in Dorset in the South of England. But he is concerned that we protect not just the wild in nature, but the wild inside ourselves and that we not succumb to the "dreadful and puritanical approach" that requires that our relationship to nature "must be purposive, industrious, always seeking greater knowledge." We should sometimes just be there in the wilds of the forest to resonate with the wild within us. 🌲



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