

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature

By J. Drew Lanham

Longwood Gardens Community Read, March-May 2021

The Longwood Gardens Community Read is a program designed to encourage reading for pleasure and start a conversation. Focusing on literature about gardens, plants, and the natural world, we feature an exceptional book annually (paired with a similarly themed younger readers' book) through a variety of programs, discussions, and lectures across all community partner organizations. For more information about the Community Read, go to www.longwoodgardens.org/community-read.



Community Read
Read. Think. Engage.

WHY THIS BOOK WAS SELECTED

The ideas behind specific book selections usually start close to home for the Longwood Gardens Community Read team. This year is no exception. We considered fascination with plants, gardens, and nature. Where might it start for someone? How it might grow into something more? Might we feature writing about the germination of that inspirational seed as it sprouts and eventually flowers into a career or hobby? Might we also feature a new perspective at the same time? Could we also highlight the fauna that are intricately connected to our gardens, meadows, and forests? Books are amazing at conveying many ideas, so surely, we could address all these ideas.

In 2021 we indeed are featuring two books that touch on all these ideas—*The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature* by J. Drew Lanham (adult book) and *Ruby's Birds* by Mya Thompson (for younger readers). In *Ruby's Birds*, a little girl discovers her spark – birds - in her own city neighborhood. They enliven her world and excite her about nature. Her own journey begins. Birds are also a lifelong passion for Drew Lanham in his book *The Home Place*, as he examines his history and path, its influences, and his struggles. Readers follow his journey as a successful, wildlife ecologist who along the way uncovers lessons about legacy and his own need to inject deeper sense of human caring into his life and work.

For the last few years, a diversity of viewpoints and literary genres have become increasingly important to Longwood Gardens. There are so many good books, writers, perspectives, and ideas to explore. Indeed, we believe that beauty comes in many forms. The human experience is equally diverse and beautiful. There are voices that need to be heard and appreciated. Discovering beauty is an idea that is fundamental to the Community Read.

For all our Community Readers, we truly hope that you enjoy these books as much as we do. And, we want to hear from you! After you read the books please reach out and share your thoughts. Email library@longwoodgardens.org, or post on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram using **#CommunityRead**. Tell a friend or colleague about the books. Think about planning an event or book discussion.

-David Sleasman, Director of Library and Information Services, Longwood Gardens



SELECTED QUOTES FROM *THE HOME PLACE* TO USE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

“Somehow my color often casts my love affair with nature in shadow. Being who and what I am doesn’t fit the common calculus. I am the rare bird, the oddity: appreciated by some for my different perspective and discounted by others as an unnecessary nuisance, an unusually colored fish out of water. But in all my time wandering I’ve yet to have a wild creature question my identity. Not a single cardinal or ovenbird has ever paused in dawn-song declaration to ask the reason for my being.” (Me: An Introduction, p. 4)

“I believe the best way to begin reconnecting humanity’s heart, mind, and soul to nature is for us to share our individual stories.” (Me, An Introduction, p. 7)

“From childhood, I’ve relied on field guides to help me appreciate both the stunning and the subtle difference among birds. Even now, I pore over every field guide I can get my hands on – in awe of the diverse catalog of color and form lavishly depicting beings I admire.” (A Field Guide to the Four chapter, p. 67)

“The stories in *A Sand County Almanac* reminded me of the Home Place life I was already living. But there were other pleasures in the book, too. Leopold was obsessive about chronicling the seasons. He painted their nuances with words and in the process revealed a love for land that connected humankind to nature as a moral imperative... I was in love. The book would become sacred to me. It was my catalyst.” (A Field Guide to the Four chapter, p. 70)

“From clouds and rainfall to streams and creeks, lakes and ponds, the sea and back again to the heavens, water is the lifeblood of us all. As enticing as creeks can be, as inspiring as lake sunsets are, water more humbly born is where it all begins. In seeps and quiet oozing, this water works its way upward and outward from unseen aquifers.” (Life’s Spring chapter, p. 125)

“A conservation success story, eastern bluebirds went from being threatened with extinction in the early to mid-twentieth century to being a common backyard bird that people readily claim as their own. They live in human-hewn nest boxes instead of competing for the scarce natural cavities that so many other birds covet. People everywhere are enchanted with the birds’ beauty, soothing songs, and apparently gentle natures.” (The Bluebird of Enlightenment chapter, p. 135-136)



DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature / By J. Drew Lanham
Longwood Gardens Community Read, March-May 2021

“The years have melted, softened, much that I once saw as black and white, morphing it into shades of gray. My good is Aldo Leopold’s good; an ethic of inclusion, promoting the wholeness of nature and treating the land and the wild things that live on it as fellow citizens to be respected and nurtured.” (The Bluebird of Enlightenment chapter, p. 142)

“The wild things and places belong to all of us. So while I can’t fix the bigger problems of race in the United States—can’t suggest a means by which I, and others like me, will always feel safe—I can prescribe a solution in my own small corner. Get more of people of color ‘out there.’” (Birding While Black chapter, p. 157)

“For all those years of running from anything resembling religion and all the scientific training that tells me to doubt anything outside the prescribed confidence limits, I find myself defined these days more by what I cannot see than by what I can. As I wander into the predawn dark of an autumn wood, I feel the presence of things beyond flesh, bone, and blood. My being expands to fit the limitlessness of the wild world. My senses flush to full and my heartbeat quickens with the knowledge that I am not alone.” (New Religion chapter, p. 176)

“I think about land a lot. In fact, I am possessed by it. I think about the lay of the land, how it came to be, what natural forces have changed it, what human forces have mangled it, how concrete and asphalt doom it. I think about the promise it holds for the future and what history it preserves from the past.” (Thinking chapter, p. 177)

“Suddenly I realized that I did have heroes in my family: the survivors who had lived through the most inhumane conditions and had yet produced farmers and teachers and college professors.” (Digging chapter, p. 198)

“Fortunately, history can be redeemed by the passage of time, circumstance, and people courageous enough to change things.” (Digging chapter, p. 199)

“Trying to do what’s best by nature is a guessing game with long-term stakes. Good decisions mean that the soil and water will prosper. The trees will prosper. The wild things will prosper. In that natural prospering all of us will become wealthier in richer dawn choruses and endless golden sunsets. The investment is called legacy. If I can see, feel, touch, and smell these things once more on a piece of land I can call my own, I’ll be home again.” (Patchwork Legacy chapter, p. 212)



Community Read
Read. Think. Engage.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature / By J. Drew Lanham
Longwood Gardens Community Read, March-May 2021

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Longwood Community Read team has been watching Drew Lanham's writing for a couple of years now, since reading his contribution to *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World* (See the brief review in the Additional Resources). Drew's essay is "Hope and Feather: A Crisis in Birder Identification." After that first essay, we then started to notice his writing appearing elsewhere. We were excited to see his memoir, *The Home Place*, published so we can enjoy his poetic, heartfelt prose that draws the reader into his native South Carolina landscape. He has so much to say. The Community Read Team thinks his voice is an important one to share with our community.

Lanham's writing parallels some previous books featured in the Community Read--Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and Hope Jahren's *Lab Girl*. The former has been hugely influential across the globe. Drew Lanham draws special inspiration from Leopold's work into his own professional life, and also his caring worldview. *The Home Place* also stands in distinct parallel to Jahren's book, an international bestseller. Lanham and Jahren both chronicle the struggle to become respected scientists and, in the process, battle cultural forces as much as the challenges of the practice of science itself. Despite obstacles, both are driven to push beyond these social barriers and thrive. Both offer their own stories to call out these problematic issues, offer insight, and inspire. (See the Additional Resources section for links to our Discussion Guides for *A Sand County Almanac* and *Lab Girl*)

These are three themes we find particularly important in *A Home Place* that may be helpful talking points:

1. The importance of engaging children with plants and nature. The source of future natural engagement starts at a young age. From such learning experiences we inspire new generations of scientists, designers, and horticulturists.
2. Birds are an important part of our world and its many ecologies. Appreciating their beauty can be a rich source of personal joy and connect us directly to nature.
3. For Drew Lanham's book there is another important idea. Racism, at times, has shaped his experiences with nature in a discouraging and negative way. How and why might this happen? Nature does not ask our race, nor does it care. Nature can inspire everyone. Nature needs everyone.



Community Read
Read. Think. Engage.

For our Community Readers we hope this Discussion Guide helps to spark your thinking and ignite a conversation. We offer a selection of resources to read more for those who want to continue their journey.

Me: An Introduction

Drew Lanham opens *The Home Place* with the line “I am a man in love with nature.” This love has direct influence on his career and hobbies: ornithologist, wildlife ecologist, professor, birder, and hunter. The passion comes to him through his ancestry and family roots. His goal in sharing his story is the hope that “somehow I might move others to find themselves magnified in nature, whomever and wherever they might be.” (p. 6)

Flock

In this section, Lanham introduces us to the land and people of his Home Place, his family's rural property in the town of Edgefield in the western South Carolina piedmont. Lanham describes the ecology and geography of the region, and lovingly details the property itself. The Home Place includes his family home (“The Ranch”) and a separate home for his beloved grandmother, Mamatha (“The Ramshackle”) – where he spent most of his time growing up. His hard-working parents cultivated acres of fruit and vegetables to feed the family and to sell, as well as raising beef cattle to supplement their teachers' incomes. Mamatha had a use for almost every wild plant growing outside her door, and still cooked and heated with wood gathered by Drew and his father from the Home Place. Young Drew, after completing his chores, could walk for hours exploring the wildness of the Home Place, without having to explain where he'd been. In his explorations, he learned about the seasons and the flora and fauna of his home and created memories which, he says, “continue to haunt me pleasantly.”

Lanham's family is inextricably tied to his memories of the Home Place. Mamatha, his paternal grandmother, needed someone around after her husband died, and Drew was “loaned” to her to help around the house and keep her from loneliness. She was very spiritual, believed in the supernatural, and prepared her own potions and herbal remedies to administer with incantations when treating illness. Hoover, Lanham's father (a respected middle school earth science teacher), looms large in his memory as “some sort of superhuman being” who took care of things at the Home Place because it had to be done for his family, and done the right way. His mother Willie May (a biology teacher) was “equally adept at the finer points of fetal pig dissection and at canning



peaches, pears, and peas.” Lanham and his three siblings have essentially, and much to his regret, lost their strong connection to the Home Place land. He has vowed to continue the passionate love of wild things that he learned on the Home Place as a religion of sorts, because “nature seems worthy of worship.”

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think the author uses the word “Colored” in the book’s subtitle, instead of Black or African American? What significance does the word colored hold to him? Why is it important to him to qualify who he is when describing his “love affair with nature?”
2. How much do you think Lanham’s life with his family on the Home Place influenced his career choice of ornithologist, wildlife ecologist and professor? How much is nature vs. nurture - could he have followed the same path if he did not have the daily interactions with nature that fueled his passion and imagination?
3. In “A Field Guide to the Four,” Lanham describes his reaction to Aldo Leopold’s classic conservation book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). Why do you think Leopold’s ideas resonated with him?

Fledgling

In this section, Lanham touches on influential events of his youth. He always had a fascination with flight, and would launch himself from ladders, trees, roofs, and haystacks in an attempt to defy gravity like the birds, butterflies, bats, and airplanes that he admired. He noticed birds from a young age, and they were always present in life on the Home Place. After getting his first field guide in second grade, the budding ornithologist and birder studied them and began to know their names: “even if I couldn’t fly like them, I could watch them and imagine life on the wing.”

The gift of a BB gun taught him that creatures’ lives shouldn’t be taken just for the experience of doing so, after he regrettably killed a sparrow for sport. His childhood love for cowboy movies fueled his imagination when he was tending his family’s herd of cows, even though it was disappointing to him that he was a teenager before he knew that there had been cowboys that looked like him. In the poignant chapter “Life’s Spring,” Lanham parallels the spring that provided water to the Home Place with the loss of his father at a young age due to his increasingly weak heart. The spring, the



DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature / By J. Drew Lanham
Longwood Gardens Community Read, March-May 2021

lifeblood of the property, could no longer support the Home Place without Hoover to tend to it, and must be replaced by a well.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it surprising that the author, a man of science, had such an active imagination as a child? Is there something about birds that fuels the imagination?
2. Lanham says of the family's cows: "[They] were so much more than stress and labor to Daddy. They were a release from things that he could not control, four-legged confessors. He loved those cows." (p. 122) Why are interactions with nature therapeutic for so many?
3. Why do you think the author relates water so strongly with his father? What role did his father play in his life?

Quotes to Spark Discussion

"Somehow my color often casts my love affair with nature in shadow. Being who and what I am doesn't fit the common calculus. I am the rare bird, the oddity: appreciated by some for my different perspective and discounted by others as an unnecessary nuisance, an unusually colored fish out of water. But in all my time wandering I've yet to have a wild creature question my identity. Not a single cardinal or ovenbird has ever paused in dawn-song declaration to ask the reason for my being." (p. 4)

"I believe the best way to begin reconnecting humanity's heart, mind, and soul to nature is for us to share our individual stories." (p. 7)

"I've expanded the walls of my spiritual existence beyond the pews and pulpit to include longleaf savannas, salt marshes, cove forests, and tall-grass prairie. The miracles for me are in migratory journeys and moonlit nights. Nature seems worthy of worship" (p. 96)

Flight

This section begins with an internal revelation by Lanham that sets up a trajectory/journey of self-discovery beyond his professional pursuit of science. Lanham



Community Read
Read. Think. Engage.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature / By J. Drew Lanham
Longwood Gardens Community Read, March-May 2021

writes about his own emotional journey. He celebrates his teachers—living, dead, literary, scientific, and nonhuman—that offer life lessons along the way to be a good student, good son, good father, good scientist, good teacher, and good writer. Lanham admits to his nature as “hoop jumper” both personally and professionally. He faces challenges in a series rather than as a ‘big plan’ to be achieved. Lanham follows his heart to expand his world and understanding. He challenges himself and thereby create new hoops to enrich his journey. One example is his interest in hunting as an adult. From these challenges he discovers new meaning (jawbone of a slain deer represents much more, for example).

As part of his journey, Lanham consciously decides to embrace caring into his professional work in an act he calls “embracing a new religion.” Encounters with the preeminent thinker E.O. Wilson and exploring his own thoughts about his past in a writer’s workshop help to point the way. Lanham more deeply examines his personal and family history that has been shaped by racism and its legacy; his own immediate family; and the birds, plants, and ecology of his native South Carolina land. This reflection on history yields a lesson on the potential (and hope) that a connection to land and nature represents for others more broadly. What might this connection to the land be? To discover for himself, Lanham digs metaphorically through both evidence and memory. Genealogy reveals a path with frustrating dead ends, unforeseen connections, and the painful truths about slavery. Because of this journey Lanham realizes that one’s own family were indeed heroic. They offer him a patchwork legacy to both family and the land to draw upon personally and professionally. Lanham closes by considering how he might combine this legacy with that of one of his teachers, Aldo Leopold, to manage 120 acres that still is held by his family.

Discussion Questions

1. Who are some of the Teachers Lanham references? What are the gifts/lessons they offer him as a student, son, father, or human?
2. Specific birds are mentioned throughout this book. What are some that you can recall? How does Lanham use birds in his writing to create place or convey a message?
3. Racism and its legacy cast a long shadow over Lanham’s life. Might you name a few of these examples? Is Lanham hopeful for the future? What signs of hope does he offer? What work must be done?



Community Read
Read. Think. Engage.

Quotes to Spark Discussion

“The wild things and places belong to all of us. So while I can’t fix the bigger problems of race in the United States—can’t suggest a means by which I, and others like me, will always feel safe—I can prescribe a solution in my own small corner. Get more of people of color ‘out there.’ Turn oddities into commonplace. The presence of more black birders, wildlife biologists, hunters, hikers, and fisherfolk will say to others that we, too, appreciate the warble of a summer tanager, the incredible instincts of a whitetail buck, and the sound of the wind in the tall pines. Our responsibility is to pass something on to those coming after. As young people of color reconnect with what so many of their ancestors knew—that our connections to the land run deep, like the taproots of mighty oaks; that the land renews and sustains us—maybe things will begin to change.” (p. 157)

“I don’t expect everyone to feel the same way that I do about the land. For so many of us, the scars are still too fresh. Fields of cotton stretching to the horizon—land worked, sweated, and suffered over for the profit of others probably don’t engender warm feeling among most black people. But the land, in spite of its history, still holds hope for making good on the promises we thought it could, especially if we can reconnect to it.” (p. 181)

“Trying to do what’s best by nature is a guessing game with long-term stakes. Good decisions mean that the soil and water will prosper. The wild things will prosper. In that natural prospering all of us will become wealthier in richer dawn choruses and endless golden sunsets. The investment is called legacy. If I can see, feel, touch, and smell these things once more on a piece of land I call my own, I’ll be home again. So maybe there is hope. Home, after all, is more than a place on the map. It’s a place in the heart.” (p. 212)

