

BLL Book Reviews - May 2022

Brewster Ladies Library
1822 Main Street
Brewster, MA 02631

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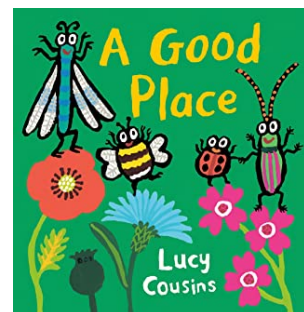
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A Good Place (Candlewick Press, 2022) Picture Book (3-7 year-olds)

by Lucy Cousins

reviewed by: Nori Morganstein, Youth Services Librarian/Assistant Director



Lucy Cousins is famous for her Maisy picture book series, and her simple, bright illustrations will look friendly and familiar to kids who pick this one up. Dragonfly, Beetle, Ladybug, and Bee are looking for a “good place” to call home. The insects are all looking for different characteristics in a good place to live. Bee wants flowers, Ladybug wants leaves, Beetle wants dead wood, and Dragonfly wants a pond. What I assumed was going to be a friendship story about compromise ended up being more of a book about habitats and nature.

The insects can't find what they seek, not because they can't all agree, but because humans kept getting in the way! The insects find flowers, but the flowers are on a busy sidewalk where humans could step on them. The insects find good leaves, on a plant, but a person then sprays the leaves with “Bug Off.” It gets to the point where the insects feel they will never find a good place but then a butterfly that directs them to a garden over a wall where apparently a boy lives who loves insects has made the good place, and it looks amazing. The last page of the book is the brightest page, covered in flowers, plants, water, wood, animals, and life.

This book would work as a great introduction to talking about gardens, ecosystems, insects, nature, and wildlife. There are not many words so it's not a hard book to swallow. It doesn't present too much information at once. It has a simple message, but a good one. Readers will feel bad that the insects can't find a good place for so long. The story might possibly make a few insects seem a little less frightening. They are all painted as bright, colorful, happy creatures. This is definitely a great picture book to read in spring time when families might be planting their own gardens. In general, it's just a fun, sweet story.

Ways and Means: Lincoln and his Cabinet and the Financing of the Civil War

by Roger Lowenstein

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

While we might know the famous battles of the Civil War, there is one battle that we don't pay attention to: the battle to finance the war. Roger Lowenstein aims to educate us about that in his finely written *Ways and Means*, a book that looks at how the Union was able to successfully finance the war with relatively modest wartime inflation and how the Confederacy failed to do so. It is an interesting education, highlighting financial developments that, while revolutionary at the time, became important elements of future monetary policy.

Lowenstein does not give us just a financial account of the war. He delves into the personalities that conducted the financial policies, particularly the Union Secretaries of the Treasury, Salmon Chase and William Pitt Fessenden, and the Confederate Treasury Secretaries, Christopher Memminger and George Trenholm. Lowenstein shows us how Chase and Fessenden worked with the legislative power brokers, Sen. John Sherman and Rep. Thaddeus Stevens, to forge policies that enabled the Union to build a strong financial backing for the war and to prosecute it to its successful conclusion. Lowenstein contrasts that with the struggles that Memminger and Trenholm faced in dealing with Jefferson Davis and a host of Southern governors who resisted what they saw as Richmond's heavy-handed usurpation of their powers.

An interesting sidelight to the financial discussion was the question of what role Blacks might play in the war and ultimately in either society. Attitudes ranged to include an Arkansas general, Patrick Cleburne, writing that slaves should be freed and that doing so would provide the South with fresh troops and a needed boost to the economy. On the Union side, one of the first decisions about slavery was what to do about former slaves on the Sea Islands that stretched south from Charleston. The debate over how the land would be dispersed feeds into our contemporary discussions about reparations (the word that was used then was pre-emption). Gen. Rufus Saxton, the military governor of the Islands, argued for land distribution to the former slaves, suggesting that decades of hard labor entitled them to a generous settlement. He told War Secretary Stanton that in terms of lost wages the slaves had probably paid for the land many times over.

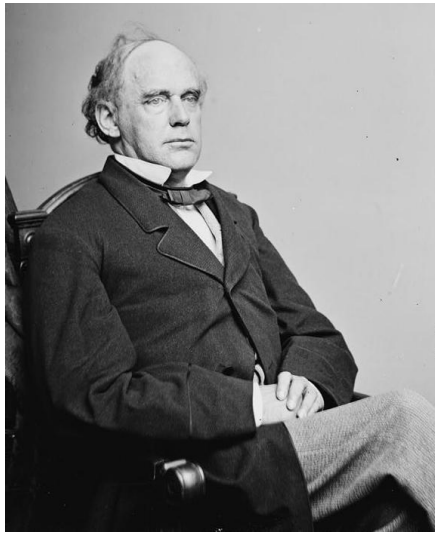
The financial prospects of both sides depended heavily, and often irrationally, on what was happening on the field of battle. While the Union clearly had the superior financial structure for prosecuting the war, it was not until Sherman captured Atlanta and Savannah and Grant began to roll Lee's army back toward Richmond that the financial picture began to clear. Even as Grant faltered near Richmond, gold rose to 200, implying that \$1 "greenbacks" (U. S. notes) were worth only 50 cents. At the same time, Southern bonds, known as Erlanger cotton bonds, rose from 37 to 70, meaning that Confederate bonds traded higher than Chase's greenbacks, a ridiculous condition given the relative financial and physical condition of the two economies.

There was considerable financial innovation on both sides. For the Confederacy, the so-called Erlanger cotton bonds promised a financial lifeline to the South. Richmond would sell the bonds, backed by the value of a quantity of cotton, for hard currency to purchase weapons and other supplies in Europe. Erlanger, who ran the French arm of a German banking house, thought that European investors would be willing to wait until the end of the war to claim their cotton. As noted above, these cotton bonds held their value surprisingly well until the collapse of the Confederacy.

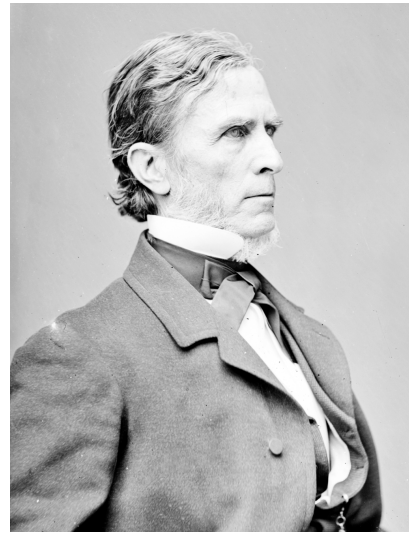
At the beginning of the war the financial landscape of the North was chaotic. Hundreds of banks issued short term notes, and these notes were limited to roughly the bank's service area. Lowenstein writes that that the chaos was easy to imagine - 1400 state-chartered banks in the Union put over eight thousand types of bills in circulation. Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase worked to reform this banking system, seeking a uniform currency that would be legal tender for all debts and that would not be tied to gold and silver. These reforms were realized in the Legal Tender Act which provided an unbacked fiat currency and the National Banking Act, which allowed the federal government to control the currency but allowed these federally chartered private banks (National Banks) to operate as independent, for-profit institutions, a structure consistent with Chase's Jacksonian leanings.

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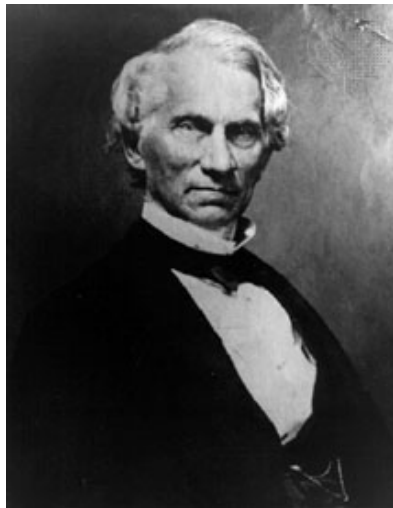
No discussion of this era would be complete without considering where Lincoln stood and how he interacted with Chase and Fessenden. Lincoln could not move ahead on the political front without the financial sector's buy-in and whatever support he gave to the financial actions that Chase proposed or enacted had to mesh with the political situation. Although we rarely think of Lincoln as a financial genius, he clearly understood how finance was the key to concluding a victorious war and securing a peace that would unleash the economic potential of the nation. Roger Lowenstein has, with *Ways and Means*, written an excellent primer on Civil War finance. That he added an epilogue to show the evolution of the banking system in the late 19th century as well as the evolution of the Republican party during that time period gives further context to the subject. This is a fine piece of financial history.



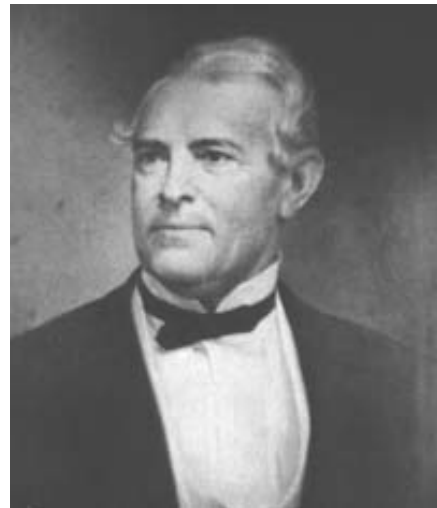
Salmon Chase



William Pitt Fessenden



Christopher Memminger



George Trenholm

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Also appear on the Brewster Ladies Library Web Site
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Thanks to JoAnn Phillips for her skill in editing these reviews.

Phantom Plague: How Tuberculosis Shaped History

by Vidya Krishnan

reviewed by Jim Mills

Throughout our recorded history mankind has been plagued by the disease, mostly respiratory, that we now call tuberculosis (TB). It wasn't until the 1880's that the cause of this dread disease was shown by Robert Koch to be the tuberculosis bacilli. In 1910 tuberculosis (known previously as consumption) was the leading cause of death in the United States. In 1843 Charles Dickens visited America and was appalled by the sight of American males continually spitting in every direction. By the end of the century American health officials had established this spitting habit as a major route for the spread of TB. Country-wide bans, including arrests and fines, on spitting had little effect on men's behavior. A second approach was to convince women to make a fashion change and eliminate the ground brushing dresses, common at the time, which helped to spread about the TB bacilli found on the ground via the men's expectorant. This effort was more successful and women's hemlines rose. Today, spitting is much less prevalent and can be seen regularly only by watching a major league baseball game.

In developed countries, with the advent of antibiotics, TB has been almost eliminated as a cause of death. The same cannot be said of the rest of the world. In recent decades there has been an alarming rise of the disease in less developed countries. The author concentrates on the TB problems in India, particularly in the slums of Mumbai (formerly Bombay). This spread is enhanced by the very close quarters that the poor are forced to inhabit as well as the shameful state of medical care available. Another factor enhancing the disease is the lack of early symptoms during a period where the carrier is very infectious. The most disturbing aspect, however, is the rise of drug resistant TB bacilli making a cure virtually impossible. The few drugs that have a positive effect on these mutant bacteria are very expensive and unavailable in many countries. The author points out the continual efforts by big drug companies to extend their drug patents and, by eliminating the cheap manufacture of generic versions of the drug, maintain the high price regimen.

The author point out that many asymptomatic individuals, unknowingly carry the TB bacilli. In the early 1980's the appearance of HIV meant that many of these individuals became ill with TB as the virus ravaged their immune systems. This aspect continues to expand the number of those actively ill with TB. The author emphasizes the inability of the world's health system to provide decent health care for black and brown citizens of the world. This deficiency has been true for a very long time. One example presented is the infamous Tuskegee Study. From 1932 to 1972 the U. S. Public Health Service ran a study of 400 black men in Alabama who had syphilis. These individuals were not informed of their condition and no treatment was provided. The study's goals were to follow the progression of the disease and to autopsy the study subjects after they died. When WW2 arrived the health service was able to get the participants exempted from military service so that they would not have a medical examination and become aware of their condition. The only conclusion to be derived from this study is that those conducting the study considered the subjects to be less than human whose quality of life were not of concern. In the modern world the lack of health care for some of us affects all of us as the current Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated. The spread of drug resistant TB from countries like India, in the long run, should be a direct concern for all of us.

I had tuberculosis in my mid-20s. I didn't have much work, was living in a damp London basement in a sleeping bag, and ate only every other day. I looked rough and felt very run down. - Engelbert Humperdinck

The importance in what we're seeing in countries around the world is a poorly regulated and poorly functioning private sector using irrational and ineffective medications that result in the emergence of drug-resistant tuberculosis. What we've done is begun a program to rapidly improve infection control in places that are treating TB patients. - Tom Frieden

Buster Keaton: A Filmmaker's Life

by James Curtis

reviewed by Jim Mills

Buster Keaton, like many of his show business contemporaries, started his career just out of infancy. In 1899, at the age of 4, Buster was added to his parent's vaudeville act, making the *Two Keatons* into the *Three Keatons*. Joseph Keaton Jr., always called Buster, rapidly became the star of the show, reviving a family act that had been in decline. The Keaton's stage act was one of very violent physical comedy with Buster being thrown about continually as part of the performance. Buster, at a very early age, learned to take a fall and remain uninjured. Being in vaudeville meant that Buster had to travel continuously to perform in theaters all around the country week after week all year round. There was little or no opportunity for Buster to receive any schooling. When in New York his father had to deal with municipal ordinances that restricted child labor. He would have to sharply define Buster's activities to get around the law and was frequently a fugitive from justice in New York. Buster's vaudeville experience would be valuable in his future career in silent film. He also learned not to smile during his humorous routines, since that reduced the level of audience amusement, hence his nickname, The Great Stone Face.

Around 1917 Buster left the family act and started performing in silent motion picture shorts working with the then top movie comedian, Roscoe (Fatty) Arbuckle. Following a short tour of duty in WW 1, Buster returned to Hollywood in 1919, producing and starring in his own movie comedies. His early works were what were called "two reelers", running around 25 to 30 minutes. From the start Keaton with his rough physical comedy routines, became a major star in the early silent film industry. A few years later, Buster was directing and performing in full length films running from 1 to 2 hours. During this period in the 1920s Buster produced the great comedic masterpieces for which he has come to be known: *The General*, *Sherlock Jr.*, *The Navigator*, *Three Ages*, *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, *Our Hospitality*, *Seven Chances*.

All of these films featured death defying acts involving Buster's unique brand of comedy. Keaton quickly joined the trio of top silent comedians including Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd. The same theme connected all three performers, a portrayal of a hero, much abused and downtrodden, eventually emerging triumphant. Almost always this theme involved the hero ending up getting the girl. Harold Lloyd's brand of comedy also included death defying acts such as in his classic film, *Safety Last*.

Like the experience of many of his silent film star contemporaries, Keaton's career began to go downhill with the advent of talking films in the late 20s. An additional problem for Keaton was his agreement in 1928 to join the film studio, Metro Goldwyn Mayer. MGM managed to severely limit Keaton's artistic freedom, resulting in a decline in the quality of his films. However, unlike many other silent film stars, Keaton held on continuing in show business until his death in 1966. He made many sound films, primarily short subjects. He had roles in many all star films such as *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956), *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1965) and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966). Starting in 1949 Keaton became a frequent performer on television shows such as Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town*. In 1957 he was featured on *This is Your Life*, the Ralph Edward's show that highlighted the life of celebrities by rounding up friends and colleagues from the past.

Keaton never really retired from show business. He kept working until a few months before his death. His career was characterized by a driving ambition and a need to always do his best. Even when not performing he was a valuable guide to other performers and directors on how to achieve comedic excellence. Keaton had a strong work ethics. He was always on time and worked harder than anyone else on the set. He was repeatedly acclaimed by audiences and fellow performers in his later years, receiving a lifetime achievement Oscar in the 1960s. James Curtis has brought this silent film star back to life. *Buster Keaton* runs to almost 700 pages and from that perspective is a challenging but rewarding read. Keaton was one of a kind, the Great Stone Face, as he was known. We will not see his likes again.

The Great Stone Face



Free: A Child and a Country at the End of History

by Lea Ypi

reviewed by Jim Mills

Lea Ypi was born in 1979 in Albania. *Free* is her story of growing up in a communist country and the psychological and sociological stresses of the transition encountered with the fall of communism in 1990. In her early years she never questioned the world view promoted by governmental and educational authorities. In 1985 the nation, Lea included, mourned the death of Uncle Enver. Enver Hoxha established the communist system in Albania at the end of WW 2 and was revered as the founding father.

Another curious episode has to do with her mother buying an empty Coca Cola can and decorating her home with it. When the can went missing, she accused a neighbor of stealing the can but as it turned out her neighbor had also purchased the treasure herself. The isolation of Albania insured that there was minimal contact with the rest of the world. The few tourists in the country usually came from other communist nations and that declined when, early on, Albania broke ties with the Soviet Union. I remember years ago listening on short wave radio to a station that condemned both the United States and, curiously, the Soviet Union. The station was Radio Tirana located in the Albanian capital.

Lea was firmly indoctrinated with communist doctrine, occasionally correcting her parents when she thought that they were espousing different views. The sudden shift of Albania to a multi-party system in 1990 was a rude awakening to the eleven year old child. She then learned from her parents the reality of the world and the increasing contact with visiting tourists also changed her view of the world. Lea was a very intelligent girl and knowledgeable about literature and was able to rapidly adjust to the new world view.

The stresses of democracy and the unrest in the Balkans in the 1990 led to widespread conflict within Albania leading to what was essentially a civil war in 1997. Thousands of Albanians left the country, as gunfire erupted across the nation, in a refugee influx directed mainly across the Adriatic at Italy. Lea's mother was an early emigre. In the summer of 1997, after finishing high school, Lea left for Italy to escape the violence, never to return. She is currently a university professor in the United Kingdom. In *Free*, Lea Ypi has created an eminently readable story of her early life and the Albanian culture both before and after the transition to democracy. She does this with great insight and humor. This is her first book and comes with the highest recommendation. Stories such as hers, once more, emphasize the very many individuals with fine minds found in nation's around the world who never have the opportunity to realize their full potential. Here, in the western world, we are so fortunate to have opportunities that are not available to many.

On Animals

by Susan Orlean

reviewed by Jim Mills

On Animals is a collection of magazine articles written over 20 years by Susan Orlean for magazines such as the *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Smithsonian*. The author's rare sense of humor enlivens 15 very different stories of animals both wild and domestic. Most highlight the interaction between humans and our fellow inhabitants of the animal kingdom.

The emphasis in two chapters is on small scale farming with descriptions of life on Orleans upstate New York farm with its large menagerie of inhabitants and the problems involved in such a life. A separate chapter deals with the widespread pursuit of raising chickens in both rural and urban environments and the problems involved since much neighboring wildlife have chickens high on their menu.

Competitions highlight several of her stories. Dog shows are conducted across the country and the author points out how rigorous and expensive dog shows can be. The pampered subjects lead a very active and controlled existence. Another area of competition deals with the expertise and skills of taxidermists. The need for hunters to display their trophies on their wall provides a solid base in the field. Many of those working in animal preservation take great pride in creating a product that is a permanent reproduction of the animals involved. Homing Pigeons have been a basis for military communications for centuries but also a hobby for thousands throughout the country.

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The ability of these birds to navigate unerringly across hundreds of miles has been a mystery over the ages. The story Orlean tells is about a Boston teenager entering her birds in competitions where the pigeons are released from as far away as New York State. Usually the owners do not accompany their birds on the trip since the pigeons would get back home before the owners are there to record their arrival.

One very curious story comes from Jackson, New Jersey just south of the Jersey Shore. It starts with the local inhabitants spotting a full grown tiger wandering around their small town. Nearby is Six Flags Great Adventure animal park but no tigers were missing. It turned out there was a local woman who owned approximately 17 tigers. She was nebulous on the number. Authorities were not able to prove that the tiger was one of hers but the story does dwell on the state's effort to rid Jackson, NJ of its tiger population.

The movie industry has, since its inception, featured animals in its films. In the early years many of these animals perished as a result. In recent decades the industry has been placed under tight controls regarding its animal use. These restrictions have become very stringent, extending to restricting work hours and in the case of insects (ants, termites, etc.), an accurate count to insure that all survive. One prominent movie celebrity was a killer whale (Orca) named Keiko. Keiko was captured off the Icelandic coast and had ended up in a second rate marine show in Mexico. From there he was featured in the movie, *Free Willy*, as the title character. Keiko's screen fame triggered a movement to really free Keiko and return him to the wild. The resulting process cost many millions of dollars and several years of training to return this domesticated Orca to a wild existence.

Other topics include donkeys in Fez, Morocco used as beasts of burden in a section of the town with streets too narrow for the use of motorized vehicles. Mules were used in the US Army and as beast of burden before the invention of internal combustion engine. The chapter explains why these animals were the preferred choice. The use of oxen in agriculture was widespread, historically, in Cuba. During the early Castro years a very generous supply of tractors and fuel from the USSR meant that oxen had almost disappeared. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 cut off this supply and Cuba gradually reverted to oxen use. The author points out, a curious aspect of oxen is that each animal in a pair is always placed on the left or the right side. Reverse the pattern and all progress grinds to a halt.

Rabbits, kept for food use or as pets, became a menace in Australia due to their rapid reproduction potential and lack of predators. A viral rabbit disease was introduced into the country in the 1950s to deal with the problem. More recently in the 2010s another viral disease, not intentionally introduced, ravaged rabbit populations in the United States.

A recent lost dog story involves a stolen car in Atlanta, Georgia. The owner had left the car running in a parking garage to provide air conditioning for his dog in the back seat on a hot August day. When he returned his car and dog were gone with only a few shards of glass left behind. An interesting story involves the effort to locate their dog and also their car. Susan Orlean has a gift for narrative and in *On Animals* she has created a fascinating work that is interesting from cover to cover. An earlier work that this reviewer can also recommend is her *Library Book*, chronicling the development of the Los Angeles Public Library and the impact of a devastating 1980s fire and its rise from the ashes.

To Speak for the Trees

by Diana Beresford-Kroeger

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

In this very short two-part book, *To Speak for the Trees*, Diana Beresford-Kroeger eloquently speaks for them and, in their defense, argues that without them life as we know it would not be possible. "The debt we owe them is too big to ever repay." She sees the rampant cutting of trees as both homicide against the trees and environmental suicide. While we may focus on what is happening to the poster child of forest destruction, the rainforests of the Amazon, she gives equal weight to the destruction of the boreal forests of the far northern latitudes, particularly those of her adopted home of Canada. In so doing, she ties her research to the scary implications of what climate change is doing to those forests and, by extension, the world.

In the first part of the book Beresford-Kroeger writes what is essentially a memoir while in the second part she details how every letter of Ogham script, the ancient alphabet of the Celts, was named for a tree or for an important companion plant of trees. It is in this latter section where Beresford-Kroeger talks of each tree and the biochemistry that determines where the tree is to be found and what impact that tree will have on its environment. (continued on the next page)

The first part of the book deals with the untimely death of her parents and how, as an orphan, she would normally have been shunted into an orphanage and the infamous laundries, hotbeds of abuse and death. But, as a Beresford and hence part of the landed English gentry, she is given to the care of her uncle Patrick O'Donoghue, a kindly, neglectful adult. Left to her own devices, Diana learns how to care for herself, ultimately thriving at school and building a solid, caring relationship with Uncle Pat. More importantly for her development, she spends summers with relatives from her mother's side of the family in the Lisheens Valley in County Cork, a last bastion of Celtic culture in Ireland. It is here where Beresford-Kroeger is taught ancient ways by elders who are the last generation that will pass along the Celtic wisdom. What makes this a fascinating story is that Diana is schooled in both Celtic ways and in what we would call cutting edge science and it is her ability to meld the two that makes this such a fascinating book.

An example of the synergy she derived from the Druidic/ scientific collaboration is given by the story of how she and a group of students from University College Cork engaged in specimen gathering at the seaside. While doing this, she and her students noticed that the rare species they sought were most likely found where rivers ran into the sea and where salt and fresh water mingled. Her hypothesis was that there must be an essential mineral carried from land to sea that allowed these species to survive. Fifty years later a Japanese marine chemist confirmed her hypothesis. As leaves decay on the forest floor, fulvic acid is released. This humic acid bonds with iron in the soil, is flushed into rivers and the ocean (an iron poor environment) and it is here in the ocean where it boosts the growth of phytoplankton, creating what Beresford-Kroeger calls a "marine buffet." The scientist, Katsuhiko Matsunaga, said a Japanese saying was that "if you want to catch a fish, plant a tree," a statement that Beresford-Kroeger said was a signpost just like those she was given during her Lisheens education. Tragically, Matsunaga's research showed that clear-cutting in Japan was directly linked to the collapse of marine ecosystems.

In many ways this book reminded me of others that have delved into both how messing with nature often has disastrous consequences and how ancient myth is so often vindicated by contemporary scientific discovery. I think in particular of *The Hidden Life of Trees* and the novel *Overstory*. That Diana Beresford-Kroeger's *To Speak for the Trees* joins this company is testimony to the high quality of her research and her writing.

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