

**Book Review by Tony Reddin:
*The Botany of Desire—A Plant's-Eye View of the World***

Author: Michael Pollan Published 2001.

Available at PEI Provincial libraries or from Tony Reddin 675-4093.

Michael Pollan is also the author of *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (January 2008), *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*—named one of the ten best books of 2006 by the New York Times and the Washington Post,— *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, and *A Place of My Own: The Education of an Amateur Builder*. The author's website is www.michaelpollan.com

There are lots of gushing reviews of Michael Pollan's work on various web sites; *The Botany of Desire* is an excellent book! It could be considered 4 short books in one. Each of the four chapters is about one domesticated type of plant with an associated human 'desire'— the apple, a fruit giving sweetness; the tulip, a flower giving beauty; marijuana, a drug plant giving intoxication; and the potato, a staple food giving the possibility of control. For each, Pollan presents well-researched, entertaining and enlightening stories and explanations about its history, domestication and most recent human manipulations.

By way of minor criticism, I don't accept that this book gives "A Plant's-Eye View of the World" beyond how people have been attracted to certain plants, and how those plants have been changed by people. The plants are better represented by the song "Carrot Juice Is Murder" by The Arrogant Worms (worth seeking out for the brilliant lyrics!). A more serious representation of wild plants, in particular trees; occurs in Bill McGibbon's *Hope, Human and Wild- true stories of living lightly on the earth*, (1995) where he describes the return in just a hundred years of the forest wilderness to the Adirondack Mountains Park in upstate New York from a barren clearcut wasteland.

As a Spud-Islander, I was drawn first to the 'potato' chapter in *Botany of Desire*, in which Pollan includes a comparison of industrial potato producers with an organic potato farmer. Pollan visits Monsanto's research labs to get the scientific lowdown on the NewLeaf brand potato seeds that are genetically modified to contain toxins that kill potato beetles. He elaborates on the large quantities of pesticides sprayed on conventional potatoes, and the organic solutions that try to avoid the pitfalls of monoculture, because "Monoculture is the single most powerful simplification of modern agriculture, the key move in reconfiguring nature as a machine, yet nothing else in agriculture is so poorly fitted to the way nature seems to work." (p. 225) This doesn't apply, of course, to pasture and hay/forage, and is another good argument for the sustainability of 'mixed' farming, with relatively small amounts of a wide variety of crops. It is also worth noting that, for now, genetically modified potatoes are not grown on PEI, because the french fry processors decided that consumers wouldn't buy them.

Pollan also gives an insightful description of the events leading up to the terrible 'potato famine' in 19th century Ireland, explaining a lot of details that surprised me—especially how the potato allowed the Irish peasantry to survive poverty with a nutritionally complete diet based on potatoes and milk. Even without horses, the Irish peasant family could grow and prepare this abundant food on marginal acidic land with a bare minimum of labour or tools. My dismay with modern potato production was reinforced, but so was my respect for the potential of the potato as an important staple food—high yielding, highly nutritious, easily stored and prepared.

As we know all too well here on PEI, potatoes cause problems when grown intensively, but are less problematic to grow organically (although it's not easy!). According to the PEI Department of Agriculture, about 300 acres are certified organic in 2008. That's not even 1% of total acreage (which, at over 90,000 acres, is probably at least 3 times too high), but 300 acres, even split up among several farms, is enough to call commercial scale.

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Pollan concludes with an eloquent questioning of the risks inherent in how biotechnology has changed our relationship to nature, and the difficulty of trying to control nature with extreme monoculture. "(T)he problem of monoculture may itself be as much a problem of culture as it is of agriculture....which is us and our desire for control and uniformity....that perfect McDonald's french fry...."(p 226). I might add that it stems from a culture of treating food production as 'agri-business', based on 'free' international trade and exploiting the labour of farmers and farm workers.

In the 'apple' chapter, Pollan describes the area in Kazakhstan, central Asia, where the apple originated, and gives the story of John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed) taking apple seeds across North America. The sweetness of the apple and its use for cider gave it appeal for settlers, so Chapman had great success in his enterprise, and due to their hybrid pollination, wild apples of almost infinite variety have spread across the continent. Meanwhile, human breeding of apples has produced sweet, modern varieties that require drenching with pesticides. Fortunately, breeding has also created disease resistant varieties.

In 'Beauty/Plant: The Tulip,' Pollan describes the tulip craze of 17th-century Amsterdam, where a frenzy of speculative trading eventually resulted in a market crash. And Pollan talks to scientists about the intoxicating appeal of marijuana, explores the literature and spiritual dimensions of plant-based drugs, and serves a healthy dose of criticism of the 'War on Drugs'. As a result, I have a new appreciation for marijuana, though I don't smoke it!

Although Pollan doesn't explicitly mention it, both potatoes and apples could be very significant foods in the near future as fossil fuels get exorbitantly expensive and run out. As was practised in the not-so-distant past on PEI, potatoes and apples can be planted, grown in abundance and harvested with just people power (and usually horse power) and stored all winter with natural refrigeration.

Throughout *Botany of Desire*, Pollan reiterates the point that people must always remember that we live in nature and that we ignore the 'laws' of nature at our peril. So the solutions to our present food crisis may end up being found in our adaptation to a world without cheap fossil fuels, where we do indeed have to pay attention to the 'plant's eye view of the world' to be able to grow enough food to survive

A useful index and excellent sources list make this a book that could be used for long-term study, or a university course.

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I haven't yet had a chance to read his latest book *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*; this description on his web site may entice me!

"Pollan proposes a new (and very old) answer to the question of what we should eat that comes down to seven simple but liberating words: Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants. By urging us to once again eat food, he challenges the prevailing nutrient-by-nutrient approach—what he calls nutritionism—and proposes an alternative way of eating that is informed by the traditions and ecology of real, well-grown, unprocessed food. Our personal health, he argues, cannot be divorced from the health of the food chains of which we are part.

"In *In Defense of Food* shows us how, despite the daunting dietary landscape Americans confront in the modern supermarket, we can escape the Western diet and, by doing so, most of the chronic diseases that diet causes. We can relearn which foods are healthy, develop simple ways to moderate our appetites, and return eating to its proper context—out of the car and back to the table. Michael Pollan's bracing and eloquent manifesto shows us how we can start making thoughtful food choices that will enrich our lives, enlarge our sense of what it means to be healthy, and bring pleasure back to eating.

"Pollan's last book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, launched a national conversation about the American way of eating; now *In Defense of Food* shows us how to change it, one meal at a time."

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Some other books I have recently come across as worth reading on the topic of Food are:

- The End of Food: How the Food Industry Is Destroying Our Food Supply- and What You Can Do About It by award-winning Canadian journalist and part-time farmer Thomas Pawlick, 2006;
- Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life by Barbara Kingsolver, 2007;
- Eating By the Seasons published by the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax in 2006;
- Bottomfeeder: How to Eat Ethically in a World of Vanishing Seafood by Taras Grescoe, HarperCollins, 2008, 314 pp well reviewed by Jared Bland [~ 450 words] in The Walrus, June 08 p. 94 www.walrusmagazine.com; and
- Tales from Willowshade Farm: An Island Woman's Notebook by Betty Howatt, ill. by Dale MacNevin, published by The Acorn Press, 2003.

Hooray for the Farmer! (Milton Acorn)

AND DON'T FORGET TO CELEBRATE WORLD FOOD DAY, OCTOBER 16TH:

World Food Day marks the anniversary of the founding of the UN Food and Agriculture Org (FAO) in Quebec City in 1945, and is an internationally recognized day to focus attention of food and hunger issues. For ideas and resources to use in your home, school or community, contact Tony Reddin, tonyr@gofairtrade.net, or Jacquie Robichaud, robicha-jq@hotmail.com of the PEI OXFAM Committee, or go to www.oxfam.ca

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