

THE LAND THAT SHAPES US

There is a landscape between Alpine, Texas and Big Bend National Park that lives in my mind. It consists of rolling grasslands and I see it as a greenish, tawny brown, so it must be in October or March, not the searing summer of July or August with the roiling thunderstorms. I lived in the area for only two years until I was 5, but that landscape shaped me then—and still now whenever my mind needs a big expansive view.

Then there are the San Gabriel Mountains. They are a magnificent backdrop to the Arboretum—a sheer face brown, craggy, rocky and, astonishingly, green sometimes. As I gaze at the plants in the Arboretum the mountains soak into my mind.

As Richard Schulhof, the garden's CEO, says, what other Arboretum in America has such a great, borrowed landscape.

We can see landscapes, paint landscapes, photograph landscapes and then we can read about landscapes. My passion is to share books that will help us understand our land and our place in it. That's the essence of me as a book pusher and the guiding principle in the books I select for the monthly Reading the Western Landscape Book Club, which celebrates its third anniversary in February.

When I was young, I soaked in information about plants but the learning didn't create real meaning for me until as a docent I created themes and told stories about the plants—their evolution, place and importance to the land. My friend, a geologist at the Grand Canyon, and I chide each other about what makes the land. She says it's the rocks; I say the plants. We are both right and it's literature that helps us really know both. So I'm constantly on the lookout for the next good read that creates vivid images of a place or landscape that shape characters and plots.

Of the books we've read in the three years, there are a few I would recommend again and again. If you haven't read James Galvin's, *The Meadow* (H. Holt, 1992) you are missing

a poet's understanding of the history of a dryland meadow on the edges of Colorado and Wyoming. His language leaves you breathless. If you haven't read Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* (University of New Mexico Press, 1996) you don't know, yet, the powerful and deep ties we can have to a specific place.

Almost anything written by Susan Straight (we read *Blacker than a Thousand Midnights* (Hyperion, 1994) helps put you right in the Los Angeles milieu, more powerfully than such writers as Joan Didion who capture easily the intellect of a place and its people, but not its nature.

When your reading engages your synapses as if you were moving through an environment it seems like the best possible read. 🍃

—Susan C. Eubank is the Arboretum Librarian.

NEXT READS

Here are the next six books that will get our synapses moving.

To join the book club, contact Susan C. Eubank at susan.eubank@arboretum.org.

Los Angeles Stories

by Ry Cooder

Wednesday, January 9; 7pm

Infinite City:

A San Francisco Atlas

by Rebecca Solnit

Saturday, February 2; 2pm

Lulu in Hollywood:

Expanded Edition

by Louise Brooks

Wednesday, March 6; 7pm

Battleborn

by Claire Vaye Watkins

Saturday, April 13, 2pm

Conifer Country: A natural history and hiking guide to the 35 conifers of the Klamath Mountain Region

by Michael Edward Kauffman

Wednesday, May 1; 7pm

The Angry Buddhist
by Seth Greenland

Saturday, June 8; 2pm



Susan C. Eubank is the new president of the Council on Botanical and Horticultural Libraries, which is the leading professional organization in the field of botanical and horticultural services. The council is an international organization of individuals, organizations and institutions concerned with the development, maintenance and use of libraries of botanical and horticultural literature.



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