

THE BOOK OF FERAL FLORA

AMANDA ACKERMAN

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For the weeds

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THE BOOK OF FERAL FLORA

WEED COURSE

clearing and preparing the landscape.

Location from which this story is being told:

Gardens. Domestic, Public, Professional and Otherwise (e.g. forests, library stacks, courts, airplanes of all kinds).

Beware of what I am afraid to say.

I am an expert gardener (killer, grower).

I can speak at length about a garden's cost, availability, weight and bulk, appearance, information retention, insulative value, lasting qualities, and decomposition characteristics.

I planted a garden. Then it grew weeds. At first they merely scraped my ankles but eventually they grew so tall they reached my thighs. Some of them even sprouted little white blossoms with yellow centers. They were living sundials. I wanted to call them pretty but they were weeds.

The leaves, the stems, the flowers, the roots, the seeds (the pistils, the stigmas, the styles, the anthers, the xylem cells that moved the water, the phloem cells that moved the food).

I wish to introduce you, the conscientious or unconscientious gardener, to the concept of weeding. Gardening, and the science of weeding, is the study of reality and how it works. What I really want to say is: Weeds, according to one variety of the dictionary, are any wild plants growing somewhere they are not wanted. They are wild, inferior, or unwanted plants. They are in competition with plants that are wanted; often, wanted plants are called “cultivated” plants and are considered polite or civil or pretty. This concept can be very useful. Weeds are universal in that they can grow on land, and in both fresh and salt water. Weeds are wild but never grow in the wilderness.”

I wanted to create a garden that had such a positive, strong state of balance that no problems could ever occur or even begin to take root in my 6’ x 6’ patch of dirt. I think we should all want the same.

But what I really want to say is:

I would like you to fill out a questionnaire:

Preferred Name:
Sex (circle one only): Male Female A Beautiful Convergence
Occupation:
Preferred Occupation (if different from actual occupation):
Current Time (to the minute):
State of Mind (circle one only): Conscious Unconscious
Habits (circle one only): Wasteful of Resources I Value Water (it is precious)
1. What defines an undesirable presence or thing; is such a designation absolute or relative; can such a definition change over time?

2. The temporary versus the permanent: which is more greatly desirable?
3. And are Humans and Nature adversaries, partners, child/parent, husband/wife, business colleagues, peers, gods/minions, collaborators, friends, inextricably linked, or extricably unrelated?
4. Voids fill themselves autonomously and quickly, when left alone; therefore, how quickly should one act to fill a void?
5. When does one act; when does one stay out of the picture?
6. Does conscious intent, or design of any kind, automatically mark a system of inclusivity and exclusivity?
7. When to kill, and when to kill completely, when <i>not</i> to kill?

What I am afraid to say but will say anyway is that I decided to kill the weeds in my garden.

You may think this is not even worth worrying about; you may think I'm a hypocrite. In any case, I bought any one (or two, or three) of the following: a weed thrasher, weed hound, weed killer, ice melter, bug and pest zapper, electric trimmer, weed dragon, garden weasel, weed popper, weed thrasher, weed eater, weed burner, weed hook, weed barrier, weed controller, weed and root remover. And replacement cutters.

But hear me out. I simply wanted to stabilize the environment and protect my ripening fruit.

All of what I am telling you is very, very important: there are weeds on the land, weeds in the air, and weeds in the sea.

(A reminder: you have the potential to become an expert at anything once you begin.)

As mentioned, the science of gardening and weeding is the study of reality and how it works. When my garden first sprouted weeds and they began spreading in all directions like an electrical grid, I realized how easy it would be to view the world as an ongoing series of battles (large and small) over territory or land. What I am trying to say is that there are legal ramifications to weeding. I tried to talk myself out of this idea, but consider what I am about to offer you as proof.

Once there was a woman who realized she needed a divorce. She was hoping it wouldn't be nasty. It didn't need to be. Her husband had been kind to her for most of the time they'd been together, though he didn't tend to himself enough. When his old pair of glasses broke, he did not seek a new prescription; he left too many water spots on plates, got too easily lost in his own thoughts at the beach, did not challenge her formidably on her opinions. He didn't hold her hand when she wanted him to. Without the presence of a partner who acted as a sexual constant, and equal intellectual adversary, her thoughts became murky. Despite her best hopes, she ended up having a property dispute with her husband over a home they had purchased together. They had bought the home at a time in their lives when they'd thought they'd live side-by-side forever, and this property dispute proved difficult.

In anticipation of a meeting with their respective lawyers, she decided to weed her garden. She worked with nature and not against it. She focused specifically on the grassy weeds, such as foxtails and bermudagrass, and grassy-typed weeds, such as wild garlic and carpetweed. She dipped her hands in dolomite and green sand. She worked hard, and she found that the garden's environment had shifted.

At the meeting to discuss the joint property dispute, everyone in the room felt much more relaxed and civil than expected. More than they ever thought possible. The couple's lawyers negotiated the terms of the agreement efficiently and courteously, just as the woman had wanted. The attorneys kept remarking that they rarely solved cases this quickly. It's what they had always wanted. No shouting, no mean stares, no barbs nor words that made the hair stand at attention; all parties expressing their desire to be fair.

She had planted a garden, pulled out the weeds, and life had given her what she had asked for.

I planted a garden and removed the weeds because they were getting too tall and too abundant. Some were choking my other plants and some smelled of decaying spinach or mint.

Then when summer came I noticed lichens (plants that eat light and nothing more) growing on the trunks of my fruit trees like tiny celestial skeletons. And so I must tell you another tale: the story of a Cyclops and what it means to see with one eye only.

Having one eye only is a gift and a burden, like any unique attribute. There was once a Cyclops with hair made of stringed cottonseed (died blue) and a blue eye, with two equally large biceps that contained the strength of ten talking boulders and a vivid yellow building crane. But despite his strength, the cyclops was gentle and kind. He planted and decorated his yard in order to provide himself with the minimal amount of food necessary for his survival. He also wanted to provide a habitat for wildlife. As a homeowner, he was aware of the dangers of invasive, exotic plant species. So far, he had managed to remove them, until one day the air potato, with its bending, heart-shaped lobes, shade-worthy stems,

and bobbed white flowers, moved in and began to quickly engulf the native vegetation. It treated everything like a trellis. The columns on the porch, the high canopies of trees, the shovels in the yard, even the Cyclops' sandals. But being one-eyed, he wanted his garden to look as beautiful as could be. He wanted the functions of his natural community to stay intact. So what do you think he did? Or rather, what would you have done if you had been in his place?

8. What is the opposite of being exotic? What does it mean to be native?

I will happily tell you that I did not rid my garden of all the weeds. I discovered that some were, in fact, edible (purslane, lambs quarters). I should clarify; my garden was on land and not in the sea. Weeds in the sea are often edible, but some are not. For example:

Once there was a restaurant owner who had the reputation of putting too much salt into his food, even his cakes and his crudités. This was because he preferred seasoning everything with plain seawater. His fatal mistake was that he did not realize he needed to harvest the sea, to separate the off-white flecks of salt (he thought they looked like small gratings of ginger), and dry them. Because there is a lot of stuff in the ocean that we do not want to consume. Especially now. A lot of fearful content.

9. What are you afraid of consuming? What are you afraid of producing?

Of course, there are some grey areas. Here are some beginning points of clarification: a rose is not a weed; gratitude is not a weed, a wheel is not a weed; my sister is currently a weed; encouragement is and is sometimes not a weed; a subordinate is a weed; an anchor is not a weed; an opportunity is and is sometimes not a weed; beauty is not a weed; a *de rigueur* arrangement or setting is a weed; a rule is a weed; and so on. You will soon become an expert at knowing the difference.

It is also important to know that planting is not the opposite of weeding. The opposite of weeding is re-remembering.

Re-remembering, in other words, is the feeling of waking up and re-remembering what you tried to forget when you went to sleep. This could be a wide range of ideas or sensations. For example, you might try to forget that you do not have freedom in your life and relationships. Or you might try to forget a disturbing workplace incident. Or you might try to forget that you forgot to purchase something crucial at the supermarket. Re-remembering is usually unpleasant. There is danger all around.

And if you continue to re-remember daily, either upon waking up in the morning or after a nap, real life starts to feel jagged. The diligent work of honesty begins to look painful – and therefore, in some respects, undesirable. The diligent voice of honesty begins to sound like a sub-voice, shattering your other voices without allowing for your inadmissible human sounds, such as non-playful or non-therapeutic howling. A problematic situation. When you re-remember, you are tired of being right all the time. You are tired of being right all the time. You are tired of having insights you will never be able to make anyone else understand. You are tired of this feeling. You are tired of being right all the time. If you are reluctant to wake up or wake up too suddenly, jarring the back, ignoring the windows in the room, small and grim and darkly solid in the bed, you have re-remembered. Re-remembering is the opposite of weeding. But it is not to be confused with planting. Re-remembering can also occasionally be pleasant, but is still not to be confused with planting.

10. What is the process of defining a powerful self? How much weeding or cutting away is involved?

Before I planted my garden, I cleared away sections of garden patches where nothing was capable of growing. I will ask you to do the same when you first begin. Then you will need to figure out how to next solve this problem so that plants may begin to “reach” into the empty space. Weeds will always be the first plants to sprout. The goal is to allow the area to fully support desirable growth.

What I really want to say is, I don’t trust myself to know what to kill and what to keep alive, and I don’t think I trust anyone else either.

When the power of life or death is in woman, is in man, how is it different?

What I really want to say is, why have we been granted this power to begin with?

What I really want to say is, have you noticed how plants and gardens are extremely sentient?

What I really want to say is:

And if the stones and weeds and oceans in your stomach all die, send apple-scented death announcements to all your friends.

PROCESS NOTES

That which is alive will never fit in its place.

-Elizabeth Grosz

Some of the pieces in this book were created by plants (specifically Michigan plants, in late summer).

At the start of this process, I had generated several pieces with irises as both my subject and conductor. (In the composition, I used several somatic devices, such as altering my body through the scent of orris root, physically touching the plants, or ingesting irises. I wanted to alter my own sensory capacities through direct encounters with the iris plants themselves.)

Then I sent sound recordings of myself reading a selection of texts to programming poet Dan Richert (who lives in Michigan). Dan then created the technologies that allowed the plants to rewrite the pieces by responding to the sound frequencies of my voice. In his home, in gardens, and in the city, Dan hooked up sensors to various plants in order to record their compositions. In other words, through their electrical impulses, the plants autonomously wrote their own version of the texts, given the sensory capacities that were available to them.

However, culture is not a mediation of nature; nature is not a precondition for culture. Plant language will always proliferate beyond constraint.

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I should not be listed as the sole author of this book. I do not believe in the concept of sole authorship. Also, many pieces in this book are the result of collaboration. Thank you to the women of the Mrs. Porter's Salon, who generated the material for "Ways to Dismantle a Story." Thank you to Dan Richert, who created the technologies that allowed plants to write poems; also, thank you to Mathew Timmons for his assistance with sound recording, and to Adam Overton and Nancy Romero for helping to spark ideas in this process. Another form of collaboration: some pieces in this book involve appropriation, re-contextualization, and collage. Lastly, thank you to Harold Abramowitz, Teresa Carmody, Vanessa Place, Michelle Dettore, Suzanne Fortier, Phoenix & Tree, and Andrew Wessels.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Ackerman is the author of the chapbooks *The Seasons Cemented* (Hex Presse), *I Fell in Love with a Monster Truck* (Insert Press Parrot #8), and *Short Stones* (Dancing Girl Press). She has co-authored *Sin is to Celebration* (House Press), the Gauss PDF *UNFO Burns a Million Dollars*, and the forthcoming book *Man's Wars And Wickedness: A Book of Proposed Remedies and Extreme Formulations for Curing Hostility, Rivalry, And Ill-Will* (Bon Aire Projects). She is co-publisher and co-editor of the press eohippus labs. She also writes collaboratively as part of the projects SAM OR SAMANTHA YAMS and UNFO.

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