

Soil and Spirit: Cultivation and Kinship in the Web of Life

Scott Chaskey

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Scott Chaskey's elegant and spirited essay collection *Soil and Spirit* concerns the interconnectedness of elements and life forms. Studded with literary quotes, poetry, personal anecdotes, and scenes from a well-traveled life, these essays consider how flora and fauna, earth and sky, and rock and water are linked through different ecosystems and cultural traditions.

The central theme of symbiotic relationships is evident in several stories about Chaskey building homes and tending crops. There are gorgeous descriptions of Cornwall's ancient, granite-strewn landscape and coastline, depicting wind, rock, and water whipped into "an incandescence of fluid matter" at the coastline. The joys and satisfaction of cultivating trees, medicinal plants, and herbs on a Long Island farm are matched by epiphanies and delight in the act of writing on paper in a wood-constructed house, embraced in the roots and branches of a massive beech tree.

In essays set in Maine, China, New Mexico, and Ireland, Chaskey explores other terrains and takes in traditional cultural wisdom about the stewardship of the land and natural resources. Several innovative conservation projects are offered up as inspiring examples of the regenerative healing of overexploited landscapes: there is a plant conservatory housed in an abandoned clay pit in Cornwall and seed repositories that "rematriate" ancient plant varieties to Indigenous people. Elsewhere, quotes from Lao Tsu, Lucretius, Eugène Guillevic, Basil Bunting, and the *Popol Vuh* pair with Chaskey's graceful poems and exuberant asides.

Soil and Spirit is a sensuous and serious collection of nature writing, replete with passages about the layered wonders of the natural world. It is also unwavering in stressing the imperative of working to undo the environmental damage that imperils all human beings.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (May / June 2023)

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