

The Nature of Being Human: From Environmentalism to Consciousness. By Harold Fromm. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009. 312 pp. Cloth \$35.00.

Harold Fromm's name is familiar to ASLE members, and other students of ecocriticism, as the co-editor with Cheryll Glotfelty of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, our field's foundational manifesto. His new book, *The Nature of Being Human*, features an early chapter, "Ecocriticism's Genesis," that describes how Glotfelty, at the time (1989) a doctoral candidate at Cornell, was already pioneering the as-yet unborn field of literature and environment. Fromm's account of her enthusiastic leadership, and of how a visionary graduate student and an established scholar partnered to produce what became an ecocritical best-seller, adds to our appreciation of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, without which our field might still be a-borning.

In a very personal sense, Harold Fromm came by his latent environmental consciousness in the truest neo-Darwinian way, through the body, as a victim of home-grown American industrial air pollution. As an intellectual and a scholar who came of age in the 1960s, he was, of course, aware of the increasing importance of "the environment" in contemporary life. But environmental issues struck home with full human force when he found himself a casualty of toxic air. His first few chapters in *The Nature of Being Human*, then, are a personal account of "being polluted," and a literal "inspiration" (in with the good air, out with the bad air) of the evolutionary—and revolutionary—concept of the oneness of humans and the environment. An allied awareness is that of the embodied mind, inextricably bound with the body in evolutionary history. This insight was first introduced by Darwin, and has since been developed by his followers down to the present, including many biologically informed writers and scientists, including E. O. Wilson, Ellen Dissanayake, Joseph Carroll, Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins, and others, featured in the book's following chapters, who are rewriting the old mind-body duality.

The publication of *The Nature of Being Human* emphasizes the emergence today of what could be called a new Grand Narrative that cannot be dismissed. Darwinian evolutionary thinking, the knotted influence of human nature and culture, has established its validity in a century and a half of scientific (and popular) challenge with no major reversal of its central tenet of evolution through natural selection. Evolution is true, and as true of the mind as the body. Its importance to today's thinking is seen in the rush of new books and other media into the vacuum left from its being ignored or avoided for so

long. Besides Fromm's, one now sees books with titles like *Evolution and Literary Theory*, *The Literary Animal*, *Shakespeare's Brain*, *The Meaning of the Body*, *What Science Offers the Humanities*, *Consilience*, and *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*.

Fromm's new book, formed around the three linked topics of ecology, evolution, and consciousness, is an excellent introduction to this cognitive revolution. It has the additional merit of being immensely readable, the work of a professional ecocritic, stylist, and thinker who reminds us that our primary business as humanists is to keep learning what it means to be human.

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***The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America.* By Catrin Gersdorf. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2009. 355 pp. Cloth \$101.00.**

The smartly written and well-researched *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert* takes an interdisciplinary approach to its subject. Gersdorf's monograph is the sixth in the series *Spatial Practices: An Interdisciplinary Series in Cultural History, Geography, and Literature*. Combining fiction, non-fiction, and photography of the deserts of the American Southwest with works from environmental historians and cultural, literary, and environmental theorists, Gersdorf investigates "the employment of the desert in articulations and negotiations of America's cultural identity" (21).

Gersdorf draws together the metaphors of garden, Orient, wilderness, and heterotopia. Her book is organized into four chapters, each of which explores and interrogates the ways American culture has imagined and re-imagined the desert through those metaphors. Chapter 1, "Garden," investigates the economic responses to the desert in the works of John Wesley Powell, William E. Smythe, and Gary Paul Nabhan. Chapter 2, "Orient," a trope not typically associated with the