



Book Review

Candle Pine: A Review of Janisse Ray (1999) *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*.
Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

by

James Brody

“If you clear a forest, you’d better pray continuously.” (p. 123)

Ed Wilson introduced us to Ray in his *Future of Life* when he quoted generously from her powerful chapter, “Clearcut.” He elicited a salted peanuts reaction: I wanted more but her book was out of print and I forgot it over the next year. Now, Ray has a second book (*Wild Card Quilt*) and *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* is in paperback. Barnes wanted \$37 for the two of them, “*Ecology*” alone is easily worth that much.

Ray weaves ecology, sociology, and biography: details about longleaf pines and their keystone role for other plants and for the creatures that live among them, the Celtic origins of many Southerners and the migration of fearsome attitudes and customs to the New World, and the heroic character of her grandparents and parents.

Through much of the book, Ray speaks to us through the eyes of a child, one who grew up poor in her father's small junkyard. She juxtaposes

two portraits, one of the SE Georgia rural ecosystem and one of her Southern family. She works carefully in alternating chapters, sharing mosaic tiles that comprise family and ecosystem.

Ecology: Built by Fire

Most pine burns easily but not the longleaf that first sinks a taproot and suppresses its vertical growth until after the fire season. It then grows a tough bark and shoots rapidly upward until its terminal buds and first branches are above threats from the next grass fire. The longleaf also spaces itself: light comes down from above to plants scattered among the pines.

The Celts were as fire-shaped as the forests they occupied. She reminds us that the English-Scotch Borderlands experienced 700 years of war. Borderlanders were migratory, blood thirsty, clannish, and suspicious of strangers. The New World Southeast gave them room to do what they had done for 700 years: “kick up their heels and wear out their knees.” (p. 82)

She has a profound ambivalence about her origins. “It didn’t take many years to realize I

was a Southerner, a slow, dumb, redneck hick, a hayseed, inbred and racist, come from poverty, condemned to poverty: descendant of Oglethorpe's debtor prisons. Descendant of people who pulled from the Union, fought with their *Patria*, and lost." (p. 30)

Tragedy and comedy also live in her pages in a mix that Samuel Beckett would appreciate. For example:

Deputy to a serial bank robber: "Foster, you could be anything you want to be."

Foster: "I am what I want to be." (p. 22).

Fire in Her Genes

There are a dozen or more heroes and villains, each a landmark and a blaze, kindled not only by Celtic tradition but also by bipolar disorder and the assorted other madnesses that accompanied it in her father and his kin.

Her grandparents, Charlie Joe Ray and Clyo: Charley was a shaman, celebrated for his natural cunning, strength, and courage. He had a 19 inch girth to his neck and fingers too large for a wedding ring and fought whenever and wherever challenged. Like the rest of his kin, especially the males, Charley had bipolar episodes, bouts of rage towards his children and extreme jealousy about his wife. He neither supported his family nor loved a human being the way that he loved the forest. He, completely submerged and barehanded, caught catfish in the Altamaha River's thick brown water, locating them by touch among the tree roots. He could disappear for weeks, living off the woodlands; he also strangled the Mother of All Raccoons when she almost drowned his favorite hunting dog. Charlie swore that he could sniff the pine needles to find a treed 'coon.

"Clyo Woodward, my grandmother, married for love, but badly. After Charley left the last time, after she paid him to leave, she would not speak his name. Keeping his eight children alive took all the rage she could muster." (p. 143) Clyo committed him once to the state hospital. He escaped and she ordered him to leave

home forever. "Pay me," he demanded. She did (probably about \$30) and he moved to Florida but returned often and taught Janisse how to fish and fight and kindled her profound love for the forest, its residents, and their secrets, nurturing the parts of him that she inherited.

Lee Ada and Frank Ray: Lee Ada not only kept the 4 children in line, she also worked closely with her spouse and mechanical genius, Frank, and kept their family intact between and during his rare visits to the state asylum. Lee Ada's chapter, threaded around verses from *The Song of Solomon*, closes with Janisse's determination to be different from her: (p 203-204) "She had given up too much---her own opinions even---to marry a strong man and be his helpmate, though he fathered her children and provided for her family and stayed loyal to her all the days of his life. The needs and desires of family eclipsed Mama's own. Yet she is the most steadfast, generous, and honorable person I have ever known, wise in her unassuming way, and because of this, approached sainthood. On these terms I did not want to be a saint."

Her righteous father shielded her from popular culture, sex and violence. He allowed no television or newspapers. Also no jeans, bare limbs above knee or elbow, parties with friends, swearing, smoking, dating, dancing, or competing in sports. (Of course, Janisse, already imitating a longleaf, did most of these things but later in her development.) He also fed strangers, attended to hurt creatures, and defended life in any form, once strapping his own children when they failed to protect a tortoise that was slain by a bully.

Janisse's strong-minded parents produced an equally strong-minded daughter, midway between them in her defiance, free of madness, and more anchored in her religion by the things of this world. She found not abuse but nurturing in his passionate commitment to her well-being. She celebrates the gifts of this prodigious individual rather than complaining of the limits that he imposed. Despite Frank's religious lectures,

she eventually was almost as nonconformist as her grandfather even if more brief, communal, and nonviolent than he.

An Elegy for the South Rather than a Song?

"Culture springs from the actions of people in a landscape, and what we, especially Southerners, are watching is a daily erosion of unique folkways as our native ecosystems and all their inhabitants disappear." (p 271)

A candle pine is hollowed, tough with dried resin, and home to red-cockaded woodpeckers. It burns intensely and straight up when lit. Likewise for *Ecology*. Ray gives us an extraordinary juxtaposition of human and sylvan life emerging from strife, life that adapts to and takes charge of chaos. Her stories are melodies of attachment and coherence shaped in fire and nourished by the tangled roots of siblings, parents, and grandparents and fed by grits, green beans, ham, collard greens, turnips, okra, and boiled potatoes. A story of homemade beliefs and clothing worn usually to cover rather than to advertise. And of love for a flat universe of brown rivers and longleaf pines and wiregrass and the 191 species (122 endangered) of rare plants that depend on it. Fifty plant species can exist in a square yard. These are ancient, living quilts.

Ray's ambition is the protection and recovery of an ecosystem, one that both supports and is supported by human and non-human animals, stabilized across generations. John Price might apply the phrase "hedonic hierarchy" to primate expressions of such organization. Barabasi would talk about stable networks with hubs and nodes. Flood and Drescher or Axelrod might see the relevance of Tit-for-Tat to the relationships between people and settings. Whatever your schema, small town wisdom aligns with evolutionary sense: passersby and distant governments are NOT to be trusted to care about the land or the life woven into it. (See Ridley, *Origins of Virtue*.)

In order to meet her goals, she must abandon Celtic folkways, join organizations, and raise money from many sources. She abandons the

rugged individualism and clannishness that characterized her ancestors but amplifies the opposing strategies that might save their forests. Human organizations change in order to preserve sylvan ones.

"It's 'Omigod, I'm becoming like my parents."

Janisse and small town lore know as much about these things as Steve Pinker. Janisse describes herself when she describes her father: "...salvaging completely suited him. He threw nothing away; he kept everything he found; whatever he was given, he took. He saw value in things most of us wouldn't glance at twice, and more importantly, he could fix things..."

"Besides, Daddy is a mechanic in the word's truest sense, loving motors and tractors and radios and guns less for their implementation than for their fabrication. He hunts the bolts, cotter keys, wires, shafts, and belts that hold together metal pieces, engineering usefulness....His game is understanding and order, two things denied him early on."

She refers several times to the Ray (MacRae) madness, and I sense that she has sometimes run her path afraid of what is ahead because of what was behind. She, however, fights madness on two levels: shortsighted lumber practices that destroy the traditions and ecosystem of her ancestors, plant and animal, and emotional excesses within her family. She refers to "More than anything else, what happened to the longleaf speaks for us. These are my people; our legacy is ruination." (p. 87) This is a very personal statement as well as a summation of her extended heritage. It is tempting, indeed, overwhelmingly so, to see Janisse as a mosaic with Frank's organization and Lee Ada's and Cloy's persistence and restraint applied to Charley's content. Like Ed Wilson and every other living creature, she weaves her order.

She has me pulling for her in every way...you will, too.

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man Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation. NY: Penguin.

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- Wright, R. (1988) *Three Scientists and Their Gods: Looking for Meaning in a Age of Information*. NY: Times Books. Wilson is quoted: Wilson: "I've always wanted to transform messy subjects into scientifically orderly subjects," he says. "To put things right, so to speak." p. 138. It is probably no coincidence that Ed loves weaver ants.

Special thanks to Barnes and Noble for their store in Devon, PA, where I regularly occupy one of their tables next to a huge window facing west, peck on my laptop, and forage on latté, oatmeal cookies, and the books in their nature section. Many of us do likewise, free riders who use the store as a library rather than a place to buy books.