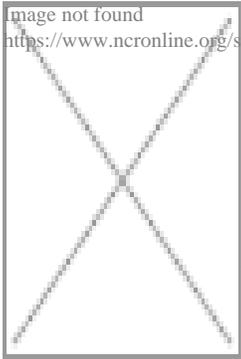


Nature's \"boundary breakers\"

Teresa Malcolm | Apr. 13, 2011 Eco Catholic

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WEEDS: IN DEFENSE OF NATURE'S MOST UNLOVED PLANTS

By Richard Mabey

Published by Ecco, \$25.99

The most straightforward definition of a weed is "a plant in the wrong place." British nature writer Richard Mabey says this definition works "tolerably well," taking in how the label is ever-shifting. But he's interested in exploring what makes a place "wrong" for a plant. When it comes to a weed, it invades somewhere because, as far as the plant's concerned, that place is exactly right. "Weeds always find their way back to places they like," Mabey writes.

Weeds follow in our footsteps, sometimes literally: seeds clinging to the shoes of travelers, hitching rides on trains and automobiles, hiding in our cargo and the fur of domesticated animals. These opportunists flourish when we wipe out our own presence through war. They swarm over the landscape when we deliberately transplant them to ecosystems where they lack any natural controls.

When we try to eradicate them, we inevitably encourage the evolution of their defenses: the hoe gave advantage to plants with deep roots that regenerate when chopped; grain sieves aided weeds whose seeds were the same size as crop grains; weeds resistant to chemical and organic herbicides survive to proliferate.

In *Weeds* (first published in Great Britain in 2010 and due out in the United States this June), Mabey's enthusiasm and even admiration for his subject is infectious. Food, medicine, religion, art and architecture figure into his histories of various plants that have been called weeds at one time or another. Through these, Mabey gives the reader a window into humanity's changing relationship to nature. For most of farming history, "weeds were accepted as a troubling but necessary part of natural life and human existence," he says. "They were the tithe we paid for breaking the earth."

But with the Agricultural Revolution's means of attacking weeds en masse came a loss of understanding them, and of understanding where the blame lies: "We gave them their derogatory name, and the opportunity to extend their repairing role out of the wilderness and into our damaged world. ... Weeds are our most successful cultivated crop."

They are the "boundary breakers," Mabey says. "The wild gatecrashes our civilized domains, and the domesticated escapes and runs riot. Weeds vividly demonstrate that natural life -- and the course of evolution itself -- refuse to be constrained by our cultural concepts. In so doing they make us look closely at the very idea of a divided creation."

Mabey encourages a renewal of human understanding of weeds' place in our world. Reading his eloquent, enjoyable book would be a good place to start.

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