



Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth

William Bryant Logan

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"You are about to read a lot about dirt, which no one knows very much about." So begins the cult classic that brings mystery and magic to "that stuff that won't come off your collar."

John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Saint Phocas, Darwin, and Virgil parade through this thought-provoking work, taking their place next to the dung beetle, the compost heap, dowsing, historical farming, and the microscopic biota that till the soil. Whether William Bryant Logan is traversing the far reaches of the cosmos or plowing through our planet's crust, his delightful, elegant, and surprisingly soulful meditations greatly enrich our concept of "dirt," that substance from which we all arise and to which we all must return.

Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth Details

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Allen Steele says

very over the top, you could tell he knew his stuff, however, he took the time make sure you knew he did. some references we're very obscure.

Edward says

Having been raised on a farm, it was ironic to read this book and realize how little I knew about the “dirt” that nourished the wheat crops which in turn provided my parents with a living. Dirt to me was just dirt. How naive I was!

The book is a collection of essays, organized into eight categories, put together by Logan who was an environmental columnist for the New York Times. Some are whimsical and personal, others more scientific and objective. I think a summary ending best captures what he was trying to do in this book. It was to show that soil (or “dirt” as he prefers to call it) is not just an inert pile of matter, but a “transformer”, constantly changing before us, and with a long history, predating mankind. It is as worthy of appreciation as anything else and has its own beauty. Bryant quotes John Adams who wrote, “The finest productions of the Poet or the Painter, the statuary, or the Architect, when they stand in competition with the great and beautiful operations of Nature, in the Animal and Vegetable World, must be pronounced mean and despicable baubles.” Logan then gives Adams’ recipe for making manure. Soil, dirt, shit, whatever one wants to call it, is constantly in flux, either through bacterial, vegetable, and living creatures, or through the forces of wind, heat, and water.

He even goes so far as to equate God-like status to the earth. Once when he was hanging from a cliff and about to plummet to his death, he says he saw the world as it actually is, something that does not depend upon human scale. “Aquinas says that God is in the world, not as the essence of things but as their cause. That, I think, is what I saw that made it possible for me to relax more deeply than I ever had before or have since. The divine was not some Thing in which to “believe”, but living and active, not far off and deigning to descend, but the common principle of existence. It filled everything, yet could be diminished by the death of nothing.” What are humans, then, but insect-like creatures crawling upon this immense surface?

Nature loves “multiplicity, interchanges” and man’s attempts to impose his puny order and scale on it are as often as not, futile. For example, the immense Aswan dam built in Egypt prevents the age-old lower Nile from depositing its silt downstream, nourishing millions of people, and it will ultimately silt up behind the dam and make it worthless. Logan talks about the attempts to exploit the Amazon rainforest, and forms of modern agriculture which pump nitrogen into the soil to make crops grow, but neglect caring for the organic matter which is the only thing that will truly enrich the soil, creating humus, tiny clumps of matter, no two of which have the same structure (like human beings and snowflakes). Soils get old and die, just like humans, and like humans, they die sooner if they’re not taken care of.

But this book is not just a plea to practice sound ecology, important as that might be. It’s also a book about wonder in the face of the beauty and power of the earth, created billions of years ago. Take clay - it has a molecular code which is more complex than either the genetic code or human language, making it capable, even, of the beginning of organic life The Bible may be truer that it realizes in saying that man comes from

the dust, from clay. “Perhaps the Genesis story can symbolize the rise of life as we experience it, from the joining of organic and inorganic realms. Wouldn’t it be strange if, in the history of the living, clay performed the function of angels?”

Marilyn McEntyre says

A remarkable rhapsody on the life of soil. Accessible and engaging even for those who might not hasten to pick up a book about soil--beautifully, thoughtfully written. Makes you want to walk more gently and look more closely.

Erica says

I'm loving this poetic, scientific meditation on dirt.

Justus says

Thoughtful, beautiful (and informative) meditations dirt. It is a great melodious read that has stayed with me for the past seven years. His other book Oak is interesting, but not nearly as universal and powerful as this one.

B. Rule says

I really enjoyed this, despite its somewhat odd approach. This isn't really a science book, although Logan occasionally tells you about scientific details about soil science. Neither does it follow a straightforward path standard for these books, where the author travels around and learns more about his subject (although parts of the book are like that). Rather, this is a series of poetic and semi-religious meditations on ecology, celebrating the wonder inherent in the natural world. Logan attempts time and again to shift the reader's perspective to understand the complex systems that surround us, and to appreciate just how liminal biological life is in relation to deep time and the titanic forces of the earth below us and the cosmos around us. The book is composed of numerous short essays on topics related, sometimes loosely, to the soil and its active role in supporting life. Some are more successful than others, and they often leap wildly in tone and subject, but you sense throughout Logan's passion-- passion for life, for understanding, for experience, and for a quasi-mystical reverence for what science can teach us about our place in the universe. It's a captivating viewpoint because it's so different from the typical science book approach. He's not afraid to sound a little addled in extolling a more worshipful approach to nature (which, incidentally, is not explicitly tied here to any particular faith tradition). And he's also not shy about expressing some blunt opinions about the follies of man (including, puzzlingly, a screed near the end of the book against particle colliders). Although this approach runs the risk of veering into the maudlin or the crackpot, I thought Logan did a great job of reining it in just enough. He manages to give voice to an ecstatic and grateful appreciation of natural theology, without descending into daffy hippiedom. I liked this much more than I expected.

Nickprince says

Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth is a fascinating look at one of the most basic and seemingly boring topics: dirt. As the name implies, William Bryant Logan makes the inanimate ground beneath our feet come alive with excitement as he explains the ways that soil is dynamic and ever-changing. Slow as this change might be, the world will never be the same after reading Logan's book.

Dirt, derived from *dritten*, an uncouth word for manure in Old Norse, has a highly misleading and boring name in the English vocabulary. As the author tells us, dirt is not simple: it is itself alien to our solar system, only arriving on Earth some far off place in the galaxy; the Sun can only produce helium. This unique compound of materials on the surface, mostly the remains of once living plant and animal life, breaks down in to humus and is naturally churned by the Earth over centuries and millennia, returning some minerals to living plants and insects, while most is compacted to form deeper horizons or eventually rock. As rock and dirt is pushed further down, it eventually will melt in to magma, and someday will erupt with a burst, returning a plethora of minerals and new, 'living' material to the Earth's surface.

Far from a textbook explanation of this process, Logan draws from a variety of sources in all disciplines who have addressed dirt in some way, with a mixture of his own personal stories thrown in. Highly personal and always entertaining, William Bryant Logan draws the reader in and subtly points out an unfortunate truth of modernity and human interaction with the Earth we walk on. No man can make a person feel such compassion for the inanimate materials we tread on every day like Logan does.

Tiffany says

Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth is penned in the style of poetic memoir, and while a natural history of soil could easily bog a reader down with tedious minutiae and scientific jargon, Logan finds a way to make his subject matter accessible and even thrilling to the reader, connecting the science of the earth with its spiritual implications and the beauty of the relentless cycle of growth, death, and rejuvenation. Dirt is chock full of mythology, history, and poetry. Read it! It's good! It's really good!

Excerpt to lure you in:

"And the surface moves. Very slowly to our eyes, it is true, but one could imagine a being for whom each of our millenia was a second . . . Such a creature would observe the shifting and the collision of continents, the eruption of volcanoes, the appearance and disappearance of mountain ranges, the spread and retreat of ice and whole floras, and the renewal of the seafloor, as clearly as we observe that a living person's chest moves up and down, and she blinks, twitches . . . This great roiling circulation belongs to the old gods . . . Imagining the undersea mouths where the new crust spills out and where the old crust is swallowed, one thinks of the first goddess, Gaia, she who gave birth to her children only to devour them." (p.95)

Anna says

I vacillated a lot on my rating of this book. On the one hand, it's very well written...in an English-major kind of way. On the other hand, I found the book very slow going because I wasn't learning much...until I would suddenly hit an extremely eye-opening passage. On the third hand, I wanted to dock a star simply because there were far too many biblical bits, but I know that's just my grumpiness at work. And, on the fourth hand, what's with the infinitesimal font?

On the whole, I'd recommend *Dirt* for people with no background in science who want to become intrigued by soil. If you do know much science, the book might be frustrating, so look for something a little more in depth.

Cameron Bernard says

A grand little book about the soil out of which we have all risen. Each essay/chapter is poetic, informative, and enjoyable.

Jennifer says

I was really expecting less talking and more science. Sometimes the anti-science attitude was downright annoying. Other times, much of what he said sounded surprisingly like, oh I don't know, science? Don't get me wrong, as both a degree-holder in science (physics), and a gardener, and an amateur writer, I enjoyed the book - it's just not what I expected.

Also, I guess this was the right man to write a book like this. He certainly knows how to make and find dirty allegories. Was he a shrink of the Freudian school in another life?

Gallerywright says

wonderful little book, well written and brings your attention to dirt, soil and grit in a most profound way.

Charlene says

This book started out extremely strong, which gave me such high hopes. For example, Logan reminded me of an awesome geology professor I had who would yell at us with great sincerity to, "Never disrespect dirt!" Logan began his book in the most incredible chapter, designed to help the reader place themselves in the universe, in the world, looking at existence through a very wide lens. He reminded the reader that dirt is older than humans, older than the very earth upon which it sits, and even older than our vast galaxy. To support his claim, Logan traced the heavy elements that make up soil, which had to come from stars more ancient than our sun.

But then the book took a turn toward spiritualism. Connecting to the earth is essential. Having the ability to know science and connect with the earth, in ways that compel a person to take action to preserve our earthly environment is optimal. My geology professor did a great job of helping us understand our responsibility to our planet. However, the way Logan went about it seemed to veer away from the scientific and more toward the non-scientific spiritual realm. This impression was only made stronger when I watched a documentary featuring Logan and his work. It seemed to be written by the type of person who takes bits of science and uses them in pseudoscientific ways to call people to action.... which considering the fact that they got the science wrong, might be the wrong action, as well intentioned as it was.

I am going to give Logan another try with his book called *Air*. I heard his work got better after 1995. I remember my own transformation from a gullible well-meaning individual to scientifically literate person who no longer fell prey to every groovy sounding idea. Logan was already pretty far on his journey to understanding a lot of really amazing science. Indeed his idea that Earth's crust is a living breathing skin is spot on (really great focus!). He just needs to develop that concept without muddying the waters.

In the meantime, I suggest a better alternative to this book if you are interested in dirt, microbes, organisms, carbon and oxygen cycles, ecology/how everything is connected -- a lecture series Called *Ecological Planet* by Kricher:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7...>

Grace says

From the standpoint of a budding soil scientist, but ever the naturalist, this book nearly bored me to tears. While it was a quick read, interesting in parts, it was also a series of non-connecting short stories about one guy's encounters with dirt, either in physical or academic form.

The topics Logan glossed over are just about everything from how soil is formed from interstellar dust (at the beginning of the planet's creation) to worms in the dirt. Most, however, were mini stories or quotes about dirt.

This book was not so academic that he didn't use the word "shit", but it did have a slight academic overview. What I'm not really all that clear about is how he associated dirt with sex so much. Seriously, I've looked at many gorgeous soil horizons, and I never found a single one of them "sexy" (p. 178). There were several references to the dirt being erotic in some sense, and often I couldn't figure out how he got that. This man loves his dirt. Possibly too much.

He also made the dirt very spiritual. I have often felt a grounded connection to the earth when I put my hands in a big pile of dirt, but never have I been able to associate it with so much Christianity. It made me wonder if he didn't seriously love his dirt too much. To each his own though.

Jon says

I never thought a book about dirt could be so poetic. Logan describes many of the topics of soil science by providing wonderful anecdotes. For example, he describes John Adams' personal love for manure. Sounds

mundane, but it is anything but. It's very fascinating. Logan gets into the nitty gritty of the ground beneath our feet and turns it into something beautiful. I would recommend this book to fans of Cosmos and anyone interested in learning more about what is in their garden.
