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11-17-2021

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Recommended Citation

Clark, R. C. (2021). For the Beauty of the Earth: A Review of The God of the Garden. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/staff_work/108

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For the Beauty of the Earth: A Review of The God of the Garden

Abstract

"Loving a master Gardener who cares for the sparrows involves *noticing* the garden."

Posting about the book *The God of the Garden* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/for-the-beauty-of-the-earth-a-review-of-the-god-of-the-garden/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, The God of the Garden, thoughts, creation, culture, kingdom, Andrew Peterson

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

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For the Beauty of the Earth: A Review of *The God of the Garden*

Ruth Clark

November 17, 2021

Title: *The God of the Garden: Thoughts on Creation, Culture, and the Kingdom*

Author: Andrew Peterson

Publisher: B&H Books

Publishing Date: October 26, 2021

Pages: 224 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1087736952

I approached Andrew Peterson's newly released book, *The God of the Garden: Thoughts on Creation, Culture, and the Kingdom*, as a music fan. I was first introduced to Peterson's lyrics and music in Lincoln, NE, when dear friends bought extra tickets to the *Behold the Lamb of God* tour and invited us to join them (side note: as Christmas approaches, this is the album to purchase and listen to, on repeat!). From that first introduction to Andrew Peterson's music over a decade ago, Peterson's lyrics have permeated our homes (we've since moved), our cars, and our hearts, because they reflect Gospel truths in various forms: death and life, brokenness and restoration, hard times and beautiful moments, loss and love.

Readers like me, who have enjoyed Peterson's music, will find enjoyment in *The God of the Garden* by discovering a few of those stories behind the lyrics. Like live concerts where AP shares backstories of his songs, a few chapters revolve around powerful stories that led to lyrics that led to an album. In this book, we see a singer-songwriter's experiences that inspired him to tell redemptive stories that are *both* good (musically and lyrically) and true (to the musician's soul), a theme that rings out even more strongly in his previous book, *Adorning the Dark*.

This book does more than cater to the music lovers among us, however. *The God of the Gardens* dwells within bigger themes of space, place, time, and the communally shared human experience. It is a book about trees and lyrics and poetry and English footpaths and family and mental health and home and urban sprawl and sorrow and joy and gardening.

And trees, again.

With the common thread of each chapter containing a poetry stanza by Wordsworth and tree sketches (drawn by the author), Peterson weaves his way through how memories and trees can intertwine. What's your favorite childhood memory? What trees were nearby? Or what are your favorite trees and what memories do you associate with them?

Delving into his own roots (yep, I did it), Peterson revisits trees from his childhood homes. First in Illinois, he locates his childhood home and yard, and after a short walk down the street into a nearby preserve, he finds what is dubbed by his family as the 'thinking tree'—finding connections to his past. The trees, now much taller and older, remain fixed to the landscape, unlike the farmland, certain houses, and other town buildings that have since disappeared. Similarly, as he revisits his adolescence homes in Florida, trees trigger memories that have shaped him, whether they created scars or wholeness. As his writing shifts to and from his current home, the reader learns about trees and the hopefulness (knowledge that this living thing will likely outlive the tree-planter) that the action of tree-planting is a calling to creation care. As Peterson outlines bits and pieces of his thirty-year landscaping schema, he lives out this hope, noticing the important role that trees embody, literally surrounding him (he's writing in a wooden cabin) and providing the pages (paper).

Primary components of the life of a gardener include season (time) and soil (place). Peterson emphasizes these callings to space and time in the reader's life. What are the seasons in my life? Peterson shares deeply personal spiritual and mental health struggles and the practicality of digging in the dirt (alongside professional counseling) being a helpful and hopeful practice for his soul. What space have I been called to cultivate? Peterson states, "...we need more than just houses. We need *homes*....It's a place that shapes and gives meaning to our lives. We need Places with a capital "P," places that honor the community's history, the sacredness of creation, and our basic need for beauty and nature" (160). Get your hands dirty in the soil, whatever small plot of land that may be.

Peterson emphasizes humanity's vocation to care for the earth, how we are called to live in ways that bring us greater interaction with *life*, both plants and community! Through this dominant theme, Peterson challenges readers' perceptions of the use of land and continued commercial development. Although the environmental concerns of 'paving over our world' are certainly present, the social and communal (even theological) concerns of not knowing our neighbors, not having a local pub, a local bakery, or a local farmer's market where we can naturally or organically run into our neighbors, has implications on human flourishing.¹ He drives this point home: "We need stories; stories need places. Places need people, and people need homes. We were made for community, but so many things about this in-between world of no-places seem designed to hinder it instead" (166).

Borrowing the phrase 'no-places' from James Howard Kunstler, Peterson explains that suburban America has become filled with uniform places that look like any other suburban sprawl: the same stores, same look, same 'comforts,' same-ness. Mining from writers like Wendell Berry, Tolkien, Eric Jacobsen, and Eugene Peterson, as well as the joys of his English countryside explorations, Peterson weaves a compelling argument for becoming more aware of local habitats, local decision-making, and the names of plants or trees in our own yards.

But most of all, Peterson tells stories—little vignettes that snap off the page and invite the reader to glimpse this moment, this tree, this footpath, this emotion, this question. At its heart, *The God of the Garden* is an invitation to *notice* the nature surrounding us. The pages encouraged me to stop, backtrack the five feet I just walked, and pick up the crimson leaf that intrigued my eyes on my afternoon walk. I found myself remembering the big maple in my childhood front yard, and the moments of bravery while climbing the limbs and finding a crook along the trunk to read, but never entirely feeling comfortable because of the height or the pokiness of neighboring branches. I watched a black-capped chickadee scratch and peck in the composting remains of my backyard garden today simply because the chickadee was there, and I chose to pay attention. I noticed these things because Peterson reminded me to notice these things. He emphasizes these points because loving a master Gardener who cares for the sparrows involves *noticing* the garden.