

A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

4. Michael Canfield's *Field Notes on Science and Nature*

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Part way through the by now classic film *Young Frankenstein*, the heroes are wandering disconsolately through a lab, trying to reconstruct the work of the Master. “If he had only left us a clue, a hint... some suggestion” one remarks. Sitting on the desk is an enormous book entitled *HOW I DID IT* by Victor Frankenstein.

Reading accounts of other people's research I have often wondered “how they did it.” What would it have been like to actually be in the field with the likes of Joseph Grinnell or George Schaller? What did they see? How did they record it? What were the first steps towards that seminal paper, that remarkable book that changed the way I viewed my world?

Readers, I am happy to report that if you too have wondered, the wait is over. In *Field Notes on Science and Nature* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2011), Michael Canfield, through his role as editor, has given us a wonderful window into the minds and lives of some remarkable people. The book consists of twelve chapters, each by a remarkable practitioner of Natural History, talking about their own and others' experiences and practices in recording what they saw.

Lavishly illustrated with some really lovely sketches, paintings, and diagrams as well as reproductions of actual pages from field journals, the book gives us a real sense of immediacy – you can put yourself *out there* with the writers and then loop back their experiences into our own.

Edited volumes always run the risk of a degree of unevenness in terms of authorship, but it is a tribute to Canfield that I can't find a wrong note here. Each chapter provides a different yet complementary insight into the process of capturing what one experiences in forms that one can later use for analysis, synthesis, or as a future archive.

Inevitably, I find that I have particular favorites: George Schaller's chapter *On the Pleasure of Observing* jumps out, as does Jenny Keller's *Why Sketch*, but for me the book revolves around Perinne and Patton's *Letters to the Future*, a discussion and explication of the “Grinnell System” of note-taking, and the importance of field notes as foundational material in long-term assessments of environmental change.

Perinne and Patton bring a droll sense of humor to their subject, but they are also extremely serious in the importance of clear, systematic note-taking that would

allow people the note-takers would never meet to duplicate their experiences and assess possible transformations in landscapes and species ranges. One also gets a better understanding of Grinnell himself and an important turning point in Ecology and Natural History.

Although some chapters are historically based or reminiscences, *Field Notes on Science and Nature* also takes us up to the present with Piotr Naskrecki's discussion of computer databases. I am probably showing my age, however, when I say that I am both more drawn to the pencil/pen/ink varieties of notes in other chapters and also immediately reflect on the impact of salt water, fog, and rain on even supposedly "field ready" electronics. Pen and paper will often dry out. Silicon often does not!

I also think on the fact that I can "access" Joseph Grinnell's notes written a hundred years ago with my eye. Will the computers

of even five years from now bother to have a "backwards compatible" USB port? Does anyone else still have letters, notes, and text on five and a quarter inch floppy disks? And does anyone have a disk drive for those things?

Canfield does a nice job of tying the pieces together in an introductory piece that sets the stage for his co-authors, and the Harvard Press is to be congratulated for producing such a high-quality publication.

I am seldom as enthusiastic as this over a modern book, but if you don't have a couple of really bright young naturalists in your life that you should rush out and get copies of this book for, well, all I can say is that you need to get around more!

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