



READING NATURE, SEEING NATURE

And counting turtles

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

TO DO A LITTLE RICE RESEARCH for an upcoming cookbook project, I recently picked up *Southern Provisions* by frequent SFA collaborator (and Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame honoree) David S. Shields. In his preface, I came across a reference to the SFA and the focus of our work.

“Since 1999, the SFA has celebrated vernacular cookery...highlighting stories told by the growers, harvesters, processors, cooks, and consumers. It has also greatly concerned itself with matters of social justice in the region. What the SFA has not undertaken is any large-scale history of any locale.”

The SFA tells stories of people. When we privilege place, we usually examine the built or cultivated environment as seen through the eyes of those who live and work there. We rarely explore the unkempt edges of the farm, or venture into the woods. That might change, thanks to Janisse Ray.

Ray has made a life of looking closely, feeling deeply, and writing about the natural world. If you're familiar with her, it's likely through her first and best-known book, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999), a memoir and a lyrical study of the longleaf pine ecosystem of south-east Georgia.

Like other incisive Southern authors of both fiction and nonfiction, Ray writes of places where poverty and beauty go hand in hand. Ray grew up in a house on the edge of her father's junkyard, and she went on to develop a fierce love for the vast and ancient landscape that lay beyond the rusted-out cars. She crafts passages like, “A couple of million years ago a pine fell in love with a place that belonged to lightning. Flying past, a pine seed saw the open, flat land and grew covetous.”

I was a little giddy when her story of a south Georgia mushroom forager

named Ancil Jacques came my way. And I'm also a little giddy to share it with you, *Gravy* readers. Going forward, I plan to look for ways to seed these pages with more nature writing. I like how these pieces help us get out of our own way to focus on the physical world. While stories of people will always be our focus, it's not too much of a stretch to say that those stories are always somehow dependent on the environment.

I don't venture into the woods much, but I do take a lot of walks and spend a lot of time on playgrounds and in parks with a toddler. When you let a two-and-a-half-year-old do her own walking, your linear progress is pretty slow. But you notice things. Working with Janisse Ray reminded me how nice that is. In her writing, she rattles off colloquial and scientific names for plants and animals—beautiful, odd, endearing, or sinister—with an ease that's foreign to me. It made me wish that I could do the same.

At a park in Oxford, Sally and I stand on the pier and count the turtles swimming in the pond. On walks, she stops to collect sticks and check drains for water. We examine ant hills and daffodils, acorns and magnolia leaves. The science and nature writer Emma Marris tells us that these are vital ways of enjoying nature with children. (Watch her TED talk.) I'd add, they're nice for grown-ups, too. In a neighbor's yard earlier this spring, we saw an explosion of mushrooms that disappeared a few days later. They didn't look edible, but then I didn't have Janisse or Ancil to ask.

Here in Oxford, the weather has recently shifted from “let's get out and enjoy it!” to “uh-oh, here comes summer.” By the time you read these words, we'll both be sweating. Still, here's to getting outside. I hope you find your own little piece of nature. Look at it, listen to it, maybe even write about it. 🐢

DTSSP