The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans

Reviewed by Janan Matthews | HEIFER STAFF WRITER

Immigrant is one of those words that periodically rises to the surface of a society’s consciousness and becomes a political touchstone. No longer do we envision Ellis Island; the word now conjures up night-vision border crossings and has about it a whiff of fear. The new metaphors are dark and deformed: immigration is a plague. Walls are built. Borders are closed.

In The Earth Knows My Name, author Patricia Klindienst steers the conversation about immigrants and immigration in a more humane direction, reminding us that, whether we are first generation Asian-Americans or eighth generation descendents of Spanish settlers, almost all American families emigrated to this land. And land lies at the heart of this book: homeland and gardening, a story that ended in uprooted plants and transplanting, a political touchstone.

Gardening proves to be an appropriate and fertile vein through which to approach the immigrant experience, with its appropriate metaphors of uprooted plants and transplanting, new soil and a certain hope in the bounty of the future. One chapter titled “Place” recounts the story of Gerard Brentyn, a Polish immigrant vintner, and the reclusive Akko Suyematsu, a Nisei (a second generation Japanese-American) berry grower. The two have found a way to share their land on Bainbridge Island, Wash. Brentyn is the most vocal of the two, also likening the immigrant experience to that of a plant. “You tear a plant from the soil,” he says, “and what is left behind is never completely left behind.”

Gardens are more than mere ornamentation; they are sources of familiar fruits and vegetables. Food serves not only as a source of nutrition for these ethnic gardeners, but also fulfills some deeper craving. “Food is a form of deep memory,” says Klindienst. These stories offer lessons for every reader: a new life is built upon the old, and what is left behind is never completely left behind.

Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping

Reviewed by Austin Gelder | WORLD ARK ASSOCIATE EDITOR

O verwhelmed by the consumer fervor that was swelling her credit card balance while draining her holiday spirit, author Judith Levine decided it was too much. It was time for a year’s reprieve from shopping malls and bargain bins. For one year, Levine and her partner would opt out of the shopping scene altogether.

Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping is a 12-month chronicle of one couple’s struggle to forgo western culture’s consumer luxuries. It was an experiment the author jumped into with equal parts enthusiasm and trepidation. What will she do for fun if she can’t meet friends for lunch in a restaurant or at the theater for a movie? Will she miss the thrill of new high heels and good wine?

“Materially, we will survive. That’s the least of my worries,” Levine wrote before she put away her checkbook. “But there’s no question have a social, community, or family life, a business, a connection to the culture, an identity, even a self outside the realm of purchased things and experiences? Is it even possible to withdraw from the marketplace?”

Levine gears up for the January 1 of her shopping hiatus, stocking the liquor cabinet, renewing magazine subscriptions, buying the DVD player she’s had her eye on. At 10 p.m. on New Year’s Eve she succumbs to a last-minute online shopping spree.

But her provisions don’t last long. Favorite socks go missing and can’t be replaced. And how do you have a business lunch when restaurants are off-limits?

These quandaries get Levine thinking. She begins to truly understand the epidemic of “affluenza,” defined as a “painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.”

Levine finds she’s not completely cured of her own case of affluenza. Lime green stilettos beckon from a boutique stand. She wonders what she can give her niece for a graduation present. In August she falls off the wagon, visiting a clothing shop just to look around and leaving with a new pair of pants.

The middle third of Levine’s book is the weakest as she takes a detour into politics. Sarcasm and self-righteousness peek through as she rails against the consumer culture, and Levine is clearly over the top. “It is more.” Levine is clearly over the top. Levine is clearly over the top. Levine is clearly over the top. The reader comes away from Levine’s sometimes too-slick writing style. The book is filled with a few too many word plays and even some gratuitous sexual references. We all know that sex sells, but do you really need to compare yachts to male genitalia?

By December, Levine finds that she spent $8,000 less than she had the year before, and that her 13-year relationship has grown stronger. She’s lost a few pounds and gained a new appreciation for talking, walking and people-watching. Relying on free concerts and the public library for entertainment, Levine and her partner come to realize that art and learning are cruelly under-funded and out of reach for those without money for private school tuition and museum memberships.

“Self-exiled from the shops and eateries, we had no place to hang out but the oval public square. The perfect place for a book that was rich and surprising, but we also discovered that what our nation owns in common is in critically bad shape.”

Although a bit on the long side (264 pages), Not Buying It may be worth paging through if you find yourself caught up in the more-is-more mindset. Levine is clearly better off after stepping away from the credit cards for 12 months. This book might inspire you to do the same.