

Book Reviews

Jeff Gundy

an excerpt of

*What We Notice, What We Know**

Until a few years ago we rarely saw turkey vultures around my little town in northwest Ohio, but then I began to notice them more and more often, sailing over the tree-lined streets of my neighborhood, perching in the trees. By last summer I could see a dozen or so most mornings, camping loftily on the ridgelines and cupola of the four-story building that houses my university's English department, spreading their wings in the morning sun, craning their bald red heads—half-majestic and half-eerie. What they live on I don't know, but there must be enough roadkill to sustain them.

Is the multiplication of these birds in Bluffton just a minor fluctuation in their range—they are found throughout the Americas—or a small yet ominous signal of global warming? I cannot say, based on daily experience, since the weather remains fickle here and in many other places. But I find it hard not to notice the turkey vultures wheeling in their lofty way—and sometimes the whole flock forming up into what birders call a kettle, dozens of birds circling majestically together in an auspicious thermal.

The books under review here offer no sweeping analyses of the state of the planet, no disturbing charts or ominous graphs, no action plans for saving the whales, the polar bears, or the people. Convenient or not, their truths do not concern global warming, the extinction of species, or carbon footprints, but the subtler effects of human footprints, both literal and metaphoric. . . .

*An essay-review of

IN THE MIND'S EYE: ESSAYS ACROSS THE ANIMATE WORLD. By Elizabeth Dodd. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 348 pages. \$26.95.

WALKING THE WRACK LINE: ON TIDAL SHIFTS AND WHAT REMAINS. By Barbara Hurd. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. 118 pages. \$22.95.

SEVEN NOTEBOOKS: POEMS. By Campbell McGrath. New York: Ecco, 2008. 223 pages. \$23.95. \$13.99, paper.

None of these books is “environmentalist” in any doctrinaire or overt way; none offers any recipes for saving the Earth. But each promotes the radical practice of paying careful and, I dare say, loving attention. Such attentiveness in and of itself will not be enough to change CO₂ curves and rising temperatures; we need smart, concerted, and large-scale action too, on a scale that will test the resolve and the mettle of all the people on the planet—most of whom, of course, are too busy scratching out a bare living to even dream of thinking in such large terms. But along with large-scale action must come the changes of focus, of attention, and of mind that these writers model for us and offer to us. Changes from each of us, according to our ability to see, to notice, and to know.

