



The Open Space of Democracy

Terry Tempest Williams , Mary Frank (Illustrator)

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Terry Tempest Williams presents a sharp-edged perspective on the ethics and politics of place, spiritual democracy, and the responsibilities of citizen engagement. By turns elegiac, inspiring, and passionate, The Open Space of Democracy offers a fresh perspective on the critical questions of our time.

The Open Space of Democracy Details

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Author : Terry Tempest Williams , Mary Frank (Illustrator)

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Matt says

I passionately enjoy Terry Tempest's writing. She can put into words certain emotions and gut feelings that may be difficult for others to articulate. She intertwines personal experience with political policy, enduring histories, and conservation activism of the last many decades, creating a narrative of American open lands policy and recent developments and regressions. This book consists of three of her essays published in Orion, all interrelated, all focusing on her concept of "the open space of democracy," how "raw, wild beauty is a deeply held American value ... liberty is expressed through the simple act of wandering" (60) and how "open lands open minds" (76).

I love her statements on the importance of (and power in!) community decision-making, the very purpose of democracy. If we all felt so strongly and listened to one another as deeply, America may be a different place (better).

A fantastic, quick read, still raw in its recency.

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Select quotes:

"In the open space of democracy, beauty is not optional, but essential to our survival as a species." (41)

"An open democracy inspires wisdom and the dignity of choice. A closed society inspires terror and the tyranny of belief." (10)

"To engage in responsive citizenship, we must become citizens who respond. Passionately. This is how we can make a difference. This is how we can serve society." (10)

"If we cannot engage in respectful listening there can be no civil dialogue and without civil dialogue we the people will simply become bullies and brutes, deaf to the truth" (23)

"Patience is more powerful than anger. Humor is more attractive than fear. Pay attention. Listen. We are most alive when discovering. Humility is the capacity to see. [...] We are meant to live simply. We are meant to be joyful. [...] Beauty is another word for God." (57)

"community interaction is the white-hot center of a democracy that burns bright" (59)

"It is time to acknowledge the violence rendered to our souls each time a mountaintop is removed to expose a coal vein in Appalachia or when a wetland is drained, dredged, and filled for a strip mall." (86)

"It is time to resist the simplistic, utilitarian view that what is good for business is good for humanity in all its complex web of relationships." (87)

Josephine Ensign says

This book came to me through a neighbor's tiny free library and will now reside in my home library. It is compact and lovely and powerful and timely: "I do not believe we can look for leadership beyond ourselves. I do not believe we can wait for someone or something to save us from our global predicaments and obligations. I need to look in the mirror and ask this of myself: If I am committed to seeing the direction of our country change, how must I change myself?" p. 88

Marcie says

4.5 stars

I love Terry Tempest Williams' writing. Her sparse descriptions are poetic in their brevity and depth. What she writes sticks with me to be turned over and savored or considered again and again.

Her descriptive ability feeds my senses and my soul. Her ideas resonate, yet still cause me to reconsider what I feel. Her passion encourages me with hope - it is contagious. Her ideas of democracy - whether you agree with her foundation or not - need to spread in this divided political climate.

After reading, I want to take time to savor the nature around me and make plans to explore the more remote areas in my reach. I'm encouraged to keep focusing my efforts on local issues to make my voice heard - to be part of "active democracy" and a "dynamic citizenry". This is a call to action.

I could include pages and pages of my favorite quotes (including much of the last 5 pages of the book), but I'll limit it to a few.

Beauty is another word for God. (p. 57)

The roots of silver-leafed willows, exposed in the cut bank, tremble like the nervous system of the Arctic. (p. 44)

In the open space of democracy, beauty is not optional, but essential to our survival as a species. (p. 41)

If we cannot engage in respectful listening there can be no civil dialogue and without civil dialogue we the people will simply become bullies and brutes... (p. 23)

The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up-ever-trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy? (p.83-84)

"The delicate game of democracy provides for a dialectic between opinions and beliefs in the hope that such exchange will expand the collective moral conscience that is the basis of orderly cohabitation." (p. 19)
- quote from Umberto Eco

Grady McCallie says

Odds are, I should love nearly everything Terry Tempest Williams writes. Her words are precise and unexpected, her descriptions of landscapes magically alive. I admire her commitment to wilderness and the natural world, and share many of her political and social values. And yet, I find her books almost impossible to read. Paragraphs unspool, sentence by gorgeous sentence:

"Scale cannot be registered here [in the Arctic] in human terms. It is geologic, tectonic, and planetary. Stegosaur-like ridge-lines form the boundaries of our passage. Ribbonlike waterfalls cascade for miles down cliffs. What I thought was a swallow became an eagle. Weather changes minute by minute. Gray tumultuous clouds weave themselves into patterns of herringbone, yet a strange softness abides, even in the razor-cut terror of this rugged terrain." [44]

But then there's such passages as this:

"The power of nature is the power of life in association. Nothing stands alone. On my haunches, I see a sunburst lichen attached to limestone; algae and fungi are working together to break down rock into soil. I cannot help but recognize a radical form of democracy at play. Each organism is rooted in its own biological niche, drawing its power from its relationship to other organisms. An equality of being contributes to an ecological state of health and succession." [58]

Wait, that's ridiculous. Why radical democracy? Why not anarcho-capitalism, or ecological realpolitik? What on earth is 'an equality of being' - how would you measure this? I suspect that the aspect of Williams' writing that drives me bonkers is why so many people find it compelling: she maps progressive values directly onto striking, concrete images of nature, not as analogies, but as manifestations of truth. This approach has a long and respectable tradition in American letters that stretches back to the Transcendentalists; few have done it so skillfully. But if you're a natural skeptic, and want language to help refine your thoughts and intuitions, this style is incredibly distracting.

This book itself is a collection of three essays, one recounting a politically liberal graduation speech she gave at a conservative Utah university in 2003; the middle, a deeply moving record of a canoe trip across the North Slope in Alaska (from which the passages quoted above); and an account of a community pulling together to fend off a resort subdivision in Castle Valley, Utah. While I'm glad her community won this last fight, I was struck by the ways privilege gave this community a leg up: well-connected residents, not all wealthy, but several with ties to deep pockets. Williams seems aware of this too; her point is broader: that in engaging to protect open spaces and ecological and social justice in our communities, we protect democracy and civilization. It's more than a bit mystical, but if you're already there, you may love this book.

Paige Ellen Stone says

I have made no secret of my love for Terry Tempest Williams, not just her writing, which is peerless, but her politics as a naturalist. This small volume is a pure treasure. It includes her Commencement Address given at the University of Utah (she is a Mormon), on May 2, 2003. That alone is worth the price of the book. The second section is "Ground Truthing," which is to walk the ground that has been surveyed by either aircraft or satellites to confirm the truth of what is actually happening on the ground. In this case, she and her companions are ground-truthing the National Arctic Wildlife Refuge. These are her notes and reflections. As she did in "Refuge", she uses nature to analogize to another area of life. In Refuge, she used/compared her thoughts and observations of her dying mother with the sudden rise of the Great Salt Lake, which thus threatened the nearby Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. It is brilliant writing, combining her scientific knowledge with her personal observations of both events.

In this case, in The Open Space of Democracy, she analogizes the fragile nature of the Arctic Refuge with the fragile nature of our democracy, and our personal responsibility to preserve both. Again, her writing is without comparison: Experience opens us, creates a chasm in our heart, an expansion in our lungs, allowing us to pull in fresh air to all that was stagnant. We breathe deeply and remember fear for what it is - a resistance to the unknown.(p.32). She wrote this in 2003, and it is clear to this reviewer that things have only gotten worse as our "leaders" attempt to keep us living in fear, rather than breathing the fresh, open, liberating air of democracy. She goes on to ask these questions, having described as only she can, the beauty she has absorbed/observed over the past few days: What will we make of the life before us? How do we translate the gifts of solitary beauty into the action required for true participatory citizenship? (p. 42) The book continues with more of her personal/intimate musings and scientific observations of not only the National Arctic Wildlife Refuge, but, in section 3, more about her own home turf. It is hard to review such a book, it is so rich it begs to be read and reread, to be opened at random for a bit of glorious indulgence in beauty and wisdom. I will close this very inadequate review with Terry Tempest Williams' own words: "The open space of democracy provides justice for all living things - plants, animals, rocks, and rivers, as well as human beings." Amen, I say, to that.

Robert says

In my opinion, the author demonstrates an unwillingness to form a community with anyone outside of a very small group of people, which undermines her argument. She gives evidence of her isolationist tendencies, such as moving to a remote town and getting upset (with the other locals) when there is a threat of more people moving to town; she seems to want to engage in civic discourse, but only on her own terms. Additionally, there is a possessiveness about these lands that is somewhat troubling. It never seems to occur to her that humans are the problem with these spaces! Humans just can't seem to do anything but dick around with nature, and this book presents that clearly; the final bonfire scene is sickeningly appropriate. If we, as humans, wish to preserve spaces for other species, we need to stay out of them.

A favorite quote: "We hiked the steep sandy slopes of Jello Hill, so named because of its unstable red scree."
pg. 73

Perhaps this unstable landscape is best left undisturbed?

Kathy says

This is a quick read, more of a journal than a novel, written from her experiences traveling in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge, at home in Castle Rock Utah, and visiting with Congress in D.C. Williams is always a good author to turn to when I need to re-affirm my commitment to a strong value of wildland conservation and education. She always delivers inspiration and hope, when so much of what is going on in politics makes me want to bury my head in the sand, plug my ears and go "la la la la!" I admire her tenacity.

Erin says

At this time when the political climate is so tense and disparaging, I figured a re-read was in order. TTW is an absolute favorite of mine. More specifically, THIS book is the best of all, hands down. It's a quick read and full of inspiring thoughts and provocations. My paperback copy is highlighted and noted in and beaten up so badly that it is like picking up a journal from years back that I can read into my past thoughts and emotions with deep clarity and insight into my emotions at each reading, starting over six years ago when I read it for the first time.

As a side note, I had the amazing opportunity to meet (and provide a pretty huge congressional favor for) TTW during my time in the U.S. Senate. Easily one of the shining moments of my short-lived Capitol Hill career! She was insanely humble and gracious to begin with, and even more so when she realized I was a fan. Pretty epic....

Jessie says

I loved the first section of this book. I found myself highlighting so much, white out for what I didn't want would have been easier. Great stuff that I'm still mulling over and thinking about, and that I will be using in my classroom this year. She inspired my long-dead sense of democracy.

The second and third sections were beautifully written, and important to her point, but a little too transcendental for my taste, which is why I bumped it down to 4 stars.

Melissa says

A stunning book that TTW wrote during the Bush administration, post-911, but that seems every bit as relevant today in the Trump era. I loved this book, and it reconfirmed for me (as if I needed it) what an amazing writer and thinker she is.

Angela Kantola says

Excellent (and quick) read. Here are some favorite quotes:

"How do we engage in responsive citizenship in times of terror? Do we have the imagination to rediscover an authentic patriotism that inspires empathy and reflection over pride and nationalism?" (From a commencement address Williams gave at the University of Utah in May 2003.) (p.7)

"The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up -- ever -- trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?... The heart is the path to wisdom because it dares to be vulnerable in the presence of power." (p. 83-84)

"It is time to ask, when will our national culture of self-interest stop cutting the bonds of community to shore up individual gain and instead begin to nourish communal life through acts of giving, not taking? It is time to acknowledge the violence rendered to our souls each time a mountaintop is removed to expose a coal vein in Appalachia or when a wetland is drained, dredged, and filled for a strip mall. And the time has come to demand an end to the wholesale dismissal of the sacredness of life in all its variety and forms, as we witness the repeated breaking of laws, the relaxing of laws, in the sole name of growth and greed." (p.86)

"We have made the mistake of confusing democracy with capitalism and have mistaken political engagement with political machinery we all understand to be corrupt. It is time to resist the simplistic, utilitarian view that what is good for business is good for humanity in all its complex web of relationships. A spiritual democracy is inspired by our own sense of what we can accomplish together, honoring an integrated society where the social, intellectual, physical, and economic well-being of all is considered, not just the wealth and health of the corporate few." (p.86-87)

"If we cannot begin to embrace democracy as a way of life: the right to be educated, to think, discuss, dissent, create, and act acting in imaginative and revolutionary ways...if we fail to see the necessity for each of us to participate in the formation of an ethical life...if we cannot bring a sense of equity and respect into our homes, our marriages, our schools, and our churches, alongside our local, state, and federal governments, then democracy simply becomes, as Dewey suggests, 'a form of idolatry,' as we descend into the basement of nationalism." (p.87-88)

"We are in need of a reflective activism born out of humility, not arrogance. Reflection, with deep time spent in the consideration of others, opens the door to becoming a compassionate participant in the world." (p.88)

Mary Richmond says

This is not a current book but anyone concerned about the horrid attacks on our environment by this irresponsible administration should read this. As always, Terry Tempest Williams writes with integrity and poetry merged into truth...

Claire says

Terry Tempest Williams is one of my heroines, both as a person and an author. This book is very much about her commitment to democracy, on all levels, as she explains so well. It is a series of essays with the common theme of democracy from different angles. I am inspired by her commitment to her beliefs, to dialogue, to experiencing the world directly and intensely.

Emma says

This is one of those books (from 2004) that reminds us that we shouldn't (but do) get wrapped up in the specificity of the current political moment — very important perspective.

skye says

Terry Tempest Williams delivered one of the most incredible speeches I've ever listened to, last Fall at the SHIFT festival in Jackson. I've been wanting to read her work ever since (and before). This book was maybe not the best place to start - sort of a random compilation of essays - but it's all good stuff.

Of most interest: reading her feelings of despair during the W. administration, compared to our feeling with Trump now. You can tell it kind of felt like it was all over then - and I remember protesting the insane Iraq War in 2005 in DC - and now here we are again.
