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**A 'Cataract of Longing': *Books and Culture* names *The Flower Seeker* by Philip Lee Williams Book of the Year for 2010**

*(This is a transcription of a podcast on the website of the journal Books and Culture about the honor given to The Flower Seeker: An Epic Poem of William Bartram.)*

STAN GUTHRIE: Welcome to the latest *Books and Culture* podcast with John Wilson, who is the editor of *Books and Culture*. I'm Stan Guthrie. John, we're going to take a look at a book by Philip Lee Williams, *The Flower Seeker*.

JOHN WILSON: Every year, Stan, I pick a list of my favorite books and my favorite. And this year it is *The Flower Seeker* by Philip Lee Williams. It's an epic poem and an absolutely fascinating book, and its subject is William Bartram, the naturalist, who was born fairly early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and lived into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was 84 years old when he died.

He had a relatively unsuccessful career—didn't do well at all. But then in later years he took a trip down to the South—North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and other areas in the South. And he wrote a book about that jaunt, which has a very long title but which people simply refer to as his *Travels*. Bartram's *Travels* is a classic of nature writing, but at first glance you might not think of this work as inspiring an epic. It doesn't necessarily fit with what we think of as epic poetry in works like *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and so on.

But this book is just an extraordinary book in several ways. I can't do justice to all those ways here, but let me try to give you a sense of what kind of a book it is. There's a certain kind of book that a writer attempts in which you might say he or she is trying to sum up what they want to say about life, about the world, bringing to bear all that they've learned in the course of their career.

Williams has been writing for many years, and he just recently retired after teaching there for a long time at the University of Georgia. He's written novels, he's written poetry, he's written essays.

There's a wonderful passage in an essay by the poet Czesław Miłosz where he says he's dreamed of writing a single sentence in which he could somehow express everything that he's sensed and everything that he has experienced. And of course it's a totally impossible dream for a writer. It's the kind of dream that a lot of young writers have, and both for good and for ill it tends to get driven out of them. Because if you come to an editor and say, "I want to write a book that pours everything into it," most of the time the editor is going to

get you out of the office as quickly as possible. And frankly, most of the people who try to do that can't bring it off, and it's better to try to take something small. But, I said, both for good *and* for ill. So in some ways, that ambition can be a vain ambition.

On the other hand, it's also a magnificent ambition, and it's something that has driven a lot of great writers. Certainly, Milton would be an example, but there are also a number of examples that are important to Philip Lee Williams in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, above all, I think, Ezra Pound and his *Cantos*—it's that kind of work that builds over time, and you try to put everything in it—everything you know. Everything you care about, your sense of why we're here and beauty and suffering and all into this huge work.

And in the case of Williams, you can get a good sense of what he's doing by starting at the back of the book instead of just plunging right into the poem. (You can do that as well.) He has a postscript in which he explains his lifelong fascination with the epic form and his desire to tackle it someday. And he chose as his point of departure Bartram's *Travels*, and he often works into the book quotations from Bartram. So there are passages here that have been taken pretty much straight from Bartram's journals with a little bit of tweaking of language and rearranging. And people who have read Pound's *Cantos* or Charles Olsen's *Maximus* poems or Ronald Johnson and other American poets who work in that vein, modern American poets, will recognize what Williams is doing.

So on one hand he's working in a tradition that's very strong in modern and even in contemporary American poetry. On the other hand, he's very conscious of the whole reach of epic poetry going all the way back to the Greeks and coming up through Dante and Milton and all those great predecessors. So you can see already from these names I'm invoking (that he invokes himself in his postscript)—you can see already that it's a work of remarkable ambition. That doesn't mean, of course, that brings it off. I think he does, remarkably well.

On top of that, it is a physically rich book. There are many variations in typography. It is a book that is a visually enticing, seductive poem that uses the resources of typography in a brilliant way. And then on top of *that*, not in the paperback edition, which is the one that I'm holding here and is very handsome, but in the hardback edition there is a CD in which Williams reads the poem, and so you have that audio.\* So you can see again his impulse to create the total work, to throw himself totally into this.

The scope of it is magnificent because you have Bartram traveling in this land where he is very often the only person not an Indian nearby. And the Seminoles give him the name the "Flower Hunter," because they were amused at the fact that they weren't collectors of flowers themselves and they saw how much he gave to flowers and other fauna, so they gave him this affectionate nickname. And Williams explains in the postscript that he deliberately changed it from the Flower Hunter, which associates what Bartram was doing

to hunting for game, with the Flower Seeker because Bartram's quest was not just for physical things. He absolutely loved—he was very much like John Muir in this—he loved the physical world intensely, and he was observant to minute detail.

But he saw something more. He was a Quaker, and he was very conscious of something that infused the world with meaning. And in fact one of the epigraphs for the book is a wonderful quotation from John Muir, which I'll read to you here:

“I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.”

So that really sums up both Muir's and Bartram's view. Then you have the tragedy of slavery that pops up in the book, you have the history of the Indians that we know in a way that Bartram couldn't—was already unfolding, the conflict and of course the tragedies that were yet to come, we know when we read this account.

And on top of that, Williams layers in his imagination of things that could have happened in Bartram's *Travels* that aren't part of the actual narrative. And so that is woven into the poem along with things that are extracts from his actual *Travels*.

STAN GUTHRIE: Will the average reader know the difference between his imaginations and what really happened?

JOHN WILSON: I would say first there are a lot of people, from among the people who will pick this book up, who will have read Bartram. And in fact Mercer University Press, the publisher of this book, has just published a new edition of the *Travels* that is a kind of companion volume to this. There are lots of other editions out there.

Williams apologizes to readers in his postscript who might take offense that he's taken liberties to invent episodes. Some alert readers very familiar with Bartram might recognize those. Many readers, of course, won't care one way or the other.

STAN GUTHRIE: What's his purpose in doing that?

JOHN WILSON: Well, because he wants to draw out more fully the meaning of the story. And that's why there are other interpolations. For instance there are passages throughout the poem where he imagines Bartram in old age, just shortly before his death. And he's looking back. Then it will shift to passages that are in the present of his *Travels*.

And then on top of that, he layers in other things—and this again is very much in the tradition of the epic and particularly it's in the tradition of the capacious poems of Pound and Olsen and also the texts of a wonderful writer Paul Metcalf, who isn't well known at all but works somewhat in a similar form to Williams here, extracting material from old

texts. But he layers in quotations from predecessors himself—other poets, Dante, for instance, and Pound. And then he has bits where he's speaking in his own voice, where the poet is speaking in his own voice. Those aren't the primary bits, but they're there, all the way through.

Then there's this sense of going out, the seeking that's a constant theme. So you have all the layers together. You have the absolute splendor of the natural world, but it's also a world red, in tooth and claw. You have the human world. You have the presence of the Divine.

Let me just read you one little passage. In this passage, Bartram refers to crocodiles, and what he's actually describing are alligators:

I see before me like Indian mounds a hundred hillocks  
on the shore                      what man of Nature could  
   let it pass unstudied  
even with the herd of bellowing crocodiles to his stern?

So I heave-to, beach the boat, and walk among them.  
traveler in a                      strange land, pyramids  
   littering the landscape  
like an Egyptian funeral ground, dome to old dome.

They are, my Providence, nests of the crocodile,  
the hatchery of                      what would tear me  
   apart for bloody bones.

Most seem now deserted, decorated with thick and  
  
whitish eggshells that lie broken and scattered around  
each quiet dome.                      Each home charges me  
   with genuine fear that  
I try to glide past. Monsters from such small shells!

From these eggs come creatures large as a horse.  
One of them now                      swims to the center  
   of the lagoon and booms  
his voice, sucks air. A horror can be borne to anyone,

I know, dying child, alleyside criminal, and a home  
a horror. Yet I                      feel no anger at them,  
   for all nature is guiltless  
of moral thinking except man. It dies according to its



perfect being, which he certainly wasn't—none of us is. But I think he would be greatly honored by it.

Who knows? Maybe some day, Philip Lee Williams and Bartram will have a chance to meet in a splendor that's just hinted at in some of these lines.

STAN GUTHRIE: It certainly seems like it opens a cataract of longing that God can use for his purposes.

JOHN WILSON: Amen, Stan.

STAN GUTHRIE: Thank you, John.

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\*The CD also includes a sound recording made in 1967 of the long dead Keowee River, which Bartram crossed (the river is now a lake for a nuclear power facility), as well as music Williams composed specifically for the book.

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STAN GUTHRIE is an author and editor at large for *Christianity Today* magazine. Besides authoring, writing, and editing books, Guthrie is a literary agent and has appeared on National Public Radio's "Tell Me More," WGN's Milt Rosenberg program, and many other programs. An inspirational speaker, he hosts the weekly podcast with John Wilson of *Books and Culture*.

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