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Arts & Leisure



BARBARA TEDESCO PHOTO

A walk with Susan



Surry writer's latest book immerses readers in the natural world

REVIEWED BY NAN LINCOLN

It has been a while since I've thought about Annie Dillard's book "A Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek." I recall as a young mother filling my precious naptime with a chapter or two of Dillard's intense scrutiny of the flora and fauna she encountered in her meanderings about her home in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and her inward gaze upon politics, religion and other human constructs.

Susan Hand Shetterly's new book "Notes on the Landscape of Home," (2022, Down East Books) brought me back to the vicarious pleasures and, yes, the horrors of nature, patiently and thoughtfully observed.

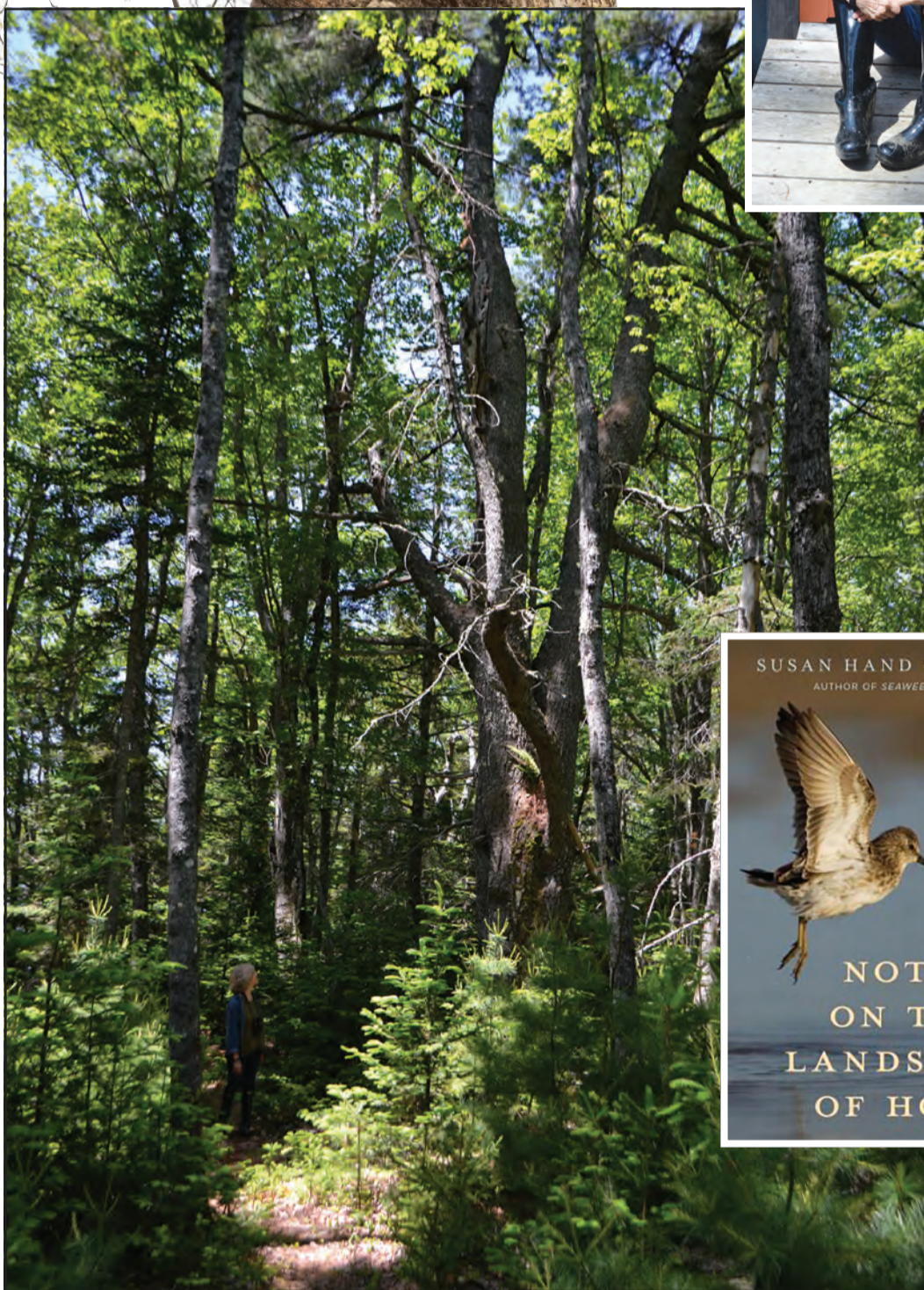
Despite its more prosaic title, and that it was largely written during a terrifying episode in human history, a deadly pandemic, Shetterly's book is a gentler approach to the natural world and the society she encounters in and around her home on Morgan

Bay in Surry.

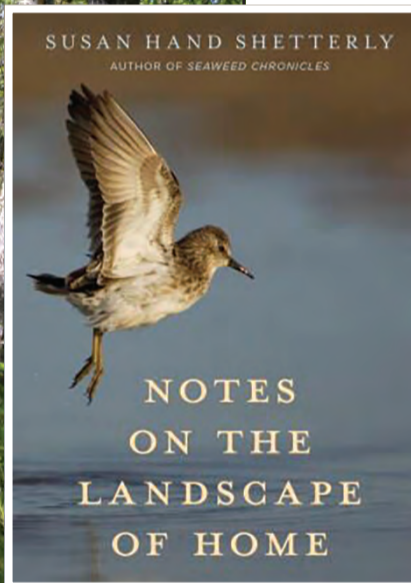
While we are told about a generous farmer splitting open the carcass of a cow with a double-bladed ax to feed endangered bald eagles, we are spared cringe-worthy ringside accounts of such natural wonders as Dillard's snake sucking a live frog out of its skin. Actually, the amphibians Shetterly introduces us to sing in damp, spring woods and synchronize-swim in moonlit ponds.

Shetterly's book feels very much like joining her on one of her peregrinations along the shore and woody paths of her adopted habitat. Walking with us are some of her own literary heroes, such as David Thoreau, E.B. White and bird artist James Audubon.

Because the author has taken the time to learn about the birds and beasts (but mostly birds) she encounters, and because she also is a teacher, there is a good deal to be seen **SHETTERLY** page 11



"Notes on the Landscape of Home" author Susan Hand Shetterly at her house in Surry.



NORMAN MROZICKI PHOTO

FILE PHOTO

Susan Hand Shetterly takes a leisurely walk in the woods of Blue Hill Heritage Trust's Carter Nature Preserve in Surry.



BLUE HILL HERITAGE TRUST PHOTO



GETTY IMAGES PHOTO BY JEFF EDWARDS



The Carter Nature Preserve skirts Morgan Bay and boasts rich plant and wildlife.

Bufflehead ducks are among the sea birds that frequent the shore marshes of Morgan Bay.

SHETTERLY/9:*“Landscape of home”*

learned from these walks with Susan.

I had never heard about Cashes Ledge, 100 miles southeast of Portland in the Gulf of Maine. The underwater mountain, an undisturbed, veritable nursery for fish and seaweeds, is now protected but faces pressures from commercial fisheries and climate change. Like any good teacher, Shetterly introduces us to her subject, briefly explains why it is important or merely interesting and then moves on. She leaves the reader with the distinct impression that she wants us to explore the subject further on our own.

On this walk with Susan, we meet some of her friends and mentors and people she admires for their courage to live unconventional, meaningful lives.

People like Cynthia Thayer and her late husband, Bill, who bought a woodlot in Gouldsboro in the '70s and created Darthia Farm. The organic farm has continued to grow and harvest trees, vegetables and livestock in a manner that has been both sustainable and fulfilling for the Thayers and others who came to join them there.

We also meet Wayne Newell, who was born legally blind on the Sipayik Reservation on Passamaquoddy Bay. Because of his sight issues, as a child Newell wasn't forced to go to school and learn his three "R's" from English-speaking teachers. Instead, he stayed home with his extended family listening to the elders tell stories in their native Passamaquoddy. As an adult he turned this love of his native tongue and his belief that you can't properly learn about a culture in a language that belongs to another, into a crusade. Eventually, with help from others, he helped create a written form of the Passamaquoddy language and got it taught in reservation schools.

the Sorrento-Sullivan Rec Center's new initiative to host more community events. Like the Thanksgiving dinner in November, the Halloween event in October and the two craft fairs in November and December, the New Year's Eve dance will strive to bring the community together and give folks an opportunity to have some fun without traveling out of town.

"We're trying to figure out things to do in the winter for kids and adults," Stanley said. "I love the energy of my committee."

There are some "villains" here too. Shetterly briefly chronicles the efforts of a Norwegian salmon farming company to bring its invasive, messy, polluting industry to Frenchman Bay and how the local folks — fishermen, farmers, summer people — have united and thus far successfully stopped them. She contrasts this with a local company, Springtide Seaweeds, Sarah Redmond's sustainable "sea garden" in South Gouldsboro, where she grows and processes kelp, dulce and other seaweeds in the winter, harvests them in the spring leaving the waters open for fishermen in the summer.

These introductions to people, places and the natural world around her are interspersed with personal stories about her fascinating, inspirational mother and her own search to find her place and purpose in the environment. "Notes on the Landscape of Home" also is about her experience of the pandemic — the security it robbed her of — and the deeper appreciations of things, once taken for granted, it brought.

"During the pandemic," she writes, "many of us welcomed the wider view of the natural world. It was the human silence that led us there. It was the precariousness we felt in our own mortal skin and the increasing assaults of a changing climate. The two weren't that far apart."

She also mentions her efforts to draw and paint some of the botanical delights she has found in her "saunterings" and I can't help wishing she had shared some of those in this book. But, hey, her elegant but unpretentious prose paints many, many beautiful pictures for us and I kept my "Peterson's Guide to the Birds of North America" and Google close by so I could get a glimpse of the "butterball" bufflehead ducks she writes about, the wild turkeys amassing at the edge of her woods or the turkey vultures riding the thermals above country roads.

"Notes on the Landscape of Home" is quite simply a lovely read, perfect for a winter afternoon by a fire and for reminding us what we have come through in recent years and the wonders that await us in the days to come.

"Spring begins in this woodlot with the male robin's sudden burst of territorial song and the wood frogs' staccato counterpoint, somewhat like a bunch of black ducks quacking. And then the chorus of spring peepers begins, high pitched bells ringing through the night."

To learn more about Susan Hand Shetterly and her writing and books, visit susan-handshetterly.com.