

JANISSE RAY

ECOLOGY OF A
CRACKER CHILDHOOD

A READING GUIDE



ECOLOGY OF A CRACKER CHILDHOOD

In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, in a voice at once unique and familiar, Janisse Ray invites readers into a rich and varied world. Her childhood home is a junkyard in Georgia, her family a complex cast of flawed and loving characters, vividly portrayed. Always compassionate, Ray comes to maturity with a thorough understanding of the complicated connections between humans, communities, and the natural world. The vanishing longleaf pine ecosystem and the harsh life of the southern “cracker” (poor but resourceful, proud but sometimes careless with resources) provide Ray and her readers with the metaphors to comprehend our place in our own personal ecology.

PRAISE FOR ECOLOGY OF A CRACKER CHILDHOOD

WINNER OF THE SOUTHERN BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD • WINNER OF THE
SOUTHEASTERN BOOKSELLERS AWARD FOR NONFICTION • WINNER OF AN AMERICAN
BOOK AWARD • WINNER OF THE SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTER BOOK AWARD

“Well done and very moving.”—WENDELL BERRY

“Ray’s passion for preserving this unsung landscape is heartfelt and refreshing.”

—TONY HORWITZ, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

“Every endangered ecosystem should have such an eloquent spokesman.”—BAILEY WHITE

“The forests of the Southeast find their Rachel Carson.”—*NEW YORK TIMES*

ABOUT JANISSE RAY

Born on the coastal plains of southern Georgia, Janisse Ray grew up in a junkyard. From unlikely beginnings she became a prize-winning poet, essayist, radio commentator, and champion of the vanishing longleaf pine ecosystem.

A native of Baxley, Georgia, Ray traveled far before returning to her hometown, where she and her son now live. At North Georgia College in Dahlonega, Georgia, Ray shook off some of the trappings of her fundamentalist upbringing as she explored literature and science and encountered for the first time the notion of environmentalism. She earned a graduate degree in creative nature writing from the University of Montana, where her chapbook, "Naming the Unseen," won the 1996 Merriam-Frontier Award. She has been an assistant editor at *Florida Wildlife* and has taught English in Colombia. Ray has published essays and poems in *Wild Earth*, *Hope*, *Tallahassee Democrat*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Missoula Independent*, *Natural History*, *Orion*, *Orion Afield*, *Florida Wildlife*, *Florida Living* and *Georgia Wildlife*, among others. She has been a nature commentator for Georgia Public Radio.

As an environmental activist, Janisse is working to slow the rate of logging in Southern forests. A founding board member of Altamaha Riverkeeper, a group dedicated to repairing the mighty Altamaha River, Ray also helped form the Georgia Nature-Based Tourism Association. Janisse Ray is presently at work on a book about her hometown.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* Janisse Ray alternates memoir with natural history. Did you find this effective? What benefits/limitations does this way of communication impose?

Throughout *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* Janisse Ray explores what a younger generation takes and rejects from its elders: The differences between Charlie Ray (her grandfather) and Franklin Ray (her father) are in vivid contrast; Janisse herself does not share her mother's interests and concerns. Discuss these differences and compare them to your own experiences with your parents and/or children.

At the end of the chapter titled "Iron Man," Janisse Ray asks, "Of what use to humanity . . . is a man who cannot see beyond his own hurt?" What has she learned from her grandfather? What do we realize she expects of humanity?

Janisse Ray eloquently describes being in an old-growth forest. She drinks it "like water," she feels "mortality's roving hands grapple with air," she sees her "place as human in a natural order more grand, whole and functional than [she's] ever witnessed," and is "humbled, not frightened." Why does she feel that she "no longer [has] to worry about what happens to souls"? (p. 69)

Consider Franklin Ray's (Janisse's father) attitude toward the natural world and his influence on Janisse. How have your own parents influenced your views of nature?

What do you think of Ray's portrayal of her father's mental illness and its effect on the family? Is it effective? Is she able to be objective? What do you think of the way mental illness was perceived and handled in that time and place?

Before you read *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, did you have any preconceptions about the word "cracker"? What do you understand about this term now? How does Ray's identification with "cracker" culture and her pride in her heritage affect her understanding of ecology?

Using the example of the farmer with the captive gopher tortoise, discuss the compromises and efforts that humans must employ in order to understand an opposing point of view. Does Ray criticize, excuse, or defend the behavior she witnesses in the rural south?

How do faith and intellect equally influence Janisse Ray's life as she grows up? How does the conflict or juxtaposition of these two ways of looking at the world shape her appreciation of her personal ecology?

While Janisse Ray never sees a longleaf pine until adulthood, she describes the "opening of her heart" when as a child she does a school project on carnivorous plants. Was there a time in your own life from which you can trace a similar development of understanding?

Scars are an often-repeated image in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*: her own childhood hurts, her father's attempts to heal animals, clear-cut forests, initials carved into a tree. Why does Ray use this recurring theme?

Ray states, "Culture springs from the actions of people in a landscape." If we "look around," as she suggests, "and see that the landscape that defined us no longer exists [and] that animals that adapted as we adapted" are dying out (p. 271), what does this say about the interaction between culture and the natural world?

THE LONGLEAF PINE ECOSYSTEM

“The pine trees sing,” Janisse Ray writes. “The horizontal limbs of flattened crowns hold the wind as if they are vessels, singing bowls, and air stirs in them like a whistling kettle.” The virgin longleaf pine forests once covered 85 million acres across the South. But by 1930, the virgin forests were all but gone—grazed and logged. Prized for lumber and favored for ship stores (the sap was used to seal ships) the longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) was replaced by the loblolly and slash pine—trees that were easily farmed.

The sad result is the loss of habitat for some three hundred species. In a longleaf pine forest the trees are typically eighty to one hundred feet tall and widely spread. The sunlight streams between them and nurtures the wiregrass that evolved with the trees. The forest is home to creatures as varied as the rare gopher tortoise, indigo snake, Bachman’s sparrow, red-cockaded woodpeckers, and Sherman’s fox squirrel.

“The southern longleaf pine barrens in the southeastern coastal plains were lost by 1986,” Janisse Ray tells us. According to the Longleaf Alliance (based at Auburn University), “stands of longleaf offer more diversity, visual appeal, wildlife habitat, and higher valued products than other pine species.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO/WHERE TO LEARN MORE

For a list of organizations working to preserve the longleaf pine ecosystem and the plants and animals that live there, see the back of the book. Some of the organizations are listed below. Find others at www.worldashome.org.

Coastal Plains Institute

Nonprofit environmental research and education organization since 1984.

1313 North Duval Street
Tallahassee, FL 32303-5512
(850) 681-6208
means@bio.fsu.edu

The Dogwood Alliance

Network of grassroots organizations in the southeast who are working together to stop industrial clear-cutting for chip mills.

P.O. Box 598
Brevard, NC 28712
(828) 883-5889
www.dogwoodalliance.org

The Longleaf Alliance

Alliance to promote the ecological and economic values of longleaf pine ecosystems by encouraging better management practices in order to reverse the decline of the forests.

Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center
Route 7, Box 131
Andalusia, AL 36420
(334) 222-0581

Tall Timbers Research Station

Route 1, Box 678
Tallahassee, FL 32312
(850) 893-4153
www.ttrs.org/index.html

Be sure to visit www.worldashome.org and click on your region of North America to see books about your part of the country and find out about organizations working to preserve our natural heritage.