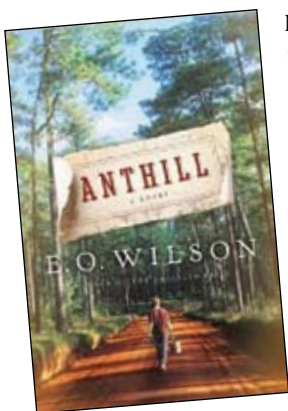


BOOK REVIEWS



Anthill

Edward O. Wilson
W. W. Norton & Company, New York, New York, USA
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Not often do we find a well-published scientist, considered a leader of his or her field, who ventures into the world of fiction writing. But what has Edward O. Wilson not done in his prolific

career? Well, we can check authoring a fiction novel off the list. As one of the world's authorities on ants, the father of sociobiology and the Encyclopedia of Life, tireless environmental advocate and winner of numerous awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes for non-fiction, few are not familiar with the scientific works of Wilson. Now Wilson tackles fiction.

Anthill is the story of a boy from the rural, southern United States with a passion for the natural world and the determination to ensure its continued survival. From the inquisitive wanderings of this young boy in the longleaf pine forests near his home, we follow Raphael "Raff" Semmes Cody as he discovers as much about the plants and animals he encounters as he does about himself, as he matures from a precocious fifteen-year-old boy to a successful man in his late twenties.

As a fellow southern (in my case by way of New Orleans), Harvard-educated, ant biologist, I felt a personal connection with much of the story of *Anthill*. This first fiction novel by Edward O. Wilson is clearly based not only on his personal upbringing in

Alabama and the Florida panhandle, but also mirrors other monumental aspects of his life in many ways. The similarity is not just in the geographic locations of the lives of the author and the main character, but also in Raff's passion for the natural world and conservation. In many ways, this is one of the major strengths of the novel. Wilson does not have to venture too far outside of what he is familiar with to create the characters and storyline, and this makes the characters believable. From his detailed descriptions of southern foods to explanations of the subtleties of southern etiquette to careful details of the ecological lives of ants, the reader is completely submerged in the experiences of the author, whether viewed from the perspective of the ant colony or of Raff, the central character. By using the perspective of the world from not only the ant colony and Raff Cody, but also in the larger global context, the reader is allowed to develop a sense of the connectedness of all living organisms on the planet without having this directly pointed out.

Only a keen and knowledgeable naturalist familiar with the subtropical southern U.S. could execute the detailed account of the natural world surrounding Raff. This novel will be the gold standard for writers wishing to capture the true spirit of the natural world in which the characters they create live. Scientifically accurate, yet not written so academically that it cannot be understood or enjoyed by the average reader, this novel will likely find many fans outside of the biology crowd.

The well-crafted characters are engaging enough to keep the reader interested without becoming overly convoluted. The writing style is easy to follow and rarely leaves the reader bogged down in overly complex explanations of details. My only critique is that anyone familiar with the life of E. O. Wilson through reading his autobiography or having heard him describe his life will be able to anticipate some aspects of the plot. For example, although Raff completed his

undergraduate studies on ants at a southern university state school, he chooses to go off to Harvard for his continued education (a law degree in this case), much like the author himself. Although the storyline of *Anthill* can be slightly predictable at times, this debut novel by an eminent biologist will leave many readers wishing for more fiction by well-trained observers of the natural world.

In this latest book and his first attempt at writing a fiction novel, Edward O. Wilson has shown the world that he is not only an eminent scientist, but also a brilliant artist. Wilson's ability to capture the beauty of nature in an accurate, yet entertaining novel brings to mind the writings of many of the great naturalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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