

Fall 2014

# Review of The Face of the Earth

Ann E. Lundberg

Northwestern College - Orange City, [lundberg@nwcsiowa.edu](mailto:lundberg@nwcsiowa.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://nwcommons.nwcsiowa.edu/englishfacultypubs>



Part of the [Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Commons](#), and the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Lundberg, Ann E., "Review of The Face of the Earth" (2014). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 1.  
<http://nwcommons.nwcsiowa.edu/englishfacultypubs/1>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at NWCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of NWCommons. For more information, please contact [ggrond@nwcsiowa.edu](mailto:ggrond@nwcsiowa.edu).

**SueEllen Campbell, et al. *The Face of the Earth: Natural Landscapes, Science, and Culture*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2011. 320 pp. \$68.95/\$29.95.**

*The Face of the Earth*, written and edited by SueEllen Campbell along with co-authors Alex Hunt, Richard Kerridge, Tom Lynch, and Ellen Wohl, applies ecocritical theory by demonstrating the interrelations of natural and cultural forces across the earth's surface. The authors use an organic form that knits scientific understandings of geology, climate, water, and the life forces of adaptation and complexity together with an exploration of how those forces entwine with human evolution and cultural forms such as language, agriculture, art, religion, and literature that humans use to engage the natural world. They chose the term "natural landscapes" to suggest "that we are focusing on parts of the earth that are more given to us than shaped by us—'natural land'—and that we are the ones doing the seeing and understanding—'scapes'" (ix).

The collective voice of the book remains unified while evoking the corporate "we." The book contains five chapters: "Landscapes of Internal Fire," "Climate and Ice," "Wet and Fluid," "Desert Places," and a concluding chapter "The Complexities of the Real" focused on grassland and forest ecosystems and the theoretical problem of trying to conceive of the Earth as a whole given the necessity "of selection involved in creating representations" (278). One such selection is that the authors concentrate on terrestrial environments, stopping at low tide rather than wading into marine ecology.

Diversity is provided by "On the Spot" reports from authors across the globe, who survey such varied places as the Arctic tundra, an Australian billabong, the Irish Burren, the tallgrass prairie, the Costa Rican rainforest, the Chihuahuan Desert, the Tibetan plateau, etc. Each report offers a personal response to a specific place, thus grounding larger concepts. "In the Negev Desert" and "On the Burren" are among the most fully realized contributions.

These integrated reports, along with chapter subdivisions, enhance readability by breaking fact-laden chapters into manageable segments. For readers well-versed in natural systems the material about matters such as plate tectonics and the hydrologic cycle may be unnecessary. However, the cumulative effect of seeing tectonics or climate re-emerge time and again as discussion advances is rewarding. Facts often blossom into delight: a segment on harvester ants teaches us not only that they forage at temperatures

between 86° F and 104 F°, populate Australia's arid zone with a density of one colony every 1-2 square yards, and contribute to the fertility of desert soils, but that they play a key role in the sacred stories of the Navajo - stories that elucidate the consequences of disturbing the ants or their dwellings (225-26).

Referencing Yann Arthus-Bertrand's photographic *Earth from Above* (2002) in the final chapter, Campbell writes: "The more time you spend studying his photographs, the more echoes you'll feel you're seeing, and yet the more you'll doubt the accuracy of your perception" (289). So, too, *The Face of the Earth* creates multiple echoes across its chapters. It could prove a useful text for courses in nature writing or environmental literature. The book's concept and execution is theoretically rich and manages a delicate balance between concern for the damage human beings are capable of wreaking on the earth and a celebration of the human capacity for finding wonder, joy, and solace in contemplating natural landscapes.

Ann E. Lundberg  
Northwestern College, Orange City, IA