

AMY STEWART, THE EARTH MOVED

A book review about . . . worms? Or about the creature that made great civilizations possible? According to Amy Stewart in The Earth Moved: on the remarkable achievements of earthworms, (223pp, Algonquin Books, 2004), they're one and the same. Lowly and often despised, the worm in its own world is a giant and a miracle worker. Ranging from tiny to several feet long and represented by over four thousand species, the earthworm may live in densities of a million to the acre. As its first and still most famous admirer, Charles Darwin, remarked, it has been busy since deep in prehistoric time, changing the face of the earth, burying the remains of great civilizations and enriching the soil – all at no cost to us.

And they have heart – one to five pairs of them – enough brain to make intelligent choices, and sufficient nerve not to be bothered by light while copulating. Along the Nile, Indus and Euphrates they may have made great civilizations possible, by enriching the soil with their castings so that humans were freed for pursuits other than farming.

Most U.S. worms are non-native – nightcrawlers, red wigglers and field worms – introduced from abroad in the last 100 years or so, and thus much like many of our common weeds, birds and insects, all immigrants like ourselves.

Interesting, perhaps, but why a book about them? First of all I think Stewart is impressed that a blind, three to six inch creature can be more powerful (in numbers, and with its ally, time) than the Army Corps of Engineers with all its

great machines. By a creature which can enrich the soil, take up large quantities of industrial pollution, absorb poisons and so act as biomonitors, live in sewage treatment plants and turn biosolids into clean soil. In short, Stewart sees earthworms as valuable, perhaps essential allies, which we ignore or disparage at our peril.

To encourage them in our gardens she suggests using “no till,” cover crops and mulch – letting the worms, with their microscopic co-workers, create the soil structure best suited to growing healthy plants. Or you can keep a worm bin, letting red wigglers turn your kitchen waste into castings to enrich soil or make compost tea.

Stewart quotes Adam Phillips: “It was to be part of Darwin’s undogmatic shifting of the hierarchies to see earthworms – typically associated with death and corruption and lowliness – as maintaining the earth, sustaining its fertility. The poor, he would imply, had already inherited the earth”

Or as Hamlet puts it, “A man may fish with the worm that eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.”