

READER'S GUIDE

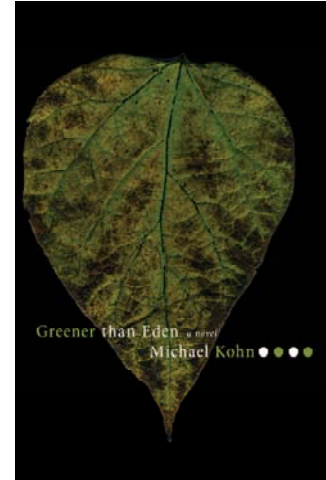
Greener than Eden by Michael Kohn



Cormorant Books Inc.

INTRODUCING *Greener than Eden*

Every spring, hundreds of tree planters migrate north to remote bush camps. Some are drawn to the fast cash, some by the scenery, and some are on the run. Kicked out of university for protesting the felling of his favourite tree for a parking lot, sick of the noise of urban life, greenhorn Noah Abramson flees Toronto in search of a quiet place where he can become a man on his own terms. But the camp has attracted other fugitives. Their mutual struggle to survive the season binds them, but as spring stretches into summer, and fever and fire close on the camp, their past catch up with them, and some scores must be settled.



IMPORTANT THEMES

The Natural World

Throughout the novel, there is a tension between humans and nature. This tension is evident in the symbiotic relationship between the planters, representing the reverence due to nature, and the loggers, representing man's progress beyond nature, where neither would exist without the other. This tension is also revealed throughout the novel, showing the dichotomy of the loggers, who willfully exploit nature, as with their treatment of the baited bear, and the planters, who wish to protect her as much as possible, as with the Noah's reaction to the death of the horned owl.

Escape

Many of the characters are running from something: Aleron is running from the Salvadorian death squads that killed his family; Noah is running away from his father, from the protesting charges, and ultimately, himself; and Cass is running from her former planting camp, and her past. The wilderness seems like the perfect escape to Noah, until he realizes that everyone else has the same idea. The notion of escape is what binds Noah to Cass, Aleron, and the other planters. It is the one thing they all have in common.

Father and Son

Noah has a very troubled relationship with his father, who criticizes Noah's choices, but is there to help defend him against the protest charges. Even though we don't get to know a lot about his relationship with his father, Noah's anguish over their relationship is palpable throughout the entire novel and determines for Noah what his quest for self discovery is really all about.

Maps and Memory

In some ways, Noah seeks to define himself outside of his father's existence, sloughing off the ties binding him to his father. Since his father is a cartographer, maps have always played a role in Noah's life. Finding himself struggling to climb a cliff with Cass, Noah reflects on maps and sees everything his "father's maps couldn't provide; despite all positives of a distant perspective, the subtle contours, the smaller lakes, animals, and people-- anything you might become attached to — are always left off." Noah resents the defining lines, boundaries and shaded regions of maps, which he finds restrictive and meaningless for most of the novel.

Q&A WITH MICHAEL KOHN

1. You were a tree planter yourself, how much of the events in the book are autobiographical?

Many of the key incidents are based on either my personal experiences or the experiences of other planters I met on my journeys. The story of the bear that enters Noah's planting camp was inspired by "actual events" — though I would hasten to say that, in the fictive process, the story, the planters and loggers, and even the bear, took on lives of their own.

2. Noah is ultimately shaped by his tree planting experiences. What is it about tree planting that has that effect? Was it the same for you? Do you look upon your time as a tree planter as something that made you who you are today?

It's embarrassing to admit it now, but after my first week of tree planting I wanted to go home. The spring was wet, cold, and miserable. The zipper on my tent broke, so the blackflies, mosquitoes, and no-see-ums were eating me alive night and day. And of course, as a greener, I wasn't making much money. Just as I was getting good at planting, and starting to make some decent coin, my company took on a bad contract that had even the best planters quitting in such numbers that the supervisor stopped driving planters to town. A friend and I loaded our 200 pounds of gear into a homemade cot and packed it out of the bush for the TransCanada highway, vowing never to return. Yet, by January, I was feeling an itch to go back, and I did, for season after season. Tree planting was my rite of passage, not only into full-fledged adulthood, but also into an identity. My annual migration to the north became second nature — a chance to reconnect with the land and myself and to commune with my crewmates. Tree planters forge deep bonds in the mutual struggle to survive the adversity of a season in the bush. We just don't get that opportunity in urban life. That's why corporations shell out big bucks to send their managers on Outward Bound trips.

3. Did you base your characters on fellow tree planters you encountered over the years?

Absolutely, but I'd have to say that any given character that emerged in the process of writing *Greener than Eden* is a composite based on several planters I'd met and my imagination. Aleron, for instance, was inspired by a number of Central American refugees I'd worked with over the years, some of whom had had close encounters with death squads. They all had a zest for life and a deeply rooted fear that there were few places on Earth that were safe enough to speak of their experiences. In this sense, they reminded me of Holocaust survivors I'd met.

4. In one passage of the book, you allude to conflict between tree planters and environmentalists: "I can't help but feel that we've left our mark and made it against the large-scale destruction of an indiscriminate, mechanized harvest. To the naysaying, canvassing enviro-critics who'd call us complicit, I say at least we've planted our timber frames and ass-wipe, and yours and your children's and grandchildren's, and the paper for your pamphlets." Can you comment on this conflict?

Well, many tree planters, including myself, are environmentalists. However, some environmental organizations have been highly critical of reforestation, arguing that it's used to justify destructive logging practices, such as clear cutting, and that "a tree farm" consisting of only one or two chosen, commercial species of trees of uniform age, "is not a forest." While I agree with some of these criticisms, I believe that some environmental groups' generalizations about reforestation overlook the good it has done in areas that were cleared long ago for farming lands that proved to be unfruitful for that purpose. When a canvasser for Greenpeace came to my door with a



ABOUT MICHAEL

Michael Kohn is a graduate of York University's creative writing program and the Humber School of Writers. He is currently a teacher-librarian in Toronto, and is a recent father. *Greener than Eden* was inspired by his experiences on tree planting crews in six of Canada's provinces. *Greener than Eden* was nominated for the 2007 Northern Lit Award, given by Northern Library Services.

pamphlet that derided reforestation, I felt compelled to correct some of his misconceptions, especially since I was close to planting my millionth tree. Yes, in the boreal forest, we largely plant only pine and spruce, not deciduous species, but the latter, particularly poplar, tend to grow back on their own rather quickly. However, in southern Ontario, I worked in provincial parks and conservation areas where we planted as many as a dozen species in an area. I have also planted on environmental reclamation projects and planted windbreaks on farms under soil conservation programs. None of this justifies clear cutting, but in my last five years as a planter, that practice, at least in Ontario, was being replaced by various selective cutting techniques. My issue with environmental organizations' criticisms of reforestation is that they should practice what they preach: if they insist on sending out pamphlets asking for donations, then they should either use hemp paper or at least "know their song well before they start singing."

5. There is a strong tension between the loggers and the tree-planters in the book, and despite the fact that, as one character points out, neither would have a job without the other. What do you think of this dichotomy?

Although there is this symbiotic relationship between loggers and tree planters, at least in an economic sense, in my experience, relations between the two are often strained. For one, on planting contracts for unionized logging companies, planters pay union dues as seasonal members of logging unions (e.g., the International Woodworkers of America). However, when the unions sit down with employers to negotiate new collective agreements, requests made by representatives from tree planting crews for increases to the piece rates and improved health and safety conditions go unaddressed. In Ontario, there hasn't been an increase in the per tree piece rate since the 1970's. This has led some experienced planters to suspect that, because they are "seasonal members," the unions sacrifice their requests as bargaining chips to gain better wages and benefits for the loggers and mill workers.

Other sources of tension between loggers and planters are geographical and generational. Many planters hail from big cities, such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, and from places to the south, whereas the loggers live and work in northern communities throughout the year. The planters also tend to be 10-20 years younger. The cultural frictions between urban and northern towns are especially pronounced, not just in the urban tree-hugger versus northern tree-chopper sense.

6. On the way up to camp, Noah, eager for escape from the world, notes that "even the CBC's gone. Good." Later, Noah says, "I've never craved a newspaper as much as I have today." Can you comment on the isolation from society that tree planting entails?

If you can't pick up CBC Radio in the bush, you probably won't be able to find anything but static on the dial, unless you have a good shortwave. At the beginning of each season, I used to love that feeling of being able to get so far off the map from the constant mass media onslaught that I could tune into nature and my thoughts and commune with others more meaningfully. Occasionally, though, something would draw my interest back to what was going on in the rest of the world — the sudden appearance of a squadron of jet fighters over our cutaway, a fragment of an early report on the massacre in Tiananmen Square. On 9/11, I was planting on a fall contract between North Bay and Temiskaming. My foreman, Steve, an old friend I'd recruited into tree planting years earlier, brought me the news, which he'd picked up on the crew truck during his lunch break. That quickly reminded me of the artificial sense of distance from mass society that working and living in the bush creates. New York and Washington seemed far away, but North Bay, the location of NORAD's northern command centre, was less than an hour's drive. I'd even planted trees on top of the giant hill in which it is buried. I imagined that, in the wake of the attacks, it would be a beehive of activity and that it might even be a target. Yet, as quickly as news and rumour travel, communication in the bush is still somewhat haphazard. A quarter hour after the quitting horn was honked, one of my crewmates emerged from his piece, which was a long walk-in from the road, and asked, "Did Steve tell you what happened this morning?" Puzzled by my gloomy response, he said, "Horrible? What's so horrible about finding a giant toad?" I knew then that he hadn't seen Steve since early that morning.

7. Noah has a strained relationship with his father. “He, who mapped to scale the ‘reduction’ of the arboretum, but paid for my lawyer when I was charged with trying to stop it ... I just want him to understand me.” Do you see his struggle to discover himself as part of his struggle against his father?

Yes, and I think that’s probably a common experience among young men as they seek to define themselves in the broader world. This struggle is between embracing the masculinity our fathers represented as role models, which we tended to do as boys, and resisting aspects of that masculinity, which we are likely to do as we mature into men. Noah, being young and idealistic, is very critical of his father’s tendency to take a distant, detached view of the world — a view that Noah suspects enables us to flatten forests without regard for the broader consequences. But Noah’s father isn’t heartless; his love for Noah isn’t conditional on Noah’s political leanings or he wouldn’t have paid Noah’s legal fees. I see Noah as an “angry young man” engaged in an ideological struggle against monolithic institutional entities and practices that are products of patriarchal masculinity. I see his father as a middle-aged man who has become socially conservative, not so much as a result of his age, but of his experience — the compromises he has felt compelled to make in his efforts to adjust to the demands of those institutions so that he can hold down a job and support his family. Since recently becoming a father myself, I have a much greater appreciation of the compromises and goal changes our fathers might have felt they had to make. Risk-taking is easier to fathom psychologically when you don’t have to worry about how it may affect your children or your ability to support your family. Yet, to make the societal changes we need to make, especially now in the face of a global environmental crisis, we’ll have to find ways to realize some of the goals of our youthful idealism throughout our adult lives.

8. As the story developed, were you surprised with the direction it took, or did you know the ending when you began?

The final chapter is faithful to a short story that I wrote as a student at York University. When I decided it was a novel, my instinct was to write towards that story as a destination because its final image articulated Noah’s experience of his upstream struggle into “manhood.” Part of that struggle requires the humility to “let it go” — to lose some of the misconceptions about masculinity, and with them, the domineering attitude that he’s on top of the world: king of the hill. Unfortunately, in the course of writing the first few drafts, I diverted myself from this destination by incorporating into my novel an overabundance of themes, which Marc Côté [Kohn’s editor at Cormorant] told me was a common mistake among first-timers. Consequently, my original vision for the ending no longer worked in the context of the body of the novel, and for a number of drafts, I abandoned it. It wasn’t until Cormorant signed me and Marc advised me to “jettison” various themes that were taking me off course that I realized my original vision for the ending was right. What surprised me was how quickly I was able to revise the novel from there. In little over a month, I cut about eighty pages from the manuscript, wrote a hundred more, and smoothed out some of the bumps. If I’d followed my early instincts and not made the mistake of adding themes in place of developing plot, I could have written *Greener than Eden* in half the time.

9. What do you hope readers will take from your book?

That’s a tough one. I just completed a course on teaching English, which was centred on transactional theory: the idea that meaning is created in readers’ transactions with texts. Although I hope that my writing acts as something of a rudder steering readers’ interpretations of my novel, I have been surprised, sometimes pleasantly, about what some reviewers have seen in it. Two reviewers in particular sum up what I hope readers will find in my book. One wrote that it “really highlights the paradox of wanting to care for the environment while having to protect your very life from its teeth.” Yes, protecting the environment means protecting blackflies, mosquitoes, leeches, and bears too. A reviewer from the *Owen Sound Sun Times* wrote, “It’s a tough life not meant for romantics. While enduring cold, rain, black flies, repellent burns, bears, aching muscles and ruthless competition, Noah begins to learn not just how to plant trees (you just don’t stick ‘em in the ground) but to find life in a world of raw scenery and mind-numbing work ... You can smell the Muskol, taste the sweat and feel the pull of carrying pounds of wet seedlings.” I hope that my book evokes the world of the planting camp through all six senses.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Noah's understanding of his protest at the university change during his time tree planting?
2. What does it mean when, at the end of the book, Noah reflects on how he and his father are different?
3. Does Noah see his actions as the result of freedom of choice, or of destiny?
4. Do you think Noah's feelings about his father changed over the course of the novel?
5. What is the significance of Noah's father being a cartographer?
6. What moral and ethical choices did Noah make? What about Aleron? Or Cass?
7. In what ways do the events in the book reveal evidence of the author's worldview?
8. At the end of the book, when Noah is wearing his father's watch during a storm, he thinks "Now that I'm winding it again, it's all I'm wearing, and it's not to keep time." What is the significance of this? What do you think it says about Noah?
9. What was surprising about the ending of the book?