

## The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World

**M. Pollan, 2001.**  
**Bloomsbury Publishing, London.**  
**pp. xxiv and 291. A\$29.95.**

OLIVIA OLDFIELD<sup>1</sup>

**M**ICHAEL Pollan is an environmental journalist for *The New York Times Magazine*. He has also written two other books – *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* and *A Place of My Own: The Education of an Amateur Builder*. Pollan was awarded the first "Reuters-World Conservation Union Global Award for Excellence in Environmental Journalism".

*The Botany of Desire* challenges the reader to ask what role they have played in choosing desirable traits for plants. He presents a story to illustrate how the fittest, or in this case the most desirable, survive — a concept students or a lay audience may have thought applied only to species thousands of years ago.

The running theme throughout is not "How have humans influenced plants?" but more "In what way have plants manipulated humans to help plants conquer the world?" This idea, while not theoretically correct (no plant can impart its will on an animal if the plant does not have a will), does pose an interesting concept. Has humankind been fooled into thinking that we are helping ourselves, while in the garden our apple trees rub their leaves together and smile smugly as another generation is planted into manured soil? This takes the theory of survival of the fittest to a whole new level. Or perhaps Pollan is simply paranoid after his trips to Amsterdam's "coffee shops" where he got to know his subject (i.e., marijuana) "a little better". Pollan traces the history of the plant-human interaction in the way a detective would find the source of a manufactured drug. He identifies many of the complexities that have

influenced the story of each plant, through "social and natural history, science, journalism, biography, mythology, philosophy, and memoir." (p xxiii).

In *The Botany of Desire*, chapters are devoted to the stories of four plants in relation to how each satisfies a human desire: the sweetness of apples, the beauty of tulips, the intoxication of marijuana, and the ability to control potato characteristics. These four plants were chosen for no reason other than that Pollan has grown them in his garden and they have an interesting story to tell. While the book is divided into four chapters, the chapters themselves have no organization. Pollan flows from idea to idea, taking the readers on his journey. His digressions make for quite lengthy chapters that could have been broken up by subheadings that, while disrupting the flow, would also guide the reader.

Pollan uses a variety of sources including botanists, friends, country-folk and drug makers, showing he has been comprehensive in his background searches. All of these are acknowledged individually in a "Sources" chapter where he highlights stories that may not be accurate (for example John Chapman, a.k.a. Johnny Appleseed).

This book is recommended for those who have an interest in genetics, botany, or social history, be they lay people, students, or professionals. As this book also looks at philosophical ideas, those who are interested in debating would find a great deal of inspiring information in these pages. Pollan does not use overly complicated language or scientific jargon, but neither does he over simplify. His style is poetic, creating images of events, sensations, philosophies and desires, while subtly conveying scientific principles. Such a writing style is perfect for casual reading.

<sup>1</sup>School of Natural Sciences, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Western Australia, Australia 6027.