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Book Review: Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect that Shaped the American Frontier

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Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect that Shaped the American Frontier. By Jeffrey A. Lockwood. New York: Basic Books, 2004. xxiii + 294 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$25.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

Locust is a hybrid academic study and popular science mystery that tells of the locust plague that

swept out of the Rocky Mountains to eviscerate much of the Great Plains' fledgling agriculture in the late nineteenth century. Lockwood provides a fast-paced story, rich with narrative, metaphor, and mythology, while also drawing out scientific insights that elevate an entomological study of the Rocky Mountain locust—*Melanoplus spretus*—to reveal wider issues of ecology and the balance of nature on a continental level. Specimens of this single species preyed on the Plains seasonally beginning in the 1870s, despite human efforts to burn them out, poison them with arsenic compounds, and entomb their eggs in deep plowed furrows—only to disappear on their own some twenty-five years later as suddenly and mysteriously as they had arrived. Lockwood, a professor of entomology at the University of Wyoming, asks why an insect swarm so prolific at its peak that it consumed 4,000 pounds of vegetation per hour would simply go away forever.

Lockwood's early chapters employ tried and true mystery genre moves by opening in the midst of the action in 1875 to reveal an estimated 3.5 trillion locusts fanning out across the Plains in ways likened to a rolling dust storm, a prairie brush fire, and a herd of buffalo. For the farmers already suffering from the aftereffects of the Civil War and from diseases like cholera and typhus, the locusts were another tribulation—"the third horseman of the Apocalypse" in the author's summation. Lockwood then jumps ahead a century to 1995 when he and a colleague are hacking through glacier ice slabs in Wyoming, searching for physical remains of the Rocky Mountain locust and clues to its disappearance.

The middle chapters relate futile attempts at eradication, such as the horse-drawn rotating drums designed to pulverize egg-laying nymphs into the soil. Lockwood reports on appeals for help to the government, insect scientists, and church leaders. Some states even resorted to the standard Old West tactic of offering bounties for every bushel of eggs rounded up. The story briefly shifts to Russia, where turn-of-the-century entomologist Boris Petrovich Uvarov had researched a different species that periodically changed phases from a mild-mannered grass-

hopper to become a ruinous locust. Yet the theory that the American *spretus* did not die out but simply morphed into a different phase ultimately proved a false lead.

After searching for clues in the Rocky Mountain glaciers of today, Lockwood pieces together a plausible story of the locusts' reign and eventual disappearance. The locusts had been intermittently swarming and then retreating to permanent sanctuaries in riverine mountain folds for at least three hundred years prior to the great nineteenth-century plague. Not surprisingly, the pioneer westward expansion in the nineteenth century with its mining and farming threatened these niche zones, inadvertently choking *spretus* out when the creatures were most vulnerable in their ecological bottleneck, their time of regrouping.

Invoking wisps of chaos theory and complexity theory, Lockwood draws larger conclusions about how the environment and its living residents can be robust and potent at one moment only to turn remarkably fragile the next. He leaves us pondering lessons from this study about how all species—humans included—have periods of delicate vulnerability and, in the case of humans, a need for sanctuary in places of worship or nature. If these sanctuaries are destroyed through pollution or other byproducts of careless living, the result can be catastrophic, as it was for *spretus*. This may seem too heavy a moral to be borne by a story of vanishing pests, but it is one that Lockwood for the most part delivers effectively and convincingly. The book does not entirely resolve the mystery of the locust disappearance, but it explores different options before settling on a likely one. Equally important, it offers a fascinating slice of Great Plains history.

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