

The Plant Hunter: A Scientist's Quest for Nature's Next Medicines. By Cassandra Leah Quave. 2021. Viking, New York. 371 pp.

Janelle Marie Baker^{1*}

¹Anthropology, Athabasca University, Athabasca, Canada.

*janelleb@athabascau.ca

Received April 23, 2022

Accepted October 6, 2022

Published December 7, 2022

OPEN ACCESS

DOI 10.14237/ebl.13.1.2022.1820

Copyright © 2022 by the author(s); licensee Society of Ethnobiology. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Public License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

The book, *The Plant Hunter: A Scientist's Quest for Nature's Next Medicines* is quite possibly the first female-authored full-length ethnobiological memoir (see Stepp 2016), in which ethnobotanist Cassandra Quave begins her life story with her ancestral roots, describes her childhood, and her path to becoming a leading medical ethnobotanist, bringing us to present day.

Quave presents the reader with an intimate view of life as a woman in science with a disability, through emotional and physical challenges, rewards, and relationships (see Nolan and Pieroni 2013). Presenting the value of ethnobotany in the form of a memoir makes for a gripping and accessible read, or listen, as the book is available as an audiobook, narrated by the author. In its accessibility, *The Plant Hunter* is a perfect text for undergraduate ethnobotany students, as it demonstrates the value of ethnobotany, while exposing the novice to the reality of life in the field to the laboratory. *The Plant Hunter* provides a history and context of ethnobotany and ethnopharmacology with rich ethnographic examples, including people and plants from the places currently known as southeastern USA, Peruvian Amazon, Italy, Albania, and Kosovo. Quave explains research ethics, including informed consent, intellectual property, and biopiracy. We also learn about how herbaria are underrated, but extremely valuable. Ultimately, this memoir exposes, from a deeply personal and sometimes graphic account, the urgent threat of antibiotic resistance.

While I intend to assign this book to my undergraduate students, the book is also enriching for

people already practicing research as ethnobiologist. Quave's sacrifices, challenges, and accomplishments are relatable, and her reflections elicit pain, joy, and frustration. Her accounts of infections, physical pain, surgeries, childhood bullying, grief, and birth of her first child during hurricane Katrina made me sob. Conversely, I had belly laughs during several of Quave's reveling personal stories, such as when a medicine man tricked Quave, later when she and her team cleaned monkey feces and a mouse guillotine out of her first lab space, then when her father's World Wrestling Federation footage came on after her film she made for her eighth grade science fair, and during references to Rumphius's misadventures, including when her supervisor used the late botanists' field tragedies to demonstrate Quave didn't have it so bad. I also yelled aloud when reading about several incidents at the Bird Bath—the family-owned laundromat. One of the most gut-wrenching moments for me was reading about the origin of the congenital defects in Quave's skeletal system. The source of her surgeries, amputation, infection, and more infections and surgeries to date. Her father was exposed to the jungle defoliant Agent Orange during the conflict in Vietnam, the poison did not discriminate, and Quave is one of thousands of children born with “constellations of birth defects” (2021:340). Those, like Quave, who were born with birth defects including missing bones (Quave was born without a right fibula), shortened limbs, and neural tube defects, have not yet been offered any benefits from the US Veterans Health Administration to cover the hundreds of thousands of

dollars in cost each person has paid for surgeries, health care, and prosthetic devices.

Quave reflects on her relationship between her scientific passion and her disability when talking about her fellow “one-legged hunter,” Zidan, who lost his leg from a land mine along the Albanian-Kosovo border (2021:304-305):

Perhaps my bond with Zidan was about more than war and a love for nature and hunting—it was also a sense of knowing what few others seemed to recognize, knowing in our bones the consequences of destroying nature. I’d gleaned this from our long interview discussions. Wars have been fought throughout the millennia, and as humans continue to battle over the limited resources this planet has to offer, there is no end in sight. The damage to humankind doesn’t end with the signing of peace treaties; nature’s scars will continue to haunt us in most unexpected ways. Zidan and I shared a respect for the awesome nature of plants.

Upon witnessing Quave’s experiences with skin infections, one cannot help but admire that she is now an Associate Professor of dermatology and human health at Emory University. Her research relies on traditional ethnobotanical knowledge of medicinal plants to find antibiotic properties and fight the terrifying trend towards global antibiotic resistance.

Quave’s mostly male colleagues, who prefer chemical drug discovery, often fail to appreciate her remarkable ability to “do” ethnobotany *and* laboratory analysis, a rare combination of skills. In this context, Quave does not shy away from hard truths. In “Chapter 10: Billy fell off the Swing,” the reader learns that a young Quave pushed a relentless bully called Billy off the swing, just as she is unseating the patriarchy in science through words rather than force now. We meet Professor Toad, Professor Creeper, and Professor Snake, characters who are all too familiar to women who have worked twice as hard to gain recognition in academia. Even if a reader is uninterested in stomping through the mud and riding donkeys up mountains in search for medicinal plants, they will find this book difficult to put down, as the

story of inequities in science is one we all need to hear.

References Cited

- Nolan, J., and A. Pieroni. 2013. Recollections, Reflections, and Revelations: Ethnobiologists and their “First Time” in the Field. *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 9(12):np. DOI:10.1186/1746-4269-9-12
- Stepp, J. R. 2016. Ethnobiological Memoirs and Memory (Editorial). *Ethnobiology Letters* 7(2):1–2. DOI:10.14237/ebl.7.2.2016.859