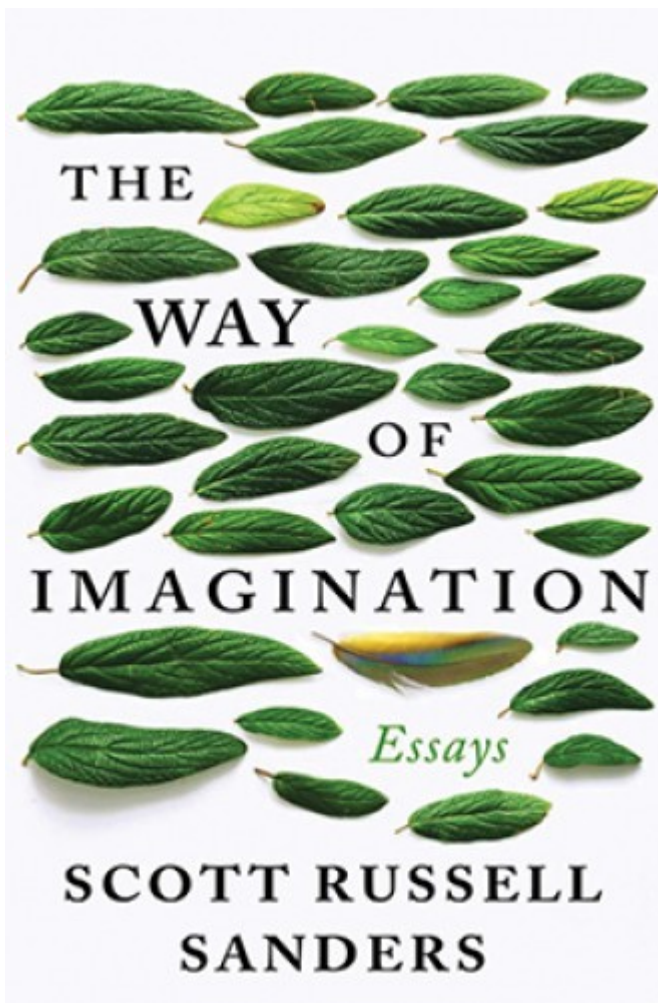


The artist at the end of the world

Scott Russell Sanders's essays balance ecological despair with the promise of human creativity.

by [Tom Montgomery Fate](#) in the [October 7, 2020](#) issue

In Review



The Way of Imagination

Essays

By Scott Russell Sanders
Counterpoint
[Buy from Bookshop.org >](#)

In the mid-90s, having just returned from stints as a wide-eyed journalist in Nicaragua and a teacher in the Philippines, I felt I had run out of writing material. My wife and I had settled in Chicago with new jobs, a little house and yard, two children, and a third on the way. All of the risky excitement and freedom of our travels was soon replaced by routine and responsibility.

It was then that I discovered the work of Scott Russell Sanders, including *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (1993) and later *Hunting for Hope: A Father's Journeys* (1998). Sanders, a longtime English professor at Indiana University, is the author of more than 20 books, including essay collections, novels, collections of short stories, and children's books. But reading those two early books at that opportune time taught me anew the core challenge of writing essays: paying compassionate attention to everyday life, including ordinary miracles like home repair and gardening and fatherhood. You don't have to live in a war zone to find good material.

Sanders's new collection of essays also stems from his observations of daily life. He attends to many of the themes he has explored in other books: the joys and struggles of fatherhood and marriage, the evolving role of spirituality and religion in our culture, the double role of the writer as artist and activist, and the slow catastrophe of climate change and the denigration of the natural world.

His focus on this last subject may be why the book seems so prescient in spite of having been written before the COVID-19 pandemic. "Clearly science alone will not persuade enough of us, quickly enough, to change course," he writes. "Perhaps nothing will. Perhaps we are bound to pass through what biologists call a population bottleneck, a drastic reduction in our numbers due to famine, floods, epidemic disease, and violent conflicts over dwindling resources."

But, as in most of his work, Sanders balances the moments of disaster and despair with the unending possibilities of human creativity and compassion, of art: the transforming power of the human imagination in the face of pending destruction. "The transfer of vision from a writer's mind to a reader's mind," Sanders writes, "exemplifies the power of art—a power as astounding, and as easy to ignore

because of its familiarity, as the flow of energy from the sun.”

“Like the influx of sunshine that powers our planet,” he continues, “the energy of art animates our inner universe, attuning us to beauty, sharpening our perceptions, enlarging our sympathies, and tempting us to become artists ourselves.” With the art of his language, Sanders invites readers to use their imaginations to find their experiences in his.

In his most personal essay, “At the Gates of Deep Darkness,” Sanders reflects on his son’s recent diagnosis with a rare terminal cancer. From this brief heartbreaking story, Sanders spins an enthralling essay that moves masterfully between the anecdotal and the analytical, between a telephoto lens and a wide angle. He writes:

Reason tells me that Jesse is likely to die soon, long before I do, but my heart rebels. Any parent who faces the prospect of losing a child to disease might feel the same. But not every grieving parent has written books celebrating the beauty, creativity, and glory of nature, as I have.

Jesse’s diagnosis causes Sanders to consider the wider implications: the dark side of nature and how humans fit into the cycle of creation. “The root of the word *nature* means to be born. But that is only half of the story. The fate of everything born, whether star or child, is to die. Whatever nature knits together it eventually unravels.”

Toward the end of the essay, Sanders’s grief mixes with regret and frustration. He is writing a year after his son’s first appointment, where the doctor told him that the lumps on his neck were nothing to be concerned about. “Had that doctor sent him to an endocrinologist, the cancer might have been detected before it spread from his thyroid, or at least before it invaded his bones. It might have been caught in time for healing.”

He then expands this metaphor—the connection between paying attention and healing—to encompass wider themes in the book:

As a nation, as a species, we risk ignoring climate disruption, soil erosion, mass extinctions, collapse of ocean fisheries, and other ecological warnings until the damage is beyond repair. The drive of cancer cells to multiply and spread is no different from the impulse that drives humans to

reproduce and spread our kind around the globe.

Sanders's insight that ignoring leads to increased risk rather than healing (which also applies to the yet-to-occur pandemic) leads to the underlying paradoxical thesis that drives the book: given our imaginations, the human being is "at once the most creative and the most destructive of all animals."

Also woven throughout the book is Sanders's ongoing spiritual evolution. This material often focuses on the relationship between religion and science or between art and activism. He draws on many writers to explore these topics, and he includes whole chapters on Henry David Thoreau and Thomas Merton. Sanders has read their work for much of his life, and he shares a core trait with both writers—a resilient social conscience, which perpetually connects their words to the world. His spirituality is most closely aligned with that of Thoreau, especially his idea of "the gospel of this moment," which encourages always being present and awake to the marvels of the natural world.

Sanders also shares Thoreau's love of etymology, and he uses it to explore elusive words and ideas, including the connection between religion and the natural world. He traces the origin of *soul* to a "Germanic root that means 'coming from and belonging to the sea.'" The word *holy*, he explains, "derives from the same root as *healthy*, *heal*, and *whole*. Buried in those two classic religious terms, *soul* and *holy*, is a recognition that each living being arises from the same sources, and is therefore kindred and precious."

This sentiment permeates the book. If we are to survive climate change (or COVID-19), we must imagine our faith and our world as a kin-dom rather than a kingdom. Humans are not separate from other plants and animals but kin, not apart from but a part of the ongoing cycle of creation. Or, as the Lakota often say, "Mitakwe Oyasin." We are related to all that is.