



The Story of My Heart by Richard Jefferies:
As Rediscovered by Terry Tempest Williams and Brooke Williams
Richard Jefferies, Terry Tempest Williams, Brooke Williams
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Reviewed by Jamie Houghton

In their first book co-authored together, writer and activist Terry Tempest Williams and her husband, writer Brooke Williams, return from obscurity the 19th century nature writer Richard Jefferies' autobiography, *The Story of My Heart*. The couple stumbled upon the "small, gold-embossed book" in the dusty corner of a bookshop in Maine, began reading it, and couldn't stop. This led to an on-going obsession both with Jefferies and his text, first as readers and eventually in the form of this loving republication, one that is eerily relevant to the uncertainties around our relationship to the natural world today. Make no mistake about it, this is not a book just for naturalists although it is sure to become a new classic in the nature writing genre. This is a book for anyone who believes there is more to the universe than meets the eye.

In her introduction, Terry Tempest Williams describes Richard Jefferies as a "poor ecstatic who could barely put food on the table, yet he was full". Brooke Williams describes him as an "obscure, nature-writing 'mystic' who lived in England and died a century ago." Together the Williamses present an intimate meditation on how an obscure autobiography written in 1883 wove itself into their lives, marriage, and hearts.

Born in 1848, Richard Jefferies suffered from tuberculosis, or as he more elegantly put it, "the insults which are showered on poverty". He died at the age of 38. *The Story of My Heart* tells of his daily walks or "pilgrimages," where he "remained in the woods for hours, among the ash sprays and the fluttering of the ring-doves at their nests, the scent of pines here and there, dreaming my prayer."

Although meditation was an eccentric concept at the time, Jefferies prays for a deeper "soul-life," an escape from what he called "house-life" which he describes as "go round and round in one barren path, a little money, a little food and sleep, some ancient fables, old age and death." He says, "by my daily pilgrimages, I escaped from it back to the sun."

Jefferies' writing is alive with poetry as he both experiences and examines the nature of the universe:

"As the swallows twitter, the dim white finger appears at my window full of wonders, such as all the wise men in twelve thousand precedent years never even hoped to conceive. But this is not all, light conceals more than it reveals; light is the darkest shadow of the sky; besides light there are many other mediums to be explored."

Brooke Williams' twelve essays, one for each of Jefferies' short chapters, are a grounding force to Jefferies' expansive prose. The reader gets to almost voyeuristically read the book alongside Williams and he compares notes. Jefferies is not an easy man to understand and I was grateful for Williams' essays and the transparent, easy tone of them. Most importantly, we enter into Williams' intimate conversation with Jefferies in which he unpacks with—and wrestles with—his own philosophy and the story of his heart; growing up in the Mormon church, discovering his soul-life through wandering and wilderness.

In my favorite essay in the collection, "Chains," Williams says, "I hear Jefferies speaking directly to me" and writes an imagined conversation in which he asks questions and Jefferies answers. I love that Williams practically channels Jefferies as if he couldn't help himself—as if the reader could. Jefferies may have been small in body, his legs thin "as a grasshoppers'" from illness, but he had a gargantuan voice that lodges itself in the reader. I found myself thinking, "What would Jefferies think of the way we live today? What would he say?" And Williams agrees, following with a letter to Jefferies in which he says "Wandering—what you did most of your life—is still seen as a waste of time."



Authors, Terry Tempest Williams and Brooke Williams.

Jefferies struggles with many of the classic dilemmas mystics have faced throughout the ages. He admits he is laboring to achieve something that he has not yet achieved: "To be beautiful and to be calm without mental fear is the ideal of Nature. If I cannot achieve it, at least I can think it." And what would he have achieved if he had lived another 30 years?

Among the many categories Williams suggests Jefferies would fit into from "sportsman" to "poet-naturalist" to "nature-mystic", I was most struck by Jefferies' logic. He was not an educated man, yet he questions the absolute reliance of science on the idea of seeing through a microscope or telescope, saying, how it's all just "little bits of glass." He asks what more can we see than what we imagine to be the highest form of looking? Could we "employ the ocean as a lens and force the truth from the sky?"

I once had a teacher who said that in order to believe in the future we must believe in the past. As a reader, *The Story of My Heart* connected me to the past and made me question the present reality of today. Terry Tempest Williams suggests it reads like a prayer.

Here, Jefferies writes his hopes for future generations:

"That they may enjoy their days, and the earth, and the beauty of this beautiful world; that they may rest by the sea and dream; that they may dance and sing, and eat and drink."

We hear you Jefferies, and this rediscovery of your text is both an answer and an affirmation that there are those who still protect wildness, search for beauty, and seek an expansive lense with which to view the world. What I love most about this edition of *The Story of My Heart* is that Brooke Williams and Terry Tempest Williams not only (re)discover a message in a bottle, they write back.







