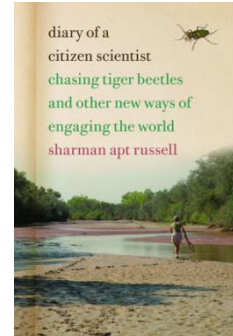


Discussion Guide

Diary of a Citizen Scientist: Chasing Tiger Beetles and Other New Ways of Engaging the World

By Sharman Apt Russell

1. *Diary of a Citizen Scientist* describes a range of activities in citizen science. You can work online in astronomy or help fold and unfold protein molecules. You can go outside to study sunflowers and bees, squirrels and nematodes. You can look at pictures of the ocean floor or help monitor the chemicals in your local waterway. What fields of science appealed the most to you and why? Could you match up other citizen science projects with the personalities of family members or friends?
2. Russell thinks of citizen science as personally transformative. “At every point in life, there is a long list of what we can still be... In every moment of the day, I can become newly engaged with the world. Newly competent. There’s so much to discover! So much we don’t know. I can still become something I am not.” (19) Does this ring true for you? Do you feel capable and energized to become newly engaged with the world? What would that look like for you?
3. Russell quotes the nineteenth-century American naturalist John Burroughs, “The nature lover is not looking for mere facts but for meanings, for something he can translate into the terms of his own life. He wants facts but significant facts—luminous facts that throw light upon the ways of animate and inanimate nature.” (129) Burroughs also went out into nature “to be soothed and healed and to have my senses put in order.” Russell says that she, too, “enlarges” in nature and calms down. How would you describe your relationship to nature? What natural areas serve as places of healing and calm? Do you find meaning and significance in the facts of nature?
4. Although *Diary of a Citizen Scientist* has a celebratory tone, the author keeps returning to the theme of global warming. She says she has spent a lot of time thinking about “how terrible things are on the planet: how polluted, how crowded, how damaged and diminished” (16). What are your thoughts about climate change and other environmental problems faced by this generation and the next?
5. For Russell, becoming “engaged in the world” through citizen science is an antidote to her environmental concerns. She wants to fall more deeply “in love with the world” even as she mourns certain losses and changes. What does “falling in love with the world” mean to you?



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6. Late in the book, while walking a country road, the author thinks, “But maybe I don’t have to work so hard. I have thought nature indifferent to humans, but maybe the reverse is true. Maybe the world is already in love, giving me these gifts all the time, calling out all the time: thak this. And this. And this. Don’t turn away.” (161) This seems a rather mysterious statement in a book about science. What do you think Russell is trying to say?
7. In her pursuit of the Western red-bellied tiger beetle, Russell sometimes comments on her lack of skill—and even her lack of motivation. “My heart sinks, and my middle- aged brain thinks, “I’d rather stab my cortex with a fork” (81). The humor in the book often comes from self-deprecation and the self-consciousness of an outsider. Did that approach work? Why or why not? What, if any, other parts of the book did you find humorous?
8. Russell’s mentors seem particularly helpful and generous with their expertise. What has been your experience with scientists and other professionals? Do you find that people, in general, like to talk about their work?
9. Russell seems pleased when one of her theories concerning the Western red-bellied tiger beetle is proved wrong. “Science depends on such testable hypotheses” (165). In what other ways is this author more interested in the process of science than the products of science? Russell was first inspired by this statement from an entomologist, “You could spend a week studying some obscure insect and you would then know more than anyone else on the planet.” By the end of the book, what do you think she has accomplished as a citizen scientist?
10. Russell takes a number of citizen science projects into a third-grade classroom. Where do you think citizen science has the most value—as an educational tool or as actual science?

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