



Under Ground: How Creatures of Mud and Dirt Shape Our World

Yvonne Baskin

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Let's get dirty. In childhood, the back yard, the flowerbed, the beach, the mucky place where land slips into puddles, lakes, and streams are infinitely fascinating. It is a mistake to leave that "childish" fascination with mud and dirt behind. The soils of the Earth, whether underneath our feet or pressurized beneath tons of ocean water, hold life in abundance. A handful of garden dirt may harbor more species than the entire aboveground Amazon.

The robotic rovers Spirit and Opportunity made headlines as they scraped their way across the Martian landscape, searching for signs of life. But while our eyes have been turned toward the skies, teeming beneath us and largely unexplored lies what Science magazine recently called the true "final frontier." A growing array of scientists is exploring life in soils and sediments, uncovering a living world literally alien to our own senses--and yet one whose integrity turns out to be crucial to life above ground.

Yvonne Baskin takes the reader from the polar desert of Antarctica to the coastal rain forests of Canada, from the rangelands of Yellowstone National Park to the vanishing wetlands of the Mississippi River basin, from Dutch pastures to English sounds, and beyond. She introduces exotic creatures--from bacteria and fungi to microscopic nematode worms, springtails, and mud shrimp--and shows us what scientists are learning about their contribution to sustaining a green and healthy world above ground. She also explores the alarming ways in which air pollution, trawl fishing, timber cutting, introductions of invasive species, wetland destruction, and the like threaten this underground diversity and how their loss, in turn, affects our own well being.

Two-thirds of the world's biological diversity exists in soils and underwater sediments, and yet most of us remain unaware of these tiny multitudes that run the planet beneath the scenes. In Under Ground, Baskin reveals the startling ways in which that life, whether in our own back yards, in fields and forests, or in the furthest reaches of the Earth, is more numerous, significant, and fascinating than we once imagined.

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