

# GROWERTALKS

## Columns

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### The Perennial Cynic

*John Friel*

### May I Quote You On That?

*by John Friel*

*(from the September 2007 issue of GrowerTalks)*

The Cynic is Out—way out, rafting the Colorado River through Grand Canyon. Fortunately, a few of my literary heroes volunteered to write most of this month's column. Sporting of them, especially the dead ones, eh?

On horticulture and art: divergent views by artists exploring similar subjects very differently. In the Prussian blue trunks, Claude Monet: "More than anything, I must have flowers, always, always." And in this corner, Georgia O'Keefe, whose voluptuous closeup studies leave no doubt as to what part of a plant the flower is: "I hate flowers. I paint them because they're cheaper than models, and they don't move."

On the importance of plants in human history: William Least Heat Moon: "Man is man because of tall grass ... it was savanna that made man stand up."

On appreciation, lack of: Dublin-born, London-raised novelist Iris Murdoch: "People from a planet without wild flowers would think we must be mad with joy the whole time to have the things about us."

On the buzzword of the year, Sustainability: Edward Abbey, who loved the Canyonlands, loathed development, and lies under a stone cairn out among the cacti: "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell." Anna Ball: "We are the original 'green' industry, but we haven't leveraged that to our advantage." Lloyd Traven: "We will never be anything more than a major consumer of energy—far more than we give back. Everything we use pollutes."

On petroglyphs, hieroglyphs and graffiti: Ivern Ball, a perfect stranger with the perfect mot juste: "Most of us can read the writing on the wall; we just assume it's addressed to someone else."

On loveliness, accidental: Novelist Sam Llewelyn: "In gardens, beauty is a by-product. The main business is sex and death." Tom Ogren: "Even botanists prefer 'staminate' and 'pistillate' rather than male and female ... the sexual revolution somehow was missed by botany and horticulture."

On writing: Michael Pollan (whose unfortunate phrase "Native plant Nazis" offended indigenous-species enthusiasts, especially Jewish ones.): "Nature writing (is) as dominated by men as garden writing is by women. After Rachel

Carson and Annie Dillard, it's... a men's club. The bifurcation seems almost cartoonishly Paleolithic, with women at home tending their flowers while men venture into the wilderness, tracking down large beasts and big thoughts."

On any subject she likes, ever: Annie Dillard, whose name I can scarcely utter without bowing: "There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by."

"Our generations overlap like shingles. We open time like a path through grass, like a boat's stem slits the crest of the present."

"The extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation."

Lastly, evidence that Annie never worked in Accounts Receivable: "I suspect that the really moral thinkers end up, wherever they may start, in botany."

On greenhouses vs. green felt tables: Cliff Tine, New Jersey Botanical Garden, RIP: "I don't need to go to the casinos. I'm a grower. I gamble every day."

On the value of ignorance: Red-suspendered author and Victory Garden host Roger Swain: "Among gardeners, enthusiasm and experience rarely exist in equal measure."

On cynicism: Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw: "The power of accurate observation is frequently called cynicism by those who don't have it ... what is the use of straining after an amiable view of things, when a cynical view is most likely to be the true one?"

Shaw references a modern, not classical, definition: Cynicism was a lofty branch of Greek philosophy whose adherents held that virtue is knowledge, that right must be done for its own sake. But when one mandates how man should behave, then observes actual human conduct ... hello, modern cynicism.

Cynicism is also confused with pessimism. Shaw again: "A pessimist is a man who thinks everybody as nasty as himself, and hates them for it."

On which Kingdom calls the shots, naturalist John Thomas: "Plants are very clever at getting animals to do things."

And finally, on the wisdom of borrowing wisdom: Minister, heretic and transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson: "I hate quotations. Tell me what YOU know."

*--John Friel*