

Watershed Attending to Body and Earth in Distress

By Ranae Lenor Hanson
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Reviewed by Suzanne Swanson

In 2015, at age 64, Ranae Lenor Hanson developed an unquenchable thirst. There were other symptoms, too, but she chalked all of it up to stress. She had been intensely worried about global warming and the tepid response to it — from friends and colleagues, corporations and government. A good friend was convinced that if she would just lighten up, she'd feel better. Maybe so, she thought.

But in a few weeks, the thirst and exhaustion had grown, and when she hauled herself to urgent care, hoping for help so that she could teach the next day, she was instead hospitalized for diabetic ketoacidosis, a life-threatening condition — and soon diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. *Watershed: Attending to Body and Earth in Distress*, is, in part, the story of Hanson's coming to accept that diagnosis, and learning about the disease itself and how to work with her own body to return to health. But only in part.

Hanson finds parallels between the tasks thrust upon her via a health emergency and a chronic health condition, and the challenges of facing climate crises, educating ourselves, and making choices to act. *Watershed* weaves her personal story of home, activism, and illness with the stories of her students — many of them immigrants or people of color — as well as with the story of an ailing planet.

The book, writes Hanson, “follows multiple arcs, not a single straight line. Consider it a braid with varied story strands woven together.” The reader, then, can pick up whichever strand calls for attention: stories of Minnesota land and water; stories of climate change in Yemen, Kabul, and Ethiopia; meditative reflections and questions; and suggestions on how to turn those reflections to action. Most importantly, Hanson encourages us to examine our own experiences of place, home, landscape, and watershed.

Land Stewardship Project members, farmers and non-farmers alike, know how deeply soil and water are intertwined. To

know a landscape, a watershed, is to build a relationship with it, to recognize how critical it is for humans — individually and collectively — to steward that land, that water.

Watershed begins with a section of beautifully and clearly written glimpses of the Hanson family moving from western Minnesota farm country to Birch Lake, near Babbitt Minn., on the Minnow Lake watershed. Season-by-season, we sense Hanson feeling her way into a life, learning the woods and animals and waters, knowing herself to be part of nature, not separate from it. We accompany her as she makes her way in the dark to a favorite rock in the woods. We sense her shock when, at 16, she travels east for the first time, and wonders how people live when they cannot walk freely, prevented by fence-after-fence.

Then *Watershed* introduces us to Hanson's students at Minneapolis College, where she taught for 31 years. It brings us their attachment to home as well as their despair over droughts and famine and disease, and the inequities they face in this country. We hear from many, among them Martina, from Mexico, and Amina, from Somalia, who discover how climate disruption catalyzed similar trajectories in their countries: crops failing, men fighting, women leaving land and animals, the cutting down of beloved trees for firewood.

Essential to the book are the ideas of home and homeland — and of being attentive to the details of what makes a place feel like home. Hanson asks us to get to know our places. In her classes, each student is required to choose one nearby tree to spend time with weekly, and to report on how that relationship develops. She asks readers to

identify their watershed, to acknowledge the Indigenous people who lived on that land. From that knowledge and love of the land, Hanson encourages each reader to take on at least one new step to protect it or revive it. Farmers are already deeply knowledgeable about their fields and pastures, their watersheds; they may begin to learn more about

soil health. Urban dwellers might compost food waste or plant pollinator-friendly native plants. All can plant, can create soil, can map their watershed.

Weaving in and out of the stories are the ways body and Earth mirror each other. For example, she writes: “Blood flows through the body. Ocean circles the lands. Both are awash with nutrients and salts. If the pH of either is off, life falters...My body has a small ocean of blood, one that was aided by ICU drip infusions and shots. Insulin brought my body back into balance. What can bring balance to the sea?”

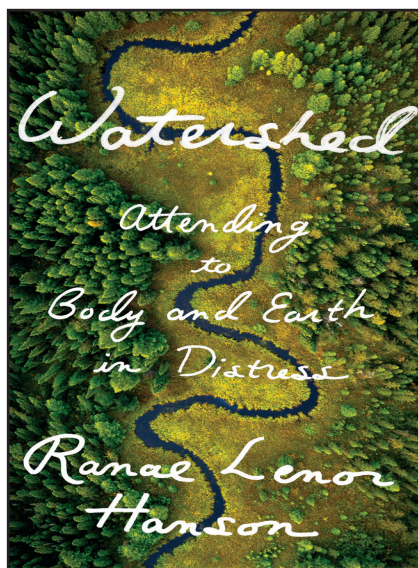
Hanson presents plenty of solid and fascinating information in *Watershed*: facts about diabetes and the discovery of insulin; a primer on climate change in Minnesota; research showing that climate disruption has increased incidences of asthma, diabetes, and Lyme disease; evidence that climate catastrophe and health issues affect people of color disproportionately. Hanson makes this material accessible. When we can grasp the issues, we are less likely to dismiss them. “Like a diabetic crisis, climate trauma numbs

our brains. The threat is too big to conceive, so we relegate it to the background. There it sits, unsettling everything, while most of us focus with increasing intensity on whatever task or diversion is at hand,” she writes.

Watershed challenges us to go beyond the numbing. Hanson asks us to listen. From the stories we hear, we can build a vision of community across barriers.

Recognizing fear and despair and griefs and longings can mobilize us to action, especially when we are not alone. When we seek company to create ideas, projects, and campaigns, we can regenerate our soil and protect our watersheds. Hanson encourages us, writing: “Remember that from the unknown, joyous possibilities may flow.” □

LSP member Suzanne Swanson's poems have appeared recently in *Water-Stone Review*, *Salamander*, and *Poets Reading the News*. She has roots in southwestern and northwestern Minnesota and now lives in Saint Paul, in the Saint Anthony Falls-Mississippi River watershed.



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