

Hannah Nordhaus

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Born: Washington, District of Columbia, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Journalist

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born in Washington, DC; married; children: two. **Addresses:** Home: Boulder, CO. **E-mail:** Hannah@hannahnordhaus.com.

CAREER:

Journalist. *Rocky Mountain News*, Denver, CO, outdoors columnist, 2007-09.

AWARDS:

Associated Press and California Newspaper Publishing Association awards; special citation from Stanford University John S. and James L. Knight Fellowship's James V. Risser Prize for Western Environmental Journalism, 2008, for "The Silence of the Bees" (feature article).

WORKS:**WRITINGS:**

The Beekeeper's Lament: How One Man and Half a Billion Honey Bees Help Feed America, Harper Perennial (New York, NY), 2011.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Los Angeles Times*, *Financial Times*, *Village Voice*, *SKI*, *High Country News*, and *Outside*.

Sidelights

In her first book, *The Beekeeper's Lament: How One Man and Half a Billion Honey Bees Help Feed America*, journalist Hannah Nordhaus chronicles the life and work of migratory beekeeper John Miller,

who transports bees across the country to pollinate agricultural crops such as almonds and apples. The book is both the portrait of a compelling individual, and an extended essay on apian biology. Nordhaus provides copious information on honeybee biology, and describes the myriad ways in which bees contribute to modern agriculture. She also examines the devastating threats to which bees are vulnerable, such as the varroa mite, which can quickly decimate entire colonies, and a newer and mysterious problem known as "Colony Collapse Disorder" (CCD), which since 2007 has wiped out between thirty and ninety percent of colonies among North American beekeepers.

Rather than write a "quick topical book" about CCD in 2007, when the subject was making national headlines, Nordhaus decided to create a "more character-oriented work about humans and bees that would follow one particular human, John Miller, through the seasons and the years of the recent honey bee crisis, and in doing so also explain this weird institution of modern beekeeping," she explained in an interview with Kevin Harnett posted on her home page. As many reviewers noted, the author chose a particularly fascinating individual for her focus. A Mormon, Miller runs one of the biggest beekeeping businesses in the United States; at one point, he owned more than 10,000 hives. He is almost constantly on the road, trucking his bees from California and Washington to North Dakota, and Idaho every year. Garrulous but also sometimes irascible, Miller is full of fascinating stories and opinions, and conveys both his wealth of bee knowledge and his deep love for his work. Explaining to Harnett that she most enjoys writing about "the little hidden corners of the human experience, the people who do weird things or scary things or difficult things by choice, and who persist in doing those things even when it's clear they'd be much better off choosing another path through life," Nordhaus said: "John Miller's life was so rich with narrative possibility, and honey bees, the creatures he tends, are so rich with metaphor," that she never lost her fascination with her subject during her years of research and writing.

Bees pollinate one-third of the country's agricultural crops, writes Nordhaus, including apples, almonds, and cherries. As they move from flower to flower, they collect nectar which is then digested, regurgitated, and stored in the hive as honey. To produce one pound of honey, the work of some 50,000 to 80,000 bees, traveling a collective 55,000 miles and visiting more than two million flowers, is required. In the hive, female worker bees attend to all communal chores, while male drones exist solely to impregnate the queen, who, in Nordhaus's description, "sits like a rock star in a mosh pit, laying eggs, encircled by fawning workers to tend to her every need." While hives normally lose many bees over the winter, when the insects are inactive, CCD has caused near-extirpation for many beekeepers. As the author explains, the consequences of this demise are dire, not only for individual beekeepers but for agriculture in general. Discussing various theories about the cause of CCD, including the possibility that cellphone signals somehow interfere with normal hive activity, Nordhaus writes that it is likely that a combination of factors, including weather, pathogens, pesticides use, and stress, are responsible. Distressing as CCD has been, the author also points out that the disorder's impact has reawakened public interest in honeybees and led to renewed educational and conservation efforts, as well as to a huge growth in amateur beekeeping. "The honeybee has always had an advantage over other insects," writes Nordhaus. "It's fuzzy; it's striped; it looks cute on baby clothes; it makes honey. And now, in the wake of CCD, it has also acquired a patina of tragic charisma."

Yet the author also writes about the more problematic aspects of honeybees in North America. One of numerous bee species, honeybees were brought to the American continent by European settlers. The newcomer bees were eager to feed on plant species that had also been introduced from Europe, and according to *Los Angeles Review of Books* contributor Marlene Zuk, "this circumstance contributed to the proliferation of invasive species such as purple loosestrife. Honeybees also competed with native species for food and space for hives. Nordhaus points out that, by taking over the trees where the green Carolina parakeet nested, honeybees may have contributed to the bird's eventual extinction in the early twentieth century."

The Beekeeper's Lament earned many admiring reviews. *Boston Globe* contributor Steve Greenlee hailed it as a "page-turner," and a writer for *Publishers Weekly* gave the book a starred rating, describing it as "revelatory" and "bittersweet." In the *Chicago Sun Times*, Michelle Wiener praised it as "a fascinating read from cover to cover." *The Beekeeper's Lament*, wrote *Los Angeles Review of Books* contributor Marlene Zuk, "is not only about bees, or the people making a living off of them, fascinating as both of these subjects are. It's about the dying of rural America, the way we grow and sell our food, the reason people take risks, and, ultimately, about loving, as Nordhaus puts it, 'something that can't love you back, that is just as happy to hurt you, that lives without concern for its keeper or his profit margins or his pride, and that dies with astonishing indiscretion--that simply does what it was born to do.'"

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

Nordhaus, Hannah, *The Beekeeper's Lament: How One Man and Half a Billion Honey Bees Help Feed America*, Harper Perennial (New York, NY), 2011.

PERIODICALS

Booklist, May 15, 2011, Nancy Bent, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*, p. 8.
Boston Globe, June 8, 2011, Steve Greenlee, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*.
Chicago Sun Times, May 26, 2011, Michelle Wiener, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*.
Kirkus Reviews, April 15, 2011, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*.
Library Journal, June 1, 2011, Robert Egan, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*, p. 115.
Los Angeles Review of Books, October 5, 2011, Marlene Zuk, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*.
Mother Jones, May-June, 2011, Maddie Oatman, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*, p. 61.
OnEarth, summer, 2011, Emma Marris, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*, p. 56.
Publishers Weekly, March 14, 2011, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*, p. 58.
Spectator, August 20, 2011, Jason Goodwin, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*, p. 33.

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California Garden Web, <http://cagardenweb.ucdavis.edu/> (February 2, 2012), Kathy Keatley Garvey, review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*.
Express Night Out, <http://www.expressnightout.com/> (February 1, 2012), interview with Nordhaus.
Fresh Words Daily, <http://freshwordsdaily.com/> (February 1, 2012), review of *The Beekeeper's Lament*.
Hannah Nordhaus Home Page, <http://www.hannahnordhaus.com> (February 1, 2012).
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