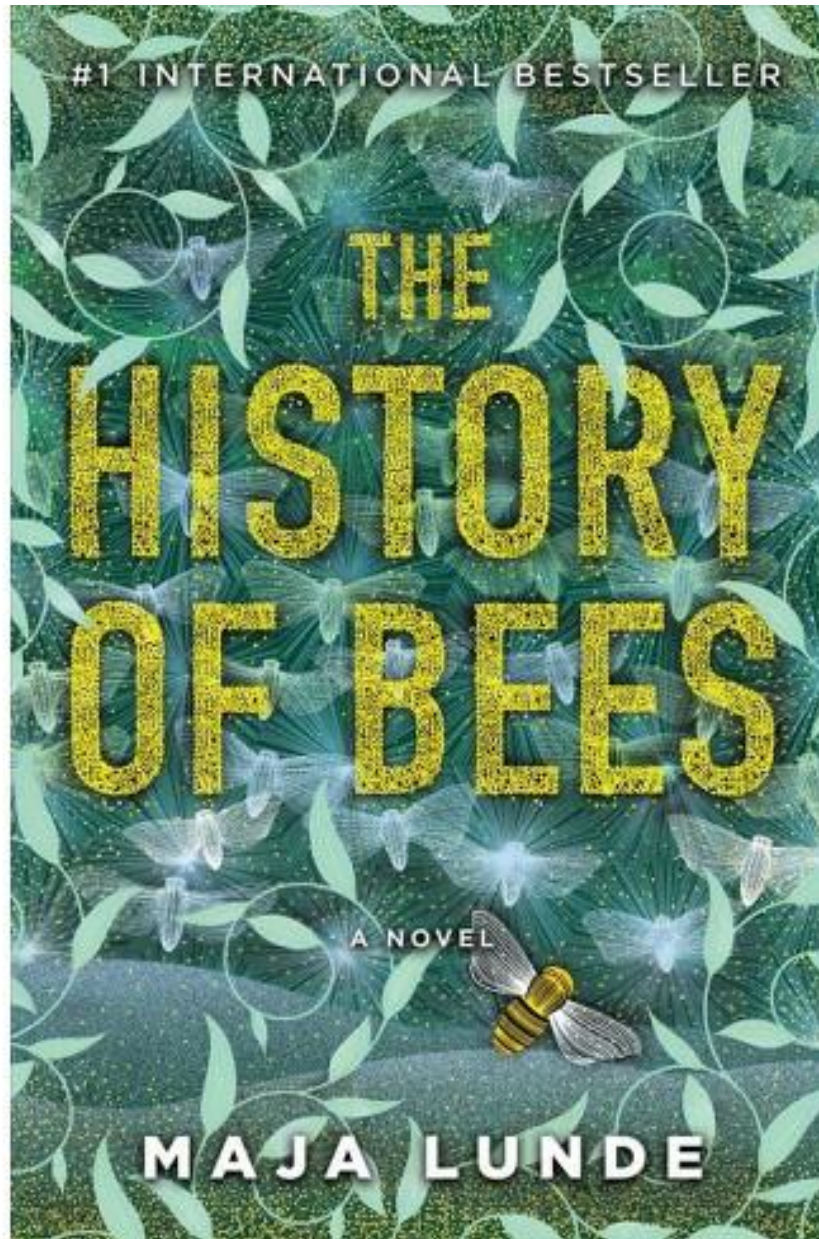


The History of Bees

by Maja Lunde



Book Summary:

from Simon and Schuster

England, 1852. William is a biologist and seed merchant, who sets out to build a new type of beehive—one that will give both him and his children honor and fame.

United States, 2007. George is a beekeeper fighting an uphill battle against modern farming, but hopes that his son can be their salvation.

China, 2098. Tao hand paints pollen onto the fruit trees now that the bees have long since disappeared. When Tao's young son is taken away by the authorities after a tragic accident, she sets out on a grueling journey to find out what happened to him.

Haunting, illuminating, and deftly written, *The History of Bees* joins “the past, the present, and a terrifying future in a riveting story as complex as a honeycomb” (*New York Times* bestselling author Bryn Greenwood) that is just as much about the powerful bond between children and parents as it is about our very relationship to nature and humanity.

Author Biography:

from Simon and Schuster

Maja Lunde is a Norwegian author and screenwriter. Lunde has written ten books for children and young adults. She has also written scripts for Norwegian television, including for the children's series *Barnas supershow* (“*The Children's Super Show*”), the drama series *Hjem* (“*Home*”) and the comedy series *Side om Side* (“*Side by Side*”). *The History of Bees* is her first novel for adults. She lives with her husband and three children in Oslo.

Review #1: *The Atlantic*

[“A Novel That Imagines a World Without Bees.”](#) by Tori Latham, Sept. 14, 2017

(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

...Following a simple premise—what would happen if bees disappeared?—Lunde’s novel, originally released in Norwegian in 2015, jumps back and forth, across time, between the stories of three beekeepers. The term, it should be noted, is used loosely: There’s William, a British biologist in the mid-1800s; George, a farmer in the contemporary Midwest; and Tao, a young Chinese mother in a bee-less 2098 who spends hours performing manual labor in the fields to make up for the lack of apiformes. All three are dealing with personal problems brought about by the existence—or lack—of bees in their life. But the novel smartly relies limitedly on its ecological-disaster framework and instead gains its best footing in the quiet and intimate relationships it depicts between its characters. At times, it’s easy to forget you’re reading a novel exploring the consequences of a species extinction—instead, you’ve become invested in the lives of the people whose stories it follows.

This family-drama quality stems from the fact that much of the book takes place before the Collapse, an ambiguous event that occurred over several decades, led to the obliteration of bees, and has greatly depleted the resources they help produce (crops, animal feed, and, in turn, a number of animals). Tao’s plotline is the only one that occurs completely in the post-Collapse world, one in which China’s citizens are forced to hand-pollinate trees, due to the country’s early use of pesticides. “It had paid off to be the ones who polluted the most,” Tao thinks to herself. “We were a pioneer nation in pollution and so we became a pioneer nation in pollination. A paradox had saved us.”

Tao’s story, which opens the novel, is easily the most captivating. It’s also the most urgent, because it takes place after, not before, global disaster. In addition to the stress and exhaustion brought about by her grueling work outdoors, Tao struggles to create a life for her 3-year-old son Wei-Wen, and her constant attempts to provide him the best possible education exasperate her husband Kuan, straining their relationship. When Wei-Wen mysteriously disappears, it pushes Tao and Kuan further apart. Lunde places you in Tao’s head and forces you to feel the emptiness around her:

This thing that was between us had grown to be insurmountably large. ... It became almost unbearable to be in the same room. He stirred up the same thoughts again and again. The same two words. My fault, my fault, my fault.

Review #2: Los Angeles Times

["The dystopian future is already underway in Maja Lunde's novel 'The History of Bees'."](#) by Ellie Robins, Sept. 21, 2017

(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

"Our children and grandchildren" is a phrase often wheeled out in conversations about climate change. For politicians searching for heartstrings to tug, this is a logical rhetorical strategy, appealing to voters' instincts to protect their kin. But it backfires in projecting the changing world into the future, as if we didn't already live on a planet where rising sea levels and sinking land have forced Americans from their homes, where drought caused by human activity is contributing to mass migration and war.

Writers have played their part in this collective delusion about the present day. Recent speculative works set in a near future several imaginative leaps away include the still-functioning, half-submerged Manhattan in Kim Stanley Robinson's "New York 2140" and a post-apocalyptic, desiccated L.A. in Claire Vaye Watkins' "Gold Fame Citrus."

Norwegian author Maja Lunde's "The History of Bees" — fluidly translated by Diane Oatley — breaks the mold by tracing the origins and effects of human meddling in nature through three story lines, spanning 250 years: a down-on-his-luck apiarist in rural England in 1851, an Ohio beekeeper in 2007, and a bereft mother in China in 2098. This structure allows for some standard speculation: In Lunde's dystopian 2098, bee die-out and subsequent food shortages have sent the global population plummeting, leaving Beijing a near ghost town, while in rural areas the [already real](#) practice of using human labor for pollination has boomed. "I was assigned to Field 748 today," says our Chinese protagonist Tao. "Out of how many? I didn't know. My group was one of hundreds."

Author Interview: Foyles

By Frances Gertler

<https://www.foyles.co.uk/Author-Maja-Lunde>

(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

How much research did you have to do into Colony Collapse Disorder? What disturbed you the most about what you discovered?

A lot. There were several things that scared me, but even more that fascinated me. Most of all how the hive is one organism. The single bee is nothing, but with the others it's everything. I think this is the truth about bees, about men, about the planet. All parts of nature need each other. Everything is connected to everything. It is easy to forget, though, even though nature tells it to us every day. Men have done amazing things when working together, think about Europe after the Second World War, so much was rebuilt in so few years. We now stand face to face with climate changes that should make us act, and work together. And I hope we will...

Why do you think we continue to ignore the evidence of the importance of bees and the significance of their decline, despite all the mounting evidence and warnings of a catastrophe of the type you describe?

If I only had the answer to that ... It is so difficult to connect the small choices we do every day to the big picture, even though they are connected.

Charlotte is an unsung heroine in the story of the bees. Was she based on a real person? Will women's past contributions to the sciences ever be fully recognised or does the documentation just not exist?

Lorenzo Langstroth, the father of modern beekeeping, inspired William. Charlotte, on the other hand, is not inspired by a real person, because she is the kind of person the history books do not write about - as you say, the documentation doesn't exist. But that doesn't make her story less true. There are millions of Charlottes out there in the world, both now, and in the past.

Non-Fiction Materials: *Rolling Stone*

["What Is Killing America's Bees and What Does It Mean for Us?"](#) by Alex Morris, Aug. 18, 2015

(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

There was a moment last year when beekeeper Jim Doan was ready to concede defeat. He stood in the kitchen of his rural New York home, holding the phone to his ear. Through the window, he could see the frigid January evening settling on the 112-acre farm he'd just been forced to sell two weeks earlier. On the other end of the line, his wife's voice was matter-of-fact: "Jimmy, I just want to say I'm sorry, but the bees are dead."

By then, Doan was used to taking in bad news. After all, this was long after the summer of 2006, when he had first started noticing that his bees were acting oddly: not laying eggs or going queenless or inexplicably trying to make multiple queens. It was long after the day when he'd gone out to check his bee yard and discovered that of the 5,600 hives he kept at the time, all but 600 were empty. And it was long after he'd learned back in 2007 that he was not alone, that beekeepers all around the country, and even the world, were finding that their bees had not just died but had actually vanished, a phenomenon that was eventually named colony collapse disorder and heralded as proof of the fast-approaching End of Days by evangelicals and environmentalists alike. Theories abounded about what was causing CCD. Were bees, the most hardworking and selfless of creatures, being called up to heaven before the rest of us? Were they victims of a Russian plot? Of cellphone interference? Of UV light? Were they the "canary in the coal mine," as the Obama administration suggested, signaling the degradation of the natural world at the hands of man? Possibly. Probably. No one knew.

Discussion Questions:

Developed by Jack Saari for Portland Public Library

1. The novel alternates between three different stories. Did you have a favorite? A particular section that was a chore to read? Which story do you think was most important to the novel? Why?
2. Why do you think the author chose this unconventional way to tell a story? Do you think it helps the book, or hurts it? Did you enjoy the author's style?
3. The author states in an interview that she found the story of Tao easiest to write, even though it was set far off in the future. Why do you think that is?
4. Much of the novel is about family relationships. How did people's relationships change from the 19th to the 20th century and into the far future? Do you think we have different dreams for our children at different times? Or are human relationships more universal than that?
5. The character of William was based on a historical figure. Could you tell while reading the book? Is that information important? Does it change how you think of William's timeline?
6. A number of the relationships in the novel are challenging. What did you think of William, George, and Tao's relationships with their children? Is there one relationship you wish you knew more about? One you wish you could just jump into the book and fix yourself?

7. Tao can seem very tough on her little boy--schooling and testing and pushing him to do better. There's a lot of pressure in Tao's timeline to succeed at a young age. Do you think she was too harsh? Do you think any of the parents were too harsh?
8. Speaking of Tao's drive for her son to succeed, do you see any parallels with modern day standardized testing? It's common in NYC public schools to need to test into middle school; is that too young? Testing at an earlier and earlier age is becoming more common; why do you think that is?
9. Were you aware of Bee Colony Collapse Disorder before reading the book? Does it worry you? Do you see a future for us not unlike Tao's timeline?
10. Bees are the metaphor that helps string this book together. What do you think the bees represent? Are they man's better half? Or more like their folly?
11. The Rolling Stone article about Colony Collapse Disorder follows a third generation beekeeper. The article ends with:

I didn't want to be the person that failed three generations of Doans keeping bees. I didn't want it to end with me," Doan says. But he knows that he may not have a choice in the matter. "I mean, we want something to pass on, but I'm not sure there's going to be anything to pass on in another year or two. Just empty boxes."

How do you think that quote relates to the stories of William and George? How desperate were they for 'something to pass on'?