

# **BOTANY OF DESIRE - A Plant's Eye View of the World**

**BY MICHAEL POLLAN**

Botany of Desire (certainly sounds more interesting than Botany 101!) comprises four essays prompted by the author's enquiry as to whether plants actually control humans rather than the conventional assumption.

Michael Pollan, Professor of Journalism at U.C. Berkley, specializes in the field of science and the environment and attempts to answer the question, fortunately not too pedantically, by considering four desires from both human and plant perspectives.

The chosen desires are sweetness, beauty, intoxication and control. The corresponding plant kingdom representatives are the apple tree, the tulip, the cannabis plant and the potato.

The author explores the relationships of desire through the development of clever tapestries which weave historical, cultural, botanical, scientific, environmental and economic elements together. Some will be familiar, many probably not. The apple with its huge inherent genetic diversity and superb adaptability; the cultural closeness of humans and the tulip; the unintended consequences of applying mores to an intoxicating plant and the paradoxes of potato monoculture are just glimpses of the eclectic content of his book. Intended or not, each successive desire appears to involve increasingly complex issues.

Contrary to my expectations, I found the essay on cannabis to be especially interesting, with its insights into altered consciousness (no, I never inhaled!). Did you know the human brain has TCH (the hallucinogenic component of pot) receptors as part of an essential cannabinoid neural network?

The humble potato provides Pollan with a huge resource which brings into focus the major agricultural and social issues of monoculture, chemical farming and genetic modification. Pollan notes the Irish Famine was "... the most catastrophic failure of monoculture in the history of the world ... over one million people dead in three years...". He also makes clear that genetic modification is not quite the

one-dimensional issue it is usually portrayed as. Details of the (haphazard) techniques of genetic modification were most surprising – although this may have changed since the book was written (2001).

The author shows how our desires, sometimes manipulated, cause us to move away from natural symbiotic relationships with plants; the detrimental effects which we are yet to fully appreciate. However, the author presents a balanced and non-hysterical view of the issues, which is very welcome and refreshing.

I found Pollan has a tendency to be somewhat overly poetic, but it is not too distracting and his Apollonian and Dionysian metaphors work very well. This book, for which he uses his own organic garden as a back-cloth, is definitely an informative, entertaining and stimulating read.

Reviewer's Note – Michael Pollan also wrote the excellent and best- selling "Omnivore's Dilemma – A Natural History of Four Meals".

Web Link - <http://michaelpollan.com/press-kit/>

Reviewed by David Broomhead