

## WINTER READING: Begin your New Year with a Good Book

# *Does the land belong to the people, or the people to the land?*

***“Listening to the Land: Stories from the Cacapon and Lost River Valley”***

**By Jamie S. Ross.**

**Photographs by Tom Cogill.**

**West Virginia University Press, 2013.**

**By LARA LUTZ**

“Not for sale.” These strong, simple words resonate throughout a gentle, funny and provoking book that documents the land and people of a West Virginia river valley with two names, incredible natural beauty and whole cast of characters determined to preserve it.

Ralph Spaid is the first valley resident to step forward, at the opening of chapter two. Ralph’s family has been in the Cacapon and Lost River Valley since the Revolutionary War and came to settle on a lovely, secluded tract known as Little Egypt.

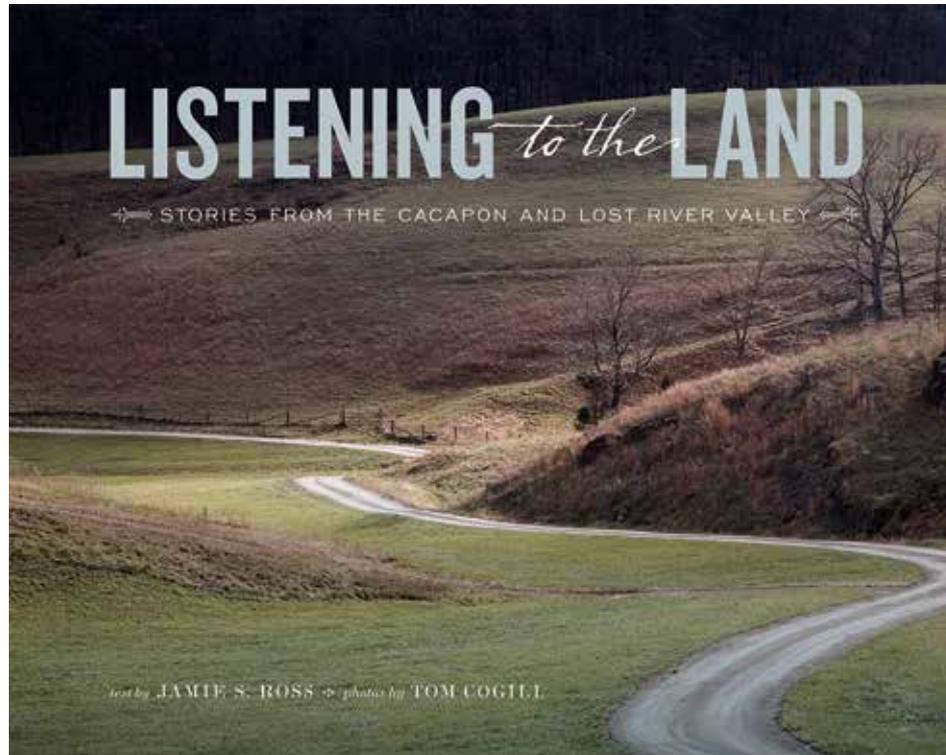
Soon after Ralph inherited the land, he was asked to meet with a lawyer.

Ralph knew something was up as soon as the lawyer called him “Mister,” he said. He joked with the lawyer to “watch his tongue” and “just call me Ralph” but, really, that didn’t help the lawyer’s cause at all. He offered Ralph \$1 million, \$2 million, and then \$5 million for his land.

Ralph said no. The purpose of this book, *“Listening to the Land,”* is to understand why.

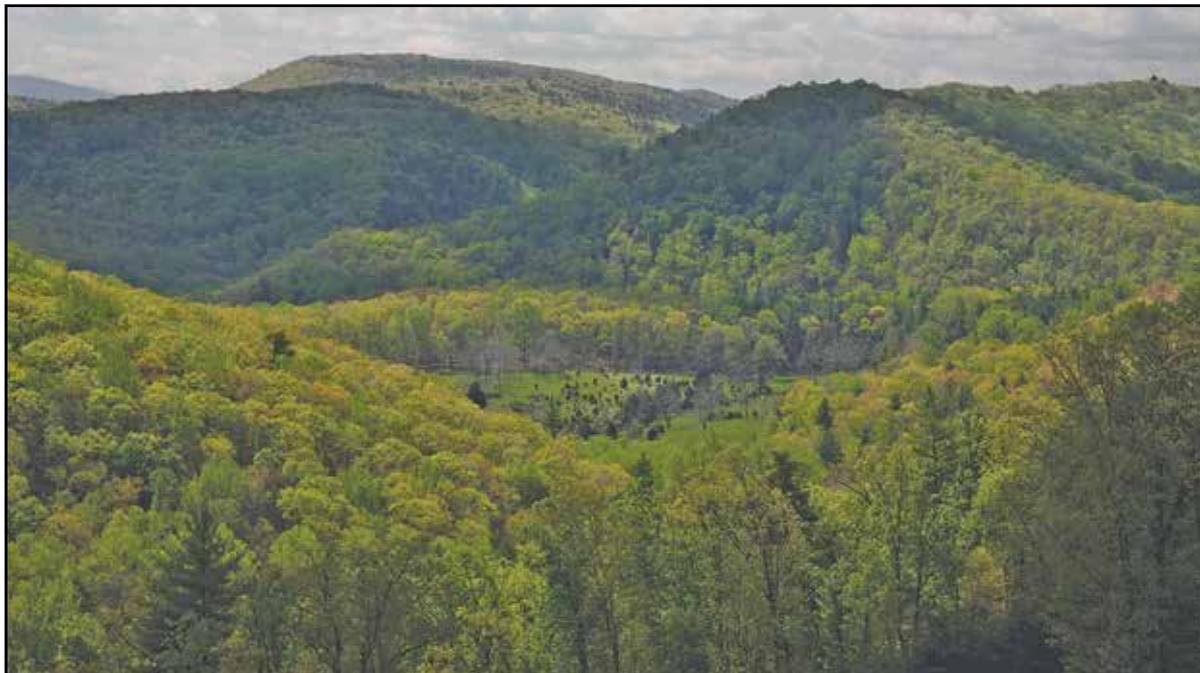
The Cacapon and Lost River Valley is a narrow band of bottomland in the West Virginia Appalachians, about an hour west of Washington, DC. Most of the state ripples farther west and south, full of the wilderness for which West Virginia is well-known.

But this valley, tucked in the Eastern Panhandle closest to the nation’s capital, is remarkably tranquil, too. There are roughly 20 people for each square mile, compared with 75 per square mile throughout the state and 9,500 per square mile in the District of Columbia. More than 80 percent of the land is



forested, often in large, continuous tracts that have become so rare in the Chesapeake region.

A geological trick earned the river two names. It starts at the southern end of the valley near the town of Mathias and flows north for roughly 30 miles toward Wardensville. There, during times of low flow, it disappears — dropping into the earth as an underground river. When it re-emerges about a mile away, the “Lost” river becomes the Cacapon. From there it runs north in a series of hairpin turns and joins the Potomac River near Berkeley Springs.



*More than 80 percent of the Cacapon and Lost River Valley is forested, often in large, continuous tracts that have become so rare in the Chesapeake region. Photo / Tom Cogill*

Beginning in the 1990s, changes began to reshape life in the valley. Power projects, a four-lane highway and increasing numbers of subdivisions have rattled some long-time residents and driven some, like Ralph Spaid, to protect their land through conservation easements.

The Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust was gifted with many of these easements, which inspired the trust to commission *“Listening to the Land.”*

In the preface, director Nancy Ailes explains that landowners often share emotional stories with trust staff about their relationship with the

land and their passion for protecting it.

“The idea of this book was born when I recognized the potential that these remarkable outpourings had for documenting the valley’s history, introducing newcomers to local values and encouraging land protection,” Ailes wrote.

But rather than a collection of case studies, *“Listening to the Land”* is a work of art, beautiful to read and to view.

Author Jamie Ross has a front porch, story-telling style that allows the voices of valley residents to sing off the page. By the time you’re done reading, you feel like these steady, thoughtful and humorous folks have just paid you a visit.

Becky Rudolph Ganskopp recounts how her father walked home in a blinding snowstorm by letting a cow lead the way, and her brother, Jack, explains how to check the ripeness of hay by its feel.

Bobby Ludwig returned to the valley after a Wall Street career because, he said, “This is where I am myself.” He has protected his family land and bought other parcels to protect them, too.

Butch Mills still climbs the tree house his father built more than 40 years ago, and Karen Hahn Findley describes the powerful draw of Dutch Hollow and the old family home on Sauerkraut Road. “I can be having a terrible time feeling like I might, just might, come apart, then I come over here for two hours and as the song goes, ‘all is well with my soul,’” she said.

The book is generously illustrated with images of land and people by photographer Tom Cogill. His work is both majestic and personal, conveying a strong sense of place and character that complements the text but communicates without it.

*“Listening to the Land”* gives warm testimony to the relationships between land and people, but

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# May an unforgettable book like this never have to be written again

**“Toms River: A Story of Science and Salvation”**

**By Dan Fagin**

**Bantam Books, New York. 2013.**

**BY RONA KOBELL**

Every few years, a science or environmental book comes along that’s so well-written that it not only reaches a broad audience, but nabs nearly every major award on its way to becoming a classic.

Timothy Egan accomplished that feat in 2006 with *“The Worst Hard Time: the Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl.”* Rebecca Skloot followed in 2010 with *“The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,”* the story of a black tobacco farmer whose family was never compensated for the line of cells she unwittingly dedicated to medicine and that are still helping to cure and treat numerous diseases.

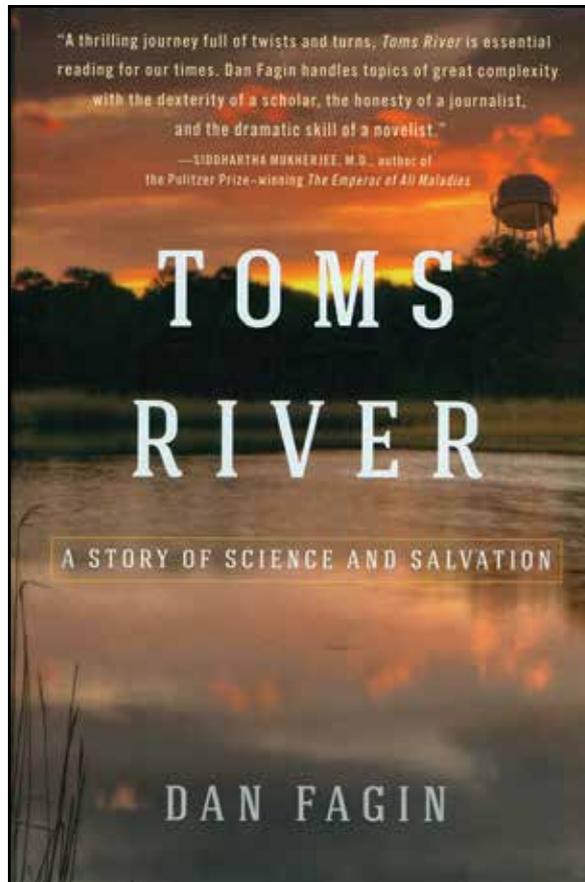
And in 2013 came *“Toms River: A Story of Science and Salvation.”* Dan Fagin’s engrossing story of a once-popular New Jersey beach town that became known primarily for a child cancer cluster has done for epidemiology what Egan’s book did for soil conservation and Skloot’s for ethics in medicine.

Like those two books, it deserves every honor it’s gotten. There are many. Among them, the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction last year as well as the National Academies Science Book Award.

Epidemiology is a tough embrace. The science of examining environmental factors and applying them to molecular biology can be dry. Fagin makes the job a little harder on himself by taking us back to the roots of epidemiology in dye factories in Switzerland and Germany and in the chimneys of London. Poor boys who swept those chimneys contracted scrotal cancer, after contact with hazardous chemicals inside the chimneys, at a rate much higher than other boys.

But Fagin, a longtime reporter for *Newsday* who directs the Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program at New York University, doesn’t let the weight of his subject bog him down. He has a way of making the connections with the center of the story: a town with a cancer problem.

It’s one heck of a story. Children in the town of Toms River are slowly being diagnosed with extremely rare cancers, the kind that afflict 200 or 300 people in the country in a given year. It would be



years before the victims’ families connected the dots, and decades before they determined a cause.

Toms River, like so many towns before it and since, was growing rapidly, accepting the trade-offs of jobs for pollution — though they didn’t necessarily know it.

In the case of Toms River, the pollution came from Ciba, a chemical plant that kept its dumping practices well-hidden from the public; a water company that used wells contaminated with toxic waste, and the Reich Farm, an egg farm that two Holocaust survivors unwittingly rented out to a dumper who ruined it with toxic waste from Union Carbide.

There seems to be a link between the pollution

and the cancers, but how are they connected? It’s riveting to read how scientists chase the molecules, set up models to replicate water flow and isolate different chemicals to discern what poisoned the children of Toms River and how to prevent it from happening again.

The polluters had silent partners in the regulators who looked the other way. State and federal environmental authorities allowed discharge permits to lapse, failed to inspect wells and dump sites, and were in many instances complicit in efforts not to inform New Jersey residents of the public health risks to drinking tap water and breathing the air.

At the heart of Fagin’s reporting are the children of Toms River. Michael Gillick, who defied all the odds and lived to be a young adult, has fought neuroblastoma, a rare nervous system cancer, since he was 3 months old. He is still fighting it; many days, he is too weak to even venture outside.

Gabrielle Pascarella never had much of a chance to fight; she died at just 14 months of a rare cancer known as neurocutaneous melanosis.

Randy Lynnworth died of a medulloblastoma before he graduated from high school.

Carrie-Anne Carter succumbed to Ewing’s sarcoma, a rare bone cancer, before she could finish college.

You don’t forget their names, or their stories, even as Fagin ambles down the drainpipes and into the landfills of New Jersey’s worst contamination.

And you can’t forget that, but for a handful of people in the right positions — an astute nurse, an indefatigable mother, a persistent state chemist, a dogged reporter and a chastened attorney — the people of Toms River would never have gotten any justice.

Whether they actually did is a matter of opinion. Dozens of children died, and money can never replace the parents’ pain or loss.

But Fagin’s reporting lays waste to the one-time conventional wisdom that there’s no such thing as a cancer cluster. In doing so, his incredible book gives life to the stories of Toms River as well as a path to making sure there will one day be fewer stories like theirs to tell.

### VALLEY FROM PAGE 14

the book also reveals the ways in which those relationships strengthen bonds between humans, too. Its stories remind us to value our own relationships to the land, if we have them. And if we live in a place where those bonds are weak or absent, we might wonder how our lives and neighborhoods would change if we did.

Peter Forbes of the Center for Whole Communities champions this concept in the book’s preface. He writes that the book “articulates the promise that neighbors have made to be in a relationship with the land

and with each other, and the stories recounted here seem to me as vital to us all as the oxygen we breathe. They remind us that there are other ways of living together.”

*“Listening to the Land” is available from a variety of booksellers. You can also order directly from the Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust for \$25.99, and a portion of the proceeds will benefit the Trust. Visit [www.cacaponguide.com/land-trust](http://www.cacaponguide.com/land-trust) or mail a check for \$30.99 (includes shipping and handling), payable to “Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust”, RR 1 Box 328, High View, WV 26808.*



*Corn dries in a field in the Cacapon and Lost River Valley.  
Photo / Tom Cogill*