

Interview with Marty Arnold, Author of *Charlotte's Crossing*

What inspired you to write *Charlotte's Crossing*?

Many things, from many directions. But here's one: Several years ago a suburb of Grand Rapids announced its plan to landscape the median of a major street with invasive Bradford pears. I gathered the facts and wrote a long letter to the city explaining why that was a very bad idea. I never got a response. (And the trees were planted.)

This experience got me wondering why so many smart, reasonable people know so little about the plants they put in the ground. With so many books, radio programs, magazines and newspapers highlighting the importance of native plants, it's shocking to me how few people seem concerned about the exotic plants that threaten them.

I was already considering writing a love story, *but this experience led me decide to weave in* (I was going to say "sneak in") an environmental message. So *Charlotte's Crossing* sort of whispers a little science into the ear of the reader.

The legal thread in *Charlotte's Crossing*, by the way, came from witnessing my father's involvement in banning DDT in Michigan back in the 70s. A group of environmental lawyers from out east came to Michigan and requested a TRO to stop the use of DDT in nine Michigan cities. It was a test case. They lost, but in the intervening months, news stories about the danger of DDT got people really worried and all nine cities voluntarily backed off. Then, Michigan's legislature stepped up and banned DDT for good. Michigan was the first state to ban its use! So this story thread was sort of an homage to my Dad.

Other story threads came from personal experiences I can't let go of—the death of a dear friend to lung disease at forty-two, a really wonderful island house I've visited, the loss of my niece to a drug overdose and several refugee families I have known. They all deserved to be "immortalized."

What did you learn when writing the book?

I'm not a botanist or an environmental scientist, so I had to do a lot of research. Being part of Wild Ones and a Master Naturalist gave me a head start—as did volunteering at Blandford Nature Center. And the Internet is full of great information if you visit reliable websites. I had fun creating the short "parables" at the beginning of chapters—for example, when Charlotte is struggling with her 13-year-old niece, I wrote a short piece describing how trees "parent" their offspring. Or, when Charlotte is falling in love, I wrote about the special relationship between bumblebees and turtlehead flowers.

What surprised you the most during the writing and researching process?

I continue to be surprised by how much I like writing fiction—especially since I wrote only expository pieces in my professional life. Story-telling is very freeing, but its messy and slow and exhausting. I guess it's what you'd call a passion. My other passion is restoration gardening. I throw myself into both pursuits and at the end of the day I'm beat, but still smiling. The bigger challenge is always to tear myself away to make dinner or fold the laundry. So, I guess you could call *Charlotte's Crossing* my destiny.

There was a ton of research packed into your book. What were some of the resources you used that readers may also be able to get their hands on to continue their own path of learning around the benefits of native plants?

Well, I'd tell anyone, if you haven't read Doug Tallamy's book's, *Bringing Nature Home* or *Nature's Best Hope* by all means, do! He does a masterful job of translating complex science into straight-forward language with flourishes of poetry. He's just *a masterful communicator*. He really has 'brought nature home' to a lot of folks.

I also recommend joining a local chapter of Wild Ones. There are chapters in Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, Lansing, Kalamazoo, Midland, Traverse City, Marquette and Keewawaw—with new one's forming as we speak!

I also rely on the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center website (www.wildflower.org) to give accurate information about native plants throughout North America. I'm absolutely fascinated with Michigan's Natural Features Inventory interactive map. Homeowners can discover what was growing in their yards in 1800 because surveyors on horseback rode all across the state taking notes of what was growing there. My own property on Grand Rapid's west side was a black oak savanna, so that's my restoration project—with appropriate seeds from Michigan Wildflower Farm and lots of advice from Esther Durwald. (Thank you!) There are a few big oaks left and it's no wonder that acorns sprout so readily. Check it out: (<https://mnfi.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=bbdca9029f184571bd0369cb4aa90cd2>)

In *Charlotte's Crossing* you talk about the State of Michigan's process of acknowledging, banning and eradicating invasive species. Can you briefly tell us what that process looks like as you understand it through your research?

A plant cannot be banned in Michigan until it has been thoroughly studied. That's fair, but it's an onerous process and the responsibility and expense falls entirely upon those requesting the ban. A half dozen environmental professionals I spoke to explained that that bar is set so high in Michigan that it is out of reach. Somehow, our neighboring states manage to ban so many more harmful plants that we do.

Ohio has banned 26 invasive (terrestrial) plants, Wisconsin, 24; Indiana, 23, Illinois, 11 and Michigan, only 5. We should all be asking why. Several professionals I talked to were pretty quick to point the finger at the horticultural industry which makes millions from the sale of invasive species like Bradford pear, barberry, vinca minor, English ivy and Asian bittersweet. They also have lawyers. The irony is that Michigan is spending millions to eradicate these species while still allowing them to be sold at your local garden center. Something's not right.

What would you say to someone that wants to do better by planting natives, but restoring their "whole island" so to speak, seems daunting and overwhelming?

A fair question. (Although Fig's island was really only about an acre. :-). My advice is to start small and let your native garden grow. But I'm no purist. I love my grandmother's peonies and my mom's garden phlox and won't give them up. But I absolutely draw the line at invasives, like vinca or English ivy which still plague me. Joining Wild One's — even just to receive their e-news would be really helpful.

Perhaps this is too much information, but six years ago my yard was a mowed, football field-sized rectangle. That first year, I created little native garden rings around each large tree trunk and every year the rings get bigger. Now, I have just paths between big planted areas. And, by the way, these "gardens" are looking and behaving more "wild" and more like a woodland every year—which was the goal. It's been a lot of fun!

Having read the book and knowing where we left Charlotte, it seems like she was really just getting started. Do you think she has more rabble rousing to do? Will we hear from her again?

Hmmm. I'm pretty sure Lansing will hear from Charlotte. Remember, Fig's strategy wasn't necessarily to win their case, but to "raise public awareness so people will demand change." I think the Saskawan Five will grow to become a multitude of concerned citizens who stand up at community meetings, write letters to their representatives and make yard signs — ("Down with Bittersweet!"). Of course, Mazie will be right there with Charlotte to explain the importance of pollinators (in the greatest of detail.)