

Natural rivals

Siblings offer different takes on the world of nature

By TIMOTHY J. FOX
Special to the Post-Dispatch

Almost a decade ago, environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben published a book called "Hope: Human and Wild." McKibben's title provides a neat starting point for considering two new collections of essays focused on the natural world: Sue Hubbell's "From Here to There and Back Again" and Bill Gilbert's "Natural Coincidence: The Trip from Kalamazoo."

Representing the "human" side is Hubbell, who has written previously about how wild nature can heal human pain. "A Country Year: Living the Questions" (1983), excerpted briefly in this collection, documented her retreat to a Missouri Ozarks bee farm after her divorce.

More on the "wild" side is Gilbert, Hubbell's brother, whose long association with Smithsonian magazine and other publications has enabled him to explore a range of topics, from the mythology of Bigfoot to the morphology of the Tasmanian devil. What both writers share is their unabashed love of the natural world and their uncanny use of words to describe it.

For a writer who has spent much of her life in the country, many of the essays in Hubbell's collection have appeared previously in that most un-country of magazines, The New Yorker.

I remember reading her essay "Earthquake Fever" there when it was first published in the early 1990s. In that work, Hubbell describes how a man named Iben Browning set off international hysteria when he predicted that a major earthquake had a 50/50 chance of striking Missouri's New Madrid fault line precisely on Dec. 3, 1990. "Here we go," I thought, "Midwestern yokels skewered again by Eastern magazine."

But it didn't happen. Instead, Hubbell offered a fascinating account of how one person with enough media savvy and a little government support — Browning first offered his prediction at the Missouri Governor's Conference on Agriculture — can set the world reeling. Along the way, she provided useful information on the history of the New Madrid region in southeastern Missouri and a highly readable account of the science, and art, of geology.

That's not to say that Hubbell doesn't have some fun describing the reactions of the people in the area as they respond to both the possibility of the earthquake and the media frenzy that descends on them, but her descriptions are not mean-spirited. Instead, her message is, "This is how real



FILE PHOTO BY KEVIN MANNING / POST-DISPATCH

In the essay "Earthquake Fever," Sue Hubbell examines Missouri's New Madrid region.



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Bill Gilbert devotes a chapter to the homely javelina.

people, anywhere, react to unreal circumstances. This is human nature in action."

Hubbell's success in delivering her message lies in her straightforward, uncynical tone. In the age of irony, it's refreshing to read an author who, at the end of an essay describing an all-day struggle to deliver a load of honey to Bloomingdale's, can write, "It was one of the best days I've ever had in New York" — and mean it.

Gilbert, on the other hand, seems more at home with his fellow critics than his fellow humans, but no less at home with words than Hubbell.

The essay that opens his book, "Hard Times — Good Times," is a moving account of his family's Christmas celebration in rural Michigan during the Great Depression. The essay climaxes with the kind of childhood "trauma" that today's psychogabble of self-help writers would blame for a lifetime of angst, but in Gilbert's skilled hands, it provides instead the roadmap for his future — the foundation of his love and respect for nature,

however "red in tooth and claw" it may be.

In Gilbert's world, all creatures have their rightful place, and all are deserving of his respect, study and flawless powers of description. The lowly crow merits one of the longer pieces, written for Sports Illustrated. Others describe animals unlikely to turn up on "Crocodile Hunter," like the javelina, an ancient piglike creature; snapping turtles ("snappers," as he calls them); and ringtail cats.

Most of these writings are grounded in Gilbert's personal history, memories of places and incidents long ago and far away. The natural world provides "the proper interior buttons" that can "virtually recreate" memories. In this context, Gilbert's love of nature become clearer — nature is, for him, critical to jogging a writer's most useful tool, memory.

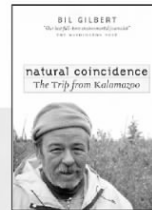
The introductory material — a foreword by Post-Dispatch reporter John M. McGuire for Hubbell and one by Smithsonian magazine's John Doherty for Gilbert — provide person-



Sue Hubbell

"From Here to There and Back Again"

By Sue Hubbell
Published by University of Michigan Press, 175 pages, \$26, \$25.95



"Natural Coincidence: The Trip from Kalamazoo"

By Bill Gilbert
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al, funny and insightful profiles of the writers. The only flaw is that neither author explains why he or she has chosen the works produced. Though readers can deduce this for themselves, it would be interesting to know what guided the authors' hands as they combed through decades of material.

It is rare for a writer to be able to publish a book without actually sitting down to write one, rarer that a brother and sister are in such a position at the same time, and rarer still that the pieces making up such books deserve to be republished, if they ever deserved to be published at all. But the work of Hubbell and Gilbert is that rarest of things: writing that deserves not only to be published, but to be read and reread for the benefit of all nature, both human and wild.

Timothy J. Fox is the editor of "Where We Live: A Guide to St. Louis Communities" (Missouri Historical Society Press, 1995) and co-author of "From the Palaces to the Pike: Visions of the 1904 World's Fair" (Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997).