

From *Grass: The story of the plants that give humans a place in nature*
(*Grasboka: Historia om vekstane som gjev mennesket plass i naturen*)

by Siri Helle

Published by Dreyers Forlag, Oslo, 2026

Translated from the Norwegian by Alison McCullough

Introduction

In which we establish that without grass, we wouldn't be here

The primary form of food is grass. Grass feeds the ox: the ox nourishes man: man dies and goes to grass again; and so the tide of life, with everlasting repetition, in continuous circles, moves endlessly on and upward, and in more senses than one, all flesh is grass.

John James Ingalls, American senator, 1872

‘You’re writing a book about grass?’

I’ve been asked this question a lot lately. When I’ve replied: ‘Yes, and about how grass has played such an important role in us humans being able to develop as we have,’ I’ve received comments like:

‘But grass is just for rabbits and vegetarians,’

and

‘Surely the point of grass is just to get it through the cow as quickly as possible so it can be turned into beef?’

And not least, I’ve been on the receiving end of rather a lot of vacant looks and desperate nods from people who aren’t sure how to keep the conversation going. Because grass is everywhere, all around us, isn’t it?

‘Well, there’s no danger of grass going extinct, is there?’ they might ask. And then I have to reply that, no, grass isn’t threatened that way – it’s far too common to be eradicated any time soon. Indeed, it can be found everywhere: on every continent except Antarctica, grass grows in such quantities that it covers somewhere between 20 and 40 per cent of the land here on earth.ⁱ

Still, it can sometimes seem as if we’re doing everything we can to get rid of as much of it as possible. Perhaps no more than 20 per cent of the grass that once existed on Earth remains, and only 10 per cent of the great grassy plains that once existed are still intact.ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, the grasslands – the plains, the savannas, the green mountainous regions, the pastures, moors and tundra – are among the world’s natural landscapes with the lowest levels of protection.

I was unaware of this myself until recently. But now that I know, I can’t help but tell people about it. Because the most important thing I’ve learned is so fundamental that I can’t believe I’ve lived for over 40 years without being aware of it: that grass – both that below me at this very moment and all the other grass that exists in the world – is one of the most important prerequisites for me being here at all. And I can hardly wait to tell you what this means.

Still, my idea to write a book about grass arose in a somewhat different place. Somewhere in my gut, perhaps, where I had a sense that ongoing discussions about biodiversity failed to encompass everything. The important realisation we’re just coming to, that the loss of nature is as great a challenge as climate change – it was as if something was missing from it. Something in nature wasn’t getting the attention it deserved.

This isn’t so strange. One of the things I love most about nature is how vast and incomprehensible it is. How it constantly surprises me.

Like on a completely ordinary summer’s day, as I take a completely ordinary walk with my dog between the meadows behind my house in rural Holmedal in Sunnfjord. It’s sunny, the air still, and as we walk the sound of our footsteps seems like the only sound in the world.

This is a feeling I seek out in nature: calm. The absence of sound tells me that things are in balance; here no one is complaining, nobody is bragging, everyone is simply doing their own thing without feeling the need to make a racket or a ruckus or to move very much at

all. But then it suddenly occurs to me that this isn't really true. On the contrary – there's movement everywhere around me. The earthworm is wiggling its way through the soil out there in the meadow, the tree beside the ditch is putting on bark and stretching its branches ever further from its trunk – and every single blade of grass around me is growing, growing, growing.

I rest my gaze on the green grass of the meadow. Through every single moment of the light-filled part of the day, this grass is working to become bigger, longer, greener, by taking the sun's energy as if from thin air and transforming it into visible, tangible, aromatic and flavourful vegetation.

This is the closest I ever come to believing in something supernatural: the fact that so much of the solid environment around us is created out of energy from sunlight. It makes me feel a deep sense of respect – for both the possibilities of science and its shortcomings. It's so easy to miss something that hasn't been created for our eyes.

Something that can't manage the transition from nature's complexity to the simplification that's required in the battle for our attention. Something like grass, for example.

I walk into the meadow – the farmer has recently cut the grass, and I step through the stubble. The old, woody stalks have been cut by the forage harvester, but beneath them new shoots are springing up, because that's just how grass is. It never gives up, and simply gets growing again as soon as it has the chance.

An ear of grass has escaped the harvester completely. It's shaped like a bushy tail, which tells me that its name is either timothy or foxtail. Between the tussocks are white clover, and some creeping buttercups and sorrel. I pick a sorrel leaf, put it in my mouth and chew. It's sour and tastes like childhood, a part of my childhood I've never let go of – I still eat sorrel and think it tastes good.

These are completely ordinary plants. And they are also nature. Nature that's worth protecting, but in a slightly different way than many other kinds of natural landscape: grasslands often require action from us humans in order to survive.

When we talk about preserving nature, we often talk about the forests – how both rainforests in far-off countries and the ancient forests around us must be taken care of. As must the oceans, which are in no way the bottomless dumping grounds we once believed they

could be. We're learning that we have to withdraw – and yes, sometimes even stay away completely – in order to save our natural resources. We must protect, prohibit, preserve.

We are absolutely right about this. But what about everything that lies between the sea and the forests, above the tree line and before the bare mountains? This is where the grasslands reign. And wherever grasslands exist or have existed, there are generally also humans.

On our Earth, over a billion people have made homes for themselves and their animals in the grasslands. Here there is food and fuel, here there are fibres and medicines. The grasslands are perhaps the biggest ecosystem on the planetⁱⁱⁱ, and many are cultivated landscapes – landscapes that are influenced by humans, but without nature being harmed.

Because when we talk about protecting grasslands, this doesn't mean protecting them against all kinds of human influence. Not all nature does best when left well alone. Grasslands need us humans to dare to intervene – with respect and regard, of course, and that isn't always easy. But still: we can't just ignore the problem. Grass demands that we see ourselves as part of nature.

Despite this, grass hasn't exactly been in high favour in recent debates surrounding the climate and the preservation of nature. Rather the opposite: we bad-mouth grass-based agriculture. Because ruminants are so inefficient, they steal acreage from where there should be wild nature. Furthermore, grasslands don't fit into our climate calculations. We call wild grass plains deforested forests, or the precursors to deserts.

We hardly even know what grass is. Test yourself: how many species of grass can you name?

I've given you two – timothy and foxtail. Maybe you've heard of the common bent, ryegrass or reed canary grass – or maybe not. I'm not going to judge you if you haven't, because I myself was some way into my agricultural studies before I saw the point of learning the names of more than two species of grass. But I would ask: how are we going to take care of something if we don't know what it is? How are we going to form an opinion on whether it's even worth preserving?

Back to the meadow, where I'm now lying on my back. I focus on a tuft, and try to conjure up some feeling for precisely this grass. First, I try to imagine that I can see the blades of grass growing, see the determination to thrive I know defines this family of plants. But I can't.

I snap off a blade of grass and chew on it – it tastes green and alive, but I’m unable to convince myself that it tastes good. Nor will it benefit me in any way in this form – I know this, of course.

It isn’t easy to awaken feelings for *one* type of grass. Not on its own. No, grass is like people: we work best as part of a community.

And yes, believe it or not: we’re part of the same community. Me and the grass, that is, it occurs to me as I sit here and all the disparate parts of my knowledge and experience of grass gather into a single great realisation: without the grass, I wouldn’t be here. Without the grass, we humans wouldn’t be here – on the planet, that is, here on Earth, because our shared history has been interwoven over many thousands of years. We’ve been there for each other through thick and thin, and we’ve developed, and developed each other, in such a way that we’ve been able to spread across the surface of the globe.

Here’s what I want to tell you:

The story of how grass and humans working together makes nature better. More diverse and more robust. Richer, tastier, healthier, more open and more playful. How grass can show us humans a way forward – one where we can be a natural part of the great cycle, and where we can cultivate and use without destroying.

I think I’ve found it, too, this story – in a multitude of places, on all continents, and far – millions of years, in fact – back in time. I’ve seen places where human influence has made nature richer.

Just think! Even today, grass can show humans a viable way to be in nature.

Along the way, however, I’ve also come across the opposite. We humans are liable to cause destruction, and we have done this to grass, too. We’ve allowed it to grow too quickly and been unable to see the consequences. We’ve hardly considered it at all, in fact, and therefore hardly know what we’ve lost. But the grass hasn’t given up. And now, through the pages of this book, we’re going to put it in the spotlight. Welcome to the greenest of all worlds, the one we really can’t survive without. Welcome to the story of how grass and humans have walked hand in hand for thousands of years.

ⁱ National Geographic (undated), 'Grasslands Explained: National Geographic Education'. Visited 04.11.25: <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/grasslands-explained/>

ⁱⁱ Sullivan, Kaitlin (2019), 'Only 10 percent of the world's grasslands are intact', Popular Science, 5.6. Visited 04.11.25: <https://www.popsoci.com/grasslands-disappearing-chart/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Suttie, J.M., Reynolds, S.G., Batello, C. (eds.) (2005), Grasslands of the World, volume 34 in Plant Production and Protection Series. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. Visited 04.11.25: <https://www.fao.org/4/y8344e/y8344e05.htm>