

POISED BETWEEN LOVE AND FEAR

Peter Reason appreciates Nature writing of a 'dark wonder'

Field Notes from the Edge: Journeys through Britain's Secret Wilderness

Paul Evans

Rider, 2015

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“Take the path from the main road at the top of the dingle which begins in the tangle of nettle and bramble at a broken stile.” So Paul Evans begins his meditations on the natural world in which he weaves evocative descriptions of landscape and its creatures with myth, literature, science, folklore and his own “raw intuitions”. He laments the disappearance of lapwings from the fields below Wenlock Edge while delighting in the swarming of flying ants – called pismires, because their colonies are drenched in formic acid and smell of urine.

This book is poised between Evans' love of a Nature that is “inspiring yet intimidating, miraculous yet mundane” and his fear of what is happening to it – the book is “a work of dark wonder”. Ecophobia, he fears, was built into the origins of civilisation, and now “a Nature we don't like is replacing the Nature we do.” His purpose is to witness the miracles the world offers us and attempt to articulate them. This is surely the purpose of all Nature writing at this time of ecological crisis: describing what one finds with love and passion is a political and spiritual act.

And how well he does it. His descriptions are both acute and informed: the



Meadow with Thistles by Michelle Morin www.michellemorinart.com

call of the chiffchaff “echoes the left-right of old nailed boots on stone”; a wren flies past “singing a five-second burst of little bells falling down a well”; the trickle of rain down ruined masonry tastes “musty and sharp on the tongue”. We are held alongside him

as he walks along the Edge; explores quarries, ruins, caves; visits the sea-side, the wild marshes; flies across the Atlantic. In all these marginal places we are shown how wilderness is “hidden in plain sight”.

The book is organised around a series

of themes – Ridge, Front, Strand, Ruin, and so on – weaving between observation and reflection while drawing on extended metaphors. For example, in chapter four, a visit to a derelict cottage sets off reflections on the paradoxical attraction of ruins, on the immutable green of the ferns, mosses and liverworts that envelop it, on their origin in the Carboniferous period and their transformation into coal. From there the story slips down to the coast and into the natural history of the limpet, the “rock licker”, and on again into an account of the ruin brought along the coastline by the wreck of the tanker *Sea Empress* – spilling oil that, mysteriously, has its origins in those same ancient ferns and mosses. We continue through the natural history of the damselfly and a dangerous encounter with a bull, to the wild marshes of the border country. This is a land “deliberately, painstakingly and intelligently ruined” when it was drained by 19th-century landowners, ruined again by intensive agriculture, and now paradoxically ruined again as the water seeps back and it returns to something like its

original state. Then we are on Islay, visiting another tract of once-drained land and another ruined cottage, where the last human inhabitants died alone and impoverished. Barn owls are now nesting in the roof. By the end of the chapter we may wonder where we have

A Nature we don't like is replacing the Nature we do

been taken – walking alongside Evans is never a direct path – but we have a deeper, subtler, more nuanced understanding of the qualities of ruin.

At times the writing is overwhelming in its intensity – this is not a book to read quickly. Evans tells us that his experience of Nature can have such a profound effect that he struggles to describe it. So many words – ‘sacred’, ‘magical’, ‘incredible’ – have become clichéd, as have their opposites – reports of ‘monster hurricanes’ and

‘Nature’s wrath’. Rather than hyperbole, Evans seeks an intimacy in his language: “Bearing witness, being truthful, requires emotional honesty.”

When he hits the spot, the impact on the reader is palpable, as when a sparrowhawk “flicks over the trees”, lands on a water pump and then “settles, directing its forensic gaze”. Not only is it “rare and thrilling ... to find myself in that glare”: as the sparrowhawk pauses, the world itself “slows to a standstill”. In these few lines readers are taken deeply into the encounter and offered an opportunity to remember their own experiences of meeting a wild being.

At the end of the book, Evans takes us back to his place at Wenlock Edge, pockets a hazelnut that has a neat hole drilled into it by a dormouse, and leaves us with the observation that the beauty of the world lies in its ephemeral almost-nothingness. We have been in the company of a master. R

Peter Reason's book *Spindrift: A Wilderness Pilgrimage at Sea* is published by Vala Publishing Cooperative.

THE POWER OF BEAUTY AND JOY

Peter Ainsworth is struck by a veteran environmentalist's defence of Nature

The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy

Michael McCarthy

John Murray, 2015

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This is a book about loss and Nature and love. It is about the loss of love and the joy of love recaptured and found in Nature and in the strange ways of the human heart. It has two sub-plots, one to do with the savage depletion of Nature and natural things, and the other a very personal one, to do with the author's family. The way in which he interleaves these themes is extraordinarily moving. It is an affirmation of the power of natural beauty and the power of love, and of their ability to make life joyful, despite the odds.

Mike McCarthy has been an environmental journalist for many years. He has chalked up enough column inches to fill an entire field of Suffolk barley. In this book he writes like a poet. He quotes many poets – Wordsworth, Hopkins, Lawrence and Blunden – and he writes from the heart in

what he must feel is some kind of retrospective expiation of personal feelings. It is, as well, a passionate call to arms in defence of a beautiful and varied natural world, which – if *Homo sapiens* continues to behave as we do – will be lost soon, and forever.

The title may seem odd. Moth Snowstorm? It will be hard for anyone under, say, 40 years old to remember the clouds of moths and other insects that used to smash up on the windscreens of cars driven at night. That is what he means by the moth snowstorm. I confess that I had forgotten them too, those insects. I had a moped in the late 1970s; the little blighters used to expire on my face. I had forgotten that they are just not there any more. Well, they aren't, are they? This book helps us to remember what has been lost – without the departure even being noticed – in our own lifetimes, under our very noses and on our hopelessly negligent watch.

McCarthy charts the fairly useless ways in which well-meaning politicians have attempted to address the issue of Nature's degradation under our human stewardship. He doesn't (much) excoriate the powerful vested interests that have assiduously sought to thwart every rational attempt to save the natural capital upon which we all rely for life,