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“Once man hunted wild animals and gathered wild roots and berries in the wilderness to survive. Now we must hunt for the wilderness itself” - Leonard S. Marcus

Within City Limits: Nature and Children's Books About Nature in the City

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ABSTRACT. Many children's books give the impression that we must leave the city to be "in nature." This is a review of children's books about nature found within city limits. The books include a natural history of New York City; a guide to city wildflowers and other weeds; a book about city trees; a delightful inquiry into the true nature of the roach; a book of experiments and collecting methods for amateur naturalists; and a story about a family of ducks in Boston. Readers of these books may not only learn to identify many urban forms of nature, but may also see some of the ways these join in our experience of city life.

FOR AS LONG AS cities have had a major place in American life, most American writers writing on "nature" and the "city" have taken the two terms as opposites, and from at least two points of view.

First, the city has been considered an unhealthful environment and nature, to be found mainly elsewhere, a healthful one. Advocates of the plan to build Central Park compared the park to a lung that would help purify the urban industrial air.

Then also writers have expressed the more debatable, and debated, idea that the purification nature affords is spiritual as well, that nature serves as a cure for some artificial quality of urban life.

Accounts of city life pointed to the bad influence of the "crowd" on individual behavior, interpreting the cause and effect in various ways, and ending with the seemingly obligatory conclusion, as in the carefully constructed argument of Frederick Law Olmsted:

... whenever we walk through the denser part of town, to merely avoid collision with those we meet and pass upon the sidewalks, we have constantly to watch, to foresee, and to guard against their movements. This involves a consideration of their intentions, a calculation of their strength and weakness, which is not so much for their benefit as

our own. Our minds are thus brought into close dealings with other minds without any friendly flowing toward them, but rather a drawing from them. Much of the intercourse between men when engaged in the pursuits of commerce has the same tendency . . . People from the country are over conscious of the effect on their nerves and minds of the street contact—often complaining they feel confused by it; and if we had no relief from it at all during our waking hours, we should all be conscious of suffering from it. It is upon our opportunity of relief from it, therefore, that not only our comfort in town life, but our ability to maintain a temperate, good-natured and healthy state of mind, depends. . .

There. Olmsted, the builder of urban parks, saw the solution to the problem within city limits as a problem of design. While the American park movement rapidly spread, and to a remarkable extent under Olmsted's personal supervision, the urban parks apparently did not satisfy the city peoples' desire for contact with nature. By the turn of the century, as Peter Schmitt in *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Oxford, 1969) describes, American urbanites had devised many recreations as ways of communing with nature: some acting vicariously, reading essays and popular fiction and looking at postcards and stereoscopic views; some actually taking to the wilds. A striking feature of the latter group of Arcadian travellers was their tendency to take certain

conveniences of the city along wherever they went, and to plant these in such a way as to make the wilderness seem more like home.

The very roads which made the countryside more accessible altered the nature of the destination, bringing out such crowds as city people had hoped to escape, then also demanding the facilities (hotels, refreshment stands, etc.) to support them. Under these and other pressures, "wild" nature was modulated to urban proprieties and interests. The city parks spread as expressions of cultivated nature. The suburbs developed as an ambiguous case. Gradually, playgrounds and other facilities appropriated more space in the city parks from the landscape, adding another layer of human design.

Once man hunted wild animals and gathered wild roots and berries in the wilderness to survive. Now we must hunt for the wilderness itself. Recently, a number of writers of children's books, apparently departing from the traditional view that the city and nature are opposite places, have looked in the city itself for evidence of wild nature.

John Kieran's *A Natural History of New York City* (Natural History/Doubleday, 1971) is a fairly large book, including chapters on every major group of plants and animals found, or once found, in New York City; it implies a great deal for readers in other cities interested in finding out about such things.

Four species of bats have been found in New York City, four types of gulls . . . Kieran does not want a systematic inventory here; he goes out of his way to leave certain matters to the "scientists." Kieran has found Arcadia in the city. In writing about nature, Kieran makes good fellowship count for as much as sharp observation, of which there is plenty, and both seem necessary to his seeing of the natural world:

So much for the Crowfoot Family . . . though there are many other representatives of the Crowfoot clan hereabout for those who have the time and the desire to seek them out. We have to move on to . . . the Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*). The ghastly name is due of course, to the thick orange-crimson juice that oozes from a break in any part of the plant . . . Bloodroot survives in only a few favored localities within the city limits. We who share the knowledge of this particular patch feel like fellow conspirators as we keep watch in early April . . . on a certain tree-studded bank that we pass regularly on our morning walks . . .

Good fellowship, the exact touch of the scientific

name, flashes of sensuous detail beside the author's good-natured piques, an evident interest in nature lore, a touch of romance and of the absurd—all mark the Arcadian, the city dweller who turns to nature occasionally for spiritual relief, at times traveling to great lengths for the experience, though Mr. Kieran makes his gesture at the artifact itself, taking wonder, as he does, that wild nature continues to exist in and around the city.

In much the same spirit, Anne Ophelia Dowden has provided an account of one group of wildlife found in the cities: weeds (*Wild Green Things in the City*, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972). Weeds are defined as plants unwanted by man: where they grow they grow despite human efforts to destroy them or to ignore their presence. Most city weeds are found in "vacant" lots.

Other weeds grow in cracks in office buildings, in railroad yards, in parks. They take part in the collage effect of city life in contrast to the still life of the pastoral landscape. In parks weeds point to the degree of human control imposed on nature. On a "well-appointed" lawn a weed is taken as a flaw.

Miss Dowden observes:

Whenever man ceases to be watchful—if he fails to repair a crack in the sidewalk or remove a pile of dust in a corner—plants will appear. And if large areas are opened up—as in bombed-out London during World War II—they will soon become gardens of wild flowers. Within two years after the big air raids of 1940-41, dozens of species of wild plants had moved into the London cellar holes and piles of rubble. In the normal times of the 1970's, over 90 species have been found in New York, over 60 in Denver, over 130 in Los Angeles.

This book includes the author's excellent color illustrations of several species of weeds, with details of leaves, roots, flowers, and seeds; a month-by-month account of what changes to look for; a discussion of how plants reproduce and how they manage to do so in the city; and definitions of basic terms where these come up in the life cycle as it is described.

We do not realize all our relations to the rest of the natural world: this is a source of the wonder Miss Dowden expresses. She takes pleasure in noting that people are often the unknowing carriers of seeds which spread the plants they consider not worth noticing. The book concludes with a list of all species of wild plants known to grow in New York City, Denver, and Los Angeles.

Among human beings, great shame is attached to being without a name. Prisoners learn this. People speak of defending their good name and of making a name for themselves. We share

a corresponding desire to name the objects of experience.

Most city people come to nature with an exceptionally limited knowledge of the names for what they find. It may be that part of the uneasiness, blankness, or wonder we feel in the presence of nature—if we feel these things—comes from the lack of particularity in our means of speaking and thinking about what we see as compared, say, to that provided in abundance and broadcast in the cities and in the media.

Many nature lovers, some marvelously geared, have taken to the fields to learn the names of the wild things they find there. Many school children, remaining indoors, have had to learn the names of many things, wildflowers included, as punishment or as what seemed like punishment. It would seem foolish to use these books in the latter way. Still who can say whether knowing the names of the natural objects we actually do see brings us any "closer" to them. Wallace Stevens remarked:

Words add to the senses. The word for the dazzle
Of mica, the dithering of grass,
The Arachne integument of dead trees,
Are the eye grown larger, more intense.
("Variations on a Summer Day")

City Leaves City Trees by Edward Gallob (Scribners, 1972) furnishes a means of identifying trees likely to be found in American cities. Mr. Gallob begins with a series of drawings of general leaf types, followed by sets of facing pages each of which treats a species with photographs, short descriptions and photograms (negative images) of the leaves. The author ends by telling how to make photograms and how to go about collecting tree leaves, twigs, flowers, fruit and seeds. The text is mainly factual; the illustrations are large and striking and likely to appeal to anyone curious to find these trees.

Curiosity is not always encouraged by children's books. Many early Calvinists considered the child's inquiring nature, where it surfaced, as evidence of depravity, and a large proportion of the first American children's books, and many after, had little to do with nature or curiosity but instead earnestly instructed the child on how to prepare for a pious death.

Early in the nineteenth century, European fairy tales appeared in America but there was strong opposition to their distribution. Adults of

many persuasions argued that the talking animals and other unnatural phenomena endangered the child's soul with their false picture of creation:

Dialogue between wolves and sheep, cats and mice . . . is as destructive of truth and morality as it is contrary to the principles of nature and philosophy.
(Lyman Cobb)

As spiritual people we look down with much contempt upon the man who would in anything compare us with the lower animals. His mind is mean and quite beneath our indignation.

(Harriet Martineau)

As antidotes to these unnatural tales, dozens of little books appeared in the early nineteenth century that sought to guide youth "from the open book of nature to the duty of God." Most of these works proposed a novel laboratory technique which must have fascinated young naturalists at first, although the repeated experience of turning over a rock only to find a moral lesson revealed there probably dulled the interest of the normal child. While the dog slept at the child's feet, for example, the mother was to remark on its fidelity and enduring gratitude. The mother instructing her children was to teach their little feet to turn aside from the worm and to spare trampling the nest of the toiling ant . . . and so on.

A book that, on the other hand, takes a subject virtually everyone in the city has some preconceptions about and holds these up to question, notes:

. . . There is a city insect that is not hard to find. People everywhere know it well. They spend a lot of time thinking of ways to get rid of it, and the rest of the time they prefer not to think of it at all. If they see one in their house, they may screech with horror and try to kill it before it scurries into a crack and disappears. The lowly cockroach is not loved by man.

(*Cockroaches*, by Joanna Cole; *Morrow*, 1971). The author proceeds to describe the cockroach's history, habits, and chances for survival. This is all very well, though it would seem that people who deal with cockroaches on a day-to-day basis know at least as much about their habits as they care to as it is, while a knowledge of the cockroach's future prospects would seem gratuitous; an unwanted luxury, in a sense.

Moreover, in the countryside a pest comes as God's punishment or bad luck or as a failure to prepare; in the city which has landlords and housing authorities cockroaches also have a political side, standing for poor conditions. As much as dandelions on the most dignified lawn,

cockroaches have come to involve human dignity.

The author here entertains the idea there may be more to know about cockroaches than that. Her method is to gather more facts, mainly around the question of how cockroaches have survived despite all efforts to destroy them; often, as the author notes, by exterminators who arrive in unmarked trucks. Like the author of *Wild Green Things in the City*, she takes adaptation, a process all city wildlife has apparently mastered, as a center of discussion. It turns out that roaches are "living fossils," having lived in the same form for the last 300 million years; that they not only eat almost anything but can eat nothing and survive for some time; that they carry no germs harmful to man, are actually less harmful than the common housefly; and that in any event they can withstand 100 times more radiation than man and seem likely to survive at least as long as man will.

In the city, nature tends to be associated with the city museums. There are first of all the natural history museums, the botanical gardens, zoos, and aquariums, which house many of the rarest and most carefully tended examples of nature the city has to offer. Then also the city parks, a remarkable number of which, the work of Olmsted and his associates, reflect principles of landscape design learned from English landscape paintings found in the art museums that are often placed along the parks' edge. Along the city streets many trees are enclosed by tiny fences and controlled as to growth, giving them a manned as well as a treelike appearance; several trees in Central Park have been furnished with cards that tell their names, plant histories, and something about their physical characteristics.

A book about the city's various nature collections is *Collecting for the City Naturalist*, by Lois J. Hussey and Catherine Pessino (Crowell, 1975), in which the authors outline several ways to gather specimens and records of both wild and planted city nature.

They point out, for example, one naturalist's collection in the city that is usually ignored: the rock collection that consists of the city's stone buildings. The authors cautiously advise the reader to choose a demolished building, of which every city has many, for collecting specimens,

and explain a safe and easy way of going about this.

They also explain methods for collecting leaves, preserving bird tracks, keeping ants, and so on, with nice illustrations by Barbara Neill, and some notes on what original research any careful observer can do. These are projects that appeal to the reader's curiosity; aimed particularly at those interested in thinking of themselves as "scientists," an attitude not overinsisted upon but clearly admired by the authors.

A naturalist observing nature regards himself as an observer; as a constant in the situation he observes; as a professional. John Kieran, we know, preferred the amateur's pose, describing nature largely in "personal" terms, by association, so that his book, although it contains a great many facts, is probably about as interesting as he himself seems to a reader. Certain associations with nature are widely held: the cockroach's usual reputation and the low status of weeds are examples of popular associations that Miss Dowden and the other authors mentioned here have found it interesting to explore, as evidence of how nature, as part of the variousness of the world, both alters and is altered by our moods, feelings, and view of the world.

Still another way of looking at nature is that of the story teller. In *Make Way for Ducklings* (Viking, 1969), Robert McCloskey tells the story of a family of ducks looking for a place to live. They fly past the wilderness, where they notice predators likely to make life uneasy for them, and eventually settle on a tiny island in the Charles River in the heart of Boston, from which they fly all over exploring the city.

These ducks are neither completely animals acting like people nor people dressed up like animals, and seem enough like both for us to half-identify with them and so half-see the city from an other-than-human perspective. Mrs. Mallard, having trained her children, takes them around:

When at last she felt perfectly satisfied with them, she said one morning: "Come along, children. Follow me," Before you could wink an eyelash, Jack, Kack, Lack, Mack, Nack, Ouack, Pack and Quack fell into line, just as they had been taught . . . Mrs. Mallard stepped out to cross the road. "Honk, honk!" went the horns on the speeding cars. "Qua-a-ack!" went Mrs. Mallard as she tumbled back again. "Quack! Quack! Quack! Quack!" went Jack, Kack, Lack, Mack, Nack, Ouack, Pack, and Quack . . .

Readers of this book do not automatically acquire much scientific knowledge about ducks. Any explanation spoils the story, which is short enough for anyone to read or have read to him. I include it here with books about "real" nature, as it is often called, because the story is a wonderful one to have imagined, and because the more nature comes under human planning, the more it becomes what we imagine it to be.

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