

A REVIEW OF 'THE MOTH SNOWSTORM: NATURE AND JOY'

Abstract

McCarthy's text bridges the gap between emotional and scientific response to the environment, making it both factually and emotively enlightening. The book's content and McCarthy's writing style makes it an accessible text to anyone, no matter their level of geographical education. This is critical for modern times, when science communication needs to ensure ideas are understood by everyone, not just academics and policymakers.

Key Themes

- Environmentalism
- Science communication
- Conservation
- Joy

The Review

I stumbled upon this humble book out of chance but, by the gods, I'm pleased I did. Although it's as much about grief as it is joy, Michael McCarthy splendidly combines autobiography, science, socio-political observation, natural history and environmental commentary in a way that makes the heart sing with desire to protect the planet. McCarthy draws on his experience as *The Independent's* environmental editor and one of Britain's trailblazing environmental writers which has earned him a string of awards to present how humanity's innate capacity to find joy in nature could be what helps us save it. He illustrates the decline of biodiversity, the pitfalls of conservation attempts and the hope we should feel for the future if we can once again fall in love with natural world.

McCarthy begins the text autobiographically, by recounting how the troubles of his childhood, when his mother was admitted to an asylum, were lessened by the almost inexplicable joy he found in butterflies. From there, McCarthy reveals how this early infatuation with nature flourished in his life paradoxically alongside what he calls 'the great thinning' of the biosphere whereby 'more than half of all Britain's wildlife, as it existed at the end of the Second World War, has now gone.' He uses the example of the eponymous 'moth snowstorm' of his younger years to demonstrate the quiet decline of native life. Interestingly, as a young person this concept was entirely foreign to me as the 'moth snowstorm' phenomenon – where moths used to be so prolific that on warmer nights they seemed to form great clouds which found themselves in eyes, mouths, ears etc. – disappeared before my lifetime and many of yours: this joy was taken from us without us even knowing. The decline has occurred so sharply that my father can recall mornings scraping insects off of car windows, but I cannot. In fact, when I attempted to survey moths for Geography A-Level, my trap (granted, it was rather rudimentary) failed to catch *any* on a local calcareous grassland – that's an absurd shift in abundance in just a few decades.

McCarthy moves onto exploring London's decline of salmon and house sparrow populations before transporting the reader to South Korea where the longest seawall was built to reclaim an estuary: an ecological catastrophe to migratory birds which proved a colossal vanity project of no real benefit, even to the local humans. What is particularly special about this text is, despite the broad globe-hopping prose, McCarthy inevitably returns to his childhood and to his locality, reminding us that the environment isn't *elsewhere*, it is wherever you are. And without becoming too settled on my high horse, it pushes all of us towards action wherever we are on this delicate planet.

After explaining *how* biodiversity has fallen, McCarthy begins to explain *why* he thinks attempts of conservation have been futile, by debunking some of the biggest environmental movements of the 20th and 21st century such as sustainable development and ecosystem services. He examines the socio-political motives and shortcomings of these philosophies and instead provides the reader with what he believes is the only method that can really motivate our species to do good for our environment: joy. The failure to restore balance is made further painful by McCarthy's revelations of why nature is vital to us as a species. Notably, he touches on experiments which have shown that hospital patients recovered faster if they had a window view of a natural landscape than those who didn't: even just viewing a singular tree rather than a barren brick wall improved their rate of recovery, which is rather astonishing.

The Moth Snowstorm truly moved me. McCarthy's masterful interweaving of poetry, science, anecdotes of natural encounters and history presents a holistic scope of environmentalism which is extremely accessible. Scientific reports on the dire state of our planet can feel distant and irrelevant to the individual but McCarthy has created an environmental text which is affecting, personal and touches the reader in a way that statistics cannot: with joy. It's something we can all empathise with and something which may just defend our home. This is a book for your mother, your guitar teacher, and your elderly neighbour as much as it is for budding geographers and environmentalists.¹

¹ McCarthy, Michael (2015) *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy*. John Murray (Publishers).