



**AWE  
AND  
WONDER**

**An EMC Anthology  
of Nature Writing**



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## FOREWORD

If you think about it, writing about nature is the oldest form of literature. Stone Age paintings on cave walls often come accompanied by abstract symbols. This 'proto-script' seems a commentary on the illustrations, which are invariably of animals for the hunt. It's a fair guess across 20,000 years of time that picture and text were not 'art for art's sake', but that they fulfilled a function for the tribe. It's a fair guess too that this function was the invocation of plenty, a supplication to Nature to be bountiful. What is certain to anyone who gazes at the cave art, with all its evident care in creation, is that the prehistoric peoples were awed by the natural world around them.

We see snatches of nature writing across the millennia. In what might be called 'The British Tradition', there is a marked love of birds. An Anglo-Saxon calendar for 1061 has 364 days devoted wholly to the doings of saints. The remaining day? The 11th February, for which the entry reads, 'At this time, the birds begin to sing.' The medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer might be more famous for his *The Canterbury Tales*, his collection of stories about Christian pilgrims, but his poem *Parlement of Foules* (fowls here meaning all birds) is full of loving observations on things feathered such as 'the frosty feldfare' (a fieldfare is a bird that comes here in winter). Shakespeare brings us to the door of the modern age; his knowledge of birds, animals and plants was immense (he mentions no less than sixty-four species of birds in his plays) but he worried too about what humans were beginning to do to the environment. New fuel-intensive industries such as iron-forging for Hamlet's 'brazen cannon' made deforestation England's first major environmental crisis.

But nature writing truly begins in the 18th century. The reasons were numerous and profound. One key cause was increased urbanisation which led to a yearning for Nature lost, another was a revolution in the human head about the very idea of Nature. Previously in the West, Nature had largely been viewed as God's creation for human use. Increasingly, Nature became seen as a thing independent, and valuable



in itself. Not unrelatedly, the same century saw the birth of the nature writer. The Reverend Gilbert White is a good early example of this curious new being: his famous *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789) is a whole book-sized diary about Nature in a Hampshire village in which we feel his presence, his personality. He is a guide, and we take his hand. Without this ‘humanness’ nature writing would be an entirely different matter, it would be the remote noting of natural phenomena – which is science.

And now we arrive at this brilliant – and important – collection of nature writing, and in a way we arrive back at the cave wall with its paintings and primitive letters of our ancestors long ago, though a little more informed, a little better at writing. In these pages your writer-guides are many and varied; their individuality allows us to see the natural world in other ways than our own, to see things we have overlooked, or have never had the opportunity to encounter. (Actually, this anthology reminds me pleasantly of the extraordinary multi-faceted eye of the fly, where one thing, in this case Nature, is seen at a thousand angles.) You would need to be stony of heart and closed of mind to exit these pages without having your sense of awe and wonder about Nature tweaked. You will also be alerted to the crisis in Nature, the loss of animals and plants and habitats, due to the destructive activity of humans. So, above all, the authors here, all of them and all in their own way, are doing the same as the painter-writers in those caves of prehistory. Making a plea for more Nature.

*John Lewis-Stempel, 2023*

## INTRODUCTION

This anthology was put together by two organisations that work closely with young people. The English and Media Centre publishes widely for secondary school students and Bloom Education works to help young people connect with nature. Here members from both organisations outline why they think this is an important book for you to read.

**From Andrew McCallum, Director, English and Media Centre**

*Awe and Wonder* seems a fitting title for this collection. As readers researching material for a nature anthology, we were constantly amazed by what we were finding out. We think you will be too, when you read about sharks that are over 600 years old, trees that communicate with each other and giant birds that are closely related to dinosaurs and can kill a human with a slash to the throat. But we were equally amazed by the quality of the writing. In many ways it's every bit as awesome and wondrous as the natural worlds it describes. Some of the most vibrant writing today can be found on the 'Nature' shelves in bookshops and we wanted to bring a flavour of its rich variety into classrooms.

The title, though, wasn't selected without a good deal of careful thought, and even anxiety. It's all very well to feel awe and wonder at the natural world, you might say, but what about the reality of what's happening on the ground? What about the climate emergency being brought about by global heating? Or the mass extinction taking place as humans consume ever more of the world's resources? Or the pollution of land and sea that jeopardises the food sources of humans and animals alike? We don't want to ignore what are undoubtedly the most serious issues facing you, as young people, today. However, we also feel that the starting point for any education that builds towards efforts to save the planet must be rooted in an appreciation of what that planet has to offer. That's what, in its own small way, we want this anthology to do: help you as readers to appreciate the planet – and to feel some of the awe and wonder that it contains.

The writing featured does not entirely ignore the problems facing the natural world. That would be very difficult. One article, for example, explores what happened to nature after a nuclear catastrophe in the former Soviet Union (modern-day Ukraine); another deals with the possible consequences of a catastrophic drop in insect numbers. You'll also read about the irresponsible felling of trees, soil erosion and the problems of over-farming.

Mostly, though, there's awe and wonder. We think that's a fitting starting point for what George Monbiot, in the penultimate piece, calls 'an ecological education'. In his words, this is an education committed to 'placing ecology and Earth systems at the heart of learning, just as they are at the heart of life'.

### **From Jane Macrae, Director, Bloom Education**

Hard as it is to believe, in our work engaging young people with nature we've found some who are afraid to walk on the grass, others who don't know what a bud is, and others still who have never run their hands over a tree trunk.

Our work tries to put this right. We want all young people to grasp the wonder of the natural world in all its harmony, from the remarkable adaptation of creatures to the nuclear winter caused by the Chernobyl explosion, to interdependence in communities such as sardines and elephants. We want you to experience and know that you are part of that harmony, part of a bigger whole, not separate from it. Bloom has been delighted to collaborate with the English and Media Centre on *Awe and Wonder*, which accords totally with our mission. The texts chosen are one way of reaching out to the natural world which the authors describe in all its richness, diversity and beauty.

Connecting with the natural world can be achieved by being outside, in the open air, in a garden, a park or woodland. But it is also possible, as the book demonstrates, to make this vital connection through reading, and being immersed in the experiences others have recorded. Nature's creatures large and small, rare and common, its great elements of air, water, earth and fire, leap from and come alive



on the pages so that the reader learns and absorbs new knowledge that a more formal text book could not give.

But we can go further. For underlying harmony are, we believe, the seven principles by which Bloom structures its work – *interdependence, diversity, health, geometry and beauty, oneness, cycles and adaptation*. Exploring the texts through these lenses will lead a young person to a deeper understanding of how nature works. This too is Bloom’s mission.



Throughout the book the authors’ love for the natural world is palpable. At a time when many of you are understandably anxious about the perilous state of the planet, perhaps reading these texts will help deepen your love of nature and lead you to find your own informed way to care for it. We certainly hope so!



## WENDELL BERRY: NONHUMAN JOY

Wendell Berry brings a unique perspective to writing about nature in his life as both writer and farmer in the US state of Kentucky. An author of fiction, poetry and non-fiction, as well as being an environmental activist, his work explores areas such as sustainable farming, connection to place and the interconnection of all things. If you like this short piece of writing, then you will probably also enjoy his most famous poem, 'The Peace of Wild Things'.

One clear fine morning in early May, when the river was flooded, my friend and I came upon four rough-winged swallows circling over the water, which was still covered with frail wisps and threads of mist from the cool night. They were bathing, dipping down to the water until they touched the still surface with a little splash. They wound their flight over the water like the graceful falling loops of a fine cord. Later they perched on a dead willow, low to the water, to dry and groom themselves, the four together. We paddled the canoe almost within reach of them before they flew. They were neat, beautiful, gentle birds. Sitting there preening in the sun after their cold bath, they communicated a sense of domestic integrity, the serenity of living within order. We didn't belong within the order of the events and needs of their day, and so they didn't notice us until they had to.

But there is not only peacefulness, there is joy. And the joy, less deniable in its evidence than the peacefulness, is the confirmation of it. I sat one summer evening and watched a great blue heron make his descent from the top of the hill into the valley. He came down at a measured deliberate pace, stately as always, like a dignitary going down a stair. And then, at a point I judged to be midway over the river, without at all varying his wingbeat he did a backward turn in the air, a loop-the-loop. It could only have been a gesture of pure exuberance, of joy – a speaking of his sense of the evening, the day's fulfilment, his descent homeward. He made just the one slow turn, and then flew



on out of sight in the direction of a slew farther down in the bottom. The movement was incredibly beautiful, at once exultant and stately, a benediction on the evening and on the river and on me. It seemed so perfectly to confirm the presence of a free nonhuman joy in the world – a joy I feel a great need to believe in – that I had the sceptic's impulse to doubt that I had seen it. If I had, I thought, it would be a sign of the presence of something heavenly in the earth. And then, one evening a year later, I saw it again.



# LOOKING CLOSELY

## DAVE GOULSON: A BRIEF HISTORY OF INSECTS

Dave Goulson is a British scientific researcher with a specialism in bumblebees. He knows a lot about a lot of other insects too, though, as shown by his book, *Silent Earth: Averting the Insect Apocalypse*. His books are best-sellers, translated into at least 17 languages, with over a million copies sold. His skill as a writer is in turning his extensive, knowledge into something exciting and engaging for his readers – without losing any of the scientific details.

Let's start at the beginning. Insects have been around for a very, very long time. Their ancestors evolved in the primordial ooze of the ocean floors, half a billion years ago, strange, armoured creatures with an external skeleton and jointed legs, known today to scientists as arthropods (meaning jointed feet). We have few fossils from that time, but those that exist, such as from the famous Burgess Shale deposits of the Canadian Rockies, give us tantalising glimpses of that early world. They are enormously diverse, with numerous types having body plans and numbers and shapes of limbs, eyes and other mysterious appendages unlike anything found today. It was as if Mother Nature had hit upon a successful concept, and was tinkering away like a child with a Meccano set, trying out different ways to bolt a creature together. For example, the aptly named *Hallucigenia* was a worm-like creature that was originally thought to walk on long, spine-like legs, with a crazy hairdo of waving tentacles on its back, but in more recent illustrations it has since been flipped over so that it walks on the tentacles and perhaps would have used the spines in defence. Meanwhile, *Opabinia* had five eyes on stalks, and a single lobster-like claw extending from its head, whereas *Leanchoilia* was a woodlouse-like creature equipped with two long arms at the front, each divided into three tentacles. Then there was *Anomalocaris*, an animal originally described as being three separate creatures – one shrimp-like, another a jellyfish, and the third something similar to





# DEEP TIME

## JINI REDDY: STAR-GAZING

When you read about Jini Reddy's background, you can see why she wrote a book about wandering (called *Wanderland*). She was born in London to Indian parents, who were raised in South Africa, and she grew up in Canada. She attended Canadian and French universities, studied journalism in London and has lived in Hong Kong, Provence and Tbilisi. She now lives in London, 'only' a few hundred miles from Northumberland in North England, where this piece is set.

The night sky is inky black and luminescent with a veil of glowing pinpricks, stars brighter than any I've ever seen in Britain. I have a crick in my neck and the North Sea is blowing a chill wind, but I am rooted to the spot.

While we gaze at seascapes, climb mountains, hike through our forests or lose ourselves in Van Gogh's swirling canvases, rarely do we dedicate meaningful time to the stellar vista above our heads. How often do we contemplate the cosmos? How many of us meander down celestial trails with our eyes and our imagination? We can't all be astronauts or astronomers but we can, in our earthbound way, immerse ourselves in the heavens.

Mariners, desert explorers, farmers, gardeners, storytellers, soothsayers and even common folk: all were once guided by the alignment of the stars alone. Alas, in modern times, though we may rhapsodise about the Milky Way, rarely do we see it with the naked eye the way our ancestors did. This is hardly surprising with the advent of street lamps, and the haze over our cities.

Fortunately, crossing over to the dark side is still possible. Several areas in Britain that are blessedly free of light pollution have been designated Dark Sky Parks and International Dark Sky Reserves – the latter awarded where light pollution is managed to enhance the existing brilliance of the skies.



**WONDER**



## JIM CRUMLEY: EAGLE CRAG

Jim Crumley is a Scottish nature writer who has published numerous books over several decades, largely about nature in his home country. He's an advocate of 'listening to the land' – something you might be able to spot in the gentle tones and close observations to be found in his writing.

She came in low and slow and out of the north-west. I saw her approach from a quarter of a mile away and from behind, over my right shoulder, because I had half turned in response to an unexplained summons, the source of which was not yet clear to me. She was not hunting. At least, I don't think so. It is not always easy to tell when she flies slowly. She often hunts within a yard or two of the ground, a phenomenon of flight I don't pretend to understand, for she flies so slowly and at times her wingtips almost touch the wingtips of her shadow and that seems to me to contravene every principle of flight, which merely shows how much a golden eagle knows about the principles of flight that I don't. But usually when she hunts, she flies slower than this, and her head is down and the wings are held wide. It is tempting to say her wings are stiff, but I have no idea whether she holds them stiffly or whether their stillness is utterly relaxed. But whether she came in low and from the north-west, she was not flying with that intensity. Instead the flight appeared lazy, wings beating to a leisurely pulse.

The sun was full on her, and of course I looked for her shadow – I have always loved to watch it ripple over rock and grass and just behind her or just ahead of her, just uphill or just downhill. But on that early July afternoon it was almost directly beneath her, the sun a high glare that lit her fabulously from stem to stern and wingtip to wingtip, with that delicious 'golden' blaze at her nape. The shadow was so dark it looked like black silk as it crossed the watershed land. Her tail, half open, rocked gently, the least movement you can imagine while still being certain that it was actually moving, millimetrically precise.