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The Moth Snowstorm by Michael McCarthy

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Joy to The World

***The Moth Snowstorm* by MICHAEL MCCARTHY**

New York Review Books, 2015 \$27.95USD

Reviewed by **JOANNA STREETLY**

Richard Mabey's *Nature Cure* and Helen MacDonald's *H is for Hawk* have established an award-winning formula for the combination of nature and memoir found in *The Moth Snowstorm* by Michael McCarthy. Both Mabey and MacDonald describe personal healing through their relationship with nature. McCarthy, too, now treads this path, commencing with a childhood thrown into disarray by his mother's mental illness and his subsequent, unintentional discovery of joy in the wilderness of the Dee estuary. McCarthy goes on to proclaim, in his beautiful writing style, that a love of nature and the consequent joy and sense of connection that comes with it — spread evangelically around the planet — is the only defense against the decline of the environment.

Bookended with his mother's experience with mental illness, *The Moth Snowstorm* is, in large part, a catalogue of species lost or drastically reduced. McCarthy is clear-eyed about the state of the environment, having spent a lifetime reporting on it in his capacity as an award-winning environmental journalist for *The Independent* newspaper. He suffers from the loss of so many of the bird species which, as a boy, were his first sources of joy.

Environmental journalism is a burden that weighs heavily on the author, especially after so many years of work. "Let us set it out," he writes in careful, pulp prose. "Our world is under threat"

(14). In doing so, he is compelled to cite facts and figures, to share the urgency, the downward trajectory, the trends, the loss of abundance, the deadscapes he has observed in his lifetime. The aspects of memoir and the crusade for joy are offset by forays into journalistic writing, such as the chapter entitled "The Great Thinning." Here, he details the havoc wreaked on wildlife by post-war policies of quotas and grants on farming in Britain.

This chapter demystifies the book's title, describing summer nights in the long-ago countryside, when driving was complicated by the swarming of headlights and windscreens by moths. Caught in the lights, the moths resembled snowflakes:

Of all the myriad displays of abundance in the natural world in Britain, the moth snowstorm was the most extraordinary, as it only became perceptible in the age of the internal combustion engine. Yet now, after but a short century of existence, it has gone. (102)

In this chapter, he also indulges in a self-congratulatory note for his part in attempting to problem-solve the demise of the lowly house sparrow, once a symbol of Cockney London, now vanished from British cities.

McCarthy sets his case for defense-through-joy against the failure of other theories. For instance, he writes that sustainable development, as set out in the Brundtland report, "Our Common Future," is based on the flawed premise that people are "good." He suggests instead that "people do not voluntarily change, if that means, stop acting out of self-interest. You might as well ask cats to stop chasing birds" (21).

Discounting sustainable development, he goes on to mention the idea of ecosystem services, the act of putting “a financial value on all the principle natural systems of the planet which support human life” (26). While the act of putting price tags on ecosystems has been eye-opening, showing the actual economic value of nature to human societies, McCarthy cannot find salvation in “the commodification of nature” which could “pave the way” for ecosystems to be “traded, speculated on, and ultimately owned and controlled by multi-national companies” (27).

Set against these theories, the idea of joy “seems out of step with a time whose characteristic notes are mordant and mocking, and whose preferred emotion is irony” (32). But McCarthy unabashedly proposes joy as “a conscious, engaged act of defense” (30) against the fact that there seems to be only one form of worth attached to the wild world: financial worth. McCarthy is correct in perceiving a societal sense of ennui. In *Birds Art Life* (Doubleday 2017), Kyo Maclear writes:

I begin to understand why many people remain wary of nature writing. It’s all that romantic wandering and dumbstruck waxing on; all those sublime mountains, delicate flowers and shimmering sunsets. There is simply too much effusion, passion, and love for our ironic age. Even my environmentalist nature-loving friends avoid it. (n.p.)

By contrast, McCarthy describes himself as “an unashamedly nerdy moth man” (208) for whom “hyperbole cannot be helped” (209). He quotes Larkin, Wordsworth, and

de la Mare, reminding his readers that poems such as these should not be relics of the past, but continuously created expressions of our connection to the natural world.

After listing and describing all the aspects of the natural year which bring him joy, McCarthy closes the book with a description of his mother’s unexpected recovery from mental illness, her remarkable contribution to his brother’s education, and her subsequent death. In a public homage to her, he commences “The Great British Butterfly Hunt,” an attempt to see all British species in the space of one summer, in which he succeeds, allowing him, finally, a sense of emotional relief.

McCarthy agrees that love of nature is not universal; instead, what is universal “is the propensity to love it; the fact that loving it is possible for people” (216). This propensity, he argues, needs to be uncovered if we are to find peace in the world.

For its wealth of knowledge and beautiful writing alone, I would re-read this book. But, while McCarthy cites a study by Roger Ulrich showing that patients who can see trees through their hospital windows recover faster than those who can’t, he doesn’t otherwise attempt to support his case with outside evidence. His idea doesn’t address the massive numbers of humans threatened by war or starvation, for whom connection to nature can only be secondary to a daily fight for survival. Nor does he offer techniques for uncovering a love of nature in Earth’s billions of mega-city inhabitants.

The Moth Snowstorm does not aim to offer the kinds of practical strategies that stop cats chasing birds. However, as a counter-cultural movement, set against the bleakness of the world stage, Michael

McCarthy's theory of joy is well worth spreading.

JOANNA STREETLY is the published author of four books. Her work has also been published in many anthologies and reviews and has recently been selected for *Best Canadian Essays 2017* (Tightrope Books). She lives in Tofino, BC, where she is currently completing a new collection of essays.