

Book reviews

Fathoms: The World in the Whale

by Rebecca Giggs (2021) 368 pp., Scribe, London, UK. ISBN 978-1-913348-80-9 (pbk), GBP 9.99.

Whenever the topic arises, many people I have met excitedly recall a period of fascination for whales and dolphins at some stage in their youth. As with dinosaurs, these ocean giants possess that blend of mystery, immensity and charisma that captures young imaginations and fuel fleeting obsessions. For some of us, the obsession is one we never grow out of, as cetaceans become lifelong subjects of curiosity, empathetic connection and awe. Their enduring appeal makes them a popular subject for literature and natural history books, and as an avid reader of such fare, I was excited to get my hands on a copy of *Fathoms: The World in the Whale* by Rebecca Giggs.

The book combines science, philosophy, and history—both natural and human—to explore our understanding of whales, our turbulent relationship with them and how it has evolved over time. The author questions accepted narratives, and her own assumptions, about these once-reviled, oft-revered marine mammals. Giggs intersperses facts and science in a way that is highly informative, without the writing feeling like a lesson or a textbook. Rather, she takes us along on her personal journey of discovery and reflection, which roams across a vast range of subjects that touch, or are touched by, the existence of whales.

I had expected a narrative largely based on the author's own encounters with diverse cetacean species, but instead, Giggs focuses on just a few direct experiences with whales. One such example is the prologue, which opens the book with an introspective meditation sparked by her witnessing the drawn-out death of a stranded humpback whale on an Australian shore. Her unflinching yet empathetic style forces us to confront both the dispassionate and the heart-wrenching, a deft nod to the importance of detached, scientific fact that yet leaves room for the poignant and imaginative.

The book that follows is structured into eight chapters, each fronted by a miscellany of words and phrases referring to various points of interest that emerge as the chapter progresses, a Darwinesque shorthand obliquely signposting the curiosities visited in the text. Repeatedly, Giggs begins by taking a grain of information about the physiology or behaviour of whales and uses this as the basis of a conceptual exploration that takes the reader far from the whale itself, reaching out into more philosophical territory. These thought-provoking

forays invite us to consider a wealth of ideas and questions beyond, but connected to, the natural history, ecology, and conservation of whales. The book covers a multitude of issues, from the relatively minute—parasites, microplastics, marauding gulls, toxic chemicals, small morsels of whale meat swimming in Japanese soup—to the massive—interstellar weather, invisible deep-sea magnetic mountain ranges, climate change and sound pollution. Few stones are left unturned in the quest to consider the whale from every angle: ecological, political, moral, cultural, gastronomic, social, and beyond. Although occasionally the narrative appears to sail a little off course, this expansive approach does live up to the book's title: an invitation to consider vast concepts with the whale as our lens, cetaceans serving as ecological lynchpins, conceptual touchstones, and storytelling devices through which to interpret the wider world.

The author is drawn to contemplating the dichotomy between the literal and metaphorical separation of whales and humans and our persistent need to bridge and overcome it, examining both the drivers and the impacts of that impulse. She charts the history of how we once feared and mythicized whales, then relentlessly pursued and slaughtered them, and in more recent times, driven by a sense of custodianship and guilt, seek to protect them, grappling with the knowledge that we should leave them be, and the contradictory desire for closeness and interaction. She meticulously delves through the complex layers of how we relate to whales in ways both practical and psychological, and our need to hold them up as a symbol of absolution and hope in the face of our impotence: the campaigns in the 1980s that led to the whaling moratorium and the fact these animals persist to the present day are proof that humanity can come together for the sake of something beyond ourselves. And yet, we have failed to address the myriad threats less blatant and villainous than whaling, but equally devastating in their own insidious ways.

Giggs defies the usual conventions of popular science writing. Poetic, lyrical, and creative, the prose is elevated by its inventive vocabulary, yet not so lofty as to be inaccessible or contrived. I enjoyed this departure from a more straightforward approach, and the way that an unexpected turn of phrase would inspire me to interpret things differently.

I would recommend this book for the way it challenges the neat lines we draw around animals and our attempts to confine their conceptualization to what directly influences them, and is directly influenced by them. In

Fathoms, Giggs explores so much beyond what is usually covered in whale-related discourse, and in so doing prompts us to consider these remarkable animals with a mind more open to the depth and breadth of their connections and interdependence with the human and natural worlds.

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Restoring the Balance: What Wolves Tell Us about Our Relationship with Nature

by John A. Vucetich (2021) 416 pp., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, USA. ISBN 978-1-4214-4155-9 (hbk), USD 49.95.

When I picked up *Restoring the Balance*, I was hoping to learn more about how wolves live and how they affect nature and the balance of life, but I wondered whether the book would be rather academic in style and a dry read. I need not have worried: I found *Restoring the Balance* enthralling from the start.

John Vucetich spent nearly 25 years conducting fieldwork on Isle Royale, studying the relationship between the local wolf and moose populations. Isle Royale is a large island in Lake Superior, in Michigan, USA. Doing fieldwork there is not for the faint-hearted: there are no dwellings on the island, and for a large part of the year, with temperatures well below freezing, the island is covered with snow and surrounded by the lake's frozen water. In the absence of permanent buildings, the author lived either in a small plane used to track wolves, a small cabin or a tent. His work involved walking in snowshoes through miles of snow and rugged terrain to access the sites where wolves had killed moose, dissecting and then carrying back the remnants of frozen moose carcasses and wolf faeces for lab analysis.

The book is part memoir, part scientific analysis, part historical account and part philosophical essay. In addition to his own observations, Vucetich also covers the experiences of other scientists who worked on Isle Royale, going back to 1959 when scientific observations began there. Some sections, for example on the history and development of the methods used to analyse fluctuations in wildlife populations are more academic, but overall the book is an exciting and enjoyable read.

The book's main premise is that the population of a predator influences the population of its prey, and, in turn, the entire ecosystem. We learn how tightly linked the destinies of various species are with each other: when the

moose population increases, so does the wolf population, because food is plentiful and the packs thrive and breed. In time, the increased wolf population leads to a decrease in the moose population, which allows trees to recover from pressure exerted by large numbers of browsing moose, and so the trees, too, can grow and reproduce.

If, as Vucetich has done, we watch this dance for many years, we see a sinusoidal pattern, not unlike that regulating the expression of the genes and hormones that govern our chronobiological rhythms. We also realize how human activities negatively affect this age-old dance, upsetting the delicate balance of life on the island. For example, as global warming proceeds, the lake around the island no longer freezes regularly during the winter. This prevents the influx of new wolves from the mainland, causing inbreeding and malformations in the spines of the wolves on Isle Royal, and subsequently the demise of this population. Vucetich alerted the government about this long before the wolf population declined, when he became aware of changes in the DNA and skeletons of the island's wolves. He suggested introducing new wolves to in-

crease genetic diversity, but was initially ignored (although the coda at the end of the book gives hope as wolves are eventually being reintroduced to the island).

Vucetich invites us to reflect on the value we place on human over animal life, and emphasizes that ecosystem restoration cannot succeed when based on anthropocentrism or misanthropy. He explains that the Ojibwe, Natives whose territory include Isle Royale, believe the wolf is their brother. This kinship means that, as fellow family members, wolves are to be treated with respect. Vucetich's observations of the interactions of species on Isle Royale can be extrapolated to the general state of ecosystems around the world, and inspire us to change it for the better.

Vucetich had me hooked from the start with his observations of the wolves' behaviour, the stories of their fluctuating lives, and in particular, the evocative accounts of how they work together to hunt moose. His descriptions elicited vivid images in my mind, and I found myself bonding with the wolves and caring about their survival. I particularly appreciated that his observations are not limited to the large and charismatic species such as wolves and

moose, but also include the smaller, but no less ecologically important, creatures such as mice and the ticks and parasites that depend on them. He also references previous studies on the interaction of bacteria and their predators, showing how the intricate balance of predator and prey plays out at every level in nature.

The author's deep respect and reverence for animals and nature is clear throughout the book, and inspires the same in the reader. He offers a wide, bird's eye view of our interactions with nature, from field observations to history and conservation policies. In a world where scientists tend to study biological processes in microscopic detail, I found his broad approach refreshing. As someone who has become convinced that our disconnection from nature is at the root of the demise of ecosystems and that this disconnect leads us to reckless exploitation of natural resources, I found this book to be a beautiful and in places poetic call to a renewed and humble respect for the beauty and power of nature.

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