

Diary of a Young Naturalist

by Dara McAnulty, published by Little Toller Books

Review by Robin Walter (June 2020)

This is an exceptional book. Like other naturalists, Dara McAnulty has a keen eye for the birds, insects and places around him, and he can describe what he sees and feels with fresh and compelling language; but what makes this diary unique is how he relates this outer drama to his vivid inner life.

Dara describes his autism from the inside – not a medical condition, but a need for order and control in an unpredictable world. Seeing nature through his eyes is to see the timeless turning of the year, where flowers bloom, birds arrive from migration, pairs mate, eggs hatch, young fledge, the world is renewed in ways both predictable and yet amazing.

Apart from his family, who form a loving buffer round him, the human world is far less reliable by comparison. Nature has a purity for Dara, whilst humans can be duplicitous and confusing, so he prefers to direct his attention to the non-human world around him. Much has been written about our relationship with nature – well here in this diary we have a first-hand account of a deep connection with the hills, the rain, and the flying creatures who live there. It is as if a veil has been lifted allowing Dara direct access to the many mini-lives being lived right next to him: delight at a tadpole in a bucket; grief at the call of a solitary corncrake; trauma at the death of a grasshopper. He rides the rapids of this beautiful cruel world, noticing the fine detail, swooping up and down in empathy with his beloved hawks – enraptured with raptors!

This diary is not just an account of what happened – it is pivotal to Dara's dance with nature. Writing things down allows him to feel them all over again in all their joy and fascination; it also allows something of himself to 'leak out' to the human world (in truth it's a torrent!). The diary mediates between outer and inner worlds, between difficult moods and thoughts, hopes and fears. There is a constant search for balance – found on remote Rathlin Island, but threatened on all sides by the degradation of the natural world.

This sense of a fragile world under threat informs Dara's activism – the school strike for nature, the eco-club, the marches, speeches, awards. Over the course of the year, it is heartening to see Dara's connections with his fellow humans develop and strengthen – again, we learn this in real time through the diary entries, as step by step he is surprised by the welcome reception from the outside world.

Yet I worry for Dara. Anyone who feels the joys and pains of the world with such raw intensity is in for a rocky ride as we fumble our way to a more liveable planet. With this book, he will have won the respect and support of many people, moved by his heartfelt truth-telling. To me, it feels like a gift.

Thank you Dara