



## **The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy**

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## **The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy** Michael McCarthy

Nature has many gifts for us, but perhaps the greatest of them all is joy; the intense delight we can take in the natural world, in its beauty, in the wonder it can offer us, in the peace it can provide - feelings stemming ultimately from our own unbreakable links to nature, which mean that we cannot be fully human if we are separate from it.

In *The Moth Snowstorm* Michael McCarthy, one of Britain's leading writers on the environment, proposes this joy as a defence of a natural world which is ever more threatened, and which, he argues, is inadequately served by the two defences put forward hitherto: sustainable development and the recognition of ecosystem services.

Drawing on a wealth of memorable experiences from a lifetime of watching and thinking about wildlife and natural landscapes, *The Moth Snowstorm* not only presents a new way of looking at the world around us, but effortlessly blends with it a remarkable and moving memoir of childhood trauma from which love of the natural world emerged. It is a powerful, timely, and wholly original book which comes at a time when nature has never needed it more.

## **The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy Details**

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Author : Michael McCarthy

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## From Reader Review The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy for online ebook

### Mark Avery says

Nice cover!

This is a book about loss – and about joy, and about wonder, and about hope. There's a lot about the loss of nature over the last few decades and the author mixes this with memories of personal loss. A love of nature can be a support and strength during one's life.

And it's a book about wonder. The loss of nature matters, at least in part, because we lose the opportunity to have 'Wow!' moments where we see things that we couldn't have imagined and that are so beautiful and are part of our, yes our, world. Our only world.

And it's a book about hope, because Michael McCarthy offers the hope that if only we loved nature more, and faced up to that love, and acted on that love, then we wouldn't make such a mess of the world we live in, and it would be a better place.

The author is maybe best at writing about the joy that nature has brought to his life, from the time he was a small boy on Wirral, to his travels as environment editor of the Independent. He recounts the people he has met and the sights of nature which have given him joy; from the discovery of a small colony of House Sparrows in London to the first sight of a Morpho butterfly in the Amazon, and much else besides.

Mike writes really well and he tells a good tale. I smiled once or twice when I read accounts which I have also heard from the author's own mouth as we have quaffed claret with others over a good dinner.

But there was plenty that was new to me and I'll be asking him about the woman with the heart-stopping face and fire-red hair some time soon (for there is more in this book than just nature).

This is a very good read from one of our finest writers about the natural world. I think Mike could write well about anything – certainly anything he cared about. But notice, that he is not, and would not claim to be, an expert on nature. Maybe that's one reason why he sees the joy more clearly than some of us who 'know' more. Perhaps that knowledge compromises how much we can feel for nature. Does the head too often get in the way of the heart? I hope not, but if it does then this book reminds us of the richness of nature from an emotional point of view as well as an intellectual one.

George Osborne should read this book – but he just wouldn't get it. Or maybe he would – it is very engagingly written.

this review first appeared on Mark Avery's blog <http://markavery.info/2015/05/24/sund...>

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### Nathalie (keepreadingbooks) says

*"Joy has a component, if not of morality, then at least of seriousness. It signifies a happiness which is a serious business"*

- Michael McCarthy

It is truly closer to a 3.5 star read for me, but I couldn't with a clear conscience give it a 4. For a book with *joy* in its title, it was surprisingly depressing for at least the first 100 pages - and to be honest, a little in the last 10 as well. McCarthy spends half the book going into detail about how we are destroying nature at an alarming rate, alternating between statistics and particular instances. He is at his best when he gets personal; when he goes on a hunt for the London sparrow, for example, after explaining (or wondering about) its rapid disappearance. But the book only got truly enjoyable when the listing of calamities was over with; I almost rejoiced out loud when I read the sentence "*so let us leave them behind, the unbearable losses, and go where the bond can be found: let us journey into joy.*" JOY AT LAST.

Yet I am not so naive that I do not recognise how necessary the depressing part is to his purpose. I would perhaps not have understood or valued the second half as much, if I hadn't just been exposed to the grim reality. Indeed, it would be difficult to understand why a 'moth snowstorm' is such a spectacular phenomenon, if you did not know why it now (almost) no longer takes place. It is an important book with an important message, and if you hang on through the first 100 pages, it gets rather good. I would even say you feel joy in some instances.

I have a few issues regarding his writing (there was some repetition of points) and his overall point - I wholeheartedly agree, but it felt like he didn't base it on anything but intuition. And intuition is rarely enough if you want to convince the rest of the world, even if your intuition is right.

McCarthy has definitely inspired me to seek out more nature writings - perhaps for now with a less depressing message, though.

/NK

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### **Tuck says**

For the most part cogent and beautifully written personal long form essays of defense of nature and environment. Thesis is that maybe the joy and awe and thrill nature invokes in a human will be a mighty tool to fight for cleaner water air earth and abundant and diverse flora and fauna.

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### **Anne says**

Describing how our spontaneous joy and love of the natural world may be the key to saving all the threatened diversity and wild places. The writer explains what these moments of joy have meant to him, and how they have helped him accept the difficulties in his childhood, as well as expounding the huge losses that have already changed our countryside and the wider environment.

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### **Margaret says**

How to describe this book? It's part nature writing, part memoir, part polemic, and a powerful and affecting read.

The book first got under my skin when defining 'joy', which is perhaps summed up as a moment of true happiness, with a spiritual, selfless, outward looking dimension. McCarthy's first experience of joy was as a boy, leaning to love the landscape and wildlife of the Dee Estuary. Later, it was bluebell woods, chalkland streams ... and so on.

Alongside this joy is anger, impotent anger, as he describes the pointless despoilation and destruction of Saemangeum in South Korea by the construction of a 23 mile long seawall which has annihilated the rich mudflats upon which countless thousands of migrating birds had depended.

McCarthy's nature writing is richly observed, pictorial, highly sensory. He is angry at the galloping pace of destruction of so many species and habitats. He demands that we observe too, and experience joy in our own ways as we explore the natural world.

Experiencing and observing however, is not enough. This is also a call to action.

A beautifully written book, often elegiac, and one which engaged me from the first to the last page.

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### **Stephen says**

Great content, and a revelation for me personally about inspiring myself and others to change behaviors that affect the natural world in a negative way.

I will say, the rhythm of McCarthy's writing was hard and took 2-3 chapters before I could sit back and enjoy.

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### **Agnes Goyvaerts says**

I just finished reading Michael McCarthy's book "The Moth Snowstorm" in which he describes and talks about the decline in biodiversity of birds, moths, butterflies, and other creatures worldwide but especially in his own Britain. He gives examples of his own experiences and that of other nature lovers, where they have witnessed this decline.

His emphasis, though, is on the intense joy that the natural world can and does bring to humankind. The book is also part memoir, his reasoning about wildlife decline is interspersed with his own memories, and of how his childhood trauma played a role in his discovery and his passion for the natural world, the joy that nature stirs inside us humans. And this resonated with me so well, I too developed this passion at an early age, mainly through the inspiration of my mother. The point that McCarthy makes is that this is something very innate in us, that we have developed this over the thousands of years of life when our ancestors were hunter gatherers, living lives in very close contact with nature. This joy, I used to think of it as my very own when I was still a young woman until I discovered that it was just out there for anyone to tap into; watching a beautiful sunset, the opening of a beautiful flower, seeing a marvellous butterfly, listening to the dawn chorus, or indeed the sound of the cuckoo in early spring, all of these scents, sounds, observations, experiencing the natural world with our senses can bring intense joy into our lives, the natural world is very good for us, essential even, and studies have showed that too now, scientists agree on this, worldwide there is a trend from professionals to advise walks in nature for mental and physical well being and health, happiness even.

This book also highlights the destruction of our planet which has been going on for over one hundred years and he gives many details of this - but it never becomes a depressing read as McCarthy always bring us back to this joy that nature gives us and shows why he believes we are wired for this and how it will be the best resource for survival in that when more and more people realise this they will unite to save the planet starting with saving its biodiversity, its birds, its animals, its insects, and all the wonderful creatures.

I would like to highly recommend this book.

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### **Penny says**

"It is clear that more than half of all Britain's wildlife, as it existed at the end of the Second World War, has now gone".

Where do I start when trying to review this book? I've given it 5 stars - pretty rare for me - so maybe I should attempt to say why. When I picked it up I expected another book in a genre I have grown to love in the last couple of years. And that is some nature writing mixed up with personal memoir, maybe some social history or travel.

I got all I was expecting, and a whole lot more. I was frequently shocked into exclaiming facts and figures out loud to my ever patient husband (who is going to read the whole book next). The way we are destroying our planet is truly breath taking, and McCarthy frequently mentions the 'terrible century ahead'.

Maybe I've become complacent. I live in England, in North Yorkshire, in the countryside, where we are surrounded by Conservation and Preservation Societies for one thing and another. I have fields and sheep and beautiful views all around me. Maybe I think it is all under control? That other people are dealing with the 'problems'. I'm clearly very much mistaken. For goodness sake, there's only a handful of the famous Cockney Sparrows left in London!

The chapter called the Great Thinning probably affected me the most. In the author's own lifetime he recalls the great abundance of wild flowers, butterflies and other insects, birds etc etc. All gone, mainly due to 'modern' farming methods introduced in the last 50 years.

As McCarthy keeps reminding us - we only have one home, one earth, one Planet. Destroy it and we destroy ourselves - we have nowhere else to go.

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### **Paul says**

Being out and about in the countryside has lots of positives; the views, the fresh air, the sound of bird song and restores our deep connections with the natural world. In The Moth Snowstorm he argues that we cannot be fully human if we lose those connections; for McCarthy the greatest gift that nature gives him is joy. The connections that link us to the outdoors run far back in our DNA, surveys have demonstrated that people subconsciously prefer the open savannah landscapes above all others and that patients in hospital heal faster when they have a view of the natural world through a window. Using various examples, he provides evidence of the damage that we are causing to the animals and landscapes of this world in the pursuit of profit and control. He describes pointless civil engineering projects in the South China Sea, blocking mud

flats from the sea and stopping millions of birds having a place to feed on their long migratory routes.

McCarthy takes time to describe those pivotal points that changed his life. These moments of joy are deftly woven with the pain that the family suffered when he was young when his mother was admitted to an asylum and as his father was away at sea a lot, they were moved to his uncle and aunts house. His brother was traumatised by it; Michael sought solace in bird watching to avoid thinking of the pain and the loss. The family were reunited, though the relationships were fragile and strained. It took years for him to understand his exact feelings properly.

It is a beautifully written book by an accomplished author. You are not left in any doubt by his fury at the destruction of habitats and places that creatures are totally dependent on them for survival. Whilst we still have some fantastic things left to see, he remind us of what we have lost. The title of the book is a recollection of the masses of moths that people remember driving through a few decades ago that were attracted to the headlights. The decline of some species has reached 90% and they are the lucky ones; others are no longer with us. He is critical of some of the attempts to reverse the trends, explaining why he thinks that they don't go far enough.

Frankly it is a worrying book; if we mess this up we don't have another planet. 4.5 stars

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### **Drew Pyke says**

whilst it's well written and easy to read, the substance for me was lacking.

the narrative is essentially saying that to save the world from man-made obliteration isn't utilitarianism (monetising the value of natural assets) because it essentially kills everything else off that doesn't provide any common benefit (that we know of).

his argument is that we have to learn to love nature, again. Because for 5,000 generations from the pleistocene period we lived off the tundra and survived because of nature it is our ancestral home but within a generation we have become computer dependent.

his personal story regarding his mother who had a breakdown and brother who committed suicide was a sad one but I struggled to marry the two narratives together.

other interesting stories were how Taiwan dried up a large wading area by building a concrete wall to prevent the sea flooding the mud to the detriment of the birds and to the potential benefit of more land (except it was never built on). A similar example was in the Thames how we lost salmon because of pollution. I also learnt about the "savannah hypothesis" which says we find certain landscapes beautiful because they are areas which gave us the greatest benefits (food and shelter etc)

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### **Chris says**

I've read a few reviews where the reviewer has complained that there is little joy to be found in this book despite having the word joy in the title. I disagree with this notion. What I took away from this book is to seek out your joy in nature while you can. Because we are ruining our planet. In our current political climate

we often hear how one particular political philosophy is more beneficial to the environment than another but McCarthy makes it clear is that it really doesn't matter who is sitting in this or that political house. As he says, our planet is "being destroyed by the runaway scale of the human endeavour". I totally agree. We may have our little pockets of wilderness, and indeed in my own country, Canada, we have no shortage of them but we are on a course that we cannot seem to step away from. Unsustainable growth in every form is dooming the planet. Rather than a clarion call for action, this book can be seen as more of a eulogy to our natural world.

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### **Elizabeth Drayson says**

This is a wonderful powerful book which shows the need to be aware of our environment. It was an evocative trip down memory lane for me, as I remembered so much of what Michael describes. Essential reading.

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### **Jackie (Farm Lane Books) says**

I have now read all the books on the 2016 Wainwright's Prize shortlist and I certainly saved the best for last. The Moth Snowstorm is a beautifully written book which explains the crisis facing our planet. I like to think I am well informed about environmental issues, but many of the facts were new to me and some were disturbing in their magnitude.

The Moth Snowstorm begins by explaining how the author fell in love with wildlife – particularly river estuaries. His descriptions were filled with passion and I admired the way he conveyed his joy at being surrounded by the natural world. His interest in wading birds enabled him to discover the crisis effecting estuaries around the world. Many are being destroyed for shipping and leisure purposes, but nobody seems to care much about these muddy flat lands. I was shocked to discover that South Korea recently built a sea wall 21 miles long, destroying the migratory feeding ground for 50 million birds.

The book also highlighted the massive reduction in the population numbers of everything from insects to wildflowers. McCarthy interviewed older people who recalled a time when wildlife was abundant. They described events such drivers stopping to clean their windscreens after driving through a cloud of moths. Sadly numbers have dropped so much that this rarely happens now. I especially liked the way that anecdotes like these were backed up with scientific data. This brought meaning to the tables of statistics, showing what large drops in population mean for our experience of the world.

Details of McCarthy's private life were also included. These were beautifully written and only added to the emotional impact of the text.

The Moth Snowstorm could easily have become a depressing book, but instead it is a joyful one, encouraging us to appreciate the beauty of the nature around us. It is an inspiring call-to-arms and I hope that increased exposure for this book will raise awareness of the natural catastrophes that are happening globally right now.

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## **Rebecca says**

Known in the UK as a veteran environmental journalist for the *Independent*, McCarthy offers here a personal view of how the erstwhile abundance of the natural world has experienced a dramatic thinning, even just in England in his lifetime (roughly the last 70 years). He gives both statistical and anecdotal evidence for that decline; as a case study of how technological ‘advancement’ destroys nature, he also discusses the construction of a sea wall at Saemangeum in South Korea, responsible for decimating a precious estuary habitat for shorebirds.

As if to balance his own pessimism about the state of the world, McCarthy remembers the singular natural encounters that have filled him with joy and wonder – first discovering birdwatching as a lad near Liverpool, seeing a morpho butterfly in South America and later seeking out all England’s native butterfly species one summer – but also the annual displays that rekindle his love of life: the winter solstice, spring blossom, the arrival of cuckoos, and bluebells.

There’s something of a debate about nature going on in the UK: is it something that has monetary value? The fields of sustainable development and “ecosystem services” would seem to suggest it does. That’s all well and good, McCarthy says, but there’s an innate human bond with nature that goes much deeper than anything economic. His memoir is perhaps more sentimental than I would expect from an English author, but I admired his passion and openness.

### **Favorite passage:**

Hyperbole? You could say so, I suppose. But what can I do, other than speak of my experience? Once, on a May morning a few years ago, I came out on to the banks of the Upper Itchen, at Ovington in Hampshire, and the river with its flowers and willows and the serenity of its flow and its dimpling trout in its matchless, limpid water, all gilded by the sunshine, seemed to possess a loveliness which was not part of this world at all.

Yet it was part of it; and there, once again, was the joy.

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## **Steve Gillway says**

This book speaks to me. In that when the author talks about the skylarks and lapwings I can remember them. He is a real zealot with respect to the joy nature brought to him and brings to us. He straddles the pessimism over what has been/is being lost with the fantastic things that are all around us, so the is hope, but that tunnel seems to be getting longer.

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