
How would you like to be referred to as an animal? Whether or not you like it, that is the first thing that William Dietrich does in his latest book, Natural Grace: The Charm, Wonder, and Lessons of Pacific Northwest Animals and Plants. In fact, he doesn’t just imply it, he comes straight out an says: “You animal you.” From there, he allows you to wander through essays about the little things that make the Pacific Northwest what it is.

Natural Grace is the third and most recent of author William Dietrich’s non-fiction books about the Pacific Northwest. It is a collection of short essays adapted from his articles in the Seattle Times’ Pacific Northwest magazine. Ranging from geology and jellyfish to geoducks (gooey-ducks) and cedar trees, Natural Grace offers information on a wide range of topics. These topics are arranged in sections that group essays with similar features. For example, the section entitled Secret and Small includes essays on stream life, dirt, and spiders, among others. Most of the essays are under a dozen pages in length and include sketches by illustrator Brenda Cunningham. The book also includes an index, as well as a suggested reading list. I found both of these features to be handy, especially since the essays encourage the reader to dig more deeply and further study the Pacific Northwest.

Greater understanding of the natural world is the common thread that ties together Dietrich’s essays. His belief is that understanding nature will help us better understand ourselves. Each of the 21 essays in the book offers an array of facts and comparisons about nature and humans. Many of these facts came from books in the suggested reading list, as well as from personal interviews with experts from state, federal, and private organizations. While offering an eye-opening education about the Northwest, Dietrich writes in such a fashion that I often found myself grinning, even laughing. For example, while discussing the success of mosquitoes, he writes:

“Researchers in Canada once allowed themselves to be exposed to a swarm and were bitten nine thousand times in one minute, an experience which calls into question the entire scientific method.”

In this one sentence I learned just how good mosquitoes are at what they do, and also was reminded about how dedicated researchers are, although I suspect that they were graduate students or interns.

I was not surprised to learn that Dietrich had won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. His writing style is easy to follow and engages the reader’s attention. Plus, he uses a strong dose of charm and wit to liven up 236 pages of facts and scientific knowledge. Natural Grace is a book that can be easily read from beginning to end, or essay by essay, in whatever order the reader decides upon. Dietrich proves himself to be appealing yet technically competent in his knowledge of the Pacific Northwest. In fact he has every right to begin by calling his readers animals. He eventually apologizes for the reference, but then compare readers to an organism that is much more unflattering. If you wish to learn which life form that is, I suggest you discover your own copy of Natural Grace. – Cassandra Wannamaker, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.