



**Dara McAnulty.** *Diary of a Young Naturalist* (Dorset: Little Toller Books, 2020, ISBN 9781908213792).

**Hannah Fleming**

University of Glasgow

On the 20th August in 2018, 15-year-old Greta Thunberg sat for the first time outside the Swedish parliament demanding action be taken to tackle the climate crisis. The day before that, 14-year-old Dara McAnulty was walking through Tollymore forest when he came across ‘something discarded but utterly beautiful: a nest’ (118). He describes in his diary how he carried the nest with him, marvelling at the intricacy of the craftsmanship, before reluctantly setting it back down on the forest floor to provide shelter and the possibility of food for a nearby garden cross spider. This entry by McAnulty—a conservationist and environmental activist from Northern Ireland—appears just over half-way through the book. The first and last diary entries are exactly one year apart, marking the end of Winter and the beginning of Spring, and in McAnulty’s mind, the midway point separating his late childhood from his adulthood.

*Diary of a Young Naturalist* is at once a call to action and a record of self-actualisation. McAnulty blends nature writing and life writing together, chronicling his change of school, home, circumstance and environment, with outpourings of awe and frustration concerning the state of the natural world around him. These genres come together seamlessly in his frequent use of natural metaphors. He calls himself an ‘acorn’, and describes the ‘uprooting’ and ‘de-rooting’ of his life (7). He compares his family to a group of otters; his voice to a bubbling volcano; his anxiety to the mountains. In fact, the combination of life writing and nature writing seems less like a conscious choice and more like a given in McAnulty’s case. He comes from a family of keen naturalists and the natural world is constantly seeping into his home. At one point, McAnulty casually mentions that whenever the family find an injured bat they always tend to it, and until the bat is healed they keep it safe in McAnulty’s bedroom. He writes: ‘I always sleep so soundly when I have

a bat staying in my room. I hear it scratching about in the night and am never afraid, I am comforted' (54).

The family co-exists with and seeks out wildlife, and what is striking is the extent to which they are moved and astounded by seemingly unexceptional sights of animals and natural phenomena. When a frog leaves frogspawn in their bucket-refuge the family is 'exultant', and respond by cheering in excitement (13). When they spot a group of whooper swans, McAnulty comments that: 'We felt so privileged' (23). This unreserved joy at seemingly insignificant events concerning the natural world made McAnulty an easy target for bullying at his former high school. He displays an understated frankness when talking about his mental health and experience of bullying which stands in stark contrast to the lyricism of his descriptions concerning his intense sensations of engaging with nature, and the ferocity of his intention to save and protect it from destruction.

McAnulty begins the book by briefly introducing himself before describing his parents and siblings in a precise, kind and thoughtful manner. This sets up the direction of the rest of the text which depicts a deeply close-knit family. McAnulty is also quick to demonstrate that each family member has an array of different interests outside of nature, and he, in part, uses this book to contend that our connection with nature should be combined with a connection to science, the humanities and technology. McAnulty himself is an accomplished writer and reader as well as a naturalist. (At 16, this book made him the youngest ever winner of the Wainwright prize for UK nature writing.) He refers to classic works, such as *The Iliad* and *Mrs Dalloway*, and also to more obscure and niche books like *The Mushroom Hunt* by Simon Fraser. He repeatedly quotes lines of poetry, and transcribes and shares his own poetry on Twitter, which led the prominent naturalist and TV presenter Chris Packham to invite him to recite his poem 'Anthropocene' at a People's Walk for Wildlife in London. The event leaves McAnulty feeling encouraged and focused, but moments of clarity such as this are frequently punctuated with signs of self-doubt and world-weariness. He describes his feelings of discomfort about being caught between childhood and young adulthood and worries about whether he has the ability to enact real change in this position.

He is also very suspicious of any attempt by others to herald him as a young naturalist leader, or worse: to use him as a political asset. When adults tell him he is inspirational, he feels 'uncomfortable' and thinks: 'Why don't they just help their children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews to join in? To do the same. To take the spotlight off me' (110). McAnulty refuses the notion that the burden of the climate crisis should be passed solely onto the next generation, and calls upon those in power to act and take on the mantle of responsibility themselves rather than idolise the

efforts of young people. While the text is, of course, aligned with the increasing number of nature memoirs published in the past few years, such as *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald and *Out of the Woods* by Luke Turner, it is markedly different because the age of the author cannot go unnoticed. This speaks to a wider discourse surrounding the framing of youth-led activism and political engagement. Furthermore, McAnulty not only draws strength from the wildlife around him like many authors of nature memoirs do, but his engagement with it is absolutely integral to his sense of purpose and peace of mind.

McAnulty explains that all of his nuclear family (with the exception of his father) are autistic, and the natural world for them is an indispensable source of healing to relieve their experience of sensory overload. He recounts his difficulties processing conversations, his tendency to zone out, and how he can feel ‘claustrophobic’, ‘bombarded’, and ‘boxed in’ in classrooms (33). At the same time, his sensory acuteness serves him well when it comes to engaging with nature on a deeper level, and recording such sensations in meticulous, gripping detail. McAnulty describes the lives of individual creatures, plants and trees extensively (always keeping their wildness intact), and while autobiographical life writing concerning non-human subjects is unlikely to be feasible, he certainly wishes it were the case, writing: ‘I wish we could translate the language of trees – hear their voices, know their stories. They host such an astonishing amount of life...’ (63). Yet, in the same way that McAnulty is constantly treading a fine line between being hope and despair, quiet moments of contemplation such as this are always contrasted with moments of palpable urgency. McAnulty mentions that he spoke at the first Irish meeting of Extinction Rebellion—an international climate action group that draws media attention through non-violent civil disobedience—who use the symbol of a stylised hour glass to signal just that: of time running out. The underlying anxiety regarding this countdown is present throughout the book, and McAnulty’s fervour is notably reinforced at times when he becomes a witness to the devastating effects of environmental degradation. For instance, the collapse of a corncrake’s habitat due to intensive farming practices makes him incandescent and he has to force himself not to scream at the sight in front of him. The experience renews his resolve: ‘A surge moves through me. I have to do something. I have to speak out. Rise up’ (50). By the time McAnulty writes this he is fully familiar with the cost of speaking out and of simply being different. But ultimately his calling is uncontainable.

*Diary of a Young Naturalist* lays bare the process of finding out who you are against the backdrop of the seasonal cycle. McAnulty is never static, repeatedly unsure of himself, fluctuating from numbness to feeling

everything all at once, and yet there is a cyclicalness in his constant return to the natural world. At his core he is sincere, dedicated and insatiably curious. The combination of his clear-eyed honesty and his deep-seated passion make this text a compelling work of self-discovery and environmentalism.