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In a rare blend of scientific fact and poetic truth, the acclaimed author of *A Natural History of the Senses* explores the activities of whales, penguins, bats, and crocodilians, plunging headlong into nature and coming up with highly entertaining treasures.

The Moon by Whale Light and Other Adventures Among Bats, Penguins, Crocodilians and Whales Details

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Karen says

This book is an appealing, attractively packaged collection of four essays on animal behavior, all of which originally appeared in the *New Yorker*. While the subject matter is interesting and entertaining, reading this book can be even more educational if attention is paid to what it reveals about current perceptions of scientists and issues of "animal rights" in the general media.

Ackerman sets herself up as a myth debunker, and does a good job where nature is concerned. When describing bats or icebergs, she shows both a sense of humor: "We don't get excited about the fact that more people die of food poisoning at church picnics annually than have died in all history from contact with bats," and a sense of wonder: "One day the water was so smooth that you could use it as a mirror, and four hours later the wind was howling at ninety knots. And was as beautiful at ninety knots as when crystal-calm. Huge ice caverns formed arches of pastel ice. Glare had so many moods that it seemed another pure color. The mountains, glaciers, and fjords bulged and rolled through endless displays of inter-flowing shapes. The continent kept turning its shimmery hips, and jutting up hard pinnacles of ice, in a sensuality of rolling, sifting, cascading landscapes. There was such a liquefaction to its limbs. And yet it could also be blindingly abstract, harrowing and remote, the closest thing to being on another planet, so far from human life that its desolation and iciness made you want to do impetuous, life-affirming things . . . "

It is when Ackerman describes the humans that she gets into trouble. All of the scientists she profiles in detail, including a bat photographer, an alligator farmer, and an expert on whales, come across as miniature Indiana Jonses: driven loners who regularly risk life and limb for the sake of adventure and the glimpse of their favorite animal. The author's sympathies lie with this macho stereotype of a scientist (according to her introduction, she herself is addicted to this type of behavior, which she refers to as "deep play"), yet at the same time, the first couple of essays are marred by a constant comparison of animals and humans, where the humans are always found wanting (unless the humans are also "exotic" in some way to her).

For example, in her description of bat houses, she begins with ". . . they look nothing like birdhouses. For one thing, they don't have cutesy roofs a la Swiss chalets. I don't know why, or when, people decided that birds preferred to live in humanesque houses shaped like Victorian mansions, red barns, Kon-Tiki huts, alpine ski lodges, or kelly-green shacks in the Black Forest. Just because desperate birds do lie in them doesn't mean they like them or don't feel as silly as some houses look . . . An official bat house is squarish, made of red cedar, and reminiscent of an old-fashioned mailbox hanging on someone's door. On the front is an abstract drawing of the Chinese wu fu, a decorative emblem worn as a medallion or as a coin or as a panel on a robe. The wu fu shows the Tree of Life encircled by five bats whose wingtips touch or sometimes interlock." Her reasoning here is mysterious at best. Apparently, in her opinion, certain types of decoration (here, Western/European) are bad and make the animals "feel silly," but other types of decoration (here, East Asian) are good and appropriate. If Ackerman ever asked the birds' or the bats' opinion on the Swiss chalet or the wu fu, it is not documented in this book. Instead, she seems to be using the animals as an excuse to tell the reader which cultural icons she thinks are better.

The motive for the following observation (mentioned twice in two different essays) is even more difficult to puzzle out: "Perhaps they would find it strange, as I do, that we feed on dismembered animals no longer

resembling what they are; and yet, paradoxically, we insist on cooking them to the warmth of fresh prey." In spite of her reference to food poisoning at church picnics, it is not clear here if Ackerman has an understanding of the phenomenon, or of the role of cooking in preventing it.

Her refrain of "in contrast with humans, who can only do X, animals can do Y" is taken to an extreme in the essay on whales: "A human male cannot voluntarily move his penis by more than a few millimeters, but a right whale can move his all around like a long finger." This device of human/animal contrasts is presumably meant to make the wonders of nature somehow more accessible while still giving the reader a sense of the alienness of other species, yet it is used so frequently that it becomes irritating human-bashing.

This book thereby restricts its sympathetic audience to those who already agree with it, and ends up preaching to the converted. This is unfortunate, because in other sections the book contains some powerful scientific and emotional arguments for preserving endangered species (even unpopular ones, like bats), and these arguments deserve to be widely read. And the last chapter (which, from the chronology in the introduction, also seems to be the last one written) is largely free of these intrusive value judgements (she even admits that getting developing countries to preserve their natural resources in the face of massive poverty is a "complicated issue"). When Ackerman leaves off moralizing and lets the landscape speak for itself, she is capable of beautiful prose. It makes you want to go out and sign up for an Antarctic cruise yourself.

Lara says

It took me awhile to get through the first two sections on bats and crocodiles, but once I got to the whales and penguins I was happy (I like bats and crocodiles and all, but not like I like whales and penguins)! Ackerman writes beautifully and there was a lot to interest me here, once I got to the marine animals. I'm not sure if I'm really planning to read any other books of hers because it looks like most of them are not about animals (haha, I'm a nerd), but...maybe?

Mary Lee says

My favorite essay was the one about whales. (She also writes about bats, alligators and penguins.) In the first part of it, she wonders about the size of whale brains and what they might do with the largest brain on earth.

"After all, mind is such an odd predicament for matter to get into. I often marvel how something like hydrogen, the simplest atom, forged in some early chaos of the universe, could lead to us and the gorgeous fever we call consciousness. If a mind is just a few pounds of blood, dream, and electric, how does it manage to contemplate itself, worry about its soul, do time-and-motion studies, admire the shy hooves of a goat, know that it will die, enjoy all the grand and lesser mayhems of the heart?" p. 131

Valerie says

I'm pretty sure this is not the edition I read.

I encountered the essay on bats from this book in serial form in the New Yorker. I was more captivated by

the description of the bats (and of Bat Conservation International's Merlin Tuttle) than by the other essays in this book--but I did like the other essays. I was interested enough in Ackerman's work that I got another book by her--but I had difficulty getting through that, so I didn't pursue her work further.

Still, I'd recommend this book, if you're generally interested in animals.

Lauren says

Another beautiful book of writings by Diane Ackerman. Her writing style is so lyrical and her descriptions are so vivid - reading her work is like biting into the juiciest of fruits. This particular collection highlights bats, crocodiles, penguins, and whales. Ackerman spends time with these animals, learning about their biology and psychology, talks with their keepers, trainers, and researchers.

While all of them were wonderful, the chapters on bats and crocodiles were my favorites of all - perhaps because I knew the least about these two creatures. The bat essay, in particular, sent me to my computer many times to see images and photos of these amazing animals. Just days after reading this essay, I had the experience of being in the open desert (Joshua Tree National Park in southern California) and witnessed the Mexican Free-Tailed bats coming out to feed at dusk... just me, my husband, and these beautiful bats. It was amazing, and is something that will stay with me for a long time. I am sure that I would have been amazed by this sight even if I had not read the book, but the experience was all the more enhanced by the knowledge I gained from this collection.

This is a book I will return to, I am sure, to remember these paragraphs filled to the brim with facts and stories... and will fall in love with the writing each and every time!

Cheryl says

I really enjoyed this book and the deep dive into the worlds of bats, crocodilians, whales, and penguins. The author is a gifted wordsmith, with vivid descriptions of these different universes. And her passion for nature shines through, reminding the reader that these alien cultures are actually intimately connected to our world. And mankind, in our collective ignorance and arrogance, is destroying the world we all live in and these amazing creatures besides. I came away feeling as if I had accompanied the author on her adventures, but also like I need to do each of them myself. Highly recommend.

Nicole says

She tries to make everything sound beautiful and poignant, but at some point I just start to get annoyed.

Tiffany says

This book made me love bats. Have you ever looked at one up close? They are extraordinary, and intelligent and we need to do whatever we can to make sure they thrive in the wild.

Preeti says

This book had been on my reading list for a while, ever since I read *The Rarest of the Rare: Vanishing Animals, Timeless Worlds*, which I loved. I finally got a hold of it through my library's inter-library exchange. (I love my library!)

The book has 4 main sections focusing on 4 different animals: bats, crocodilians (alligators and crocodiles), whales, and penguins. I was really looking forward to the whale chapter, especially since part of it took place in Hawaii - and I really enjoyed it. But the surprise for me was the bat chapter. It was really informative and interesting, and I learned a *lot*.

The one thing that's missing, which I think I mentioned in *Rarest of the Rare* as well, is photography. I'm not sure if she just never takes photos on her expeditions, but I really wish I could see some of the stuff she saw.

Because to be honest, and I thought this throughout much of the book - I don't think I'll/we'll ever again see the scenes that Ackerman was lucky enough to experience. Just the sheer number of animals, often in rural or uninhabited places. I think that experience is gone, depressingly. For example, during the bats chapter, in my notes I wrote: *20 million bats all in one location? That would be quite a sight to see though I imagine you can't find something like that anymore. That makes me really sad.*

Even during the 80s, when Ackerman did most of the travel presented in the book, Merlin Tuttle, ecologist and bat researcher, says, "I personally know of caves where people have wiped out millions of bats in one day." Sigh. That being said, Dr. Tuttle is such an awesome scientist. And his words really resonated with me. A couple of choice quotes from him:

"I never had any ambition to be anything but a good scientist. I was content to be a member of other conservation organizations and support their efforts. But for years the traditional organizations just ignored bats as too hopeless. If you couldn't raise money for an animal, it couldn't be helped. That's unfortunate. Part of our problems today come from the fact that even scientists and conservationists tend to take the easy ride and find an animal that's very popular with the public. They raise funds to help that animal, but often that's so easy and tempting that other animals that are just as valuable, and sometimes much **more** valuable, remain completely ignored." (p44)

"It's a shame that people want to view animals as either good or bad. But as Emerson pointed out, a weed is just a flower out of place." (p44)

"But this is often the case when it comes to animals – by the time you eliminate them down to the point when everyone can agree that the species is officially endangered, it's already too late." (p47)

One thing I really liked was reading about these scientists and researchers that Ackerman presented. I kept interrupting myself while reading to look up the names, and added books and articles to my reading lists. It was really informative. When I googled Dr. Tuttle, I found his Facebook page and did a bit of stalking. It's amazing the access the Internet has given us. Even just 10 years ago I wouldn't have been able to do this!

I loved Ackerman's enthusiasm, which is always present in her books: "But a carnival of bats inhabits the

world!"

And her writing is so lyrical and expressive. She paints a picture of the world for you that I really love:

There was nothing to do but wait. It is always like this for naturalists, and for poets - the long hours of travel and preparation, and then the longer hours of waiting. All for that one electric, pulse-revving vision when the universe suddenly declares itself. A ravishing tug on the sleeve of our mortality. A view of life so astonishing as to make all of life newly astonishing: a spotted bat. (p33)

On each side, sandstone cliffs, striped like sherbet, revealed layer after compressed layer of time. How can time be so rigid in rock and so molten as we live it? Underfoot, sheets of rock swirled red, yellow, white, blue. Life blooms in such unlikely places: tufts of grass jutting out from a rock; slabs of cactus sprouting from sheer cliffside high above us, where you'd think no dirt could have settled. (p51)

I loved her description of the past: "the pious fiction we call history." (p141)

I didn't gather any quotes from the whale chapter, maybe because I was engrossed. But I *really* enjoyed reading about the right whales in Patagonia. That was amazing - I wonder if they are still there? Further research is required! I love books that get me excited to find out more.

Each chapter reads like a short book which I really liked. As each ended I would take a few minutes to pause and soak it in.

The one thing that was a bit odd to me were the sections in the crocodilian and penguins chapters that focused on the non-wild places: namely, the alligator parks/farms and Sea World. I guess these were the best places to see those animals at the time? I know it's a can of worms, but that was off to me, because they weren't exactly zoos so it wasn't for conservation per se. Also it was the 80s so I don't know how the sentiment towards places like these was at the time. It was kind of weird to me that she chose to end the book - or technically the penguin essay, since I just said each chapter was like a short book - focusing on the baby penguin at Sea World who, while it would never see the wild place that its parents and family came from, would always be safe because it was in captivity. That just didn't sit well with me.

Other than that gripe, yes, I'm totally jealous of all these adventures in which she's been able to participate - it's all a bunch of stuff I will never get to see, or at least not in the same way she has, what with the declines in wildlife and wild places. At least I get to read about it in these wonderful books. If Ackerman comes out with any more animal-related books, I'm there!

A couple more of my favorite quotes:

Kent Vliet, biologist, crocodilian researcher: "You see, their whole philosophy is that a wild animal is being wasted if it has economic potential that isn't being used. That's a rather mercenary way to think about wild animals." (p93)

Vliet: "Alligators are big crocodilians, but they're shy and retiring, very passive creatures, even the largest males. Crocodiles, on the other hand, are agile and mean and fast, superpredators that consider humans prey items. Alligators just aren't like that. They're real pussycats." (p95)

Roger Payne, biologist, whale researcher: "I had a grandfather, a lumberman, who cut nothing

but walnut trees, sometimes for whole years at a time, and that excess on his part, and on the part of his contemporaries, ensured that I would never have walnut except as the most exotic of woods. He was shortsighted. Was anyone warning him? I bet there was. Going on with the destruction of a species until it's brought to the point of extinction is madness - not just a little mad or slightly mad. It's authentic madness." (p163)

Ackerman:

As far as I could see in any direction, icebergs meandered against a backdrop of tall, crumbly Antarctic glaciers, which were still pure and unexplored. Human feet had not touched the glaciers I saw; nor had many pairs of eyes beheld them. In many ways, the Antarctic is a world of suspended animation. Suspended between outer space and the fertile continents. Suspended in time - without a local civilization to make history. Civilization has been brought to it; it has never sustained any of its own. It sits suspended in a hanging nest of world politics. When things die in the Antarctic, they decay slowly. What has been is still there and will always be, unless we interfere. (p209)

"Tenacity," I said, thinking out loud - and not meaning the macaroni penguin's tenacity, exactly, but life's. Life hangs on in such out-of-the-way places, pushes on with such ingenuity and bravado. Turning over a mother-of-pearl-lined limpet shell on Elephant Island a few days earlier, I had seen a hundred squirming wingless flies. Life just seemed to keep reinventing itself - inside a limpet shell, or hundreds of feet up on a rocky cliff above a roaring ocean. (p336)

Rebecca says

Reading this book brought back the feelings of childhood: the immense curiosity and wonder at life, the excitement of learning, facts that inspire awe, stories that provoke wonder. This book stoked emotions that are rarely touched by manmade objects and are usually only reached by nature itself, and I found myself getting excited and worked up with each new piece of knowledge gained. I didn't want this book to end. I wanted to keep on reading and keep on learning more and more about everything this world has to offer. Diane Ackerman is such a talented writer. She is poetic but not grandiose, reflective but not self-absorbed, interesting and involved but not egotistical. She is humble, easily impressed, thoughtful, observant, and loving, and she wishes to tell us all about all the amazing things she's lived and learned about whales, bats, penguins, and crocodilians.

If Diane Ackerman wrote a thousand-page account of the entire history of civilization, I'd read it. And the moment I finished it, I know I'd want to read it again.

"The Moon by Whale Light" is a book I've been recommending to everyone I talk to, and there is already a three-person waiting list of friends eager to get their hands on my copy after hearing me spout just a few of the many amazing animal facts I've learned from every page.

It's an inspirational read, one that will make you want to learn more about every single living creature, that will cause you to look differently at every animal you see, and think differently about mankind's position in relation to everything else. I appreciate this book immensely, and I am so, so grateful I was able to read it. It has enriched my life beyond measure.

Kayris says

Loved it, especially the chapter on bats. Like many other reviews, I would have loved to see some pictures and maps. However, I did go to the Internet to look up Bat Conservation International and am seriously considering putting a bat house in my yard. I'm also recommending this book for people I know who are freaked out by bats. Some of the traveling the author did that led to this material happened over 20 years ago, which makes me wonder the current status of the 4 animals she wrote about.

Sarah says

I would give this six stars if I could.

Maddy says

Ackerman is a lovely writer. Even when she doesn't talk about the animals as much as the researchers (e.g. the whales chapter), still interesting!

Laurie says

I really loved this book. It is filled with beautiful descriptions of Ackerman's experiences learning about four different types of animals: bats, crocodilians, whales and penguins. In each chapter I learned unexpected things about the animals, and experienced Ackerman's wonder at the beauty and uniqueness of each animal group. Seriously, I cannot say enough good things about this book. Ackerman perfectly captures that feeling of awe and wonder experienced when observing nature working so perfectly. I recommend this to anyone interested in animal behavior or nature writing.

Sherrill Watson says

Whales by Moonlight?

In these masterful essays written in 1991 Ms. Ackerman gives us some insight into what it's like to travel with the primary researchers in their fields of bats, penguins, crocodiles and whales and study with them. Decidedly NOT squeamish and matter-of-factly determined, they give her their reads on their findings into the various animals in their habitats, which she faithfully reports, adding poetic and beautiful passages a little like a travelogue. I have no intention of going into a bat cave (except with Batman!) or to the Antarctic to see penguins, and I get too seasick to even go out and see whales on Maui, but I found her descriptions of those animals fascinating.
