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Reconnecting with the Non-human World: Loss and Uncertainty in Esther Woolfson's *Field Notes from a Hidden City: An Urban Nature Diary*

Abstract. The article focuses on the issue of reconnecting with the non-human world of animals and plants that can be encountered in the city, as presented in Esther Woolfson's book *Field Notes from a Hidden City: An Urban Nature Diary*. Even though it deals with an urban environment, the book can be treated as an instance of nature writing, more specifically British new nature writing. By focusing on non-human beings living in the city, Woolfson makes them more salient in the readers' minds, demonstrating that direct contact with nature is not limited to the wilderness or the countryside and is accessible to anyone, regardless of where they live. At the same time, her diary reveals underlying sorrow connected with the gradual loss of species, populations, habitats, and familiar weather patterns, as well as uncertainty as to what can and should be done to protect the environment and the living beings that inhabit it.

Keywords: Esther Woolfson, new nature writing, urban nature, city, animals, environment, ecology

1. Introduction

The article aims to investigate Esther Woolfson's book *Field Notes from a Hidden City: An Urban Nature Diary* as an attempt to explore human connections with the natural world and non-human beings in an urban environment. While the wilderness, national parks, or the countryside receive much attention from environmentalists and nature lovers alike, urban environments are frequently underappreciated, forgotten, or ignored. Thus, Woolfson's book contributes to increasing the salience of urban nature in readers' minds. At the same time, it reveals the losses that the non-human world has suffered,

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both in cities and elsewhere, and uncertainty about how to care for the environment and its inhabitants.

The article begins with discussing Woolfson's book in the context of nature writing, specifically British new nature writing. The concept of salience and its application in investigating nature writing is also introduced. The next section is devoted to the issue of nature writing as a way to face loss and uncertainty, which is then explored throughout the article. The following part offers an analysis of selected passages from the book which focus on different non-human beings in cities and various environmental issues connected with them. In general, it is argued that Woolfson's diary is an attempt to make urban nature more salient and to foster connections between humans and non-human beings. Simultaneously, it expresses sorrow over the losses and uncertainty about the fate of the natural world and its inhabitants.

2. Esther Woolfson's Book as an Instance of Nature Writing

Field Notes from a Hidden City: An Urban Nature Diary is not a typical instance of nature writing as it deals with nature in the city. The majority of nature writers, especially those living in America, describe their excursions or their stay in some kind of wilderness, such as a national park, a desert, mountains, or their daily walks in local countryside, in areas such as woods, fields and meadows, and sometimes their life on a farm. As a result, readers who live in urban areas and have no opportunity and no financial resources to travel to the places those writers present (or to similar ones) may find it difficult to understand or to relate to such texts, as pointed out by, for example, Michael P. Branch in his article on teaching nature writing to students.

In contrast, Woolfson, who lives in the city of Aberdeen on the east coast of Scotland, describes her experience of nature in that place over the span of one year. She searches for a connection with nature wherever she can find it: in a park, on the river bank, on the beach, in her own back garden. Even though some of those places are close to the city centre, they appear remote and retain their natural beauty and calm, offering a respite for the inhabitants of the city. She devotes her free time to walking, gardening, feeding birds, watching the sky at night, and observing weather phenomena. In her diary she focuses on many common species of animals found in cities, especially different kinds of birds, but also rodents, and even slugs and snails, as well as her numerous pets, past and present. As a result, most readers can easily relate to her experience no matter where they live, even though not all of them may own gardens or live on the coast, as she does.

Woolfson's diary can be considered as an instance of nature writing, more specifically the recent trend of so-called British new nature writing. Nature writing is usually autobiographical writing in which the natural world plays a significant role, often in the form of a collection of essays, a diary, a journal, an excursion narrative, or a travel

narrative (for an overview of typical forms and themes, see, for example, Lyon). New nature writers often combine "autobiography, travelogue, natural history and popular science" (Hubbard and Wilkinson 254) in their works, which are frequently "thematically wide-ranging and stylistically digressive, combining personal reflection with natural history, cultural history, psychogeography, travel and topographical writing, folklore and prose poetry" (Moran 49). As a result, there is no general agreement on whether nature writing should be treated as a genre with different subgenres (which is the most common approach) or perhaps as a literary tradition that can find its expression through different genres (see Smith, "New Nature Writing" 267).

Nature writing differs significantly from professional scientific accounts of the natural world and even from many popular science books about nature. In nature writing, the narrator and his/her/their activities, reactions, thoughts, and emotions play an important role, offering a characteristic combination of scientific and poetic language, of scientific knowledge and personal reflections, "stretching and complicating the scientific in inviting ways" (Smith, "New Nature Writing" 268). Scott Slovic argues that many nature writers focus not only on the natural world itself but also on the ways in which their minds interact with it, especially on their heightened awareness, which is partly a consequence of trying to articulate their experience and combining aesthetic appreciation and scientific understanding of natural phenomena, so characteristic of nature writing in general (3–4). As Joe Moran claims, contemporary nature writers are convinced that trying to describe and make sense of nature through language "increases our attentiveness to it and potential for caring for it" (61).

Although the term "new nature writing" was used for the first time in 2008 by Jason Cowley, Jos Smith in his book *The New Nature Writing* argues that the beginnings of the trend date back to the early 1970s, a period of increased concern about the condition of the natural world, and the development of environmental activism in Britain (4). However, it was only at the beginning of the twenty-first century that new nature writing gained popularity (11). New nature writers tend to concentrate on specific places and local areas, while at the same time being conscious of connections between local and global issues; they are concerned about the destruction of the environment and its roots in society and the economy, aware of the fact that nowadays all landscapes and ecosystems are to some degree modified by humans, and conscious of numerous connections between people and other living beings (Abberley et al. 198).

British new nature writing is distinct from American nature writing in general, since it deals with landscapes heavily modified by human culture and civilisation, as opposed to the seemingly pristine wilderness celebrated by many American nature writers, who are often not aware of or familiar with its former native inhabitants and their cultures. In contrast, the British variety is much more focused on cultural elements and the cultural history of the described places (see Smith, "Archipelagic Literature" 6–7). Phil

Hubbard and Eleanor Wilkinson observe that most nature writers in Britain attempt to overcome the opposition between nature and culture, and explore interconnections between the land and the lives of its human inhabitants (253). Thus, contemporary British nature writing frequently concentrates on "the mutual entanglement of the human and the nonhuman and the profoundly cultural attitudes and assumptions embedded in the natural world" (Abberley et al. 201).

New nature writing is also distinct from earlier British nature writing in several ways. Contemporary writers are primarily interested "not in the rare or exotic but in our everyday connections with the non-human natural world," in "small-scale and quotidian encounters with nature, often in unpromising surroundings" (Moran 50). Consequently, they explore quite ordinary places, often halfway between the city and the countryside or affected in the past by industrialisation, and their works emphasise the significance of such places for the wellbeing of their human and non-human inhabitants (Hubbard and Wilkinson 254). Thus, this kind of literature questions the way people have traditionally evaluated landscapes in the past, giving preference to the countryside or to the mountains. Finally, new nature writing differs from earlier British texts in its rejection of pastoral and romantic traditions as well as "the conservative tradition of a nationalistic landscape aesthetic" in favour of a broader and more contemporary perspective on global environmental issues (Smith, "New Nature Writing" 270).

Arran Stibbe argues that British new nature writing is a genre that makes nature more salient in readers' minds. He defines salience as "a story in people's minds that an area of life is important or worthy of attention" (162). Certain salience patterns can be used to provide "a linguistic or visual representation of an area of life as worthy of attention through concrete, specific and vivid depictions" (Stibbe 162). He enumerates many different strategies employed by new nature writers to increase salience, including the following: (1) personalisation of animals achieved, for example, by using the pronouns "he" or "she" rather than "it", and "who" rather than "which" to refer to animals, or by presenting animals as unique, irreplaceable individuals rather than as a mass or as typical representatives of a given species identical to one another; (2) presenting animals as agents (active participants doing something in the world) or as sensers (conscious beings that think, feel, and perceive their surroundings with their senses); (3) employing vocabulary referring to basic level categories (the names of specific species, the level at which it is easiest to imagine animals) rather than to abstract superordinate categories (such as "fauna" or "mammal"); (4) using sense images (subjective descriptions of nature referring to multiple senses to help the reader to imagine a given scene vividly), which frequently involve employing metaphors and similes (see Stibbe 174–180).

The opposite of making something salient is its erasure from a text. According to Stibbe (146), erasure can be defined as "a story in people's minds that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration". The use of various erasure patterns results

in "a linguistic representation of an area of life as irrelevant, marginal or unimportant through its systematic absence, backgrounding or distortion in texts" (146). Obviously, erasure of unimportant details is an unavoidable process in creating any text. It becomes meaningful or even problematic only if something that is deemed important by the analyst is repeatedly omitted, ignored, or just mentioned briefly, when "something which is present in reality, and could possibly have been represented, has been excluded" (Stibbe 149).

It can be observed that Esther Woolfson's book has many characteristics of new nature writing. It combines the form of a diary with dated entries with interspersed essays on specific animals and environmental issues. Reported scientific findings are intermingled with accounts of personal experiences and reflections. Like some recent nature writing, the book focuses on ordinary landscapes and animals, in this case found in a city. Finally, like many other new nature writers, Woolfson pays attention to broader environmental concerns and issues, without giving any simple answer or suggesting easy solutions.

As far as salience and erasure are concerned, one can observe that while the non-human world of animals and plants is given salience in Woolfson's diary by being presented in detail by means of all the strategies mentioned above, the world of humans is to some extent erased, except for the narrator herself and her actions. She devotes a lot of attention to animals and plants surrounding her, to her memories of her former pets or wild birds she once tried to rescue, and to scientific studies of animals she has read. Humans, on the other hand, are absent from the text or backgrounded, lacking individualisation. For example, her adult daughters, who no longer live with her, are only briefly mentioned in her memories, while animals play the main part in them and are described in detail. The reader gets the impression that she lives alone in her house and works alone in her garden. It is not until the last part of the book ("September 7th") that her husband suddenly appears in a description of their walk together, and even then she devotes more attention to a dead shrew that they encounter than to him. Other people, if they appear at all, are presented only as unnamed walking companions or anonymous members of an organised trip. As a result of the partial erasure and backgrounding of humans, non-human beings become even more salient in the text.

3. Nature Writing as a Way to Face Loss and Uncertainty

Even though the human element is downplayed, nature writing can still be considered a special type of life writing. Mark Allister, in his study of nature writing as a kind of autobiography, focuses on several books that follow a similar pattern: "All are books of mourning. All begin with the writers recounting a recent trauma and describing their initial despair and subsequent depression. All the books end with the writer announcing that they have moved—tentatively, awkwardly, mysteriously—through the mourning process" (1). As he observes, what helps those writers to deal with their grief is focusing on and writing about

the non-human world surrounding them, which starts a healing process for them. While Allister focuses on examples from American literature, a good instance of this kind of book among representatives of British new nature writing could be *Nature Cure* by Richard Mabey, originally published in 2005, which recounts the author's attempts to overcome his depression through, among other things, direct contact with nature and writing about it.

While Esther Woolfson's book is different in many ways, as it is a fragmentary diary rather than an autobiography, and since there is no definite initial trauma or depression that she attempts to heal through her writing, the awareness of losses and the feelings of sorrow, uncertainty, and helplessness surface throughout the diary. Over the year, her attempts to reconnect with the non-human inhabitants of her immediate environment appear to offer some kind of comfort, even if only the comfort of community and common fate.

One source of her sadness appears to be the unavoidable passage of time and transience of all things. Her diary is interspersed with memories of the past: her family, including her little daughters, who are now grown up and have left their home, all her past pets, now buried in the garden, and all those wild animals that she brought home over time and tried to rescue. As she contemplates a photo of her small daughter in the bare garden, now overgrown with all kinds of plants, she observes: "Everything has changed and grown: the tree, the empty flowerbeds, the small girl on the grass" ("March 1st"). Both the human and the non-human world are unified in transience and constant change. Her present loneliness without her daughters and pets is coupled with a sense of inability to protect and save the ones she cares about. She can feed animals in her garden, but she cannot protect them from predators or from other people outside. She can bring injured or sick birds home, but she cannot always save them. This vulnerability as well as her helplessness extend across all beings, ranging from birds to her offspring, as she observes in the entry from May 10th: "I cannot save anything in this world. I cannot defend anything from anything. (Child-rearing is the most ambitious enterprise in this direction that I have endeavoured.)" Placing both animals and her children in the same sentence, she emphasises the unity of their fate and their precarious position in the external world beyond her control and protection.

Another source of her sorrow seems to be the realisation that despite all available scientific knowledge about the natural world, or perhaps because of its vastness and complexity, it is still uncertain how to properly care for and protect the environment and the beings living in it, humans included. The uncertainty about the future of the world and the feeling of grief follow from the awareness of loss: the loss of entire extinct species, the loss of whole populations of animals once inhabiting her city or her country, and finally even the loss of familiar weather patterns as a result of climate change.

The last loss is the impulse that leads her to start keeping her diary, as she explains in the Introduction: "It may have been the winter, the worst many people had ever experienced which, in its startling and prolonged severity, had brought an atmosphere of strangeness,

a feeling of closing in and uncertainty, that had encouraged me to feel reflective." The hard winter also made her acutely aware of "the effects of weather, the ways in which we all live with it in precarious dependence," conscious of the vulnerability of both humans and non-human beings inhabiting the same environment: a young, injured pigeon found in the snow and brought home "seemed to symbolise the fragility that suddenly I felt was there, at the heart of everything" ("Introduction"). It is the disappearance of predictable weather patterns, then, that makes her realise the loss of stability and safety, and start her diary.

As she observes in the Introduction: "It seemed a year designed to test every certainty, to bring the stirrings of disquiet, to make you wonder what might be next and when." In addition to the unusual snow and frost, she enumerates other natural disasters and anomalies that were concentrated in that year all over the world, such as heavy rains and floods, or extreme heat, earthquakes and ash clouds from volcano eruptions. One result of those circumstances was limitations imposed on travelling, both by plane because of the ash clouds, and by train or car because of the heavy snow, which made her cancel her trips, change her plans, and stay at home. Consequently, she decided to focus on her immediate environment, "a world in miniature" ("November 24th").

For the contemporary reader, her descriptions and reflections from that period are reminiscent of the shock and uncertainty of the year 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns in cities, and restrictions on travelling, which also increased people's appreciation of local nature. Her descriptions of life in the city during the heavy snow and severe cold especially evoke associations with the lockdowns that later emptied city streets during the pandemic: "everything seems to have shrunk to the possible or just the necessary. … It's a city silence, weighty and unnerving, all sudden, unexpected absence" ("November 27th"). The feeling of unusual loneliness pervades the few short walks she takes during that period: "I'm often the only person in the street. Traffic's sparse. … very few cars pass and I'm alone. It makes me think of wars, disasters, prolonged sieges, but it's only snow" ("November 28th"). It appears that all kinds of unusual and unexpected disasters that disrupt familiar routine make people realise their vulnerability and the fragility of their civilisation, their ways of life, their plans, and their future, questioning the stability of their world, which they have taken for granted. In times of uncertainty, they may turn to the local natural world for solace, as Woolfson does. Even if nature is threatened too, at least a sense of community with non-human beings may emerge, which in turn may change attitudes and improve the ways in which those beings are treated.

4. Reconnecting with Non-human Inhabitants of Aberdeen

Esther Woolfson's diary presents different encounters with animals in the city. There are vivid descriptions of animals and their behaviour, which frequently offer a starting point for more general reflections on various environmental issues. She emphasises similarities

and connections between human and non-human beings and their intertwined lives in a common urban environment. While the book makes urban nature more salient in the minds of the readers, which can emphasise its importance and contribute to its greater appreciation, at the same time it reveals her uncertainty about what one could or should do in the face of all the losses of individual beings, populations, species, and locations crucial for their wellbeing or their very existence.

In the introduction to her "urban nature diary" Woolfson signals one of the main themes of her book: "In one city, there are more cities than we know, hidden cities inhabited by those with whom we share everything we rely on: food and light and air. In differing degrees, we share our vulnerability to the elements that shape and dominate our lives: cold or heat, wind and rain" ("Introduction"). Throughout the book she emphasises commonalities between human and non-human inhabitants of the city, demonstrates how their existence is intertwined, how animals enrich the lives of humans, how people's decisions and actions affect, intentionally or not, the lives of other creatures around them in positive or negative ways, but also how both human and non-human beings alike are affected by unfavourable weather conditions or by spreading urbanisation.

She begins her diary with the story of a young, injured pigeon that she rescued and brought home one cold winter night. Like humans, pigeons are common city dwellers, familiar with and adapted to their urban environment. When the bird recovers, she decides to return him "to the wild", that is to the place he comes from and where other members of his species live. She observes that in this case, "the wild" will be the nearby neo-Gothic church and streets with Victorian villas not far from the city centre. Yet "this was a wild bird – a wild, city bird although the words 'wild' and 'city' seemed difficult to reconcile" ("Introduction").

Extending the sense and use of the word "wild" to places and animals usually not considered wild is a characteristic of new nature writing in general. As Graham Huggan observes: "The wild means different things to different people: a quality of self, a relation to the world, an atavistic memory. The 'new nature writing' explores the broken connections between these" (165). Wildness is understood by British nature writers differently than by many American ones,[2] since it is hard to encounter truly wild places in such a small country which has been civilised for centuries (Abberley et al. 206). As a result, British writers, such as Robert Macfarlane in *The Wild Places*, separate the idea of wildness from the concept of wilderness, with its connotations of a vast, uninhabited

2 However, this contrast is not universal. For instance, Henry David Thoreau, one of the fathers of nature writing in America, was aware of the distinction between the wilderness and wildness, and demonstrated in his writings that the quality of wildness does not depend on a particular location and can be encountered anywhere, even in places modified by human civilisation (see Suchostawska 45–46).

area, and are able to perceive wildness in "everyday experience in a 'hybrid world' that is neither social nor natural, but both of these things, and in multiple possible variations" (Abberley et al. 206). In contrast to the notion of wilderness, referring to an area apparently unchanged by human activity, the concept of wildness is less dependent on a particular location, since it may refer to the quality of any being "resistant to human control, prediction or understanding" (Clark 33).

Woolfson wonders if perhaps people regard feral animals that live in the city as "less wild" than animals living in forests or mountains, as "a lesser part of nature". As she points out: "Their presence may be the only contact many urban people have with the natural world but our relationship with them seems changed by proximity, diminished by the very fact of their being here among us" ("Introduction"). She fears that human inhabitants of cities might be perceived similarly by people living in the country, not as part of nature but as those who are alienated from it and who contribute more to the exploitation and pollution of the environment. In another place she wonders why in Scotland walking in the city is generally less valued than walking in the countryside, just by virtue of its location: "to walk in the hills is worthy, to walk in town isn't" ("April 7th"), even though it is the same type of activity. When local nature is protected, "wilder" places are more salient and attract more attention than urban locations and their dwellers. Woolfson's goal is to give greater salience to the latter.

Yet despite the fact that cities are teeming with animals and comprise semi-natural areas, such as parks or river banks, which offer a retreat for humans and animals alike, these green spaces are sometimes under threat of disappearing. Alternatively, access to them may be denied to the public, as when a green area becomes surrounded by houses on all sides and accessible only to their owners through their private back gardens. Woolfson describes a beautiful old public garden on the river bank close to the busiest road, a place where people come with their children to rest and play and where, high in the old trees, rooks have lived for as long as she can remember and probably much longer. As she reports, there are plans to convert the area into a shopping centre and a parking lot. The rooks will lose their home, and the human inhabitants of the city will lose an opportunity to encounter nature: "Where will they [the rooks] go? Where will people without gardens sit on the warm days of summer?" ("July 28th"). Both animal and human city dwellers need such places, and both groups will suffer from this loss. Moreover, as she points out, studies have shown that crows remember their favourite places for generations and keep returning to those locations, now turned into shopping centres and car parks, just for this reason. Many birds, including migratory ones, are characterised by so-called philopatry or place fidelity, the affinity they have for locations that they were born in, to which they return every year to build nests. Yet those places are often thoughtlessly destroyed. Such devastation can negatively impact a particular bird population and their number in a given area.

Throughout her diary Woolfson observes how people value rare or endangered animals, which become salient in people's minds because of their status as threatened with extinction, more than common and familiar ones, like, for instance, a woman interested in songbirds who openly expressed her hatred of pigeons. Large ubiquitous birds, such as pigeons, crows, or seagulls, are often perceived by inhabitants of cities as a nuisance, as unpleasant creatures that cause disorder and pollution, even though people have contributed to the problem themselves. For example, as she points out in her entry from August 11th, both overfishing of the seas and the increase of edible food leftovers in rubbish bins have caused seagulls to leave their natural environment and move into coastal cities. When one day she observes a woman sitting in front of a building and sharing her breakfast with a gull and talking to the bird, she thinks that perhaps the woman comes from a place where seagulls are rare, and that the creature is new to her, since inhabitants of Aberdeen generally treat them with indifference or complain about the disorder and noise they make. She asks: "Does it take unfamiliar eyes to value what we have?" ("August 22nd"). To counter this attitude of indifference, Woolfson provides her readers with vivid descriptions of common city birds, their behaviour and habits, emphasising their intelligence and their family and social links with other members of their species. Thus, she defamiliarizes those birds to some extent, making them appear interesting, attractive, and exceptional, increasing their salience in readers' minds. If certain species are perceived as common, ordinary, unworthy of attention, there is a danger that some of them may become nearly extinct, and it will be only then that people will start to notice, value, and protect them, which may already be too late. An example of such a situation may be the fate of herring gulls, starlings, and sparrows, once common birds that have become endangered in Britain: "They are 'red list' birds, ones we forgot to value or didn't know how to, ones we didn't know we needed to protect" ("Flying through the Storm"). The fate of British sparrows in particular reflects this common pattern of a paradoxical evaluation of animals: once they were so widespread that they were treated as pests by farmers and killed on a massive scale; now they are rare and protected.

Starlings, once present in large numbers in Aberdeen, are disappearing, too. Woolfson relates her memories of large clouds of starlings in the evening sky, "darting urban commuters making their way across the city to their meeting point", with crowds of spectators watching from the streets the spectacle which "transformed the sky, the city, the lives of the observers with the inexplicable mystery of their precision and grace" ("January 29th"). She wonders if, from the point of view of starlings, their human spectators also appeared to them a unified mass on the ground, "if they looked down from their elevated high-flying towards those of us watching from the pavement, and see only undifferentiated members of another species" ("January 29th"). Since individualisation and personalisation increase the salience of a given being in people's minds, it requires a personal relationship with an individual representative of another species to appreciate

his or her uniqueness, exceptionality, and worth. Woolfson recalls her relationship with a particular starling called Max, who lived with her in her house, and how this relationship, in turn, changed and enriched her perception of the cloud of anonymous birds.

The crowds of starlings over the city have disappeared, though, as a result of human decisions. The town council decided to put a net over the bridge where the starlings gathered for the night, because of the accumulating dirt that had to be regularly removed. However, she believes that it was a small price to pay for retaining their habitat and their presence. Nowadays, the sky is empty and quiet as few starlings remain in Aberdeen: "They look lost, disembodied, as if they've been broken off something larger, something whole." The council's decision has affected in a negative way not only the birds but also the present and future inhabitants of the city: "I wonder how future generations will learn about the value of the life around them, of birds such as starlings. How will they know what they've lost or are losing?" ("January 29th"). One of the reasons for such removals of non-human dwellers of cities is the argument that animals such as birds and rats may carry dangerous diseases. However, according to Woolfson, such a threat is largely exaggerated. Moreover, she points out that every being, including humans, may spread a disease: "Condemned as disease carriers, they are only as we all are or might be, as many other animals and birds are" ("Fellow Travellers"). She observes that members of our species are perhaps the most likely to spread diseases all over the world due to increasing mass tourism and global trade, as the recent COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated.

Not only birds attract her attention, though. For instance, she devotes a whole chapter to squirrels. As she observes, squirrels are not only clever, intelligent storers of food, which they hide from other animals in many carefully selected places that they remember, but also inquisitive, curious creatures. She recalls how one day she noticed a squirrel on the other side of her kitchen window, peering through the glass at the humans and their pets gathered inside "with the half-alarmed, half-fascinated look of a small child at a zoo, … peering in at the assembled company, nose and tiny paws pressed against the pane" ("The Fugitive in the Garden"). In this passage, the usual subject-object relationship is reversed and, instead of the typical scene of a human subject observing animals, there is a squirrel subject watching the way humans live.

As usual, Woolfson intermingles descriptions of her particular encounters with individual squirrels with broader reflections on their fate and the changing ways in which they (and other species, including plants) are labelled and judged. She recounts the story of red and grey squirrels in Britain. American grey squirrels were introduced in the nineteenth century and they have almost replaced the native population of red squirrels in Scotland, being more resistant to a disease which they also spread. As a result, the rare "native" red squirrels are now welcome, while grey squirrels are regarded as an invasive species, persecuted, trapped, and killed. Consequently, even the fact that a grey squirrel comes to her garden to eat bird food makes her feel as if she is "harbouring a fugitive", and she fears that

others may consider her tolerant attitude as "subversive". She reflects on how using certain words, such as "invader", "invasion", "invasive" species, words that trigger the frame[3] of war and conquest, changes our attitude to certain animals and plants. Paradoxically, the now admired red squirrels were once so numerous that they were regarded as pests and killed in large numbers until the beginning of the twentieth century, which also contributed to their drastic decline. Watching a red squirrel, she observes: "It is as lovely, as delicate a creature as it would have been while it was being persecuted as a 'pest.' As I watch it, it occurs to me that all that changes is human perception" ("The Fugitive in the Garden"). Labels and attitudes to species evolve over time. To a person facing an individual animal in an unprejudiced way, representatives of both species are equally admirable. Each of them is simply another being that wants to live. The question is whether people have a right (or even an obligation) to kill an animal just because it belongs to a specific species considered "invasive" or a "pest" when this creature actually poses no threat to them.

The controversy over squirrels in Britain is just one instance of a broader conflict between two distinct approaches to living creatures, namely ecology and the animal rights movement. As Greg Garrard points out, many animal liberationists argue that it is immoral to cause pain to any sentient being, whereas environmentalists consider the suffering of an individual animal as an inevitable aspect of natural life (139–140). Consequently, as Timothy Clark observes, animal liberationists tend to treat "the animal as an individual existence, more in the way in which a person is considered" (179). Ecologists, on the other hand, "esteem a species in terms of its place in an ecosystem: value lies in the ecosystem as a whole, not in the individual", which leads to debates between the two groups, for example concerning ethical aspects of exterminating a growing population of invasive species (Clark 180–181).

Woolfson comments that "invasions" of foreign species of animals and plants, caused either by humans importing and introducing them, intentionally or not, or by animals spreading to new localities, are quite common and have always taken place. While some populations are really detrimental to local species and habitats, it is not entirely clear what should be done about them. Others, however, may pose no significant threat, so there is little point in trying to extirpate them, "waging war against an enemy that is, perhaps, no enemy at all" ("The Fugitive in the Garden"). For instance, as she reads more on the subject of invasive species, it turns out that she has an invasive species of rose in her garden. She wonders if she should remove and destroy the beautiful plant or let it grow there and enchant the inhabitants and passers-by alike, as it used to in the past, when the concept of invasive species was unknown.

As usual, the questions remain unanswered, and the reader is confronted with a large body of references to other texts and invited to reflect on the issue, as well as on the others tackled throughout the book. Woolfson often poses thought-provoking questions

3 For a discussion of the notions of frames and framing in texts about the environment, see Stibbe (46–62).

which the readers are invited to ponder and then come up with their own responses, as she refrains from giving any straightforward and decisive answers. Her unwillingness, or perhaps inability, to answer the questions she raises reveals her uncertainty about what should be done to protect nature, as well as the accompanying realisation of the limited scale of a single person's influence on the world. This uncertainty is not lessened with the growth of scientific knowledge, and perhaps even heightened because of its complexity, as scientists and society in general are faced with more and more facts and contradictory interpretations and opinions. Coupled with that uncertainty is the awareness of the unavoidable loss of species, habitats, environments, and familiar weather conditions, a feeling of loss of stability and predictability of the world.

5. Conclusion

Esther Woolfson's book is an unusual example of nature writing in that it does not deal with life or travels in the wilderness or in the countryside. Instead, the book is an account of one year she spent at home in her city, giving salience to urban nature and urban environments with their non-human inhabitants. The diary demonstrates that it is possible to seek and find a connection with the natural world even in one's home city. Small areas scattered in the middle of the urban landscape, such as parks, river banks, or back gardens, are teeming with wildlife, not to mention various species kept as pets. Thus, it is possible to observe and interact with a number of animals, as well as plants, regardless of where one lives. The fact that Woolfson deals with urban nature makes it easy for most readers, even those who live in cities, to relate to the text. Reading her account may make them more attentive and sympathetic to urban nature, animals, plants and green areas, and to appreciate and care for them to a greater extent than before.

Moreover, her diary emphasises that human and non-human beings alike form a community of inhabitants of the city, dependent on the same environment, sharing the same space, and enjoying or suffering the same weather conditions, so people should learn how to coexist with non-human inhabitants of their cities and think about their decisions and actions, which may have a strong positive or negative influence on other beings' existence. Thus, while the feeling of community with non-human beings can give comfort and joy to people, it cannot be forgotten that the community is threatened, that certain losses are already unavoidable, and that there is still no agreement on the best course of action to protect and save the world from further losses.

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