**REVIEW** by Knut Hoem, 26/8-20, NRKNorwegian Broadcasting Corporation

**Oh, oh, oh! Brilliant about nature and culture**

Conservation biologist Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson’s message is simple: We humans are just one species among ten million. We are undoubtedly among the more creative and inventive. But other species certainly are as well. We have done so much damage over the centuries but if we are now to try and repair our planet again, we can draw on ample assistance from the other species out there.

Aided by a wealth of astonishing and jaw-dropping examples, Sverdrup-Thygeson demonstrates that we stand on the shoulders of nature and that, in many cases, it can be important to let nature repair herself. All we have to do is make sure we provide the necessary conditions. To take one of many examples in the book, it may be sensible to ensure that mangrove trees are allowed to grow in the sea along the coast of Asia because they turn out to offer much more effective protection against tsunamis than even the most advanced human constructions can achieve.

**No Filter in Central Park**

The book opens with something of a rarity: good news from New York. The city has the world’s largest unfiltered water system. Instead of spending billions on a filtration plant, they chose to set up a system that lets the water flow unhindered from the surrounding rivers and mountains until it ends up in the drinking fountain in Central Park – to the delight of the thirsty author, who comes jogging by.

The capacity of nature and species to regulate, mitigate and repair is a recurring theme throughout the book. We simply need to find out what abilities even fairly one-track-minded organisms actually possess. Are you among those who have underestimated the skills of the tiny *Turritopsis* jellyfish? Well, unlike us, it is capable of being reborn over and over again and can even teach us more about how to control the cells in our bodies and repair damaged tissue.

**Naturally Personal**

Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson is a person with several passions in her life, the most important being insects, dogs, fungi and other organisms that thrive in dead trees.

These are not interests that I, with an academic background in the humanities, initially share.

Phenomena familiar from science lessons, such as photosynthesis and pollination, also need a bit of a boost to capture my interest. So it helps that Sverdrup-Thygeson readily draws on culture to explain nature. One example of this is when she compares nature’s ability to archive information about earlier times in bogs and growth rings with the document collections of Norway’s National Archive at Sognsvann in Oslo.

**Livening things up with frogs**

She also goes in the opposite direction, showing how knowledge about nature can lead to a new understanding of cultural phenomena. Could Jan Eggum’s classic song ‘Mor, jeg vil tilbake’ (Mother, I want to go back) actually describe the gastric-brooding frog, which gives birth to its young through its mouth? Well, perhaps that interpretation is stretching things a bit, but it certainly makes for lively writing.

Somewhat more relevant, then is her reading of T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘Ash Wednesday’. She shows how the yew tree is not just the source of the cancer medicine taxol, but that the ancient Celts also believed the tree could bring back the voices of the dead, ‘like a whisper’, as Eliot puts it in his poem:

*‘This is the time of tension between dying and birth  
The place of solitude where three dreams cross  
Between blue rocks  
But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away  
Let the other yew be shaken and reply.’*

There is nothing spectacular about being interested in both the natural and mythological properties of the yew tree. Once, people would have called this common knowledge.

**A unique specimen**

Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson is a biology professor with high-level communications skills. She is not alone in this but I would claim that the vivid links she draws between nature and culture make her a unique exemplar of the species.

Like her two previous books, ‘On the Shoulders of Nature’ will probably reach an international audience. But it is important to create this kind of popular non-fiction on the basis of our flora and fauna, using locally sourced references and language. It does something to the text when the author is both at home in the lyrical universe of Jan Eggum and in the vicinity when black ravens are helping maintain order in nature by guzzling dead reindeer on the Hardanger Plateau.

**If you are only going to read one book on species diversity this year, this is definitely the one!**