Book review: A fantastic journey through the secrets of nature

A bullseye of a book: Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson has written an eloquent, funny and exciting book about the connections in nature.

Hilde Østby

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Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson:

*On the Shoulders of Nature. How Ten Million Species Save your Life* (non-fiction)

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It goes without saying that I had great expectations for this book – after all I loved the previous one! Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson conquered not just *my* heart, but the hearts of people worldwide with her well-written and engaging best-seller, *Insektenes Planet* (Extraordinary Insects, 2018).

The professor of conservation biology is at the forefront of a new generation of Norwegian scientists who are keen to communicate. They aren’t afraid of giving their material a tabloid spin to ensure that we ‘ordinary people’ understand it.

Last year, Sverdrup-Thygeson also wrote a children’s book about insects. She appears to be almost tireless in her engagement on behalf of our nature, not only as a scientist and author but also as a communicator on TV and radio.

More Ambitious

This year’s project is more ambitious than the previous one. In a short book, barely 200 pages in length, she aims to inspire her reader with awe for nature’s inconceivable diversity and ingenious interconnections.

She seeks to be entertaining and eloquent, and to disseminate knowledge about natural science while also spanning a broader horizon. It should be virtually impossible to do all this simultaenously – and yet she manages it!

*On the Shoulders of Nature* describes the *Morpho* butterfly’s blue colouring and the way it can inspire top-class modern technology. It tells the stories of an arsenic murder in the author’s own family, river mussels that can live to 300 years of age, and the complications of fertilising a Brazil nut tree.

There is such a diversity of stories and interactions between nature and humans that it is easy to get overwhelmed and caught up in the anecdotal aspects.

Cheap mangrove forests

But this author is on a mission. *On the Shoulders of Nature* is at once a call to arms and a declaration of love: a happy union of natural science and the climate issue.

After reading this book, you’ll know that mangrove forests provide protection against storms and tsunamis for a mere fraction of the price of equivalent human-made protection, and that the antibiotics of the future may lie hidden in an insect.

Sverdrup-Thygeson also discusses science that shows how drastically our proximity to nature has diminished in just a few generations. We spend a lot more time inside – as children too – even though being out in nature is good for both body and soul.

Since we need nature for absolutely everything we do and make, it is important to get to know it from our early years, the author reasons. It’s easy to agree with that. Send the children outside!

An Author in Command of her Style

Perhaps the text could contain fewer funny stories and spectacular experiences of nature. Perhaps it could be written a little more like a story (I have something of a weakness for this), rather than being broken up into so many sub-chapters and short anecdotes.

Yet at the same time, the author has such good command of her style. She writes in such a lively, lovely and engaging way that I cannot hold it against her.

Some images are still lodged in me, long after I read them: whale falls – when dead whales drift slowly down to the ocean bed to become a banquet for the creatures of the deeps.

Sverdrup-Thygeson’s image of being at the base of a gigantic redwood also makes an impression. She exhales as hard as she can in the hope that the tree will consume her nitrogen through its canopy, 100 metres above her.

Thus we are all connected, from whale to bone worm, from professor to giant tree. We are linked in a cycle that will, hopefully, not end any time soon.

Biologists Who Could Rule the World

Biologists haven’t tended to make good politicians (we don’t have to go too far back in time to find biologists at the forefront of a project linked to racial purity). But after reading this book and Dag O. Hessen’s book from earlier this year, *A World at Tipping Point*, I feel certain that biologists of this calibre should rule the world.

Or be in charge of conserving our nature at any rate. And these books should be on the bedside tables of all readers with even the slightest interest in nature.