

DEFENDING NATURE'S RICH SONGBOOK

'Earth's Wild Music' explores terrain, wildlife

Kathleen Dean Moore's latest essay collection, "Earth's Wild Music," is a book for our times.

Moore is a philosopher, environmentalist and interdisciplinary educator who had a long affiliation with Oregon State University. She left academia in 2013 and has since dedicated herself to amplifying humanity's moral imperative to understand and heal the environmental degradation that humans have caused. It has been an uphill battle.

In these writings, Moore uses the irresistible siren songs of the natural world to draw readers in. Early on, she notes, dinosaurs could not vocalize in the way of many animals today — they were alive before voice box organs had evolved. Although, scientists believe dinos were able to hiss or blow air through resonance chambers in their skulls.

Song didn't begin to flourish until the development of an organ called the syrinx in birds, which has been detected in 67-million-year-old bird fossils. Mammals developed something similar — the larynx.

"Now the whole Earth chimes, from deep in the sea to high in the atmosphere, with the sounds of snapping shrimp, singing mice, roaring whales, moaning bears, clattering dragonflies, and a fish calling like a foghorn," Moore writes. "Who could catalog the astonishing oeuvre of the Earth?"

With her own philosophical bent for wonder and a poetic capacity for finely honed cadence, Moore takes readers with her as she roams the varied habitats of western North America. Whether on the grasslands of Saskatchewan, the islands of southeast Alaska or the dunes of Oregon's coast, she explores the terrain and the wildlife that inhabit it.

The immediacy of Moore's writing is a joy. From her descriptions, you will think your ears are still ringing from that crack of thunder over the marsh — or that you were the one to experience the unnerving eyeshine of spiders. Every essay is a sortie into deep engagement with the natural world.

But then there is the capper at the end of each piece.

After you have had a chance to get to know the charms of the Arizona desert, for

This week's book

'Earth's Wild Music' by
Kathleen Dean Moore

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instance, a little gray box contains this factoid: in Saguaro National Park, a place dedicated to the preservation of that iconic cactus, "establishment of young saguaros has nearly ceased since the early 1990s," according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. The decline is attributed to drought and extreme heat events associated with climate change.

There is a dreaded gray box at the end of every chapter and each contains a dire statistic: the decline of migratory shorebirds; the fragmentation of habitat for red-legged frogs; the global shrinkage of forests; the rise of bone marrow cancer in humans and so on.

Moore rolls all of these into 250-plus pages of keen observations about the splendor of our home planet and how human activity and apathy are rapidly devastating it. "Earth's Wild Music" is a lamentation, an exaltation, an impassioned indictment and most definitely a call to action.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com.

