

Book Review

Cameron MacDonald. *The Endangered Species Road Trip*. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2013.

Cameron MacDonald's *The Endangered Species Road Trip* bears more than a passing resemblance to *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*, the autobiographical travelogue written by William Least Heat-Moon in 1982. Both authors are college instructors, and the content of their books reflects their respective areas of expertise (English literature for Least Heat-Moon; conservation biology for MacDonald). And both narratives begin with a personal crisis, which becomes the catalyst for an extended cross-country drive.

The crisis that launches MacDonald on his travels is the realization that he is missing out on his own career as a naturalist and a biologist. The lecture-slide images he shows his students are all taken from the internet: they are not his own photographs. He has never actually seen most of the endangered wildlife that he talks about in class, and some of these species are so rare and critically endangered that (he realizes) if he doesn't see them now, he probably never will. And so MacDonald does what many of us have daydreamed about doing: he takes a leave of absence from work, loads his minivan with camping gear, and then along with his wife, his two small children, and his dog, hits the open road. The objective is to see as many of the "most endangered species north of the Mexican border" as possible. He begins with an ambitious list of thirty-four birds, mammals, reptiles, and plants; the narrative that follows is his relationship with these species, and with their possible locations.

For the author, this road trip turns out to be a crash course in improvised meal planning (trying to reconcile the cravings of "yuppie taste buds" with an environmentally conscious diet), and what could only be called extreme parenting (tenting in the desert with an infant suffering from diaper rash, and hiking with a toddler in bear territory). For the reader, it is both a collection of humorous and occasionally hair-raising anecdotes—and an easily accessible intro-level course in ecology. If you are not yet familiar with terms like *umbrella species*, *ecosystem engineers*, *trophic cascades*, *brood parasitism*, or *rewilding*, you'll pick them up as you go.

While it is probably not destined for canonization, *The Endangered Species Road Trip* does fit comfortably within the literary tradition that includes *Blue Highways* and other classics like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Drawing upon this lineage, and perhaps hoping to be counted among its members (and who could blame him?) MacDonald begins his chapters with quotations from some of these texts. The parallels with William Least Heat-Moon have already been noted; another author that comes to mind is the renowned naturalist and eco-activist Edward Abbey. MacDonald is not as crusty or anti-social as Abbey, but his combination of personal reflection, natural history, and social

critique will probably remind some readers of Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, or (and this is a better fit) his lesser-known *Down the River*. Lines from Abbey's *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness* appear as the epigraph for "Restless Nights in Grizzly Country," MacDonald's chapter about Yellowstone Park.

True to the travel narrative genre—which always seems to be at least part pilgrimage—the author is informed and enlightened by the things he encounters on the road. MacDonald's journey follows an outward trajectory, as the minivan traverses the continent from Vancouver Island to the Bay of Fundy, from the Everglades to the Mojave Desert, and all the prairies and mountains in between; but it is also an inward journey. The narrative is punctuated with dialogues and dilemmas concerning our consumer-driven society, and its effects on the natural world—including the author's acknowledgement of the irony built into his own project: burning fossil fuels, driving cross-country, hoping to spot wildlife that is rapidly vanishing due to climate change and habitat loss.

The gap between good intentions and everyday actions is, according to MacDonald, a "canyon of hypocrisy." And once it is recognized, what can be done? A canyon is no easy thing to cross. "Can an environmentalist," he asks, "really have kids, travel, eat mangoes, own a house, or drive a car?" Throughout the book he wrestles with these and other difficult choices that conservation biologists must face, for example the need to kill one species in order to save another. He discusses the urban and academic perspectives that colour his own perception of nature in general; he hints at the deeper underlying questions of where human beings fit (or fail to fit, as the case may be) within the natural world.

Whether they begin with seemingly mundane issues like grocery shopping, or with larger questions involving the role of *Homo sapiens* as one species among many in the biosphere, any conversation about the environment is bound to ruffle some feathers; and *The Endangered Species Road Trip* is no exception. MacDonald writes with a refreshing dose of self-deprecating humour and humility, but some readers will undoubtedly disagree with his conclusions nonetheless. His claim that the "goal of conservation biology [...] is to get all species through this bottleneck of humanity with as much genetic diversity intact as possible"—particularly the likening of our species to a "bottleneck"—might come across as misanthropic. He acknowledges the dire ecological situation we find ourselves in, yet the narrative ends on a surprisingly positive note—"[m]uch of the doom and gloom I foresaw twenty years ago simply has not come to pass"—a conclusion which might feel a little too pat for some readers.

All possible objections aside, I find it easy to appreciate MacDonald's project on many levels. For one thing, his casual, conversational tone makes me want to join him for a cold beer after a dusty hike in the badlands. I also admire his neo-Luddite (he doesn't use that phrase himself) approach to travel: his entire enormous road trip was undertaken without the assistance of a

GPS or a smart phone. In our era of chronic device-dependency, this alone is enough to elevate MacDonald in my estimation. And while I hesitate at his speculation that “the only real wildlife sightings, the only ones that should really count, are those that happen when you are alone and well away from a vehicle,” I certainly understand the sentiment. Finally, and more to the point, the subject of his book is hugely important; yet most of us know precious little about it. The practical difficulty of his class assignment, in which students are required to list three species that have gone extinct within the past fifty years—*without* using the internet—is telling.

Langara College (MacDonald’s employer, in Vancouver) should be applauded for supporting him in this unconventional and interdisciplinary endeavor, and I imagine that since its publication, his biology lectures have become more interesting and more fulfilling for everyone involved. The ongoing dialogue between the Arts and the Sciences that is so vital to culture, literature, and post-secondary education—and especially the urgent dialogue currently taking place between creativity and ecology—needs more books like this one.

Kelly Shepherd