

# Book Review

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## **Unseen city: The majesty of pigeons, the discreet charm of snails & other wonders of the urban wilderness**

**Johnson, N. (2016). Rodale**

Johnson is asking city dwellers to try a simple exercise – zero in on a bit of your surroundings. Notice, observe, and look for nature. He is out to prove a point: even in a city, there's wilderness all around, waiting to be seen.

In this easy to read urban ramble, Johnson redefines what wilderness means to the modern world. Having grown up in the Sierra Nevada foothills where he knew the names of all the trees, he'd become a stranger to nature in urban San Francisco.

When his daughter Josephine started pointing to trees and asking, "What's that?" on their preschool route, Johnson didn't have answers. He wanted her to have more than just, "It's a tree" to describe her world. So began his quest, and along the way they discover nature previously unseen; the beauty and intrigue, the everyday and ordinary.

Learning to see the world like a child, Johnson argues, is a shift in thinking about nature. From something "out there", nature becomes part of our everyday lives and part of us, like feeding pigeons. "To play with a wild thing provides some common ground for neighbours who may have nothing in common. This kind of casual shared experience is the foundation of friendship and, ultimately, of community."

But how do you have an experience of natural wonder without leaving the city? Johnson sets the goal of learning about one new species per month. That pace, he writes, "Prods me to make an effort, but in a leisurely fashion".

### **Universal ideas**

While this book is a window into middle-class North America, the ideas of building community and growing great families through spending time in nature are universal and timeless. Perhaps there is less divide between nature and people in New Zealand, but as we become one of the most urbanised countries in the world, a reminder to notice nature, to explore and wonder and to make time to get out with the family could be the foundation to growing strong communities and a sense of kaitiakitanga.

After all, even in cities, trees trap carbon improving air quality. Green spaces are places to move and breath, exercise and play together and green views help decrease stress, improve mental health, and make us more productive.

Johnson argues, "Instead of glorifying only untouched wilderness, we might build an environmental ethic that allows humans and nature to live together". To me, Johnson attempts to build an environmental ethic that sees, values and respects nature. And along with some time together outside, that's a good recipe for a better world.

**Reviewed by Annabelle Studholme, Community Ranger at the Department of Conservation.**

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