

Review: A Year In Rock Creek Park: The Wild, Wooded Heart of Washington, DC

By: Melanie Choukas-Bradley

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Choukas-Bradley, Melanie. *A Year in Rock Creek Park: The Wild, Wooded Heart of Washington, DC* Staunton, VA: George F. Thompson Publishing, 2014. 240 pp., illus., maps, photographs. ISBN: 9781938086243, US\$29.95, paper. Photographs by Susan Austin Roth.

“When I walk through the bottomland forest and into the upland woods, I may be deep in solitary reverie but I am never alone” (p. 7). Naturalist Melanie Choukas-Bradley (with beautiful photographs by Susan Austin Roth) presents a colourful ode to Rock Creek Park, “...a welcoming sanctuary for millions of city-dwellers who feel the need to commune with Nature” (p.7). Through vivid descriptions and poetic musings, Choukas-Bradley documents the ‘natural events’ of a year in the park. The detailed daily entries are divided into four seasons and record the changes that take place over the course of the year in this crucial urban habitat for birds, wildflowers, trees, and those seeking solace from the bustle of the Washington, DC area. While the author describes the physical and aesthetic as well as emotional refuge in lyrical detail, what sets this book apart is the undertone of the imminent threat to the habitat from global climate change.

In Part 1, *Winter*, the author begins with her reluctant move from their rural family home in Comus, Maryland to be closer to the city, and how she initially felt “exiled from Nature” (p. 13) until discovering Washington’s Boundary Bridge Trail Network—named for the border between D.C. and Maryland--and Rock Creek Park. Quoting from Thoreau’s 1854 *Walden*, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately...,” (p. 17) the author explains that she wished to do the same thing but had to remain in the city both for work and her family. Yet she is “able to live my life in communion with Nature, here in Rock Creek Park, where...I feel I have lived in the woods all along” (p. 17). She describes both the personal significance of the sanctuary through its whitened winter landscape, the storms and sleet, different paw prints in the snow, and the melting of the creek ice at the beginning of spring.

With its rich descriptions but clear warnings about the fragility of the author’s beloved sanctuary, the book serves as homage to an ecosystem, while demonstrating its fragility. Choukas-Bradley writes:

What is winter if not the chance to rest in a state of semi-hibernation, the stillness and cold serving as antidote to the industry of all the other seasons. ...the stillness that is not death but the incubating prelude to exuberant rebirth. (p. 27)

In Part 2, *Spring*, Choukas-Bradley tells us: “...I want to be out of the cave and into the day and the night, especially the fertile night” (51). Spring brings with it new life,

birds repopulating the wooded areas, and first leaves on plants and trees bringing new hope and rebirth from the winter hibernation. This symbolic new life comes tinged with fear for the earth, however: "...when I hear of a birth or impending birth, I'm filled with hope for the future...But I also fear for them..." (p. 104).

Summer (Part 3) brings warm weather and "signs of change everywhere" (p. 148). The author rejoices in the wildflowers but the joy is accompanied by the awareness that many of the flowers are invasive species, the juxtaposition of earth's natural growing and reproduction cycles with the reality of the potential danger to endemic wildlife. Choukas-Bradley also laments that many trees are covered with white insects—"spreading Beech Bark Disease, a serious, new disease that threatens trees of the Northeast" (p. 155). She also describes reading headlines about climate change and rapid sea ice melting, and explains that the message this conveys is "We need to wake up and pay attention. The facts are the symptoms "... and the land, air, water, soil, trees, and plants of the world do not lie" (p. 157).

In the final section, *Autumn*, the author describes a canoe trip paddling up Rock Creek, where "...trash hangs from the trees like plastic Spanish moss...beer and soda cans are strewn across the beaches" (p. 201). She describes the stark contrast between the natural beauty and the human-caused degradation: "...amidst the Dr. Pepper cans, raccoon prints are stamped into the muddy shore, and a mother deer and her fawn... stand in the creek drinking" (p. 202).

Through her meditations on the changing seasons, Choukas-Bradley concludes that mankind's wellbeing relies on maintaining the integrity of the natural environment, while the environment in turn depends on our stewardship and sustainable use of its resources. Global warming "an unfolding tale with an uncertain plotline" (p. 35) compels us to preserve such urban refuges as Rock Creek Park--places that "...are just as essential to humanity as the far grander places of wildness such as Yosemite and Yellowstone, the Everglades and Adirondacks" (p. 35).

The book also contains a list of works references as well as further reading, and a useful glossary of botanical terms and wildlife. This greatly enjoyable and unique book is highly recommend it for readers both with an environmental or science background and a general audience. This book ultimately makes a powerful case for promoting environmental stewardship and why such precious resources need our protection.

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