



Life Everlasting: The Animal Way of Death

Bernd Heinrich

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From one of the finest naturalist/writers of our time, a fascinating investigation of Nature's inspiring death-to-life cycle

When a good friend with a severe illness wrote, asking if he might have his "green burial" at Bernd Heinrich's hunting camp in Maine, it inspired the acclaimed biologist to investigate a subject that had long fascinated him. How exactly does the animal world deal with the flip side of the life cycle? And what are the lessons, ecological to spiritual, raised by a close look at how the animal world renews itself? Heinrich focuses his wholly original gaze on the fascinating doings of creatures most of us would otherwise turn away from—field mouse burials conducted by carrion beetles; the communication strategies of ravens, "the premier northern undertakers"; and the "inadvertent teamwork" among wolves and large cats, foxes and weasels, bald eagles and nuthatches in cold-weather dispersal of prey. Heinrich reveals, too, how and where humans still play our ancient and important role as scavengers, thereby turning—not dust to dust—but life to life.

Life Everlasting: The Animal Way of Death Details

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From Reader Review Life Everlasting: The Animal Way of Death for online ebook

Hobart Frolley says

The science is good but I don't like his writing style and there is no excuse for a scholar in this day and age to use the term "Indian" when referring to Indigenous people

Evie Hemphill says

From its title all the way through to its uniquely personal closing chapter, Heinrich's book grounds the reader in nature's death-to-life cycle not by way of technical treatise but by sharing his observations and interactions among a rich assortment of carcasses, scavengers, recyclers, and undertakers. Many of them are not the most popular sort of organisms—beetles, flies, ravens, and fungi, to name a few—but that doesn't stop Heinrich from giving them careful, even loving, attention. His connection to the flora and fauna of the land he inhabits in Maine and Vermont is intimate and breathtaking, and it's rooted in an authentic experience and strong sense of the human animal's role in the circle of life. As a child in post-war Europe, Heinrich and his family lived as refugees in a forest, and he recalls foraging for berries and acorns, hunting small rodents, and prizing a recently dead elk. "The carcass was fresh," he writes, "and we ran to the cabin to tell our parents, who rushed back to cover it with brush, the way cats hide their prey or ravens cache meat." Illustrated with Heinrich's own line drawings, *Life Everlasting* digs deep into the reality that we are "tiny specks in a fabulous system, part of something grand."

Doug says

Another Bernd Heinrich study of nature! This one was about animal caretakers! Wonderfully written as only the author can! Some great stories and a further glimpse into his life! Another great read! Looking forward to reading another one of his books soon!

Kristen Bigley says

From beetles to birds, humans to fungi. Ending with a look at metamorphosis and a brief glimpse into theory of the afterlife; this book provided more than I anticipated in a well-rounded approach to the concept of the ultimate recycling of life.

Bill says

The theme of the book is how animals and plants recycle the components of dead animals and plants. He discusses, from personal experience and knowledge, beetles, other insects, flies, ravens, vultures, trees, fungi, soil, worms, salmon, evolution, and culture in the wide-ranging, yet focused discussion of plant and

animal “undertakers.” The insect and plant behaviors he describes are fascinating, and he does a lot to reduce my natural aversion to animals like vultures, flies, and beetles which recycle the bodies of dead animals into the ecosystem. The detailed descriptions of beetles and their work was particularly new, detailed, and interesting to me. I never thought I would find anything written about beetles or vultures to be interesting, so I was pleasantly surprised by this book. His comments on human burial practices gave me pause and is causing me to rethink the type of burial that I wish to have done to me. As a result of the book, I have a renewed sense of belonging to the biosphere, being an integral part of it, not something or someone outside of it, with the illusion of controlling it.

Amberle says

A very interesting read. There were a few "dry" reading episodes that was just me. Nothing to do with his writing. I really enjoyed all the facts about the cycle of death and recycling. It gives one the understanding that there truly is a purpose for everything in the natural world.

Nicola says

You'd think that a book discussing the disposal of carcasses by beetles, ravens, vultures and other smaller but no less significant creatures would be grisly or disquieting or even downright disgusting. Nothing could be less true than that notion when you read this well-composed, easy-to-read book. The flow and pace of Heinrich's writing is nicely timed; I felt like I was attending classes given by the only prof on campus who could hold my interest, and to whose classes I looked forward.

I came away well-informed, but with curiosity roused on topics raised within the book. I'm so glad that the author included further readings; some will be too academic and advanced for me, but others, I suspect, will provide more great reading and entree into even more related works.

I'm also moved to learn more about green burial and alternative ways of disposal of my own flesh when I've finished using it. And there's not a single creepy thing about that or the way in which Heinrich inspired me to pursue the question.

Petra X says

I have just fucking lost a long review on this book. Sometimes I fucking hate GR. Why can we not have drafts automatically saved? Isn't it something that couldn't be monetized so it's just not a feature worth bothering with?

I might get round to rewriting it because this is an important book, but then again, I might not.

Lisa M. says

I did not like the way this book was organized, nor did I like the tone. This was the first time I had ever heard

of/read any Bernd Heinrich, and I didn't know anything about him or his experiences besides the information the blurb on the back of the cover provided. The book started off with a very casual tone, and it made me a little uncomfortable. Who was this guy? How much experience did he have? I didn't trust him as a narrator. I was also disgusted to find he was actively killing animals for the casual "experiments" he was describing. Sure, they were "only" mice and rats, and it was "for science." But, it was a) the only time in the book he felt the need to kill an animal and b) he had similar experiences using roadkill or naturally dead animals - killing them wasn't necessary.

So, by the end of the first chapter I was angry about the murder and I was sort of like, "What the fuck, who is this guy?" Until he casually mentioned that he got a study based on the topic in a peer-reviewed magazine. Oh, ok ... If only you had begun the book with an introduction or something to their nature establishing who you are, or had taken a bit more of a formal tone, I would be more comfortable with that.

Thankfully there were no more murders in this book. (I almost returned it because of that.)

This book contained a lot of interesting information I was not aware of - but then again, I'm not necessarily the most knowledgeable on animal life cycles. I thought most of what was included was described well enough, and he gave a lot of background information on various animals. I wish the salmon chapter had been explained a little more deeply - it was very brief and I didn't fully understand why he had included it. Bernd also makes a point of showing us how humans have been, and will ultimately, destroy the planet.

This book didn't hold my interest as much as other books about animals did. I really love animals and I love to learn about them. I don't know if it was the author's tone, or the fact that these animals aren't "cute" or often are dead stars of this book, but I just found myself rushing through it. There were definitely interesting parts but I often was just pushing through.

The points about human burial were very intriguing. I hope Bernd's family friend found peace, wherever he may rest. One thing is for sure, I may not read a Bernd book again, but he is clearly an intelligent and worldly man.

Alexis says

"We deny that we are animals and part of the wheel of life, part of the food chain. We deny that we are part of the feast and seek to remove ourselves from it, even though we kill and consume animals by the billions and permanently remove the life resources for many more. But not one animal is allowed to consume us, even after we are dead. Not even the worms. We need a new creation story that connects us to nature and to others, one that can give us strength -- that can make us real rather than rich. Nature, religions, and science coincide on the real: kinship with each other and with the mountains and prairies, oceans and forests. I am talking about beliefs built on facts that we all can agree to and that transcend individual deaths."

Saturday I was a bit depressed. I went to the library and picked up five books, mostly about animals, because animals are not people and they live these fascinating lives and I wanted to be close to something different. I thought it would be an escape, but reading this book was particularly touching and, dare I say it, spiritual. I want to read everything by Heinrich now -- he has a simple but beautiful way of writing that combines facts with anecdotes with theories without any one overwhelming the rest.

Kevin Parsons says

A thoughtful and intelligent study of life and death. He approaches the topic of death from many angles, some obvious and some much less so.

Clare says

Bernd Heinrich's new book is a beautiful musing on death, but more so, it is about life. An organism, an animal, is a being that processes energy -- energy comes in, becomes ordered, and eventually leaves. What happens to that energy after it leaves is Heinrich's subject. It doesn't disappear, but rather it feeds myriad new lives. The death of one individual provides life for countless bacteria, hundreds of invertebrates, dozens of ravens with all their intelligence and capacity for joy. Heinrich discusses the deaths of many things, from shrews, to elephants, to trees, to whales, to plankton. In every case, the death of one individual contributes to the health and growth of the ecosystem.

The way we live today, we isolate ourselves from death and "waste". Heinrich discusses the way we rake our lawns every fall, conscientiously removing every fallen leaf and sending it away. But those leaves, if allowed to return to the soil through the work of earthworms and other creeping things, would come back to us as new grass. Instead, we try to subvert the cycle, denying the earth the nutrients derived from death and instead using chemical fertilizers as a poor substitute. In our own deaths, we try to retain the form we had when alive using embalming fluid and hermetically sealed caskets. We seem to believe that by preserving our bodies and preventing their dissipation, we will hold onto our lives in some way. But all we do in this way is to prevent the thriving of new lives.

In some ways, this book reminds me of the end of Phillip Pullman's "His Dark Materials". Pullman, in looking for a new form of an afterlife, suggests that the most beautiful thing that could happen after death is to disperse -- to become one with the dragonflies and the flowers. Pullman is looking for an atheistic conception of death, one that does not rely on supernatural beings. Heinrich doesn't reject religion outright in his discussion of what happens to us. Rather, he wants us to embrace new traditions in line with what we know about ourselves and the natural world: that we are part of the ecology of this planet, that our energy, when we die, should be allowed to continue in the bodies of others.

Diane Kistner says

Vultures and other scavengers may give us the willies, but the author of *Life Everlasting* shows us in careful, touching, and sometimes funny ways how essential they are to life—and what we humans, as the biggest scavengers of them all, have in common with them.

I found charming the story of the beetle couple on their backs underneath a dead mouse "walking" it with their feet to a soft spot to bury it for their soon-to-be-hatched-out young. I laughed out loud over the raised-from-fledgling raven Goliath rolling the author's yard (possibly over the slight of him staying away for too long) using tp from the outhouse. Dealing as this book does with death and decay, there are parts that will make the most squeamish, well, squeamish; but nothing that would overly bother most people. It's worth getting through those moments to experience the rest.

Heinrich's careful observations encourage the reader also to slow down and observe carefully, rather than trying to read the book as quickly as possible; to think about the meaning of it all in a larger geological and ecological context. As with Joe Hutto's excellent "My Life as a Turkey," I found this book brought me closer to the living world around me, at times in endearing and even spiritual ways, and it opened my eyes wider. A "Further Reading" section organized by general interest areas (e.g., "Metamorphosis," "Vulture Guilds," "Neolithic Vulture Cults") is provided for readers who wish to explore more deeply. I'm glad I read this book.

Veronica says

I often find it really quite difficult to rate a book out of five stars. Easier would be at least a minimum of ten. Three seems to underscore most of the novels I have read, but four may not be indicative of my true feelings on the subject.

Anyway, I have really enjoyed all the Bernd Heinrich I have read so far, and it is absolutely on my list to read them all. I was quite captivated by his attention to our connection in the global ecosystem, and I related to it very well myself. The only aspects of the book I was not entirely satisfied with were the following:

1. The book introduces so many wonderful subjects, and I think it's a fantastic method of acquainting oneself with subjects that may not always be at the forefront of thought when you are outside of that discipline. That being said, some of them were almost too brief and I wish he had expanded a little bit more on a few of the subjects he introduced.
2. Maybe as a consequence of the former, there were a couple of moments where I felt like the continuity of the book lost its flow. There are clearly so many ideas that can stem from the subject that it seemed as though there were parts that jumped a little too much, and thus I had to often 'reorient' myself to where he was at a given moment.
3. I felt like his treatment of some subjects outside of his specific field in the last chapter were so...vague to be almost wrong. He failed to hit what I personally believe to be some key points in the explanation of some of those subjects. Of course this is a dangerous statement because they are also out of my field, but my understanding of the subjects based on various readings by people who are at the forefront of the field left Heinrich's a little lacking in important areas to me.

That being said, he is a unique and engaging individual, reminding us that we are part of nature, and should envelop ourselves in it. He sparks my interest in organisms that I have been absurdly afraid of for no reason, and I have learned from him to suck it up and look closer at them. While the fear is often still there, it's not as consuming and I always wind up being taken down a curious little rabbit hole. He speaks without embellishment and yet there remains a poetry or a magic that fills me with a sense of wonder and excitement.

I had read a comment previously on this book wherein someone was put off by his murder of the animals. Frankly, I didn't see incident of this other than when he was talking about being a young man, which was also further on than the other reader appears to have gotten. He would describe moving an already deceased animal from its grounds, or purchasing a giant hog to experiment on. He did briefly discuss hunting, but not simply for the sake of hunting, and I have a phenomenal amount of respect for an individual that will hunt and use that animal for food, clothing, knowledge, or whatever else have you. This is because we are a part of nature, and that is a part of the natural world (maybe not with the utensils we carry with us, but he's not

exploiting the environment or animals) and because we often don't appreciate the magnitude of our effect on those natural systems when we shop at a grocery store. Even had that individual been a vegetarian, suggesting that buying fruits, vegetables, and grains hasn't both had a direct impact on the environment, but also a more indirect one with a global spread.

Another win for Bernd Heinrich. I recommend this book to anyone. It was engaging, educational, introduced subjects that are often 'creepy crawly' in a fashion which inspired their observation, and was always accessible to everyone, regardless of their previous knowledge on the subject.

Naomi says

Tightly crafted essays illumine the necessary connections between life and death, namely, how matter is transformed from death into life. Heinrich's writing, as ever in his books for general readers, is lyrical and accessible. The last essay wends into reflection on how we make meaning from life and death and invites reflection on how religions are part of that meaning-making. Many Unitarian Universalists and other liberal religionists will take both inspiration and comfort from this book, for, with Heinrich, we accept that one cannot argue with life itself (Heinrich uses the term "nature"). Heinrich is making a case for a greater acceptance that we are of and belong to the whole, and to change how we approach both life and death. He does not directly raise the issue of fearfulness of death and dying, but he does provide many reframed perspectives which might open the way of changing that fear and separation and strengthening our sense of connection to the wholeness of life, which is, by necessity, also the wholeness of death. Liberal religionists exploring death and dying issues may wish to take up this text, and the conversations that will easily arise from them, on how to return to the whole and not keep ourselves apart, on the wisdom of many religious traditions and customs that recognize and sustain that wholeness and not further separation, and on how we can make choices to live, sustained by and sustaining the whole, and make those choices accessible to all.

Andrea Petrullo says

I'd eventually like to come back and write a more polished review of *Life Everlasting*, but for now:

This is a series of essays on how different types of bodies break down after death in different environments. Rather than being morbid, it reads more as a celebration of life, sometimes bordering on the spiritual when discussing how the energy and nutrients of one body pass into and fuel another. It's really quite beautiful, but maybe not for the faint of heart.

Sky burial sounds like the way to go--for me anyway.

Frank says

Very good nature writing that wanders off of the subject of animal death a little too often.

Bobette Giorgi says

Ruined his book and my reading experience by falling for the climate change bs and including it in this book. Goodbye to one of my all-time favorite authors; I just cannot waste my time reading someone who is so gullible.

Zola says

I admit freely that I rated this book high because it had a profound effect on me. I feel there are issues with the style, with consistency, with the attitudes and personality of the author himself, and yet... this book made me cry numerous times, made me ache for life, and connected me to a truth that I have been and am still striving to articulate. It helped me immensely in processing some of my griefs, and for that I am grateful. It reaffirmed my fascination with vultures, with biology, with the unknown. It moved me.

Myke Cole says

Life Everlasting is a collection of essays that addresses the broad topic the human taboo surrounding death and its corresponding impact on our decision to remove human bodies from the biosphere. The book ultimately serves two functions: it's a call to write a new creation myth that destigmatizes the idea of scavengers eating the dead, and a death panacea, comforting us with the idea that our corpses, consumed by hundreds of species post-mortem, lives on in the DNA of thousands of new lives.

Honestly and competently written, this book serves as both a philosophical work, a naturalist's journal and a scientific survey. It is both compelling and comforting, and does a great job of straddling the line between metaphysical rumination and scientific inquiry.

Most importantly, it is Heinrich's voice, exuberant and passionate, curious and rational. He is impossible not to like, and by extension, so is his work.
