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Solitary Goose

Sydney Plum

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In the fall of 1996 Sydney Plum encountered a solitary Canada goose on a pond near her home in New England. Caring for the animal became a way for her to reconnect with nature. Walks to the pond were daily rituals?reflective times during which Plum thought about the relationships between humans and animals. Mixing memoir with closely observed nature writing, Plum searches for a deeper understanding of what was changed by the experience with the solitary goose she named SG.

In the tradition of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, Plum writes lyrical lessons on the life cycle of geese, the mystery of their great migratory patterns, and their amazing adaptability. Canada geese were not always so plentiful in the United States, she explains, nor were they always denigrated as “flying carp.” Plum shows how species-management programs reestablished the birds outside their previous range at the same time as golf courses, office parks, and suburban ponds began dotting the countryside, providing them with prime habitats where they were unwanted.

Memories of breaking holes in the ice for SG to escape predators turn Plum’s thoughts toward what it means to nurture. Coming to terms with how SG thinks leads Plum to examine anthropomorphism in nature writing. In contrast to the metaphors through which we commonly view nature, Plum argues that science combined with metaphor is a better way to understand animals. Though Plum’s focus is generously outward toward nature, this book also reveals an inner journey through which, as she describes it, “the enclosures of my human life had been opened. I had become more susceptible to the kindnesses of birds.”

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