

## BOOK REVIEW

*Journal of the Lepidopterists' Society*  
57(3), 2003, 304–305

AN OBSESSION WITH BUTTERFLIES: OUR LONG LOVE AFFAIR WITH A SINGULAR INSECT, by Sharman Apt Russell. ISBN 0-7382-0699-7. Publication: 2003, Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, Massachusetts US\$24.

Sharman Apt Russell's *An Obsession with Butterflies* is an impressionistic guide to some of the treasures available to those who pursue butterflies. The book traces a sort of natural history of butterfly obsessions in 15 satisfyingly brief, informative, and eager—if somewhat breathless—essays.

The essays, on such topics as metamorphosis, intelligence, color, parenting, ecology and the environment, are, on the whole, nicely detailed and enjoyable. I thought the essay on the natural history museum quite successful, though I found confusing the attempt to trace conservation efforts for the El Segundo Blue in Los Angeles. It is possible to read these essays all at once in a few hours, and thus to emerge with a reasonably satisfying, many-angled view—a Cubist portrait?—of the butterfly. The essays are also fine as quick reads; in a few minutes with one essay you can learn something about butterfly migration, say, or the composition of a butterfly's wing. The bibliographical essay at the end is an enjoyable and useful approach to the resources made available to the writer.

Russell's approach to the subject has us both implicitly and explicitly comparing what we know about things in our lives to the sort of things butterflies do. The writing is gently anthropomorphic, as some of the chapter headings attest: *You Need a Friend*, *Love Stories*, *The Single Mom*. These butterflies think, remind themselves of things, wait for “love” or “destiny.” There is enough assuring distance and savvy, however, to keep the author from ascribing more than figurative associations between our species. After all, for some of us butterflies are not just bugs but metaphors on the wing.

This guide to some of the many ways in which our lives intersect with those of butterflies could have benefited from a clearer focus. Russell flits about from one subject to another, to the point of giving each individual essay a somewhat different tone from the others. Much of the book introduces individual scientists and collectors, past and present, who have themselves been obsessed with butterflies in one way or another. Other parts portray various different butterflies and caterpillars, their behavior throughout the life span in different environments, and the cultural surround by which butterflies are assimilated by those of us who are not obsessed.

Obsessions are, like butterflies, fascinating things. They are resolutely individualistic, and should prove excellent guideposts both to our human nature and to whatever it is—butterflies in this case—we might become obsessive about. Whatever the obsessions of the collectors and scientists briefly sketched in this book, however, they must be assumed, because they have not been demonstrated or evoked. The characters introduced in these essays, even the author, never seem to emerge from the pages. This means that their individual curiosities and interests merge with everyone else's, and are rarely satisfyingly portrayed.

The relationship between the natural world and our human obsessions seems, at times, obscure. She writes, for example,

I like the numbers, the big numbers. More is better. More butterflies are better than fewer butterflies. A river of butterflies is a wonderful thing. Millions of butterflies are the jackpot. I like the largesse, the almost casual gesture, as if a generous earth were whispering into my ear, “See how I replenish myself, see how I birth and birth and birth and darken the skies and fill the waters and cover the ground and still I have more to give.”

I find a little of this sort of thing goes a long way. It is true, I suppose, that most who read this book will do so for what it has to say about butterflies, not about our selves in nature, or as obsessive beings, or because the Greek word for this creature is our word for “soul.” But I had wished for more.

I confess that the book taught me a great deal about butterflies I had not known; I further confess, however, that I knew very little about them before I read it. I teach in the humanities; my most compelling interest in butterflies has been my interest in the work of Vladimir Nabokov, a writer known to all lepidopterists and a subject fit for any consideration of obsessions with butterflies. As an artist and as a scientist, Nabokov was keen on design; he enjoyed exploring and toying with the intricate, devious, tricky plays of meanings which patterns reveal and conceal. It is little wonder he followed butterflies, or that Russell quotes him in her book. Nabokov is worth quoting because he conveyed his personal obsessions to the written page with enormous finesse and skill as a writer, in both scientific and fictional contexts. Russell is wise to borrow his observations—and perhaps to avoid his more mystical musings on mimicry.

The essays are composed in a dramatic style, which, to my taste, relies too much on the sort of flourish created by paragraphs of a single sentence. The impressionistic details in many of the essays can charm up close, but often fail to contribute to a satisfying sense of the whole. The opening character sketch, of 17th century collector Eleanor Glanville, is tantalizingly indistinct and ill-focused. Here is someone with a genuine

obsession for butterflies, and a tragic story to go with it, yet her portrait here is never achieved, and her role in the book, as heroine, guide, or symbol, is never made clear.

I had concerns with the illustrations. I suppose no matter how well illustrated any book on butterflies is likely to be, we will always wish for more. The black and white illustrations (uncredited) seem to be very well drawn, but are small, sparse, and appear poorly printed.

Although it can be enjoyed by any reader, I would feel most comfortable recommending this book to curious youngsters who have already found something in nature—it wouldn't have to be butterflies—and who would like to know, and find, more. The book itself is not likely to instill that curiosity—that's up to the butterflies.

KENNETH HOPE, *Columbia College of Chicago, 600 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Illinois 60605, USA*

## ERRATA

*Journal of the Lepidopterists' Society*  
57(4), 2003, 305

### THE HISTORY AND TRUE IDENTITY OF *MELITAEA ISMERIA* (NYMPHALIDAE): A REMARKABLE TALE OF DUPLICATION, MISINTERPRETATION, AND PRESUMPTION

In the above article by John V. Calhoun (*Journal of the Lepidopterists' Society* 57(3):204–219), page 208, first paragraph, line 17 should read:

“Volume 16 contains 130 paintings and is dated 1804 (V. Veness pers. com.)”