



A Shape in the Dark: Living and Dying with Brown Bears

Bjorn Dihle

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Approaching nature from a personal perspective, Bjorn Dihle's *A Shape in the Dark* overturns the media myth of brown bears as vicious, deranged killers, constructing a poignant portrait of the creatures that recognizes their true complexity.

Born and raised in Alaska, Dihle works as a bear-viewing guide in the southeastern region's ABC Islands, part of Tongass National Forest, America's largest at 26,500 square miles. A refuge for many of the US's remaining megafauna, this rainforested archipelago encompasses an area known in Lingít since prehistory as "the fortress of the bears," where the capricious nature of capitalism is as much a force for brown bears' elimination as it is for their preservation.

The book's first part uses memoir as a framing device to explore bears through historiocultural and biological lenses, while its second part makes use of this groundwork for a personal meditation on bears, and on Dihle's role as a mediator in their world. Dihle holds history and biology in tension, acknowledging the bloodthirstiness and remarkable courage of legendary white explorers and mountain men, as well as the complications of their lives and legacies. Dihle himself embodies aspects of their pioneer spirit: courageous, capable, and always seeking the wilderness. While Dihle troubles the waters of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism, and their through implications versus their declamations, he's more interested in embracing his fundamental sense of uncertainty, and the contradictions that are embedded in social ideas of wildness and nature.

A Shape in the Dark is a nature memoir that reveals the complicated morality around brown bears, wilderness, and ideas of masculinity. It is reverent in discussing wilderness while acknowledging human being's enduring compulsions to subdue it. Rather than suggesting answers, the book acknowledges human paradoxes and is humble about living within them.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (January / February 2021)

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