

★ **Otter Country: An Unexpected Adventure in the Natural World****Miriam Darlington**

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In her beautiful, mesmerizing memoir *Otter Country*, Miriam Darlington traces her year-long exploration of rivers, estuaries, and marshlands in Great Britain in search of the provocative, secretive otter.

An entrancing storyteller, Darlington describes her travels with cheerful lightness, as with her amusing accounts of donning her wellies, clambering down riverbanks, and sinking deep into peat bogs searching for the elusive flash of an otter's furry back in the water. The book is loaded with fascinating insights into the marine animals, whose "smooth disappearances invite the imagination and conjure...stories made to seduce humans into this mysterious other world." The playful otter is also a ferocious predator with a "monumentally strong" jaw, like a "small grizzly bear in the waves," related to wolverines and badgers.

Rich literary references are included: Darlington visits the homelands of Gavin Maxwell and Henry Williamson, who wrote delightful, influential stories about pet otters in the mid-twentieth century; she cites the poetry of Kathleen Raines, Ted Hughes, and Elizabeth Bishop; she evokes the nature writing of Annie Dillard. Darlington's own writing is poetic too, capturing the song of "four skylarks twittering as if splitting notes and remaking them" and the movements of a wren "like a small brown mouse through ivy and black-knuckled ash twigs."

Describing the impact of climate change, encroaching highways, toxic industrial runoff, and other ecological perils, Darlington refers to otters as "a pulse within...[l]ike litmus paper." She celebrates restoration efforts such as the Shared Earth Trust in Wales but also notes that these resilient animals are learning to survive on the edge of civilization, in the shadows of highway overpasses, old industrial sites, and city parks.

Captivating and enthralling, *Otter Country* is an entertaining, enlightening account of fascinating water creatures and the changing British landscapes where they live.

KRISTEN RABE (January / February 2024)

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