

Under the Stars: A Journey into Light

Matt Gaw

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“To walk at night” creates “a night twice lived,” Matt Gaw declares in *Under the Stars*, which is structured around a series of night walks to delve into the science of the night sky.

The pull of the moon is undeniable, Gaw says, though the simultaneous fear of being outside in the darkness seems as innate as the overwhelmed feeling that arises from contemplating the vastness of a sky full of stars. Gaw seeks to enter into the night—not to tame it, but to find peace in experiencing its wildness. His purposeful wanderings take him everywhere from London to a remote Scottish island, while his tools for understanding the night sky range from a telescope to folk tales.

Gaw writes that being outside at night allows him to feel like “part of the natural world in a way that I rarely have during the day.” It’s easy enough to find that kinship at the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory, but more of a challenge in a seedy area of central London. A walk through Soho reinforces how removed cities are from nature; Gaw calls for stricter regulations of artificial lighting, noting that it is harmful for both humans and animals, altering breeding patterns and leading to bird fatalities via collisions with buildings.

Serendipitous encounters with wildlife abound, as when Gaw has a “cup of tea with an owl” in a predawn supermarket parking lot. His tone is reflective but cheerful, and the narrative is concise and inviting. Gaw extends a beckoning hand to join in ambles to Dartmoor and to the beach, and his metaphors and alliteration gild his lyrical prose: “Syrup soft, an enchanting shimmer,” the moonlight follows him and renders the clouds “old, burnished mirrors.”

Under the Stars illuminates the nature of night through on-the-ground knowledge.

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