

★ **World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments**

Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Fumi Nakamura, Illustrator

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Aimee Nezhukumatathil's shimmering essay collection about fantastic creatures and plants, *World of Wonders*, is shot through with memories of her peripatetic life and observations about race, motherhood, and environmental issues. Fumi Nakamura's delicate, elegant illustrations frame these emotive, tender writings.

The essays uncover the astonishing habits of ribbon eels, whale sharks, flamingos, dancing frogs, and other lovelies, while other less popular but no less wondrous flora and fauna also shine. Alluring lines about the Corpse Flower, an Indonesian native that grows large and stinky to attract nocturnal pollinating beetles, are enough to make anyone a fan. Cassowaries with killer claws, the bizarre Vampire Squid, and the Potoo of Central America (a bird with a croaking, retching call) are also described with passion, artful wordsmithing, and reverence.

Natural world subjects are touchstones for heartfelt personal revelations and meditations about social and cultural issues. As a child, Nezhukumatathil moved often; her Filipina mother and Indian father shifted through various medical jobs, and she relates the difficulties she felt as the constant "new girl" and "brown girl." As an adult, she still pastes on the tight salamander smile of the Axolotl when faced with yet another acquaintance greeting her with an insensitive "Namaste!" (she's a Methodist).

Ruminations on the marvelous homing instincts of the Red-Spotted Newt are connected to finding her forever home in Mississippi; a comfortable place where she doesn't have to be the "one brown friend to so many people" anymore. There's also sly humor: bioluminescent firefly larva band together to hunt earthworms looking "like a macabre, candlelit chase right out of an old B-movie;" Nezhukumatathil's endearing father calls after a lost pet "in a thick, coconutty Indian accent."

World of Wonders is a bibliophilic and visual delight that dazzles the senses, much like Nezhukumatathil's beloved comb jellies. Her entrancing essays are a reminder to spend more time outdoors wondering at and cherishing this "magnificent and wondrous planet."

RACHEL JAGARESKI (July / August 2020)

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