



Diary of a Young Naturalist

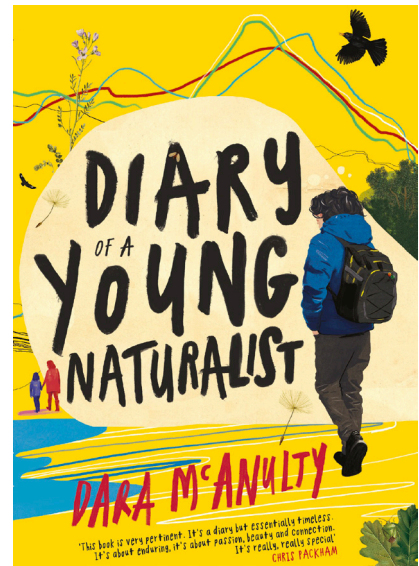
DARA MCANULTY

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Non-Fiction

RECOMMENDED YEAR LEVELS: Years 6 to 12



CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning and connect it to an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Diary of a Young Naturalist chronicles the turning of 15-year-old Dara McAnulty's world. From spring and through a year in his home patch in Northern Ireland, Dara spent the seasons writing. These vivid, evocative and moving diary entries about his connection to wildlife and the way he sees the world are raw in their telling.

Diary of a Young Naturalist portrays Dara's intense connection to the natural world, and his perspective as a teenager juggling exams and friendships alongside a life of campaigning.

'In writing this book,' Dara explains, 'I have experienced challenges but also felt incredible joy, wonder, curiosity and excitement. In sharing this journey my hope is that people of all generations will not only understand autism a little more but also appreciate a child's eye view on our delicate and changing biosphere.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dara lives with his mum, dad, brother Lorcan, sister Bláthnaid and rescue greyhound Rosie in County Down, Northern Ireland. Dara's love for nature, his activism, and his honesty about autism, have earned him a huge social media following from across the world and many accolades: in 2017 he was awarded the BBC *Springwatch* 'Unsprung Hero' Award and *Birdwatch* magazine's 'Local Hero'; in 2018 he was awarded 'Animal Hero' of the year by the *Daily Mirror* and became an ambassador for the RSPCA and the iWill campaign; in 2019 he became a Young Ambassador for the Jane Goodall Institute and the youngest ever recipient of the RSPB Medal for his conservation efforts.

BEFORE READING

1. Consider the title of this book. What is a 'naturalist'? What are the characteristics of a naturalist? What does a naturalist value? Does your understanding differ from the dictionary definition?
2. As a class, look at the photograph on page 2. Who do you think is depicted in this picture? What is the person doing in the photograph? What else is visible in the picture? How does this picture set the tone for the diary entries to come?
3. 'Globally, we have lost sixty per cent of our wild species since 1970.' (pg. 196) What do you know about the history of extinction? What has caused species to become extinct? What current species are currently faced with extinction? Complete research into this topic and share your findings with the class.

WHILE READING

4. 'We are all autistic, except Dad.' (pg. 9) How does being autistic shape the way that McAnulty sees and experiences the world? Is this different to how you experience the world? Is it important to acknowledge that we each experience and see the world differently?



5. Describe how McAnulty feels when he visits a 'wild place'. Use evidence to support your response.
6. On page 25, McAnulty explains what 'confines' his childhood. What does it mean to be confined? What confinements does McAnulty face? Do you think other young adults also feel stressed by these factors?
7. McAnulty refers to the Irish term '*uaigneas*' when explaining his emotions. What does this word translate to in English? Can all words be translated accurately? Are there some feelings that can only be understood in certain cultures?
8. 'This is what I want to be, surrounded by kindred spirits, doing useful things with care, knowledge and clarity.' (pg. 71) What is a kindred spirit? Do you have a kindred spirit in your life? Why is it important for McAnulty to be surrounded by 'kindred spirits'?
9. On page 88, McAnulty constructs the metaphor of nature as an orchestra. How is nature similar to an orchestra making music? Do you agree with this metaphor? What else could nature be compared to?
10. 'I'm still a kid really, but there's this piece of me that wants to be treated like an adult, and to behave like an adult.' (pg. 93) How do McAnulty's diary entries reflect his coming of age?
11. 'We all have a place in this world, our small corner. And we must notice it, tend to it, with grace and compassion.' (pg. 112) McAnulty takes the reader to many of his favourite wild places. Do you have a favourite natural or wild place that you like to visit? What do you love about this place? How does visiting this place make you feel?
12. Research the young activists mentioned in this story; Dara McAnulty and Greta Thunberg. What inspired them to become activists? How are they currently encouraging environmental change? Do you find their stories inspiring?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. 'I have the heart of a naturalist, the head of a would-be scientist and bones of someone who is already wearied by the apathy and destruction wielded against the natural world.' (pg. 7) How does the reader see these characteristics in Dara? Find examples in the book to support your interpretations.
2. 'I still crave symmetry. Clockwork neediness.' (pg. 16) Why does Dara crave symmetry and order?
3. 'I hold each memory close. These are the things that will lighten the bad days to come.' (pg. 77) How does Dara use his memories of nature to help him in troubling or difficult times?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

4. 'I love how these names tell stories about the land, and how telling these stories keeps the past alive.' (pg. 21) What myths and old narratives does McAnulty refer to in his diary entries? How do these stories affect how we

understand the land? Can you think of any places that have names that allude to their history?

5. How does the tone and mood of McAnulty's diary entries change as the seasons change? What do you notice about the sections in italics? Why has McAnulty chosen to structure his diary entries in this way?
6. Why do you think the book is separated not in chapters, but by the seasons? How does this structural decision connect to what you know about a 'naturalist'?

THEMES

Nature

1. 'As nature is pushed to the fringes of our built-up world, it's the small pockets of wild resistance that can help.' (pg. 21) Why do we stop wild things growing in our spaces? Why do we have this fear or reluctance? What reasons does McAnulty provide in the text? From an ecological perspective, how does 'wildness' help our world?
2. 'The urgency of supporting collapsing ecosystems and protecting wildlife gets overtaken by human narcissism and insecurity.' (pg. 97) Do you agree with McAnulty? Why or why not?
3. 'Nature sparks creativity. All we have to do is start with the question, Why?' (pg. 176) How can nature inspire creativity? Alternatively, what scientific developments does McAnulty cite as emerging from a fascination with nature? How does the natural world inspire McAnulty?

Connection

1. How important is it for a child to be 'free to explore'? (pg.29) How can a connection to nature aid anxiety and encourage mindfulness?
2. 'I love these stories. They enrich my life as a young naturalist. Science, yes, always science. But we need these lost connections, they feed our imagination, bring wild characters to life, and remind us that we're not separate from nature but part of it.' (pg. 45) How do stories connect us as human beings?
3. 'If only we could be connected in the way this oak tree is connected with its ecosystem.' (pg. 61). What does this simile suggest about the failings of humans connecting? Why do we currently fail to embrace others and the natural world around us?

Duty

1. 'I muse on how much we humans depend on each other for survival, and how wild species are at our mercy for survival.' (pg. 36) Do we all have a duty to protect the natural world? Are we the unspoken 'custodians' (pg. 197) of the land? Why do we often neglect our duty to nature and its creatures?
2. 'The only thing that I am really bound to is nature – as we all are.' (pg. 114) Why is it important that humans see themselves as an extension of nature?
3. 'Although I know they are all "proud" of me, they can't be seen to be outwardly encouraging civil disobedience.' (pg. 198) Do we all have a duty to stand up for what we believe is the moral thing to do? How does McAnulty stand up for his beliefs and values?



RESPONDING

4. 'Folklore and stories are often inspired by the strange and beautiful in the natural world, and these stories bring nature, deeply, into our imagination.' (pg. 41) Create your own fantasy story for a natural place you have travelled to.
5. Throughout McAnulty's diary entries, he includes poems that celebrate nature. Using the war poet Edward Thomas' poem on page 38, write your own poem celebrating the beauty of nature.
6. 'I wonder how many schools have a nature table these days.' (pg. 39) As a class, create your own nature table with objects found in the schoolyard or local park.
7. 'We can't access nature the way my parents' generation could. Our exposure to wildlife and wild places has been robbed by modernity and "progress". Conduct an interview with a parent, grandparent or carer focusing on their relationship with nature. Ask them about their relationship with nature when they were younger and how this relationship has changed over time.
8. Travel to a 'wild' place near your school or home. Sit in this place and observe it closely. Pay close attention to the sounds, the smells and the sights. Write an immersive creative piece describing this setting. Focus on including imagery, metaphors and similes to successfully illustrate the setting.

