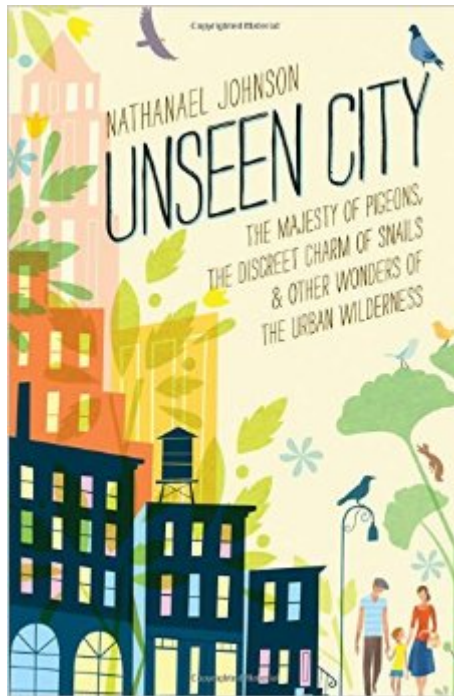


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Unseen City: The Majesty Of Pigeons, The Discreet Charm Of Snails & Other Wonders Of The Urban Wilderness



Synopsis

It all started with Nathanael Johnson's decision to teach his daughter the name of every tree they passed on their walk to day care in San Francisco. This project turned into a quest to discover the secrets of the neighborhood's flora and fauna, and yielded more than names and trivia: Johnson developed a relationship with his nonhuman neighbors. Johnson argues that learning to see the world afresh, like a child, shifts the way we think about nature: Instead of something distant and abstract, nature becomes real—all at once comical, annoying, and beautiful. This shift can add tremendous value to our lives, and it might just be the first step in saving the world. No matter where we live—city, country, oceanside, or mountains—there are wonders that we walk past every day. *Unseen City* widens the pinhole of our perspective by allowing us to view the world from the high-altitude eyes of a turkey vulture and the distinctly low-altitude eyes of a snail. The narrative allows us to eavesdrop on the comically frenetic life of a squirrel and peer deep into the past with a ginkgo biloba tree. Each of these organisms has something unique to tell us about our neighborhoods and, chapter by chapter, *Unseen City* takes us on a journey that is part nature lesson and part love letter to the world's urban jungles. With the right perspective, a walk to the subway can be every bit as entrancing as a walk through a national park.

Book Information

Hardcover: 256 pages

Publisher: Rodale Books (April 5, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1623363853

ISBN-13: 978-1623363857

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 0.9 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (19 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #44,565 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #81 in [Books > Science & Math >](#)

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the best—what to call it, example of nature writing?—books on nature I have read in several years. Johnson's writing is clear, sometimes funny (and more rarely, poignant), and I suspect many readers will keep turning pages and finish the book as I did in one sitting. It's got

some of the characteristics of science journalism, in conversations with academic and scientific authorities, and a first-person exploration (which can get tiresome but not here). But there's another voice, even if written by the author: his toddler daughter Josephine. The book has its origin in him taking her on walks and trying to interest her in nature, which may sound like a literary tactic, but it works and works well in this book, giving it a freshness, somehow. Chapters focus on more prosaic species we share our urban areas with: pigeons, weeds, squirrels, bird language (about listening really), ginko, turkey vultures, ants, crows and snails. The chapters vary in length but I found all equally interesting. One striking analogy is between pigeons and the homeless, efforts to eliminate a problem just move both to other locations without dealing with causes. The chapter on weeds looks at edible plants growing wild. The squirrels section has lots of amusing anecdotes, and should amuse anyone who has tried to keep them away from bird feeders. The section on bird language is, I think, about listening to things other than human din. Ginko is about a common urban tree, and there's more to the tree than I ever knew. Who knew a ginko can live a thousand years? The turkey vulture section is a little gross, but informative and I would guess that most readers will come away knowing far more than before about these birds.

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