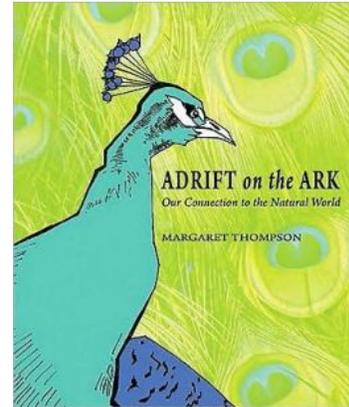


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# Adrift on the Ark

by Margaret Thompson



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## Interview with author Margaret Thompson

### **1. This book is your second collection of essays, after mainly focusing on fiction and children's literature. What compelled you to start writing non-fiction?**

Compulsion didn't really come into it. It was more a case of stretching out a toe and testing the writerly waters.

I had written one or two non-fiction pieces, mainly to enter the *Event* creative non-fiction competitions, and had some success. Then I met Lynne Van Luven at a blue pencil event in Victoria, and she encouraged me to pursue the idea of a book of travel essays. The result was *Knocking on the Moonlit Door*.

I enjoy the personal essay form because it's not rigid and can echo leisurely thought processes. In some ways, it's like thinking out loud. I was also intrigued by the creative part of CNF, using fictional and literary devices in the service of factual accounts without contaminating "truth."

### **2. When did the idea of writing about nature strike you? And how long did it take for the project to come to fruition?**

I don't think there was any aha! moment. Just out of personal interest, I had written some pieces about animals over a number of years. At some point I realized I had what you might call a critical mass, and filling them out to complete a book seemed an obvious step, especially as there was a growing awareness of global warming and its repercussions. From there it took about two years to the moment I held the published book in my hand.

**3. Tell us about your personal connection to nature. Did you unearth any new feelings or revelations during the process of writing this book?**

I have my father to thank for my feelings of connection to the natural world. We lived in the suburbs southwest of London, and Dad worked in the city itself, but he was really an ex-pat countryman. He came from East Anglia, where all his family remained, nearly all of them connected to farming in some way or another. He had a countryman's unhurried approach to life; in his company I learned to see the creatures around us, to remember their names and behaviours, to understand the value of being still and unobtrusive and the privilege of noticing what so many ignored.

Writing the book brought no new revelations, but it crystallized my conviction that a love for nature matters, and that it is essential for survival that humans discard feelings of innate superiority and accept that their species is just one of many equals.

**4. Before you began focusing on your literary career, you spent many years as an English teacher. Can you tell us how it felt to start a new career so late in life? And how do you think your former experiences inform your work now?**

Literary career sounds so...premeditated! I kind of sneaked up on writing, and it still feels less than intentional. If you teach English with any conviction at all, you spend a lot of time trying to develop your students' capacity for lucid thought and elegant expression. Inevitably, the success rate is variable, but the point is that the components and principles of both these things are constantly in mind. I have been writing off and on ever since I was a child, but while I was working there never seemed enough time to get serious.

But just before retirement I started writing poetry, then short stories, and I was off—*making* time for it. And when you actually get some things published, it no longer seems quite such a pipe dream. As for informing my work now? A teacher's life is at least fifty percent learning, and I think I still approach every piece thinking how much I have to learn about using words. Apart from that, school life has given me bags of material!

**5. According to your website, you have one Siamese cat, two basset hounds, and you're visited every day by the peacocks that live in the neighbourhood. Sounds like the perfect setting to write about nature. Tell us about how Victoria influenced the writing of this manuscript, and your thoughts about the natural world.**

Well, living on the peninsula provides an almost perfect balance between town and country. I'm a few yards from the Pat Bay highway, but I overlook a tranquil view of farms in the Hunt Valley and Haro Strait. I don't think Victoria influenced the manuscript in any obvious way apart from supplying material for some of the essays, but it proved to be a restful place to write undisturbed. However, living here did give me the opportunity to study several generations of peacocks at close quarters, something that still fascinates me even though we only have one bird left.

**6. Who are some of the other essayists you admire? Would you count any of them as literary influences?**

I'm not sure how one measures the influence of other writers on one's own work. It seems to me that the way I write is influenced by anything I've read, by experience, by societal standards, by age—you name it. Singling out one writer who may have inspired a choice of subject or a style seems very artificial.

That said, I admire E.B.White as an essayist, largely for his unassuming comfort in the genre; Loren Eiseley for the way he conveys his own sense of wonder at the universe; Salman Rushdie for the wide-ranging scope of his interests; and Bruce Chatwin for the sheer perfection of his prose.

**7. You've been very involved with the Federation of BC Writers, and even served as their president for two years. Can you tell us about your experiences there? How have they helped you grow as a writer?**

My experiences with the federation could probably fill a book! Actually, the best way to answer this is to tackle the last part of your question. When I first joined, I used to make 220-mile round trips to Prince George to attend meetings. That may give you some idea of the sense of isolation experienced by writers in general, and particularly those in small rural communities. The fed provided contact with like-minded people; it gave useful information and set up workshops and readings and competitions. Above all, it provided a window on the writing and publishing world that has been invaluable. As a member of the board and as a volunteer, I have come into contact with many BC writers, and in acting as editor of *WordWorks*, learned a great deal, in a very steep learning curve, about putting together a magazine with a genuine literary voice.

**8. For people who enjoyed this book, could you recommend other readings on the same topic? And what advice do you have for people that want to rekindle their connection with the natural world?**

I'm loath to recommend specific books—I'm bound to leave out something obvious. Suffice it to say, environmentalism is a hot topic, and there are many good books available. And anything Jane Goodall has to say is worth reading.

As for advice, get out there and do it. You don't have to go on safari; just go outside, be still, watch and listen. You'll be amazed how many different lives are being lived in your own backyard.

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**Book Club Discussion Questions**

1. The author's connection to the natural world is the product of her experiences as a child. In an increasingly urbanized world, how likely is it that modern children would encounter such exposure? What are the possible consequences of nature-deprivation?

2. What is the value of keeping pets? What does it say about us as a species that we take on these dependents? How is it that we come to recognize many of our pets as members of the family? Is that simply a form of anthropomorphism? How do we explain those people who buy a puppy and leave it chained up outside all the time?
3. Why do we feel entitled to regard ourselves as the pinnacle of creation? What is your personal definition of "stewardship"? *Are* we responsible for the well-being and survival of the earth? If ninety percent of all the creatures that have ever lived have become extinct, what is the point of worrying about endangered animals?
4. Ignorance and fear have created strong prejudices against certain animals. Discuss the creatures you find frightening and analyze the reasons for your repulsion. How often are they founded on baseless assumptions about the animal? On misinformation? On hearsay? On experience?
5. Are zoos cruel? Is there any justification for caging wild animals for the entertainment of humans in an age where film can bring the wild into everyone's home? Why is cruelty such a uniquely human vice?
6. In how many ways do humans qualify as the most fearsome predators of all? What is the difference between human predation and that of creatures like lions, eagles, orcas? Or of frogs, dragonflies, Venus flytraps?
7. Humans exploit animals for food, clothing, adornment, entertainment and security, as well as for medical, cosmetic, scientific, and military research. Inevitably, this creates moral and ethical dilemmas. Can we justify any of this exploitation? Is it hypocritical to denounce factory farming and still eat meat? If medical advances come only at the sacrifice of hundreds of lab animals, should we use them? Is it possible to do all these things only because we see ourselves as superior beings?
8. We are not looking after the planet very well. Despite our self-proclaimed superiority, we could engineer our own extinction. What do we have to do to prevent this, if indeed prevention is still possible? What, if anything, does awareness of the natural world have to contribute? Can an individual make any difference to the outcome?