

Book Review: The Comfort of Crows
By Margaret Renkl

Every now and then it's important to stop and smell the roses.

A cliché? Sure, but also an invaluable bit of advice. And, I believe, one of the key takeaways from Margaret Renkl's new book "The Comfort of Crows."

The book is comprised of 52 chapters, one for each week of the year. Starting with the onset of winter in late December, Renkl reflects on the changes in nature from her own backyard as well as surrounding area, and how many of these changes mirror those occurring in human life.

For example, she watches how the crows will slide down rooftops in the snow, quarrel and then make up, and gather around when one passes away. That not only reflects human behavior, but behavior through our life cycle.

Renkl describes that even though the world is burning due to climate change, so much of nature is still re-born every spring. She also grows melancholy with the decreasing and slanted rays of sunlight in autumn, comparing it to how the days of her own life are growing shorter.

The book is also educational. Renkl suggests pulling up a weed from wet soil and sniffing it. She says doing so "will flood you with a feeling of well-being. The microbes in freshly turned soil stimulate serotonin production, working on the human brain the same way antidepressants do." Who knew?

Along the way Renkl provides highly entertaining stories, such as the time she built a tank pond in her yard to attract frogs. She wonders, who could ever love a wasp, with its poisons and pain. But then reminds us – especially those with vegetable gardens – that wasps eat the caterpillars that eat our tomato plants.

And in nature as in life, it's okay to forget something. Even squirrels don't remember where they buried every single acorn. For if they did, there'd be no oak trees in the forests.

There are beautiful color illustrations at the start of each chapter done by Renkl's brother Billy, as well as a personal plea to recognize how the changes in our environment are harming species of plants and animals. It's not preachy, just observations she has witnessed in her own backyard.

As Renkl points out, "Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there."

"The Comfort of Crows" is a very mellow, very relaxing read that I am happy to give 4.5 out of 5 stars. It may not prompt us to save a caterpillar or a snail, but it's important to understand the implications therein.