

## An Immense World by Ed Yong

Review by JD Brown

The Immense World of author Ed Yong is the umwelt of animals, the perceptual world that animals sense and experience that adds layers and layers to the world that we experience as humans. The term umwelt, defined and popularized by zoologist Jakob von Uexküll more than 100 years ago, provides Yong with an ideal touching point to guide his detailed exploration of the science of the perception of animals.

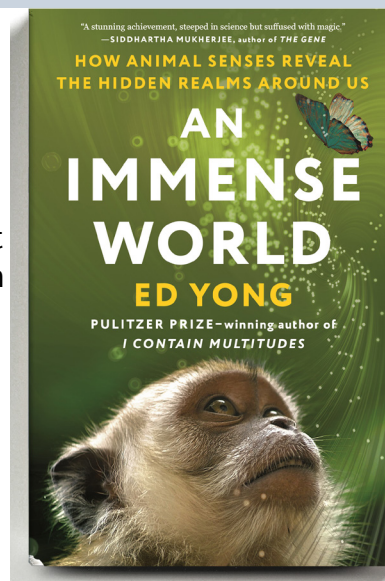
Like an impressionist painter, Yong creates a multifaceted world that, while sharing a temporal plane with humans, feels like a vastly different place. In short, Yong invites you through the doors of perception (without the aid of illegal substances).

A few of my favorites include the tactile superiority of otters and their “penchant for disassembly”, the neon-blueberry eyes of scallops, the near freezing hibernating body temperature of the thirteen-lined ground squirrel, the ocean traversing songs of

whales, and the subtle tempo of bird songs that are hidden to the human ear.

Even if we lack the perceptions of animals, biophilic benefits are there for the taking for those that can learn to immerse themselves for even a moment in an expanded umwelt. The science of biophilia documents the health and wellness salutary effects of time spent in nature; benefits that can potentially only expand as the umwelt of other species are better understood and explored.

The challenge for those that are moved by this opportunity and desire to not only perceive these experiences themselves but to invite the same possibility for future generations is: how do we



nurture an environment where species with a multitude of varying perceptions feel at home?

Perhaps one avenue is not over-think it and to simply let nature do what it does best. Yong quotes one scientist’s statement that “[n]o robot is as sophisticated as an insect” to remind us that evolution is “a far superior innovator that works over a much longer time frame” (Page 129).

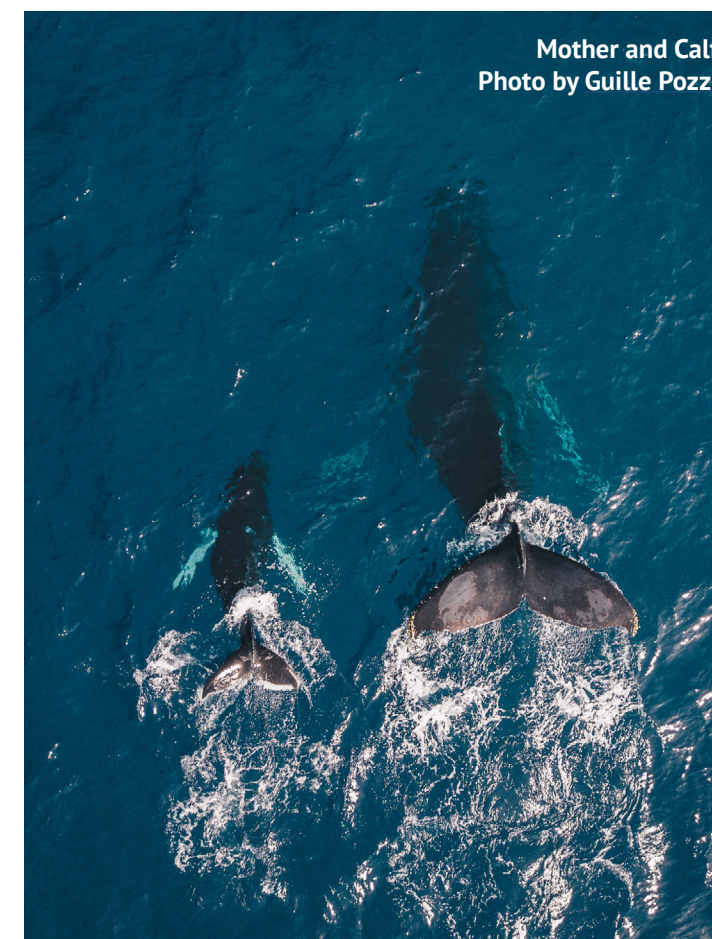
A second critical action is to question the status quo. Yong laments that in our present world “[w]e normalize the abnormal, and accept the unacceptable” (page 352). This includes a vast majority of the global human population where their perception of nature is extremely dampened in the form of light-polluted skies and constant ambient noise. Via the present course of the Anthropocene epoch, resultant climate change and biodiversity freefall, we are headed in the precisely the wrong direction. “Instead of stepping into the Umwelten of other animals, we have forced them to live in ours by barraging them with stimuli of our own making” (336). The result is a “homogenizing” human influence (347).

Instead, Yong urges readers to enter the “wilds of perceptions” (353). Echoing the words of William Cronon and his critique of holding the magnificence of nature as something apart from ourselves and our daily experiences, Yong advocates us to perceive the world through other senses, “to find splendor in familiarity, and the sacred in the mundane.” These wonders exist outside your doorstep and ready to explore through investigations of the umwelten of animals.

Ed Yong. 2022. *An Immense World*. Random House. New York. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/616914/an-immense-world-by-ed-yong>.



Singapore Otters  
Photo by Tim Beatley



Mother and Calf  
Photo by Guille Pozzi



White-crowned sparrow  
Photo by Andy Holmes

## *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* by Dacher Keltner

Review by Tim Beatley

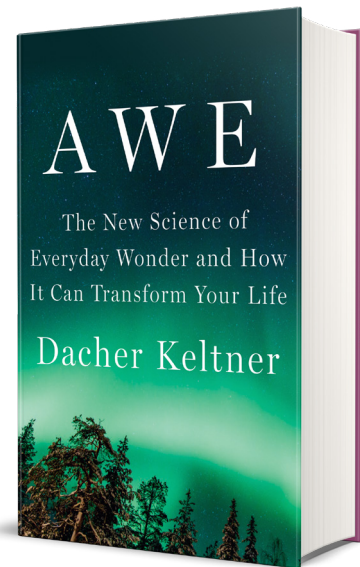
We ought to aspire to live in cities that induce experiences of awe and the powerful advice and groundbreaking research of Dacher Keltner contained in this wonderful new book can help guide the way. A psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, Keltner has been the leading researcher on awe and producer of creative and groundbreaking studies on the power of awe. Keltner defines awe as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.” Nature (or what he calls “wild awe”) is one important source, according to Keltner, but there are many others, including moral beauty, music, visual design, and experiences of life and death. The book presents a thorough and comprehensive summary of the academic research (Keltner’s and others) as well as many personal stories and anecdotes, and insights from interviews with many “awe pioneers.”

While experiences of awe from nature comprises but one chapter in the book, there are many clear nature implications from each of the other sources of awe that Keltner identifies (what he refers to as the “8 wonders of life”). Moral beauty—finding awe in the remarkable kindness and virtue of individuals—is something that characterizes many who are pioneers and champions of nature (one thinks of Jane Goodell, who he cites as a personal hero in the book). The set of awe-experiences is called “Collective Effervescence” (a term coined by sociologist Émile Durkheim) and refers to our collective feelings when moving together in public spaces. The psychological experience of walking is a major topic taken up here, and again there are many examples of overlap with the awe experienced from wild nature. Walking (and hiking, running, climbing) in nature is an immense opportunity to combine feelings of connection with awe. The “awe walk” is an especially potent

device explored in Keltner’s research and suggests walking with the right frame of mind (with instructions to “take in the vastness of things”). Art and architecture, and visual design more broadly, is another source of awe. Here, as well, there are important intersections. A building like the WOHA designed Park Royal Hotel in Singapore, for example, mingles in striking and novel ways elements that are artistic and the natureful, and often elicits surprise and “whoas” (my first reaction in seeing the hotel from the street). In these ways, the entire book is about wild awe.

One key message from the research and the book is that experiences of awe can be profoundly transformative. They can shift our emotions and perceptions away from what Keltner repeatedly refers to as our “default” condition: one of self-interest, independence, and narcissism. Through awe, narcissism recedes, and we begin to see ourselves as part of something larger. We are, in short, better human beings when we experience awe, and our lives are happier and fuller of joy and delight.

Another key point in the book is that awe can and should be thought of as an everyday experience. Like everyday nature, everyday awe can be encountered around us where we live and work; by gazing out one’s window or during a morning



Park Royal Hotel, Singapore  
Image by Tim Beatley

stroll. Travel to a distant national park or a remote wilderness park is not necessary to experience awe. The implications for biophilic urban planning are many and profound: we must work against urban trends that interfere with opportunities for awe in cities; for instance, the proliferation of light pollution that makes experiencing the vastness of the night sky so difficult. And we must work, on the other hand, to expand the possibilities for moments of urban awe. The unexpected sighting of a humpback whale from a Manhattan cafe or an encounter with an ancient oak tree along a sidewalk can encourage us to ponder the vastness of time. Planners should work to better understand these potential awe experiences and see them as assets to map, inventory, and make visible in plans and planning documents. Maybe cities need an urban awe-plan or awe-strategy to ensure a more careful and systematic approach, and to make sure that the powerful benefits and transformative potential of awe are fully understood and prioritized in our vision of biophilic cities.

I think there’s a strong case made here by Keltner

that to move in the direction of a more just, sustainable, and natureful world, and to address the range of problems we face from deforestation to homelessness, will require us to break out of our “mean egoism,” as Keltner calls our default human condition. This book gives us the research and scholarly underpinning to believe that this is possible and provides an exciting and hopeful agenda for how to make cities more awe-inducing and wondrous.

Dacher Keltner. 2023. *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*. Penguin Press. New York, NY. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/622175/awe-by-dacher-keltner>.