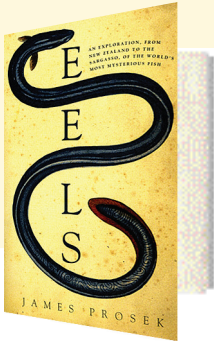


EELS

By James Prosek

Harper, 304 pp., \$25.99



GETTING MY YOUNG SON TO fall asleep each night is an eternal struggle. But watching his favorite TV show with Dad helps him close his eyes, which is how I came to see an episode of “Curious George” in which the cartoon monkey tries to catch an American eel that has found its way into the local fishing pond. His goal is to return the eel to its native habitat, a nearby river, so it can swim to the ocean to spawn. But the subject of this noble effort strikes me as an unappealing choice for a children’s show. We’ve seen George encounter penguins, crickets, possums, and squirrels. But an eel? *Eeeeww*.

Though perhaps I’m being too harsh. James Prosek’s *Eels: An Exploration, From New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World’s Most Mysterious Fish* made me reconsider my knee-jerk prejudice against an animal that I knew almost nothing about. Before picking up the book, I couldn’t have told you for sure whether the eel was a fish, a snake, or something entirely different.

Turns out I’m not alone. Some tribes of the South Pacific still consider eels part-man, part-fish demigods. The ancient Romans suggested that eels and snakes interbred. A nineteenth-century

naturalist called the eel a missing link between purely aquatic and amphibious reptiles.

But the freshwater eel is, in fact, a fish, albeit a very strange one. Eels are the anti-salmon—instead of being born in mountain streams and returning as adults to spawn, they go the other way, beginning their lives somewhere in the featureless ocean and somehow finding their way back to the same spot after decades in freshwater. An eel scientist tells Prosek that salmon, famed for their heroic upstream journeys, have it easy compared with eels.

Young eels (known at this stage as glass eels) swim up rivers while still tiny and transparent, settling in lakes and ponds that often have no obvious connection to the sea. When it’s time to return, they can cross land during heavy rains and floods, using one another like bridges and even balling up into a single rolling mass. No one has seen a freshwater eel spawning in the wild. Until the late nineteenth century, no one was even sure eels had gender; their sex organs don’t appear until they return to the ocean.

Because his subject is so mysterious, Prosek frames part of his book as a detective story, traveling the world in search of knowledge about his elusive prey. (He also provides etchings to illustrate his journey.) He helps build a weir to capture eels on the Delaware River, drinks the soporific *sakau* with the eel clan on the Micronesian island of Pohnpei, visits a slaughterhouse while celebrating Eel Day in Japan, and dons a wet suit to swim with five-foot-long New Zealand eels that bump against his snorkeling mask.

Prosek seems to have fallen in love with the details of his investigation—where he slept, whom he talked with, what he drank and ate. He spent 11 years researching the book, and it’s clear he couldn’t get enough eel stories; readers are unlikely to share his unlimited attention span. Sections of the

book, particularly when he visits New Zealand, begin to drag as Prosek faithfully relates one conversation after another about the native Maori’s *taniwha*, or guardian eels. (The title of one chapter, “More Tales of *Taniwha*,” might have been a sign to move on.) The spiritual significance of eels to island cultures is a key revelation in the book, but at several points the reader yearns for synthesis, not literal transcription.

Ultimately, the larger story Prosek weaves about the eel is the most interesting in the book, and like almost any natural history written during our modern age, the eel’s tale is not a happy one. Like passenger pigeons and Newfoundland cod before them, eel populations in the past have been described as so vast they could never be diminished. We

know where this is headed: passenger pigeons are extinct, cod fisheries are devastated, and now eels are disappearing worldwide, beset by a multitude of factors including pollution, climate change, the Japanese appetite, and hydroelectric dams that crush them during migration. Yet an attempt to put eels on the U.S. endangered species list was rejected in 2007 because a steep decline does not equal imminent extinction.

That the reader comes to care about the future of this alien-looking, slime-covered fish may be the ultimate testament to the power of Prosek’s eel stories. I still get that *eeeww* feeling, but I’m glad my son enjoys watching George help one find its way home—whatever dark, mysterious corner of the ocean that might be.

—SCOTT DODD

Blizzard

How did I get to this amazing country, where all things are concealed? In a zinc-white blur, pines are not pines, their branches are under down;

cedars wobble with the weight of it; and harlequin trunks, hooded azaleas (or whatever, in disguise) ignore me

as I watch millions of six-pointed flakes drift into a mass, hiding the road. Exile begins with the unfamiliar:

now a missed elm, now words that fail. In the window pane, my face is gone. My body’s lighter. I’ve lost my name.

Feathers fly, but no birds. Wait. Those silvery things out there are angels, singing as the wind sings, out of tune.

Silence now. Blank sky. It’s dark at four. Blizzard, send an angel down to wrestle me in this pale air, breathe life into my throat.

Let a tough angel crack the roof and shake me with blessings. I’d trudge out into day with new eyes, a new name, and song.

—BY GRACE SCHULMAN

