



Rainbow Dust: Three Centuries of Butterfly Delight

Peter Marren

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Like fluttering shards of stained glass, butterflies possess a unique power to pierce and stir the human soul. Indeed, the ancient Greeks explicitly equated the two in a single word, *psyche*, so that from early times butterflies were not only a form of life, but also an idea. Profound and deeply personal, written with both wisdom and wit, Peter Marren's *Rainbow Dust* explores this idea of butterflies—the why behind the mysterious power of these insects we do not flee, but rather chase.

At the age of five, Marren had his “Nabokov Moment,” catching his first butterfly and feeling the dust of its colored scales between his fingers. It was a moment that would launch a lifetime's fascination rivaling that of the famed novelist—a fascination that put both in good company. From the butterfly collecting and rearing craze that consumed North America and Europe for more than two hundred years (a hobby that in some cases bordered on madness), to the potent allure of butterfly iconography in contemporary advertisements and their use in spearheading calls to conserve and restore habitats (even though butterflies are essentially economically worthless), Marren unveils the many ways in which butterflies inspire us as objects of beauty and as symbols both transient and transcendent.

Floating around the globe and through the whole gamut of human thought, from art and literature to religion and science, *Rainbow Dust* is a cultural history rather than merely a natural one, a tribute to butterflies' power to surprise, entertain, and obsess us. With a sway that far surpasses their fragile anatomy and gentle beat, butterfly wings draw us into the prismatic wonders of the natural world—and, in the words of Marren, these wonders take flight.

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Todd Lyons:

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