

A Field Guide to Compassion

Ben doesn't just study insects, he befriends them, invites them on playdates. No way this boy is going to squish a friend—even one that stings him.



Ben finds friends in the mossiest places.

We're off to the beach. Almost. Eight pieces of bread are lined up on the counter, and I'm unscrewing the lid from the peanut butter when Ben flies in through the front door. His face is pale, his eyes are huge, and one elbow is clutched inside the fingers of his other hand. "I think I've been stung by a bee," he says, with the kind of grave formality that makes me want to smile. Instead, I exclaim maternally, "Wow! Your first bee sting!"

I squat down to look at his face, and 5-year-old Ben smiles the shy, battle-weary smile of the hero. The sandwiches must wait while the stinger is found and removed, ice and ointment are applied, the swelling is inspected, and the story is told and retold while Birdy, 2, hovers nervously and pats her big brother on the head. "I was just walking? And it kind of—zoom!—flew into my arm and then it stung me. It seemed like maybe it dropped to the ground afterwards."

I feel so many things: proud of this boy's bravery; a diffuse sense of worry, even though there's no suggestion that Ben is about to clutch at his throat in an allergic fit of anaphylaxis; a tender, guilty gratitude that this big kid is here again, in my arms, allowing himself to be mildly fussed over; and outrage, or more precisely rage, toward the attacker who has made my

“I am two with nature.” —Woody Allen

In between nature outings, Catherine and Ben have been reading *James and the Giant Peach*, so, she says, “we’ve come to expect our insect friends to be full of personality.”



son’s elbow look like something out of a catalog of country hams. But Ben? He’s just feeling curious. At his urging, we get out the field guide so he can identify his little wingy nemesis—which turns out to be the terrible, common honeybee.

Thanks to a combination of our many nature outings and Ben’s ongoing obsession with classification, this book is getting a lot of use this summer. And the insect world has become not just a nature study for us, but also a kind of emotional laboratory. Our dealings with bugs and critters allow us to experiment with a range of feelings that are precisely

human: regret, fear, disgust, and grief. Above all else, perhaps, is compassion.

There’s the morning when Ben spots a slug sliming its way along a tree root and runs for his bug catcher—“even though it’s not actually a bug, of course.” The slug is coaxed inside the mesh cage, named (Sluggo—what else?), offered shreds of lichen (snack or interior decoration, as the slug sees fit), and admired. In five seconds, he goes from pest to pet, and his eating the delphiniums is forgiven as we marvel over his many talents, his sluggish *joie de vivre*.

Anthropomorphizing takes us on a kind of shortcut to compassion. “You are different from me,” we say to slug, to bug, “but I am trying to appreciate what it’s like to be you.” Watching our slimy friend—or maybe by watching Ben watch him—I start to understand this. Because much to Ben’s delight, Sluggo begins a slow and erratic performance of the alphabet. “He’s a J!” Ben cries from the front step. “Wait—now he’s a C! I want him to do a B, of course, but I think he’s probably not able to.” The morning passes happily until it’s time for an outing. Ben and I consult briefly about our having to desert the slug. It’s a warm day but not terribly hot, and we decide to leave Sluggo with a

leaf full of applesauce and to put him in the shade. Ben worries a little about this, and I reassure him. “You’ll let him go later,” I say. “But I’m sure he’ll be fine for a couple of hours.”

In the made-for-TV drama version of this prediction, you’d hear my words repeated in a ghostly way—“... fine for a couple of hours ... for a couple of hours ... a couple of hours ...”—that would cue you to its gloomy mistakenness. When we return from our outing, Ben finds Sluggo curled up beneath the shady leaf: awfully small, awfully brown, and awfully dead.

Ben’s eyes fill with tears, and I fill with regret. Despite the fact that I’ve drowned a million slugs in my garden—set beer traps out for them like some fatal gastropod keg party—I’ve grown fond of this particular one, since my son is so fond of him. We set Sluggo’s body in the bushes with sorrow and with hope that he might nourish a hungry bird. This is the classic flip-flop we see in nature documentaries on TV, isn’t it? When the show’s about the lion, you root *for* the lion; when the show’s about the gazelle, you root *against* the lion. Now all we can do is root for a bird looking for lunch.

How do you steer a kind heart when the winds of righteousness are so constantly

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