

Natural

THE SEDUCTIVE MYTH OF
NATURE'S GOODNESS

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States of America in 2020 by
Beacon Press, Boston, MA

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 198 5
eISBN 978 1 78283 524 0



NATURE: Since I am the whole that exists, how is it possible for a being like you, so small a portion of myself, to comprehend me? Be content, atoms my children, with seeing a few atoms that surround you, with drinking a few drops of my milk, with vegetating a few moments on my breast, and at last dying without having known your mother and your nurse.

—VOLTAIRE, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

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Introduction

HOW CAN WE LIVE IN HARMONY with nature?

Animal species, millions of years in the making, gone in a geological blink; ancient waterways clouded with waste; the land disemboweled and burned; the fumes heating the planet—with every passing day the damage grows worse, the question more urgent.

One promising answer was served for dinner at a recent conference on the future of environmentalism. Along with some of the world's foremost scientists, journalists, and academics, I bit into my Impossible Burger, the latest in high-tech fake meat, and wondered if it would live up to the hype. Not just in terms of flavor—which to my palate was indistinguishable from a standard fast-food patty—but as a solution for our broken relationship with the natural world.

Enthusiasts see meat substitutes as essential, even salvific. “Fake Meat Will Save Us,” proclaimed a headline in the *New York Times* the morning after our dinner.¹ Impossible Foods' mission is “To save meat. And earth.” Their enthusiasm is understandable: scientists agree that animal agriculture as it is currently practiced plays an outsize role in climate change, oceanic dead zones, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and other unnatural horrors. Then there's the ethics of eating creatures bred to be cheap factory outputs, crammed cheek by jowl in ghastly living quarters until they're old enough to be slaughtered. Impossible Burgers and other fakes provide an appealing alternative, allowing us both to reduce our culinary carbon footprint and to treat animals with dignity, instead of seeing them, and the rest of nature, as raw material meant for the fulfillment of human desires.

Only days earlier, however, my family and I had dined on a radically different answer—a juicy pork loin purchased from Polyface Farm, just an

hour from our home. The farm is 550 bucolic acres of open grassland and wooded hillsides deep in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, at the end of a bumpy dirt road called Pure Meadows Lane. The road was named by Joel Salatin, founder of Polyface, to reflect the natural purity of the land he stewards, and his redemptive vision of a purified relationship between humans and what he reverently calls "Creation."

Touring the farm I found myself wholly won over by the power of his vision, which the journalist Michael Pollan described as a "dance on the theme of symbiosis" performed by humans, animals, and plants on nature's stage.² Upon arriving I saw a toddler playing happily with rabbits in front of open greenhouses—not pet rabbits, but rabbits that would eventually be slaughtered and eaten or sold. With a few other visitors I hiked up a hill, stepped over a single electric wire, and joined a group of pigs that were rooting away with pleasure. We shared a field with cattle as they flicked flies with their tails and munched on native grasses. "Good farming should be aesthetically, aromatically, and sensually romantic," said Salatin proudly, surveying the scene. His farm certainly was. Birdsong and the hum of insects filled the sweet-smelling air, and I felt a primal need for closeness with nature fulfilled, as if I were on a hike in a national park.

A passionate environmentalist, Salatin regularly calls out the hubris of fellow conservative Christians who seek to replace a divinely ordained natural order with one of their own making. Unlike "chemical-wielding farmers," as he refers to them, Salatin raises chickens, pigs, rabbits, turkeys, sheep, and cattle according to "nature's template." Lagoons of manure that contribute to dead zones? Every ounce of manure at Polyface fertilizes vegetables and grasses, in addition to attracting grubs that feed the chickens. Routine dosing with antibiotics? Unnecessary, declares Salatin, because he allows his animals to live as nature intended.

According to his philosophy, Impossible Burgers epitomize the problem with our relationship to nature, not the solution. They depend on genetically modified soy for a protein called "soy leghemoglobin" (the eleventh of twenty-one ingredients), which lends a characteristic meaty flavor. "GMOs . . . egregiously violate God's pattern," claims Salatin, a phrase he uses interchangeably with "nature's pattern."³ He has blamed the consumption of genetically modified foods for everything from increasing allergies to increasing violence. When I asked if he could imagine some role for these technologies in the future of food, his answer was unequivocal: "There is no

redeeming value to GMOs or fake meat.” If we want to live in harmony with Creation, we should honor the wisdom of natural systems rather than manipulate them further. Like ancient hunter-gatherers and traditional small-scale farmers, we must sanctify our relationship with the animals we eat, not remove ourselves from the cycle of life. The way of artificial hubris ends in damnation, not salvation.

Over our dinner of genetically modified patties I described Salatin’s perspective to other attendees. Since the conference was sponsored by an organization that strongly supports technological approaches to conservation, their responses were unsurprising. Some scoffed at the very idea of a division between natural and unnatural. *Isn’t everything natural? Isn’t nature a social construct?* Others were willing to grant the division, but insisted that saving nature depends on transcending natural patterns. Denser cities, effective birth control, and intensive agriculture may violate “nature’s template,” but they will help us meet important conservation goals such as reduced land use and lower carbon emissions. The contrast with Salatin couldn’t have been starker: when Pollan pressed him on how to feed New York City using locally sourced food, Salatin replied, “Why do we have to have a New York City? What good is it?”⁴

Pork loin or Impossible Burger? The country or the city? Again and again, the question of our proper relationship with nature is reframed in the same way: Should we obey nature or transcend it?

This book is a comprehensive response to that question. Instead of choosing sides, it shows how the framing is fundamentally misguided and counterproductive. An oppositional binary between “natural” and “unnatural” inhibits constructive dialogue about humanity’s most pressing problems. It trades complicated truths for the comfort of clear categories. It encourages dogmatism over compromise, certainty over humility, and simplicity over nuance.

Breaking down the binary won’t be easy, however, since the appeal to natural goodness is among the most influential arguments in the history of human thought. Far from being restricted to modern debates over food, we will see how this argument has influenced virtually every aspect of our individual and collective lives, from sexual habits to economic principles, from how we raise our children to how we organize their sports.

Variations on the idea of “natural goodness” are ubiquitous in all intellectual traditions, ancient and modern, East and West. In ancient China, sages wrote approvingly of *ziran*, the “self-so” of natural impulses uncorrupted by

human meddling. Monks promised miraculous healing if people abandoned their homes for caves and gave up farming to forage in the wild. Across the globe, Greek poets told of a golden age when natural laws made politics unnecessary and a golden race lived effortlessly off nature's bounty. *Natural*: it describes Eden before agriculture, our instincts before we sinned. It is ideal beauty and the best sort of food; how we ought to act and how we hope to die—naturally.

Likewise, “unnatural” has always connoted evil. Throughout Shakespeare's plays, for instance, the word serves as shorthand for moral deficiency: “unnatural and unkind,” “unworthy and unnatural,” “savage and unnatural,” “inhuman and unnatural.” In his time—and long before it—an “unnatural” birth meant a baby born with some deformity; an “unnatural” death meant, and still means, life cut short by murder or sickness. With regard to sexual activity, “unnatural” describes perversions of desire; in government, perversions of justice.

Yet there are obvious contradictions built into this binary. Disease, deformity, and infant death are “unnatural” occurrences that feature prominently in the natural world, the very drivers of evolution. Violence and resource scarcity mark the natural existence of all animals, humans included. Those Chinese monks wrote their praises of natural living on unnaturally processed bamboo strips, just as advocates of natural living today spread their message via social media.

So how have people overlooked these contradictions and arrived at a vision of natural goodness and unnatural evil? Why is it that even some tech utopians insist on justifying technology by arguing that it, too, is natural, instead of simply embracing unnaturalness?

As a scholar of religion, I find the answer is clear. Another primary goal of this book is to show that despite appearances, “*natural*” is a religious term. The impulse that guides so many shopping carts and parenting decisions is thoroughly theological. “Nature” is another term for God; “natural,” a synonym for holy. “Unnatural” acts are violations of nature's wise commandments, laws inscribed in the structure of reality and ignored at our peril. Only humans are capable of such violations, since by definition anything unnatural—synthetic, artificial, fabricated, manipulated, manufactured—is caused by us, not nature.

This way of thinking is extremely compelling. Even Charles Darwin was drawn to articulate his theory of natural selection as if it were orchestrated by

a benevolent deity. Confronted by the painful realities of the natural world, Darwin admitted it was derogatory to suggest that “the Creator of countless systems of worlds should have created each of the myriads of creeping parasites and worms.”⁵ But in the very same passage he maintained that the laws of evolution “should exalt our notion of the power of the omniscient Creator.” At other times he divinized nature directly, capitalizing Nature and speaking of her as a hidden goddess “silently and insensibly working . . . at the improvement of each organic being,” slowly making “progress towards perfection.”⁶

I began with the examples of pork and Impossible Burgers because I first noticed this unique form of religiosity while researching attitudes toward food. In 2016, the US Food and Drug Administration put out a call for public comment on the meaning of “natural” to help inform regulatory practices. It’s an important question: data show that over half of Americans prefer “all natural” food. Market analysts have even found that “natural” is a more desirable attribute than “organic.” Reading the 4,863 comments from the respondents confirmed to me that this preference was deeply religious. There were many references to nature’s “intentions,” as if a higher power *wanted* us to eat certain foods but not others, and had our best interests at heart. Some comments were straightforwardly theological: “Natural should be limited to those ingredients that have been created by God,” said one.⁷

But despite its popularity, the idea of “natural food” is impossibly vague and relative. While people have long advocated for the benefits of eating naturally, there’s little consensus on what it means. After all, the freakishly large vegetables and fruits at farmers’ markets would be unrecognizable to early hunter-gatherers, and so would the carefully bred chickens and cattle raised at Polyface Farm. I came to believe that a clear-eyed understanding of our food system required abandoning historically naïve and theologically inflected visions of natural goodness.

However, my growing skepticism about natural goodness was accompanied by guilt and doubt. In a world wracked by global warming, with plastic bags and discarded tires polluting the seas; facing, as we do, an epidemic of extinctions and endless man-made threats to public health, wasn’t it reckless, almost sacrilegious, to question the intrinsic goodness of nature and reverence for natural living? Our technological hubris seems uniquely responsible for the sorry state of the earth. Salatin belongs to a long tradition of environmentalists whose passion was fueled by belief in the divine wisdom

of natural systems. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for forcing us to recognize the importance—indeed, the sacredness—of the natural world, and how humans were imperiling it. If skeptics like me had won the day, their voices might have gone unheeded. Why push back on beliefs that humble us and urge respect for the environment?

One reason jumped out immediately: unexamined faith in natural goodness can lead to tragedy. Reverence for natural approaches to health and healing caused the preventable deaths of hundreds of thousands of South Africans from AIDS between 1999 and 2008.⁸ They were advised by their president, Thabo Mbeki, and his health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, to avoid “toxic” chemical drugs and instead treat the disease naturally with beetroot, olive oil, garlic, lemons, and African potatoes.⁹ The ongoing public health crisis of vaccination refusal has a similar basis in the ideology of natural purity. Parents who refuse vaccines tend to see them as unnatural interventions. As with proponents of natural food, there is an underlying religious component to the parents’ beliefs, occasionally made explicit through the conflation of God and nature. “We have a God-given immune system,” said one mother in an interview conducted by the sociologist Jennifer Reich. “You don’t have to shoot things into the body. Let’s support what we already have.”¹⁰

Catastrophic medical decisions are only the beginning when it comes to the distorting force of appeals to nature’s intentions. Sexists invoked the natural inferiority of women to justify their exclusion from education, athletics, and politics. Eugenicians used natural selection to rationalize their breeding programs. Opponents of interracial marriage argued that unions between different races were unnatural, and opponents of same-sex marriage make a parallel case today. Ethnic nationalists secure followers by painting a nostalgic picture of once-great nations peopled only by their original, “natural” occupants. (We see the residue of this in the legal language of “naturalizing” citizens.) Advocates of radical economic deregulation have justified their proposed policies by appealing to economist Adam Smith’s naturally emerging “invisible hand” that reaches down from the proverbial heavens to guide ideal commerce—or would, if only unnatural political interference were removed from the picture. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, communist revolutionaries argued that political violence was part of the natural progression of history from capitalism to communism.

Although these arguments usually depend on flawed science, good science is no antidote. Justifying same-sex marriage by pointing to homosexual activity in primates, or to genetic determinants of sexual orientation, only repeats the fundamental mistake of seeking morality in the mirror of nature. What if homosexuality only occurred in humans? What if there were no genetic markers for sexual orientation? Could we then condemn homosexuality as unnatural? What if a nation was once populated by only one ethnicity? Should it therefore expel more recent immigrants? Natural goodness sounds great in theory, but in practice it's a mercenary ethic that anyone can hire to fight for their cause.

And then there's the problem of my own privilege. I have never walked for miles to secure drinking water, or medicine, or books. Machines wash my clothing and my dishes. Natural light is a wonderful thing, but for nearly a billion people with no access to power, and billions more with only intermittent access, the prospect of unnatural light is no less wonderful.¹¹ No one has told me that my sexual orientation is unnatural, or my biology is naturally inferior. Seen differently, praise of naturalness can look like praise of the privileges that render its downsides invisible.

This point was made eloquently to me by the late Calestous Juma, a professor of international development at Harvard University. As a young boy in rural Kenya, Juma's evening entertainment was often stargazing. Ninety miles from the nearest city, he looked up into a pitch-black sky, pupils unshrunken by screens or filaments or the glow of his family's kerosene lamp.

But there were also rare nights when the late arrival of a bus disturbed the stillness. First there was the distant growl of an engine, then headlights cutting through the darkness like a scythe through a grain field. His pupils contracted, the stars dimmed, and the natural world yielded to technology.

This moment can easily be seen as tragic: a scene of invasion, pollution, and desecration. In his classic paean to nature, *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau calls the local locomotive a "bloated pest," its iron belly full of mercenaries bent on ravaging his idyllic woodland.¹² And yet, any Kenyan child can tell you that Thoreau's perspective is not the only one. Rather than mourning the arrival of the bus, Juma described to me how he and other villagers would rush to the marketplace and greet it. The approaching headlights promised all manner of unnatural wonders: bicycles, books, radios, medicine. To him, these treasures represented the very realization of human nature, an inborn drive to discover and create and improve our lot in life.

But nuance is powerless against appeals to Nature (with a capital *N*). Like citing a holy text, they have incredible persuasive force, making it difficult to assess evidence objectively, and easy to oversimplify complicated issues like economics, immigration, and love. Yes, what someone calls “natural” may be good, but the association is by no means necessary, or even likely. The philosopher John Stuart Mill said it bluntly: “Nature, natural, and the group of words derived from them . . . are one of the most copious sources of false taste, false philosophy, false morality, and even bad laws.”¹³ (The “appeal to nature” is so frequently abused that it has earned the status of an informal fallacy.)¹⁴

It’s impossible to capture the scope of the problem by looking at a single time period or a specific feature of human culture, which is why the following chapters are interdisciplinary and transhistorical. A broader perspective reveals that wherever the concepts occur—whether avowedly religious or supposedly secular—“natural” and “nature” are the idiosyncratic products of culturally specific ideologies, deployed to justify a wide range of inconsistent positions. Nevertheless, people persist in believing that their version of naturalness is an eternal truth, holy scripture dictated by Mother Nature.

As with all religious faiths, the consequences of belief differ dramatically from one person to the next. For the orthodox, nature worship is a persistent and conscious factor in every aspect of their lives. They constantly ask themselves, “What would nature want?”—in the voting booth and during the school selection process, while shopping for cookware and the food they will prepare in it. Like monks, some make enormous sacrifices, living completely “off the grid” or giving up clothing as part of the “naturist” movement.

For the majority of us, however, faith in nature’s goodness only affects certain aspects of our lives—some food choices here and there, or maybe that expensive organic mattress for the baby’s crib. Even so, it is important to recognize that the effects of a lukewarm faith are not limited to individuals’ decisions. Nature worship infuses culture in myriad ways, its power hidden under the sediment of time and built into the unconscious demands of custom and language, making it all the more difficult to recognize and challenge.

Rejecting theological versions of nature does not entail embracing their opposite. We should not ignore the genuine wisdom of those who see divinity reflected in nature, since they have often learned a great deal from careful attention to natural systems. Appeals to natural goodness are not

always fallacious, and categorically dismissing them is its own equally pernicious form of faith. Sometimes unnatural solutions will be catastrophically misguided, sometimes not—but only by identifying and abandoning faith in nature’s goodness, wherever it occurs, can we know when that’s the case. Since this faith may reflect an inability or unwillingness to think outside one’s privileged context, bracketing it is especially important when it comes to social and political policy. The best future for humanity and nature must be built on dialogue and evidence, not taboos and zealotry.

I hope this book can help us achieve that future. Unlearning the orthodoxies of nature worship will be liberating—and not just from the guilt of feeding our children the occasional non-organic snack. It will allow us to seek complicated truths instead of being tied to mythic binaries. It will help us clarify why nature is sacred and worthy of protection. It will facilitate the identification of propagandists, bigots, demagogues, and marketers who wrap their rhetoric in the mantle of “what’s natural.” And it is necessary if we are to be good stewards of the earth’s welfare, and good neighbors to each other. As Calestous Juma said to me: “Mythology gives us an excuse to abdicate our responsibility to the world. Instead, we must be courageous enough to play our role responsibly.”

Myth

“One doesn’t expect Dr. Frankenstein to show up in a wool sweater,” wrote the political commentator Charles Krauthammer, ominously, in the March 1997 issue of *Time* magazine.¹ He was referring to British scientist Dr. Ian Wilmut, who eight months earlier had successfully created Dolly, the world’s most famous sheep, by cloning her from another adult sheep’s cell.

Krauthammer’s criticism was unsparing. “This was not supposed to happen,” he insisted. Dolly was “a cataclysmic” creature. But PPL Therapeutics, the company responsible for funding the science behind Dolly, was undeterred, and four years later produced five cloned female pigs.

Again, the news provoked outrage. Lisa Lange, a spokeswoman for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, echoed Krauthammer when she dismissed justifications of cloning: “There’s always a reason given to validate these Frankenstein-like experiments.”²

Invoking Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is standard fare in arguments over controversial science. Five years before the creation of Dolly, Boston College English professor Paul Lewis coined the term “Frankenfood” in a letter to the *New York Times* that argued for stricter FDA regulation of genetically modified foods. “If they want to sell us Frankenfood,” he wrote, “perhaps it’s time to gather the villagers, light some torches and head to the castle.”³ And in 1978, in vitro fertilization pioneer Dr. Patrick Steptoe tried

to preempt such criticism when he defended his role in the birth of Louise Brown, the world's first "test-tube" baby. "I am not a wizard or a Frankenstein," he pleaded.⁴

Steptoe was wise to dissociate himself from Frankenstein. The story is particularly potent, deftly incorporating elements of the world's most famous myths. The subtitle of the book is "The Modern Prometheus," a reference to the ancient Greek Titan who stole fire from the gods and ended up chained to a rock, his liver to be devoured daily by a vulture and regenerated at night in eternal punishment. And who can fail to notice the resemblance to the Fall: temptation leads Adam and Eve, like Dr. Frankenstein, to acquire forbidden knowledge, which results in their expulsion from Eden. Their punishment included the curse of having to work the land—agriculture—and, for Eve, pain during childbirth and enforced patriarchy ("he will rule over you," Genesis 3:16).

People don't just live by archetypal myths—they are constituted by them. As the scholar of myth Bruce Lincoln has argued, myth is *ideology in narrative form*. Want to know what someone stands for? Look to the myths that shape them. Group identity, from religion to politics, depends on an investment in a few foundational stories, which serve as justifications of one's preferred moral and social order. This is why mythically justified beliefs are so resistant to evidence: changing them means changing yourself.

Another way to think about myths is as narrative metaphors. Metaphors are indispensable for our understanding of reality, and shared metaphors are threaded through the fabric of a culture. In their seminal work on metaphor, the linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson show how metaphors like "argument is war" shape everyday language, and, in turn, our perspective on what is metaphorized: He *attacked* my arguments. She *shot down* my main points. Your argument is *indefensible*.⁵ When Krauthammer says that Dr. Wilmut is Frankenstein, he activates a set of implicit claims about cloned animals, all derived from the story: Dolly is a *monster*. She is *out of control*. She is a *danger*.

Calling something natural may seem like a straightforward description, but it is actually a powerful narrative metaphor. The adjective "natural" cannot be understood without reference to "nature," a concept that necessarily depends on a narrative. Nature is not a static object, but rather a story that takes place over time. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "natural" as "something having its basis in the natural world or in the usual course of

nature.” But what exactly is “the usual course of nature”? When did it begin, how did it proceed, and where do we locate departures from it? Answers to these questions come in the form of myths, the stories that we depend on, consciously or unconsciously, whenever we judge a product, a process, or a way of life to be natural.

In a sense, then, “natural” is better understood as a meta-myth. It is built from multiple archetypal narratives that come together to form an overarching conceptual framework. We can use this framework to evaluate anything. Food judged to be natural is food that fits certain story lines, ones we see reflected in packaging design: red farmhouse, green leaves, animals grazing, sun shining, fresh fruits and vegetables, a grandmother with a wooden spoon. These story lines are deeply ideological. Just consider the common pairing of “natural” with “healthy,” “true,” “pure,” “honest,” “authentic,” “simple” and “real.” At the sight of the word “natural” we reflexively tell ourselves myths about *authentic* culinary traditions handed down for generations, or *honest* farmers who work in sun-dappled fields to bring us whatever *real* grocery store product has chosen to incorporate the power of these narrative metaphors on its label.

Labeling a story as “myth” might seem like a pejorative judgment of falsehood, but myths are not necessarily bad. Just as “mythic” can mean either “false” or “awesome,” myths themselves may be harmful superstitions or expressions of sacred, primal truths. Nor is the veracity of a myth, strictly speaking, the most important thing about it. Like *Frankenstein*, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* achieved mythic status, to the point that “Orwellian” has become an adjective commonly used to describe actual political policies. While based on Orwell’s lived experiences, the book is, of course, still a fiction, but one taken to provide wise guidance about the real-world dangers of totalitarianism. Truth is important, but figuring out which myths to believe in—that is, which myths should shape your ideology—is more than an exercise in fact-checking.

Over two thousand years ago Plato recognized this ambiguity, writing that myths “on the whole are false, but still they have some truth in them.” Famously suspicious of poets and their fictions, he nevertheless saw these narrative metaphors as essential to the education of good citizens. “One must supervise the makers of myths,” he argues in *The Republic*, “and one must approve that which is good in their compositions and condemn that which is not. And those which are approved, we will persuade nurses and

mothers to recount them to their children, and to shape their souls with these myths, even more powerfully than they shape their bodies with their hands. But one must reject most of the stories they now recount.”⁶ Since we are not subject to the whims of a philosopher-king, we must be our own supervisors. We must decide which myths to tell ourselves, our friends, and our children, a process that starts with becoming conscious of the myths that influence our individual and collective lives.

Our understanding of what’s natural can never be completely free of myth. Nature is inherently mythic, a concept so gigantic in scope and significance that only with narrative metaphors can we conceive of it, speak of it, at all. But myths can be interrogated, measured against reality, and scrutinized for alternative interpretations and implications. We can trust Krauthammer on the meaning of *Frankenstein*—it’s a horror story about humans disturbing the natural order—or we can judge it for ourselves.

In the original tale, Dr. Frankenstein’s creation is no monster, but rather a kind, gentle Creature. Tragically, the Creature soon learns to fear the humans he loves, who, terrified by his appearance, reject him and never come to understand his true identity. The real villains in Shelley’s story are neither Dr. Frankenstein nor his artificial creation—or at least not *just* them but also the intolerant, torch-wielding villagers. Only after experiencing cruelty does the Creature become a monster, exacting revenge on those who refused to give him a chance. Read in this way, the novel suggests a radically different vision of our ideal relationship to the natural order than the more familiar version.

The next three chapters critically examine some of the most important myths we tell ourselves about nature, from the epic to the everyday. At times this examination will feel profoundly disorienting—at least, I know it has felt that way to me. Changing our understanding of myths means interrogating ourselves, and no myths are more important to us than those about nature. But we don’t have the luxury of sticking to the status quo. To invoke an apocalyptic myth that has some truth in it: Judgment day is never too far off, and the future of the natural world depends on our ability to examine myths wisely, to approve that which is good and condemn that which is not.