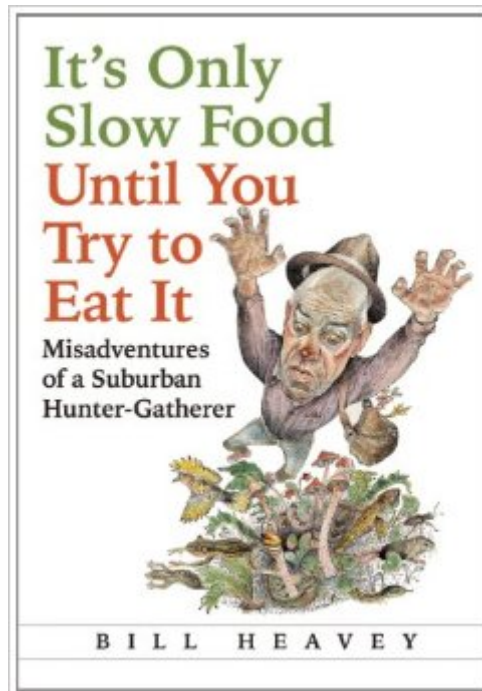


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It's Only Slow Food Until You Try To Eat It: Misadventures Of A Suburban Hunter-Gatherer



Synopsis

Mr. Heavey takes us back to the joys and occasional pitfalls of the humble edibles around us, and his conclusions ring true. • Wall Street Journal Longtime Field & Stream contributor Bill Heavey has become the magazine's most popular voice by writing for sportsmen with more enthusiasm than skill. In his first full-length book, Heavey chronicles his attempts to eat wild, • seeing how much of his own food he can hunt, fish, grow, and forage. But Heavey is not your typical hunter-gatherer. Living inside the D.C. Beltway, and a single dad to a twelve-year-old daughter with an aversion to nature food, • he's almost completely ignorant of gardening and foraging. Incensed at the squirrels destroying his tomatoes, he is driven to rodent murder • by arrow. Along the way, Heavey is guided by a number of unlikely teachers, from the eccentric Paula, who runs an under-the-table bait business, to Michelle, an attractive single mom unselfconsciously devoted to eating locally. To the delight of his readers and the embarrassment of his daughter, he suffers blood loss, humiliation, and learns, as he puts it, that • edible is not to be confused with • tasty. •

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Customer Reviews

Between the title, cover art, and description, I very much expected this to be a very funny take on the topic, in line with the Patrick McManus outdoorsman books. It's not. It DOES have humor in it and many of the stories did make me smile if not laugh out loud, but it also is quite serious in many places with a lot of introspection by the author into himself and those he encounters. It also has a lot of profanity, a touch of drug use, and more than a few graphic descriptions of killing various animals,

FYI. But on the whole I very much enjoyed the book - Heavey isn't shy about sharing bits of his life and goes through his various experiences dealing with foraging. He apparently started as a writer for Field and Stream Magazine and similar publications as an "everyman" - i.e. not an expert but just as a guy who enjoys getting out there. In the process, he finds that getting his own food is quite a powerful experience and makes various acquaintances who encourage and grow this habit. He does a great job of making himself and the people around him - his partial custody and picky eater daughter, his foul mouthed and holder of non-standard ethics friend Paula, his self sought guides in Cajun country and indigenous Alaska, the characters of the "local foodie" movement of San Francisco and his new found friend Michelle who forages to help her grocery bill with her two children. Heavey looks into what the foraging opportunities are in a variety of settings both local to him: from the fruit trees of suburban DC, the grass of his own backyard, along and in the Potomac, the fungus in Arlington National Cemetery, and to which he travels: several tours and events sponsored by an entrepreneurial foraging "guru" in San Francisco and his very knowledgeable tour guides, hunting ducks/alligators/frogs/crawfish/etc in the Cajun Bayou, and hunting caribou with a native group in Alaska. On the whole you do get a very good picture of what some of the motives are and how hard it is to really feed yourself with your own two hands. For some people it's a way of life, for others a matter of pride or survival or cost reduction, for some a conceit or snobbery, for others just plain interest and fun. In the end, you get to see some interesting experiences through the author's eyes, get to meet some interesting people, and get to think about what hunting (killing your own meat) and gathering (finding and seeking) and preparing (hand smoking, butchering, etc) really involve and mean. And, in the end: Sometimes even the Master foragers use store bought pie crust for their hand gleaned sour cherries.

I understand Bill Heavey's desire to have food independence - live by growing, hunting, fishing and foraging food. It's the food side of living off the grid. Heavey challenges the lifestyle of the consumer who scouts in supermarkets buying shrink wrapped meat on Styrofoam trays and vegetables from the neatly arranged display under "natural" light, sprayed periodically to look fresh. I took a personal interest in Heavey's story, being a Master Gardener and occasional forager and also living "inside the Beltway" around the District of Columbia. For me, foraging for natural edibles has the same lure as treasure hunting. Although I did not expect hilarity in this book, I laughed out loud several times. For example, Heavey's "lawn salad" made from old weeds was not a great success. "It was agreeably crunchy at first bite, after which I settled in for a prolonged period of mastication. I chewed until I felt like the muscles on the sides of my head were actually increasing in size." As a

novice backyard gardener, Heavey experienced the common problems of correct soil preparation, buying seeds based on the enticing pictures on the packets, then, squirrels poaching his tomatoes. I understand the desire to take out these tree rats and know people, also living inside the Beltway, who fire paint ball and pellet guns at them. Being a bow hunter, Heavey instinctively went for his bow when confronted with squirrels creating mayhem in the tomato bed. Big Mistake! Not only is this illegal, but injuring the squirrel who escaped with an arrow impaling his leg is reprehensible, as acknowledged by Heavey. Upon the arrow hitting the targeted squirrel, Heavey relates that "my heart raced and a rush of conflicting chemicals flooded my system, exhilaration and shame, wonder and horror, pride and disgrace." These emotions were experienced before he realized the inhumane results of his action. Some reviewers were offended by the hunting portions of this book. I was not. Heavey is not an irresponsible, bloodthirsty killer shooting animals for pleasure. No shooting for trophies here. Heavey bow hunts - a more sportsmanlike type of hunting requiring patience, stealth and skill. He spent three years trying to kill a deer before succeeding. He is ethical in taking shots, trying for a double-lung shot because it results in the fastest death. Obviously, he also field dresses the kill and eats the meat. Neither Heavey nor his fellow hunters take pleasure in the death of an animal, only in the success of the hunt for the resulting meat. Foraging in an urban setting is risky and difficult but possible, with delicious results. I have made delicious raspberry pies from berries picked in public parks and growing near apartment buildings. As a new urban forager, I have also stood, unknowingly, in deep poison ivy while harvesting juicy blackberries growing in a neglected lot near a gas station. This required a visit to a doctor for cortisone shots and pills, and LOTS of pain and suffering. That pie was expensive, indeed. Heavey expanded the theme of living off the land to include interesting chronicles of the disappearing lifestyles of Louisiana Cajuns and Gwich'in Indians, living on the Alaskan tundra. He was able to find acceptance among them and participate in their hunting and fishing expeditions. Wild game is a critical portion of the diet of these people. Jody, Heavey's Cajun crawfisherman friend, estimated that 70 percent of his family's meat is wild game. Reviewers also objected to Heavey's nighttime frogging trip in the Atchafalaya Basin with Jody. They used no gigs or mechanical grabbers. With bare hands, they just snatched the frogs from the surface of the water and put them in a rubber-coated wire envelope, a crawfish trap. The next day Heavey helped to butcher and clean the frogs. Later, families and friends had a frog feast, relishing the light, sweet meat cooked in a rich sauce piquant eaten over rice. Heavey's ultimate success as an urban forager was finding and marrying a foraging soulmate. How can you beat that! In the epilogue, Heavey tries to explain his hunger for a deeper connection to the natural world. "I was a modern man still trying to find out where I belonged." He wasn't born an Indian or a Cajun.

He didn't grow up in a family of hunters or foragers. He just craved for a closer relationship to nature. "Was it possible to be nostalgic for something you'd never had?" In sum, I found "It's Only Slow Food Until You Try to Eat It" to be honest, interesting and well-written stories of Heavey's trials and success in foraging, as well as realistic, sympathetic descriptions of subsistence fishermen and hunters and foragers in San Francisco, Alaska and Louisiana.

Being a fellow hunter/gatherer, I expected someone authoring a book on these subjects to be better informed. Only after reading a few chapters do readers discover Bill Heavey really doesn't know much about weeds, gardening and wild greens. Had he not written chapters about other people's far more interesting experiences, his own would be few and unremarkable. Mr. Heavey's personal fishing and hunting stories were better. It's obvious these are really his true passions. Nevertheless, the author fills in the blanks nicely, and ties it all together with a wonderfully written introduction and epilogue. As a matter of fact, they were my favorite parts of the book. Those short sections say a lot about Bill Heavey's character, and others like him who hunger for a deeper connection with the natural world.

I've been getting more into foraging, and have all kinds of guidebooks, but it's kind of lonely because no one around me is into it. This book is great because you get to partner along with a good writer on the same journey. From his backyard to the coast and hunting with the Gwich'in of Alaska, he not only learns the basics of finding and collecting plants and animals to eat, he gets deeper into the cultural and psychological aspects of it all...using humor and an easy-going rapport with the reader. For those that like a little romance with their reading, there's some of that too...with a happy ending :-)

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