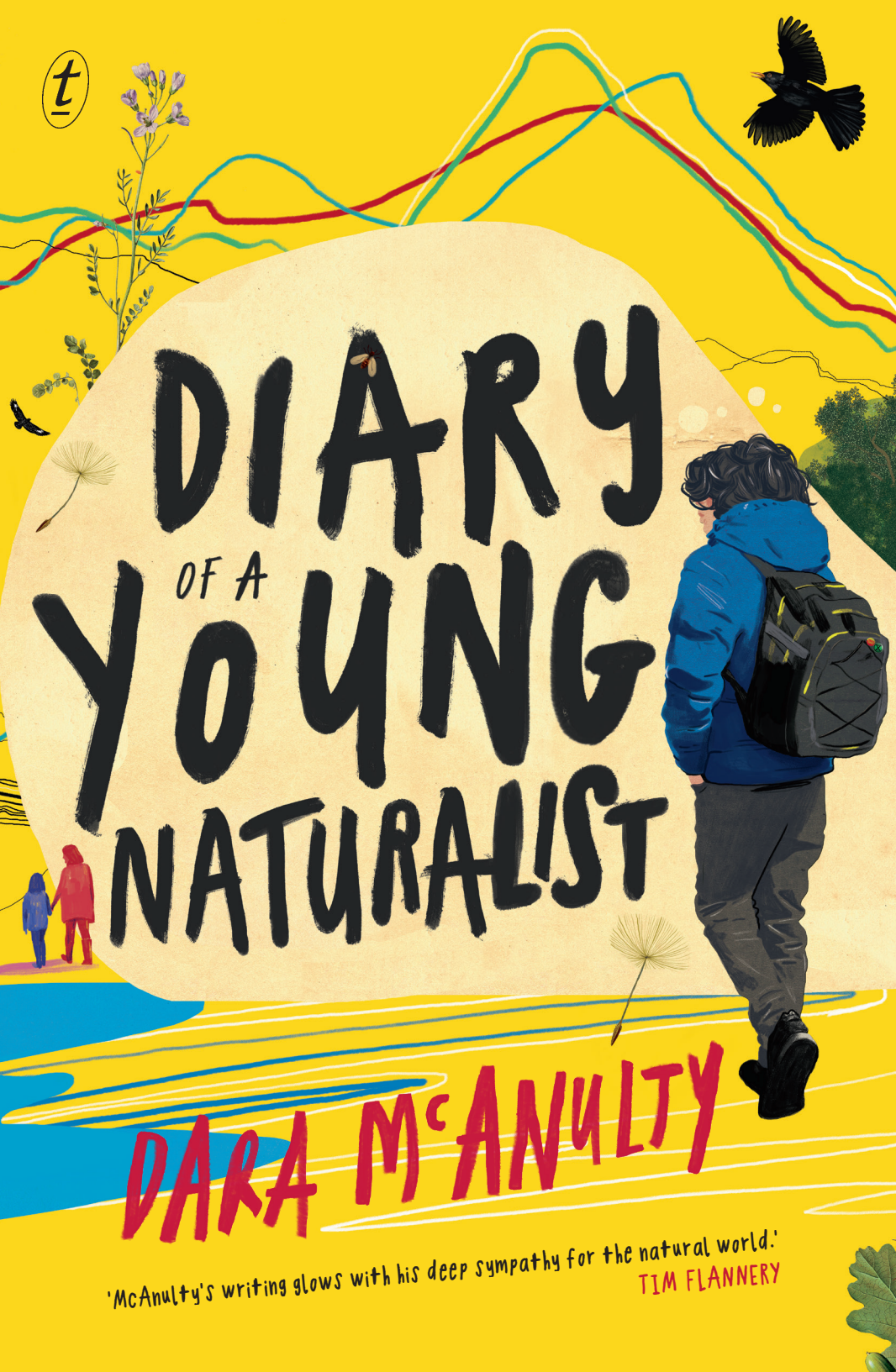


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DIARY OF A YOUNG NATURALIST

DARA McANULTY

'McAnulty's writing glows with his deep sympathy for the natural world.'

TIM FLANNERY

Prologue

This diary chronicles the turning of my world, from spring to winter, at home, in the wild, in my head. It travels from the west of Northern Ireland in County Fermanagh to the east in County Down. It records the uprooting of a home, a change of county and landscape, and at times the de-rooting of my senses and my mind. I'm Dara, a boy, an acorn. Mum used to call me *lon dubh* (which is Irish for blackbird) when I was a baby, and sometimes she still does. I have the heart of a naturalist, the head of a would-be scientist, and bones of someone who is already wearied by the apathy and destruction wielded against the natural world. The outpourings on these pages express my connection to wildlife, try to explain the way I see the world, and describe how we weather the storms as a family.

I started to write in a very plain bungalow surrounded by families who kept their children behind closed doors, and empty-nesters who manicured their gardens and lawns with scissors – yes, I actually witnessed this. This is where sentences first began to form, where wonder grappled with frustration on the page, and where our garden (unlike any other in the cul-de-sac) became a meadow during the spring and summer months, with wildflowers and insects and a sign that read 'Bee and Bee' staked in the long grasses, and where our family spent hours and hours observing the

abundance that other gardens lacked, all of us gloriously indifferent to the raised eyebrows of neighbours that appeared from behind curtains from time to time.

We've moved on since then, crossed the country to make another home, and not for the first time. We've lived in many places during my short life, in a kind of nomadic existence. But wherever we settle, our home is crammed with books, skulls, feathers, politics, unbridled debates, tears, laughter and joy. Some people believe that roots grow from bricks and mortar, but ours spread like mycelium networks, connected to a well of life lived together, so that wherever we go we stay rooted.

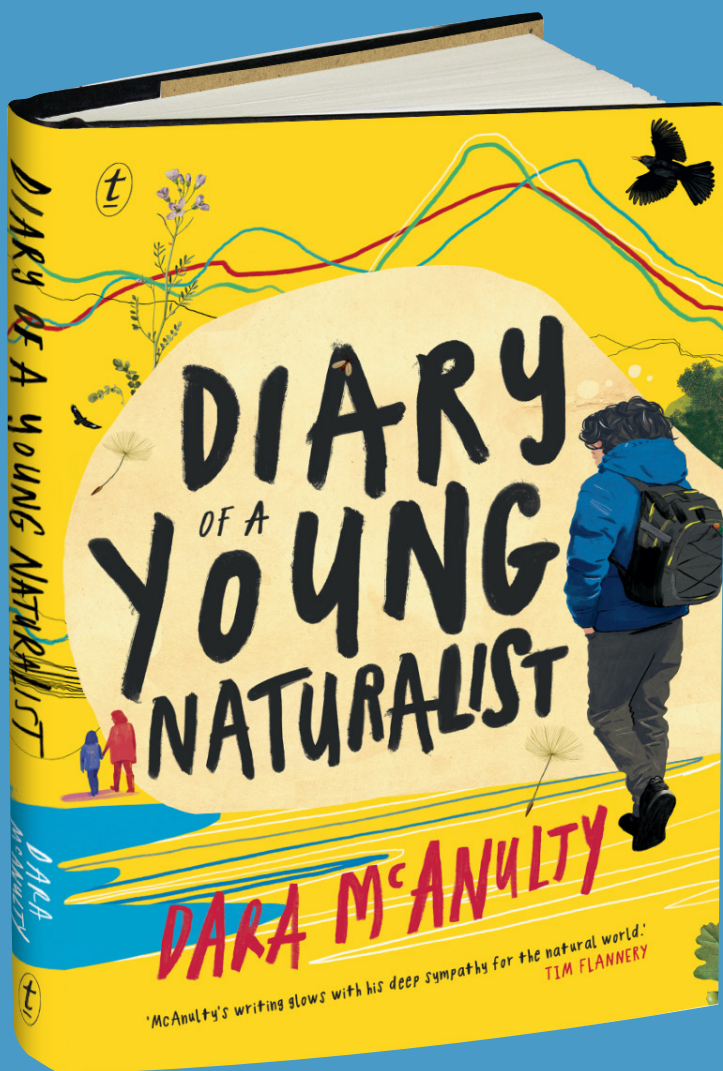
My parents, both from working-class backgrounds, were the first generation of university-goers and graduates in their families, and they are still fresh with ideals for making the world a better place. This means that we're not rich materially, but as Mum says 'we are rich in many other ways'. Dad is – and always has been – a scientist (marine and now conservation). He's brought alive the secrets and knowledge that wild places hold and explained the mysteries of nature to us all. Mum's career path resembles the way she crosses a stream: never in a straight line. Music journalist, voluntary sector, academic – she still does a little of all these things as well as teaching my nine-year-old sister, Bláthnaid, at home. Bláthnaid's name means 'blossoming one', and at the moment she's a fairy expert who can give you a multitude of insect facts, keeps pet snails and also fixes all the electrical equipment in the house (which Mum boggles over). I also have a brother called Lorcan – 'fierce one' – who is thirteen. Lorcan is a self-taught musician and never fails to rouse in us sheer wonder and confusion all at once. He's also an adrenaline junkie – think running down mountains, jumping off cliffs into the sea, and generally going through life with the energy of a neutron star. Then

there's Rosie, a rescue greyhound with severe flatulence and a brindle coat, whom we adopted in 2014. She's our tiger-dog. We call her the living cushion, and she's a wonderful companion and stress reliever. Me, well, I'm the pensive one, always with dirty hands and pockets stuffed with dead things and (sometimes) animal scat.

Before I sat down to write this diary, I had also been writing an online blog. A good few people enjoyed it and said more than once I should write a book. Which is quite amazing really, as a teacher once told my parents 'Your son will never be able to complete a comprehension, never mind string a paragraph together.' Yet here we are. My voice is bubbling up, volcano-like, and all my frustrations and passions may just explode into the world as I write.

Not only is our family bound together by blood, we are all autistic, all except Dad – he's the odd one out, and he's also the one we rely on to deconstruct the mysteries of not just the natural world but the human one too. Together, we make for an eccentric and chaotic bunch. We're pretty formidable, apparently. We're as close as otters, and huddled together, we make our way in the world.





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