Book Review: “Rewild or Die” by Urban Scout

Contributed by Keith Farnish
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Coming to the writings of Urban Scout afresh, I’m immediately surprised that I hadn’t embraced him earlier -- maybe it was his apparent coolness that put me off, but then he makes a point of addressing this in one of the chapters of his new book, “Rewild or Die”.
Those who have been taking in Scout’s musings as regular sustenance might find little that is new here, but for the rest of us -- and surely that’s who this book is aimed at -- this collection of essays comprises a rich vein of intelligence, humor, controversy and often plain bizarreness.

The first thing to say about “Rewild or Die” is that it is not a single, coherent piece of work: in some ways that is a good thing, for this makes it possible to dip in and out of the text, grab a quick chapter or two before breakfast (perhaps a fresh salmon from your local stream, dressed with wild dill; or maybe something altogether more civilized -- like an industrially processed Pop Tart filled with raspberry goo) and still have plenty of time to embark on your daily journey to wage-slavery. On the other hand, it can’t really be taken as a meaningful whole, having the tendency to skip through subjects as diverse as Dieting, Robots and Ageism, all within close proximity.

Given that, the second thing to say about “Rewild or Die” is that Urban Scout writes really well; not only does he write well, he appears to be constructing text in the manner of an artisan: few words are wasted or superfluous, and the style matches the context effortlessly. Or rather, it seems effortless, though I have little doubt that a great deal of effort has gone into each and every one of the essays, frivolous as they sometimes might seem. Take the tiny chapter called “Primitive” Skills vs Rewilding (everything is “vs Rewilding”):

One of my favorite civilized delusions involves archeologists hypothesizing that “early humans” must have “discovered fire by accident.” Just as I imagine modern astronauts must have “accidentally” built a space ship and flew it to the moon. They can’t fathom that “stone age” people had the same level of intelligence that civilized people do.

Not content with merely tossing out this devastating logical brickbat, Urban Scout goes on to taunt the majority of readers who will by now be nodding eagerly with pleasure:

Know what plants to eat? Great. Eat them. But do you know the most ecologically beneficial time of year to harvest them? You made a bow and some arrows? Cool. But do you know which deer to kill to strengthen the herd? You can’t separate ecology from handmade tools.

Do you know the best places to gather in your area during the right seasons? Do you have a tribe of people to efficiently gather those plants?

Does that group have songs and customs that make the tedious work of gathering more fun? Does your group have a system to distribute food equally among the people? To assume that donning buckskins and making a bow and arrow makes you a hunter-gatherer shows a great underestimation of the vast wealth of culture and expert knowledge of indigenous peoples. It also makes you an asshole.

Take that, you bunch of frauds! Clearly the author is not out to make friends, even among those who purport to side with The Earth: nothing is simple in the mindset of the Rewilder who is faced with a wall of civilization closing in on all sides. Something as fundamental as money, that most of us feel we can’t live without, gets refreshingly short shrift; and for very good reason, as explained eloquently in the chapter Money vs Rewilding:

Money works as a symbolic representation of people, of tribe. We even put pictures of people on our money. In civilization, people do not give you support, money does. That demonstrates how money, although a symbolic representation of people, holds more value than the people making it. It reveals to us why people of our culture seek money more adamantly than they seek actual friendships, and feel more willing to abandon a friendship if it means getting more money.

Who would want to dirty their hands with money after that? This chapter, as with so many others, makes an often devastating case for the way of life, tentatively called “Rewilding” – a word that the author constantly wrestles with in fear that the act of naming something causes its essential fluidity to be lost. Words have a big part to play in the book: words to be avoided, words to be redefined, words that have gained the ability to surmount the things they represent, words that control the behavior of people that naively accept their “normalness.” The simple act of using the verb “to be” is shown, by its thrilling absence, to immobilize thought: no other single idea raised in “Rewild or Die” caused me so much pleasure as E-Prime.

Nevertheless, there are one or two problems: not least with the lack of a single narrative running through the book (except the “vs Rewilding” motif) making any chance of using it as a stepping off point to something practically rewarding rather remote. Not that “Rewild or Die” is overindulgent, it’s just that more effort could perhaps have been made to bring the generally excellent chapters together in a manner that pulls the reader to their own conclusion, rather than the slightly skittish approach demonstrated especially toward the end.

There are also arguments and attitudes that I have trouble accepting, and at times have been moved to write furious remarks in the margins: such as with the sections on Veganism and Dieting, that seem to take Lierre Keith’s ideas very much as read, rather than excising the good from the bad as is necessary with such a personal viewpoint.

Agriculture has caused all of our problems. So what do we come up with as a solution? More agriculture! …Fucking genius. Veganism just cuts out the middleman of meat. Why feed grain directly to cows when you could feed it directly to an ever-growing population of humans? Yes, factory farms fuck shit up. But agricultural farms fuck shit up more and form the foundations for factory farms.

Yes, agriculture is a huge problem, and it certainly made civilization possible, as well as being a direct cause of population growth: but it hasn’t caused all of our problems -- you could say, using this line, that evolution caused all of our problems by making agriculture an option for humans; agriculture was a trigger, and there have been many more triggers along the way to our potential annihilation. I won’t get into the vegan argument directly, it would take a whole book to address properly, and many excellent points are raised here in a refreshing way; but some arguments are weaker than others -- I am happier to kill a carrot than a fish because genetically a fish is closer to me than a carrot; there is a genetic empathy there that it would be difficult to deny, and no amount of empathy with other non-human entities overrides this. Similarly, the author conflates science (in a chapter on Religion) with the way science is used in civilized society -- two different things that he, conversely, recognizes in a separate chapter all about science -- and ends up running into a bit of a dead-end.

My final criticism is with the use of offensive language, as demonstrated above: I can deal with any amount of “fuck”s in an appropriate context, but sometimes the author uses the word so much that its power as a sharp linguistic tool is blunted, almost to the point of parody. I also winced at the use of the word “Whitey” with reference to light-skinned people: there’s really no need for that.

This digression into detailed criticism isn’t meant to suggest that “Rewild or Die” isn’t a fine piece of work: very many of the chapters are tours des forces in addressing a vast spectrum of some of the most offensive aspects of civilization – the chapter on schooling would make John Taylor Gatto proud of his, perhaps unintentional, progeny – and I have no hesitation in recommending the book to anyone who has the nous to dissect the arguments within and create their own pathway towards a Rewilded world.

I’m pretty sure Urban Scout would share this position: hell, we can’t all have the same ideas or viewpoints, and it would be a pretty dull world if we did. Now, go and buy the damn thing and make your own mind up!

“Rewild or Die” by Urban Scout, is available to buy via the author’s own website: urbanscout.org.

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