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NATURAL HISTORY

A NOVEL

MAUREEN HOWARD

"A dazzling tour de force." —Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

Natural History

a novel

Maureen Howard

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Also by Maureen Howard

Not a Word About Nightingales
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Grace Abounding
Expensive Habits
A Lover's Almanac

Natural History

To my brother, George Kearns—other stories.

It seems to me not at all unnatural to precede *Natural History* with a list of acknowledgments. So many with seasoned and detailed knowledge have helped me to transform my curiosity and faded memories into the entries in this novel. I hope the Bridgeport friends will forgive their facts turned to my fiction: David W. Palmquist and Mary Witkowski of the Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library; Robert Pelton of The Barnum Museum; Charles Brilvitch, architectural historian; James Callahan who knows his McLevy and Lennie Grimaldi for his extensive research, a continuing act of loyalty to our city. I want to thank Charles Silver of the film department, Museum of Modern Art, and Paula Frosch, the Thomas J. Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art. The books will never balance, for I'm heavily in debt to Walter Bernstein, Lee Deigaard, Nancy Edwards, Jack Ennis, Betty Fussell, both Hatchers, Gerry Howard, Loretta Howard, Cleo McNelly Kearns, Emma Lewis, Gloria Loomis, Andy Marasia, Janet Marks, Michelle Novak, Sonia and George Tscherny, and YOU BET—to Mark Probst.

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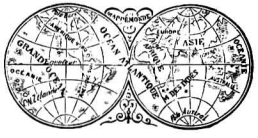
From above, start with the privileged view. Lay on the page a neat grid of neighborhoods, the quirky crosscuts of routes that followed secondary streams or an Indian footpath, what was decreed by nature or habit and is long forgotten, long a dead end or confusing turn in the city—the lost logic of a marsh or a stubborn farmer's lawsuit that will not let you pass. Though you are above, remember? Bird's-eye view. See-it-all as though know-it-all, as though you can with practiced calligraphy, with India ink on the nub of your art-shop pen, label the streets—North, Parrott, Main, Iranistan, Golden Hill—and in labeling possess them. As though you are a recording angel on the ceiling of a glorious cathedral—not here, not by a long shot, but pictured up high, say in the abandoned RR depot or above the stage in Klein Memorial—depicted with your compass, plumb rule, and telescope, all your outmoded apparatus, to measure the depth of Ash Creek, the elevations of Tunxis and Chopsey Hills, the wide mouth of the Pequonnock, the acreage of Brooklawn Country Club larger than any public park, the cramped property lines of poor folk, broad boulevards of the rich. But already you have left off the

scientific, are coloring in. Conventional road-map blue for Long Island Sound, watercolor waves feathering against the lighthouse at Fayerweather Point, desert tan for beaches, peaceful green for the parks of Park City and for its cemeteries—St. Michael's, Lakeview, Mountain Grove. In these you draw miniature crosses to mark the dead and move on to sketch in steeples, the white hospital on a hill, two eccentric onion domes, all landmarks for the living, as though the living can see what you see from above—where they are heading or that the amusement park across the bay is shaped like the extended siphon of a clam or that the city seen upside down is an ear, the whole harbor scooped like an auricle with deep inlets, canals trapping words, for you have left off mapping and are well into a storied topography with whaling ships, trading ships, tankers set afloat. You line up factories as toy battlements along the river.

As though you have given up the ancient art, which, after all, is best accomplished by accurate messages from the stratosphere, you doodle a decorative border on parchment paper—livestock, cornhusks, teepees, silvery-blue mussels, and squirming lobsters of burnt sienna flashing bright gills. Cartoon city: poor battered ear with rust strip of the last century's railroad bed across it like a bloody Band-Aid, the recent sinuous thruway draining its life like a rubbery tube. As though to draw the eye from such injury, you settle to the flat panoramic view, mark in the toot of ferryboat and factory, the oiled hum of sewing machines, whirr of Frisbie pie tins and jazz notes above a spinning Columbia record—Louis Armstrong or Benny Goodman, who recorded in the city—as though . . . well, as though demoted to your draftsman's table you must put down as legend on the faked shading of your parchment the sounds natural to this place and can't remember sparrow tweet or gull's caw or rustle of Norway maple, but only bus fart and father's whistle, which seems unworthy, and so you print in the rat-tat-tat of test shots from Remington Arms and the Nubian tiger's growl with many r-r-r-rs, the trained elephant's muted honk which makes it as legend in this imaginary landscape. Now you are driven to vignettes,

capturing in cloud shaped frames a circus tent with clapping seals, hobo clowns, the hard heeled march of the Socialist mayor, all that is marvelous in your view of the city, cleverly incorporating an ink blot as witch marks on the breast of Goody Knapp, hanged for harmless hysteria in 1643. Driven to words now, literal legends, you write out "There's a sucker born every minute," attributed to P. T. Barnum, late, late of this city, and resort to the old vaudeville line "When you're not on Broadway, everything is Bridgeport." And topple off your stool as though North Wind with puffed cheeks on a very old map blows you down, as though the horned sea dragon of a vast uncharted sea buffets you with its paw. Down to earth, in a windowless place you set the uncertain boundaries of recall, with stub of an Eberhard No. 2 draw in small figures below the simple, wavering horizon.



Easy does it. Boy and bike. His Columbia come to life, out from under the claws of bamboo rakes and strangling coil of hose, wheeled past spare tires worn treadless gray but saved along with empty 3-in-One oil cans, jars of rusted brads, ruptured sled, the license plates off a prehistoric Model A. James' bike is out of its winter grave. He swipes the deep red of its fender with a cheesecloth rag, rings the bell once, twice, in a ratchety grind, then, full and satisfying, rings it out across the double drive. Ping. Ping to the street, which is quiet, carless at this hour. He's off—going where he's sent each Saturday. This Saturday the sense of live earth in garage dust; the very grit under his foot has a manly rasp. He's off—destination only Mr. De Martino. So what! The fact of his music lesson slips quickly out of sight behind a clear view of himself straining uphill, a champion effort, then, at breakneck speed, coasting down Anson Street through every stop sign into the day's adventure.

A twenty-eight-inch bike, last year almost beyond him: he sets the seat up a notch, throws his clarinet and music book into the wicker basket, where dead spiders lie in the gay shroud of a candy wrapper. A queer Saturday in March, false spring, and off he goes, easy down the long asphalt drive unaware of any danger into the city street. What is there to fear? Unless, like his mother, a figure clotted milky white, spying behind her curtains, you thought of him in grim detail—crushed skull, mangled limbs. Oh, he's had it with her caution, pedaling easy on the crest of the road when a manhole cover assaults him. Clarinet case jumps. Hard leather saddle rams his behind. The tires of his bike are flat. Suffused with innocence, freewheeling joy, he's been riding on the rim.

Watching her son's come-uppance, Nell breaths easy. Boy and bike safe on the sidewalk by Coyne's, wheeling round their ash cans with the lids half off. Ashes, for they still get the load of cheap coke, their furnace unconverted, poor untidy Coynes, their ashes blowing at her boy. Safe now, no more danger than a cinder in his eye and he's sensible at last, at least in from the street where he might be killed.

Her pleasure would be to drive James to Mr. De Martino, but for the hint of spring that brought his bike to mind, and this Saturday the jamboree. Catherine to chauffeur across town. Cath impatient at the kitchen door in her skimpy Girl Scout uniform, sleeves and waist riding high, the hem let down. Cath, far from bacon grease and butter smear, the blast of the hot-air register cruelly fluttering the precious scraps glued so precisely to her posterboard display: COTTON, QUEEN OF THE SOUTH.

"King," James had said. "When cotton was king." And threatened the whole beautiful project with a blob of jam until tears gathered in his sister's eyes. "Bro-ther," James said and off he went to dig out his bike, but not before his mother, pretending to be cross, said: "Ride against the traffic, James. Watch at the four-way light!" The soft grate of her warning she could not help.

She could not help herself with him, could not stop the

fears—scenes, really, in which she saw his body limp, dangling from treetops or bloated on the sandy rim of Seeley's Pond. James splayed on the railway tracks. Quick glimpses of her boy horribly dead, and that is why she stands behind the curtain in the dining room, not to be seen, not to be mildly despised by James. Yes, she is searching out her car keys and the purse, but must watch his foolhardy start, then watch as he walks the invalid bike ceremoniously past Coyne's, Grillo's, Shea's, past the jack pine that towers over the little gray box of Louie's grocery store, until James, safe and sane, is out of her sight.

At the kitchen door, guarding COTTON, QUEEN OF THE SOUTH, Cath has seen him, seen him unearthing his bike, could have rapped on the kitchen window, called out, "Flat tires, bozo," but why should she when Queen was what she meant, Queen of the Old South. She had leapt ahead from Scarlett, smudge on her regal brow, sweating in the burnt fields of Tara, to Victoria, slip of a royal girl, blessing the Industrial Revolution. Both queens beholden to cotton, for her project swept through history, the straight line of it—small brown seed to the patent number of the great Lowell loom. Painting the gold title on red posterboard, she had trembled for fear of splotches, the cotton lint, sprung from its pod, wobbling dangerously as she tacked a nice thick tail on her Q. With her beautiful display, all wired and pasted, she'd earned her badge, but this was the day long awaited, this Saturday of the jamboree. The competition, for that was what Miss Sullivan called it in the chill cement basement of St. Patrick's School. "I say we enter Catherine in the competition."

Enter QUEEN OF THE SOUTH, not Cath, but the girls knew Sullivan's talk, no pussyfooting around. Miss Sullivan was tough, her trim green uniform and overseas cap ready for the salute, the command; her hair shaved in the back like a man's. The seven mile hike, campfire in Beardsley Park, knots and signals her natural way and all Girl Scout baking, sewing a terrible chore. Catherine had come to the meeting with her unheard-of project for the badge. Odd

and independent, never asking could she, Miss Sullivan, do history? She'd already put them through folk dancing, made them jig to her Virginia reel, twisted them up in a morris dance, Sullivan sticking to the cement floor in her gum soles. Not asking, just coming one Wednesday night with the big red posterboard. Mr. Bray holding the basement doors open for his daughter, coming into their meeting where no man entered, flicking his ash.

QUEEN OF THE SOUTH: alone, up in her room, she'd cut out the picture of an antebellum portico, its massive white pillars dwarfing slaves bent in the fields. She'd drawn the boll weevil's pincers and the equally nasty fingers of the cotton gin. All labeled and dated, her display bore true legends of fine Egyptian thread and the trials of Eli Whitney. At the end she had cut the many types of manufactured cotton into petals and pinned them to her posterboard in an artificial rose. Catherine Bray was entered in the competition described on official stationery from headquarters which Sullivan passed (now-you-see-it, now-you-don't) quickly before her eyes.

Car keys found, her mother said: "Your coat." Mrs. Bray was in her old sealskin, her everyday hat, the lovely Christmas purse from New York on her arm. "Your *coat*, Catherine." She held the posterboard while Cath stuffed herself into the navy blue melton, a childish Sunday coat with velvet collar.

"Back out the car," said Cath. She could not bear to see the cotton boll teeter, the casual way her mother sauntered right into the windy warm day with a smile. "Back out!" said Cath.

"Heavens!" her mother said. You could not laugh at Catherine, not in this mood. A terrible sight, that child's round face clamped tight with her purpose. In the garage, Nell Bray—Mrs. Bray always to the neighbors, for she was naturally grand though unaffected—Nell saw the mess her son had made—the hose, worn tires, all thrown against her old Packard. James in a hurry. James with his clarinet now safely on his way to Mr. De Martino. Her gloves streaked red with the dry rubber hose; the new purse, black lizard, scraped along the back fender as she fought her way to the

car door. James was careless, she must say; in another world with his music, a musical child.

Saved—so much saved. The faded bladder of a beach ball, sled hung from a rafter, her very own with wooden runners and a faint stencil design. Saved, all of it, the Currier & Ives ice skates along with the studded collar and heavy chain—*requiescat* Bootsie, Boston bull, of distemper, 1939. That insignificant death: the children had not fed or watered their sluggish pet, but saved—Bootsie's license, and somewhere his chewed rawhide bone. The family riches, all saved, necessary as attic must, cellar dank, useful in some way . . . faceless gold pocket watches, linen dusters, ivory nail buffers, harness and riding crop, mason jars, buttonhooks, back issues of *The Delineator* and *Life* magazine.

Catherine would not come down the back steps until her mother drove right to her with the car. A tipping and bending of posterboard: its pictures and scraps fluttered, the cottonseed oil sloshed in its little vial.

"There now," her mother said, "easy does it."

"We're late," said Catherine, who was seldom easy.

"I don't imagine," said Nell, who did not believe jamborees began on time, "with girls from all over . . ."

"You've never been," said Catherine, and when they got there, way out at Fairfield and Park, the big drive of St. John's was full up, parked tight. QUEEN OF THE SOUTH would have to be carried half a block, its smudges and nicks exposed in full sun before it was properly displayed. Here, in alien territory, three Scouts popped out of a station wagon, a big red dog barking out the rear window. Girls in penny loafers and polo coats, knee socks without the trefoil, no kerchiefs or Scout berets, barked back at the dog, teasing as they ran away, chasing up onto the big lawns. Here, the houses sat far back; the bushes not barberry and privet stuck beside front stoops, but varied and clustered shrubs, the rhododendrons basking this fine day; trees set out for the look of them as well as shade. Cath found St. John's Episcopal Church a confusing sprawl—fortress, meeting-

house, thank God for the plain brick of the hall, no steeple. Still, she must say it once more, she'd not enter the church, never would pray there, never.

"It won't be required," her mother said, "that you lose your immortal soul." How many times they'd been over the mumbo-jumbo brought home from St. Pat's as to the dangers of the unconsecrated—the very wood and stone of a Protestant place occasions for sin. There was no dealing with Cath's peasant faith or the obstinate set of her mouth as they balanced the red posterboard between them. A wind swept across State Street, which widened here where it left off being downtown and became the residential avenue for businessmen who ran the city, a boulevard for bankers, doctors, and lawyers. The cotton scraps and carefully inked legends of QUEEN OF THE SOUTH flapped wildly as it proceeded up the unholy Episcopal steps. No fear, Cath's project was maneuvered into a big still room, secular as a parlor cleared for a dance. Little girls everywhere setting up the jamboree in a hush.

Nell Bray was not wanted. She stood in the door, a slack civilian, enormous and gaudy in her sealskin and guinea feather hat. Catherine, who wanted her gone, did not turn to disapprove of her mother's laugh, Nell laughing now at the spectacle, a sputtery unshared laughter that came upon her most anyplace—at the beach, after Mass, at the stocking counter in D. M. Read's. Then she was at a remove as though standing by herself on a small stage—on the pavilion while the half-naked bathers disported themselves in Long Island Sound, or on the porch of St. Patrick's, loitering dreamily, looking down on the parishoners as they bought the Sunday *Post*. "There they all are," said Nell Bray's laugh: her daughter hated it, for she was out there bobbing in the high tide, working at the breast stroke; it was Cath saying good morning to the neighbor ladies and Skinny Finn, who passed the collection basket. And Catherine choosing her mud-colored stockings for school suddenly might be—well, anyone, lost in the department-store crowd to her mother, as she was now, one more Girl Scout, and what was so funny about the