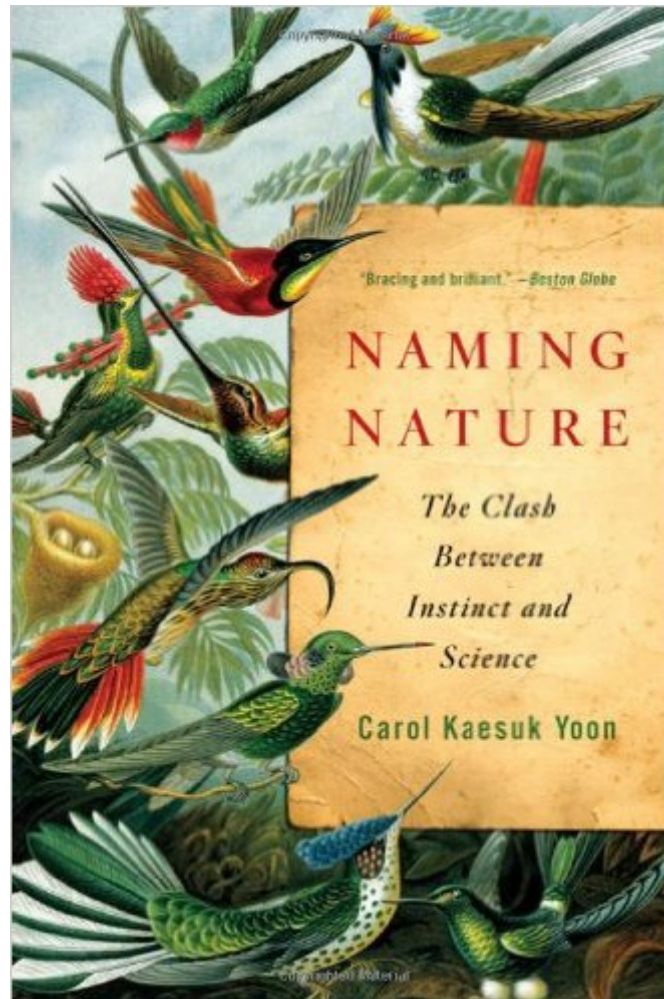


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Naming Nature: The Clash Between Instinct And Science



Synopsis

Finalist for the 2009 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Science and Technology: the surprising, untold story about the poetic and deeply human (cognitive) capacity to name the natural world. Two hundred and fifty years ago, the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus set out to order and name the entire living world and ended up founding a science: the field of scientific classification, or taxonomy. Yet, in spite of Linnaeus's pioneering work and the genius of those who followed him, from Darwin to E. O. Wilson, taxonomy went from being revered as one of the most significant of intellectual pursuits to being largely ignored. Today, taxonomy is viewed by many as an outdated field, one nearly irrelevant to the rest of science and of even less interest to the rest of the world. Now, as Carol Kaesuk Yoon, biologist and longtime science writer for the New York Times, reminds us in *Naming Nature*, taxonomy is critically important, because it turns out to be much more than mere science. It is also the latest incarnation of a long-unrecognized human practice that has gone on across the globe, in every culture, in every language since before time: the deeply human act of ordering and naming the living world. In *Naming Nature*, Yoon takes us on a guided tour of science's brilliant, if sometimes misguided, attempts to order and name the overwhelming diversity of earth's living things. We follow a trail of scattered clues that reveals taxonomy's real origins in humanity's distant past. Yoon's journey brings us from New Guinea tribesmen who call a giant bird a mammal to the trials and tribulations of patients with a curious form of brain damage that causes them to be unable to distinguish among living things. Finally, Yoon shows us how the reclaiming of taxonomy—a renewed interest in learning the kinds and names of things around us—will rekindle humanity's dwindling connection with wild nature. *Naming Nature* has much to tell us, not only about how scientists create a science but also about how the progress of science can alter the expression of our own human nature. 27 illustrations

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To set the record straight at the start, I am a taxonomist, as well as an ecologist. My specialty is in spiders, of which I've described and named 14 species. I also have some interest in microscopic organisms, especially diatoms. I am quite aware of the problems associated with defining species and also aware that taxonomy is difficult to explain to the layman, and even to some biologists. The world is not organized for our convenience, but it is, I think, of use to at least try to understand what is meant by kingdom, phylum, class, order, species, and populations, even if we decide that some categories are a bit on the fuzzy side. After all evolution has not stopped (even for humans) and thus many species and even higher classifications may seem a bit blurry. It is with this background (and probable biases) that I examined Carol Kaesuk Yoon's new book "Naming Nature: The Clash Between Instinct and Science." I was impressed by the many positive reviews that were listed and saw even more on the book website, including at least one scientist I know. Unfortunately in reading the first part of the book I quickly became uneasy. She has invoked the ethological term "umwelt" to define the natural instinct to name things and believes that the re-reinstatement of "instinctive" classifications for organisms (which make whales fish and cassowaries mammals) would make people appreciate nature more. While I think I see her point, I tend to also think, like Quentin Wheeler in another on-line review of the book, that her suggestion does not really solve the problem. In the early 19th Century a U.S. court ruled that for commercial and tax purposes a whale was a fish. Do we not find it easier to kill a fish than a mammal?

Yoon's basic contention is that scientific taxonomy should be viewed as one among many competing and equally valid approaches to understanding biodiversity. She is willing to (grudgingly) accept that the science of taxonomy is correct to arrive at various counter-intuitive conclusions (her favorite being that fish are not a natural group). However, she is attached to various aspects of intuitively obvious taxonomy and unwilling to let those go. Worse, she interprets this as a universal restriction on human understanding. She claims that our intuitive understanding of biodiversity is so ingrained and hard-wired that it simply is not possible for us to comprehend a world in which fish are not a natural, real group. Accepting scientific taxonomy leaves us, she says, divorced from any comprehension of the natural world. We just can't understand objective reality, so we shouldn't try

and should insist that subjective intuition is just as good. I don't buy it. Yoon gives us a world in which there ultimately is no reality. We're left with a morass of differing opinions, all "valid". Scientific taxonomy is left in a kind of limbo. She isn't quite willing to say we should just ditch it, but she's adamant that we not attach any greater importance to the results of painstaking empirical research than to those of a toddler looking out on the world of vertebrates for the first time. Science is allowed to exist in its own little domain, but not to help the rest of us comprehend the world. Yoon frequently professes that she is a scientist--really, she is!--but her view here is anti-scientific to the core.

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