

Low beggars

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THE ALLURE OF FUNGI

by Alison Pouliot

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Of all the forms of life historically divided into kingdoms, only two – plants and animals – have attracted large bands of human followers. Entire organisations and university departments are devoted to understanding, controlling, and conserving plants and animals, and our cultural domains are saturated with their likenesses. Two of the other kingdoms, Protista and Monera, have arrived on our radar more recently and most often in the guise of pathogens, though recent advances in microbiology have seen the microbiome take on a whole new cultural salience. That leaves Carl Linnaeus's 'thievish and voracious beggars', the fungi.

Fungi also have their followers, including Alison Pouliot, who spent a thousand days in the forests of eastern Australia and northern Europe contemplating why fungi are regarded so differently from other life forms. She also engaged with a multitude of fellow fungus enthusiasts over the course of four years and hundreds of forays, workshops, and seminars. The rich corpus of stories, images, and impressions emerging from these encounters provides a way in to the underlying issues around our paradoxical and contradictory relations to fungi, and to nature at large.

Pouliot's argument for a reappraisal of the ecological, social, and ontological significance of fungi unfolds in nine chapters. While each turns around a particular concept, the structure is not rigid and compartmentalised, and the significance of senses, emotions, and values runs like mycelia throughout. One important theme is that of language and its relationship with perception and knowledge of fungi; from the connotations associated with the use of 'mushroom' as a verb in English, to why fungi are 'hunted'. The text dances

persuasively towards the conclusion that a more appropriate fungal lexicon is needed to express not only the poetry of fungi, but also their cultural and ecological significance.

A related theme is the organisation of knowledge. Pouliot proposes that if we were to take a fungus as our archetype of the living organism, our approach to understanding the natural world would be very different. Western scientific understandings of nature, even in the age of ecology, still bear the imprint of an earlier emphasis on identification and categorisation. However, *really* understanding fungi (and perhaps even more so lichen) demands a more relational approach that places processes and interdependencies front and centre.

The impassioned final chapter, serving as a conclusion, focuses on fungal conservation. Here it is most apparent that fungi, while important in their own right, also serve to throw into sharp relief some of the key problems with commonplace contemporary approaches to the non-human world. In their spontaneity, ambiguity, and essential interconnectedness, fungi provide a model for a different way of approaching nature, conservation, and – allegorically – human societies. In the same way that concepts from scientific ecology informed the new environment movement and its cultural effects, Pouliot calls for the uptake of 'fungal wisdom' – the 'attentive care and resourceful hope' that emerge from deep engagement with this hidden and unruly life.

Photo essays comprising stunning macrophotography of fungi appear between substantive chapters. Pouliot's use of a very shallow depth of field in most of the photographs evokes a sense of mystery, appropriate for a kingdom that remains poorly known to science, especially in Australia. The images draw the viewer's attention to specific aspects of the diverse and delicate beauty of macrofungi, but in presenting much of the organism out of focus they work to reinforce a key argument of the thesis: that to know fungi requires multisensory engagement.

Given the book's emphasis on the Western cultural neglect – even disparagement – of the fungal kingdom, the

title at first seems perplexing. Its overtones of glamour, while actually well suited to the beauty of the photography, seem at odds with the more earthy subjectivity that Pouliot advocates. One wonders whether the alluring photography is framed here as the Trojan horse for the book's project of recovery – of species often associated with dirt, decay, and disorder, as well as those followers of fungi who, as mycologist William Hay noted in 1887, were commonly regarded by their scientific peers 'as a sort of idiot among the lower orders' and required to 'boldly face a good deal of scorn'.

Authentic fungal followers – downward-gazing folk at home among decay – are probably not uniquely possessed of a natural sensibility that will lead us out of ecological crisis. But reflecting on the nature of fungi – and their followers – certainly leaves us with a richer sense of where we might have gone wrong, and possibilities for less damaging ways of thinking and being. This tale of misunderstanding, marginalisation, and possibility thus delivers insights far beyond the (important and fascinating) fungal kingdom. The skilful use of stories and images does not merely embellish or enliven the text, but evokes a deeper, emotional understanding, making it a book both engrossing and motivating.

In the preface, Pouliot wonders – as many of us who understand the truly dire state of things do – whether it was 'an indulgence' to be writing about fungi instead of actively resisting the acts of ecocide that daily destroy them. While such resistance is crucially important, such rearguard action can never – as we can see – keep up with the pace of destruction. What we need is deeper cultural change, and we can only hope that alluring works like Pouliot's are playing a role in that shift. ■

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