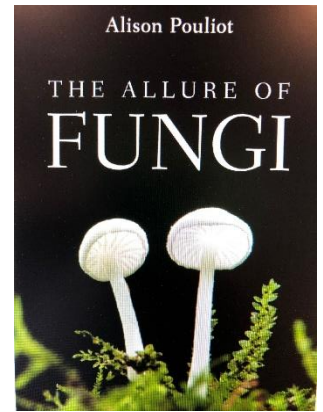


“The Allure of Fungi”, Alison Pouliot, CSIRO Publishing, 2018

Very rarely I come across a book which makes me run around boring friends by saying “you must read this”! But this is one of those.

At the heart of this beautiful book there rests a very profound proposition. Alison Pouliot uses the interconnectedness of fungi to look at plants, animals, fungi indeed ecology in a very different way.

This is a quite extraordinary book in a variety of ways. Yes, it is about fungi, but it is also about the living world, the inanimate world, history, literature, culture (both horti and arty), gardens and taxonomy among other things. It is beautiful to look at (Pouliot is a wonderful photographer) and engaging, though dense, to read (Pouliot is a great science writer).



Meeting many people interested in plants as both a Guide and Friend of various plant-focussed institutions as well as AGHS I am still surprised how little people know about fungi. Indeed, even though Whittaker moved fungi out of the plant Kingdom into their own domain in 1967 and Cavalier-Smith showed us they were more closely related to animals than plants in 1987, many still think they are a form of largely underground plant. Many still see them and think the plants they are associated with are sick, rather than in most cases they are an indicator of healthy ecosystems or gardens.

Sure, there are some nasties. And they certainly dominate the media attention whether they are poisonous, like Death Caps (*Amanita phalloides*) or harmful to other plants Cinnamon Fungus (*Phytophthora cinnamomi*, not actually a fungus either).

It is almost certainly because we only see, usually, the reproductive parts of fungi, above ground, on trees or in a myriad of other places, that we think that is all there is to them. Even then we miss out on a lot. While I knew we had many “truffle” species in Australia, those fungi that live totally underground, I was not aware until Pouliot pointed it out that we in fact have somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 species, almost 10 times the number in Europe. She gives a good reason for this, largely to do with our climate.

Pouliot spends half her time in Europe and half in Australia each year. And in case you might think this book is dull and dry science her sense of humour comes through in this piece on lichens (an association of fungi and bacteria): “While foraging in the Centovalli in southern Switzerland I came upon an unexpected case of lichens eating trucks. All the material of the long-abandoned vehicles in a disused quarry- metal, rubber, glass, plastic, wood, upholstery- was being slowly dismantled by their actions. Unlike my hiking companions, the lichens had no apparent preference for vehicles of French or Italian origin, with both being suitable for colonisation”.

The book is unlike any other “biology” book I have read citing references to Judith Wright, Patrick White and Hildegard von Bingen, to name a few.

It raises serious issues for those of us called by our critics “splitters”, in the area of taxonomy, and I direct readers to the wonderful “naming game” the author proposes on pages 99 – 100.

Pouliot invites us to consider “cooperation” as the core idea in biology instead of “differentiation”: “Alliances, symbioses, mutualisms, A fungus uses every trick in the book to cooperate with other organisms”.

Anyone interested in garden history (there is much history in this book) or gardens should buy it...and it is pleasing to report that it is one of the better “value” books I have seen from the often-overpriced CSIRO publishing!

Max Bourke AM

Full disclosure: The author once attended one of the extraordinary day-long ‘Fungi Workshops’ run by Dr Pouliot a few years ago, if you see one near you do it!