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COSMOS

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# SPECTRUM

PEOPLE, CULTURE & REVIEWS

*Mycena capillaripes* in all its fungal glory

CREDIT: ALISON POULIOT

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## ZEITGEIST

### The globe-trotting fungus-lover

Mycologist and photographer Alison Pouliot keeps on the move to pursue her passion. She spoke about her latest book to TANYA LOOS. →



## ZEITGEIST

ALISON POULIOT HAS SPENT two decades following the fungi.

Each year she moves between Australia and her adopted home near Bern, in Switzerland, studying, photographing and marvelling at the fungal hyphae or mycelium cycle that governs nutrient and energy flows through ecosystems. And that means much more than just mushrooms.

“The spore bodies, the mushrooms, are fascinating, and that’s what gets us hooked,” she says, “but it’s that architecture – the literal and allegorical framework that fungi provide – that is really interesting.”

Originally a freshwater scientist, Pouliot has long been fascinated by the inter-tidal and productive riparian and semi-riparian ecosystems and their soils because, she says, “that’s where the dynamism and the energy is, the reproduction, and that’s where your greatest diversity is. And to me, fungi are also in that interface.”

These days Pouliot spends the southern hemisphere autumn in eastern Australia, largely around her beloved Wombat Forest in central Victoria, then moves to Europe, where a thick leaf litter layer and the prevalence of both summer and winter fungi make for a long season.

Fungi and their mycelium demonstrate interdependence and flow, she believes, and all life is symbiotic. And she is perplexed that this “third f” has been largely ignored in Australia, where conservation planning focuses largely on flora and fauna.

But things may be changing. Interest in fungi is growing exponentially, for a number of reasons: greater interest in fungal ecology from Landcare groups, the rise of the forager movement in permaculture, the foodie culture’s demand for wild-picked mushrooms, the prevalence of citizen science and smartphone apps, and burgeoning interest in fungal photography and art.

When Pouliot, now 51, ran her first workshop in Creswick, central Victoria, 15 years ago, Australia was ambivalent about, or even hostile towards, fungi. In fact, most English-speaking countries share a deep-seated unease about them as being poisonous, dank, dirty, and agents of disease, she says.

It’s called mycophobia, or fear of fungi, a term created in 1957 by R Gordon Wasson and Valentina Wasson in their ground-breaking work *Mushrooms, Russia and History*.



Photos from the field: an inky cap (*Coprinus Senus*), left and the psychedelic *Psilocybe subaeruginosa*

CREDIT: ALISON POULIOT



Alison Pouliot

CREDIT: CSIRO

Countries in non-English speaking Europe are more mycophilic, however, with a long grounding in mycological science, and centuries of folk tradition.

The interplay between the two views, and the growing regard for fungi in Australia, prompted Pouliot to undertake a PhD at the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University in Canberra, where she is still a Fellow. The resulting study, *A thousand days in the forest: An ethnography of the culture of fungi*, provided the groundwork for her recently published book.

No dry academic tome, *The Allure of Fungi* is a thoughtful meditation on nature and on fungal-human relations. The prologue describes it as “a return to the dirt, to the senses, and to fungus-human interactions, as a way we can confront these challenges in the hope that we might remember we are part of the one ecology”.

In a further commitment to the “sensorial”, she wrote the book by hand, in pen or pencil, in the forests where fungi grow.

It details a series of serendipitous encounters in the forest, in Australia and Europe, with a broad range of people Pouliot dubs “fungal folk”. The tales are told with a great sense of

narrative and touches of dry humour. “Few people want pure information,” she says. “They want context, they want to hear of the relationship to their own lives.”

A consummate writer and environmental philosopher, much in the vein of Rachel Carson (author of *Silent Spring*), Pouliot is also a professional photographer.

In her early days as an environmental scientist, she used photography simply to record change in freshwater ecosystems for various government agencies, but about 10 years ago this morphed into the pursuit of something more visceral.

“For years I used to think that photography had most in common with painting; with rules of thirds, diagonals and so forth. It was only a decade or so ago that I realised that it’s not painting at all – its poetry,” she says.

“Poetry is such a distillation. That honing, that crafting into just a few words. In an image or a photo essay, to actually hone it back – it is hard. But this process brings across something really powerful. And once I realised that, for me, photography is a lot more like poetry, everything made a lot more sense.”

Each chapter of the new book is accompanied by a gallery of photographs without captions. That’s not the norm for CSIRO, a science publisher whose books are often identification guides, but it agreed with Pouliot’s vision and the book has benefitted enormously.

Pouliot wants people to see and appreciate the photos in what she calls the affective dimension. “To respond, how you feel in that split second before your brain cognitively goes ‘ah that’s the Wombat Forest’ or ‘that is species x,’” she says.

“As a scientist I am trying to make sense of the world, and as a photographer I am trying to retain some of its mystery.”

Photographing the fungal kingdom has its challenges: the subject does remain still, but the light is often low, filtered in forest environments, and capturing colours is difficult. And then there are the environmental challenges such as leeches that like to crawl into your mouth.

Modern cameras have flip monitors, but Pouliot prefers to be on the ground at the subject level. “Looking through the viewfinder is very important, framing the subject in context. Seeing it from their level.”

She is scheduled to deliver around 60 workshops and events in country Victoria in the first half of this year.

She says she walks away from all her the workshops having learnt as much as the participants, and that it is a privilege to visit a group and learn about its patch of forest. Her most specialist workshop attendee was a “mycological forensic ear wax specialist who looked at spores in ear wax”. ©

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