Reading the Grain: The Patterns of Wood Rewilding Contemporary Prose & Poetry

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Introduction

Reading the Grain explores how contemporary writers engage with scientific discourse and forest history to re-imagine our relationship with trees, woodlands, and forests.

Key Texts

The Overstory by Richard Powers

All the ways you imagine us – bewitched mangroves up on stilts, a nutmeg's inverted spade, gnarled baja elephant trunks, the straight-up missile of a sal – are always amputations. Your kind never see us whole. You miss the half of it, and more. There's always as much belowground as above… (Richard Powers, The Overstory, 2018)

Richard Powers is an author renowned for his penchant to write a wide range of specialist discourse into his fiction. *The Overstory* is no exception. Powers' fascination with mycorrhizal networks, botany, phylogenetic trees, and tree-myths make this text essential for any analysis on how trees influence fiction.

Barkskins by Annie Proulx

When they first arrived the pine candles had been in bloom, each great tree pulsing out tremendous volumes of pollen until the sky was overcast and the choppers and even ships at sea wondered at the brilliant yellow showering down… (Annie Proulx, Barkskins, 2014)

Barkskins is a forensically researched piece of historical fiction. Its scope will allow me to analyse how Proulx traces our shifting baselines and changing attitudes towards forests.

The Feminist Wilderness Narrative

Reading the Grain will also feature a section on the feminist wilderness narrative. Key texts identified so far include: *The New Wilderness* by Diane Cook, *The Word for Woman is Wilderness* by Abi Andrews, *Sal* by Mick Kitson, and *Pollard* by Laura Beatty.

The Grain

Tree Metaphor: These metaphors include family trees, mythological world trees, phylogenetic trees of evolutionary thought, and technology trees. These types of tree metaphor tend to provide foundations for thought and worldview in the human sphere, they are also used in the structuring of prose narrative e.g., *Barkskins* follows two family trees through multiple generations.

Timescales: Richard Mabey concisely surmises that 'it isn't just that trees outlive us. Every stage of their lives is governed by rhythms alien to us' (Mabey, *The Ash and The Beech*, 2007). Trees, woodlands, and forests all inspire a play with timescales. Writers tend to conflate human and tree timescales which usually sharpens the sense of the ephemerality and fragility of human life.

Woodcraft/Wood-Economy: It is not just woodlands and forests that pattern these texts, their products also form a grain in the literature. In the wilderness narrative this might appear simply as campfires, shelter, food, and medicine. In other texts these products appear as luxuries e.g. furniture, fruit, paper, timber etc. How woodcraft is presented, and how nuanced such knowledge is, is of vital importance to critiquing writers' engagements with these landscapes.

Rewilding

Rewilding is a term that has been used sparingly in ecocritical debates and an exploration of its applicability and possibilities within the discipline promises an exciting and original frontier.

My initial research indicates that rewilding is as intrinsically connected to recovery and regeneration as trees are in poetry and prose. This can include the re-imagining of myth in 21st century contexts, re-creating lost forests, and exploring seemingly lost ways of life in presentations of woodcraft in wilderness narratives, for example. Paul Jepson's recent article on the 'Recoverable Earth Narrative' inspired by rewilding stories (like the Knepp Wildlands Project) is an especially interesting development in discussions regarding rewilding as it presents a new conceptual strand of thought on the term.

Analysing how trees shape the form and structure of this project's key texts, how they influence the cast of human characters, will demonstrate how the multifarious patterns of wood in contemporary literature contribute to an emerging 'Recoverable Earth' narrative.

Research Aims

- To define what a literary rewilding is, and inspire more nuanced debates on rewilding in the humanities and the wider eco-critical debate.
- To provide in-depth analysis on the effects trees, woodlands, and forests have on contemporary fiction and poetry.
- To continue and encourage interdisciplinary thinking by offering a unique perspective on the values and meanings of forests in art.