

# Forest Ecology & Fantasy Fiction

## Mobilising the Imaginative Resources of Fantasy Fiction for Living with Forests

- ❖ Fictional forests offer a vital resource to stimulate audiences, in a variety of **creative, critical, and accessible** ways, to engage with real forest sites and forest ecology.
- ❖ The complex, diverse forests in fantasy fiction have the potential to **enrich and challenge** normative perceptions and cultural conceptions of forest environments.
- ❖ The research seeks to **read forests in fantasy and fantasy in forests**, using literary ecocritical and social methodologies to study real and imagined forest ecologies in the fantasy fiction of William Morris, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Ursula K. Le Guin.
- ❖ Through an extended partnership with **Ruskin Land in the Wyre Forest**, the project has run a series of workshops with undergraduate students which include interactive and immersive woodland ‘reading walks’, creative sessions, conservation activities (apple-pressing, charcoal-making, species identification), recorded walking interviews, and focus group discussions.

Discover more at my **Fantasy Forests Exhibition at Winterbourne House and Gardens on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2022**

### Ruskin Land

Ruskin Land is an area of the Wyre Forest in Worcestershire cared for by the Guild of St George set up in the 1870s by the Victorian social and environmental critic and William Morris’s mentor, John Ruskin, whose aims were ‘to take some small piece of English Land, beautiful, peaceful and fruitful’, and provide opportunities for working people to cultivate land and reconnect with nature.

Today the Guild manages the land in collaboration with the Wyre Community Land Trust, which reinterprets and incorporates Ruskin’s ideas to create a people-focused, biodiverse, and economically viable forest for the twenty-first century.

If we are to reach a sustainable future, we first need to be able to imagine it.

John Holmes & Dion Dobrzynski, “No Wealth but Life”: The Role of the Arts and Humanities in Tackling the Climate Crisis (September 2021)

Figure 1

### I. Escape

Forests are popularly conceived as places removed from human society where one may “**escape**”. Likewise, fantasy is pejoratively described as the “**literature of escapism**”.

Far from escaping or compensating for the social and political complexities of the “real world”, fantasy dispels the **fantasies of anthropocentrism** so that we may face the inextricably socio-ecological realities of deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change.

### II. Enchantment

Fantasy fiction enacts and models a powerful psychological and collective experience of **wonder** stimulated by the mystery, complexity, and beauty of forests.

I explore the **ethics of enchantment**, arguing that fantasy is able to **renew our appreciation** of ordinary and sometimes overlooked aspects of forest ecosystems.

### III. Experiment

The fantastic mode relies on a symbiotic relationship between the real and unreal at the creative junction of the **scientific and fantastic imagination**.

I consider fantasy forests as **thought experiments** which imagine forests thousands of years into the future, under different planetary conditions, or affected by radically alternative societies, economies, and cultures.

### IV. Engagement

The literary ecocritical study of fantasy forests in chapters 1-3 (see above), centred around three distinct but interlinked themes, form the focus of each of the three workshops (**9 October 2021: ‘Escape’, 22 January 2022: ‘Enchantment’, 30 April 2022: ‘Experiment’**). The reading material of the walks are drawn from the corresponding corpus of each chapter, enabling **theory and praxis to cross-pollinate throughout** the writing process and workshop planning.

In this final chapter, ‘**Engagement**’, there will be a thematic analysis of the range of qualitative data collected from the workshops, following an interdisciplinary ‘**empirical ecocritical**’ methodology. Data sources include **participant journal entries, GPS maps, walking interview and focus group audio transcripts, as well as participant-created pieces** such as artwork, photography, and creative writing which will be displayed at an exhibition to communicate the findings to a wider audience.

‘It has changed my relationship to the natural world. I realise there is so much more beneath the surface that I wouldn’t have ever considered before [...] so many stories to be told, so many processes that are important [...] I didn’t realise how connected everything is.’

Participant 7, Workshop 3



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

**Fig. 1:** The Dragon’s Nest, Ruskin Land (Jim Stephenson 2018)

**Fig. 2:** Reading to the Companions of the Guild of St George in the Dragon’s Nest

**Fig. 3:** A participant fondling frogspawn

**Fig. 4:** Participants take part in an ‘eye to the sky’ activity

**Fig. 5:** Discussing the ontology and ethical status of trees with Forest Edge



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