

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... 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. 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.

A River Runs Through It by Norman Maclean

On the Big Blackfoot River above the mouth of Belmont creek the banks are fringed by large Ponderosa pines. In the slanting sun of late afternoon the shadows of great branches reached from across the river, and the trees took the river in their arms. The shadows continued up the bank, until they included us. (Norman Maclean, A River Runs Through It, 1973)

Norman Maclean maintained a close connection to the USFS throughout his life, and the woods of his fiction immerse the reader in an elegiac world of work and labour in the forests of the American West.



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.



Forestry & Writing

My project is a piece of literary criticism that places particular emphasis on the forest as a worked and managed landscape. In *Balancing Act: Environmental Issues in Forestry*, Hammish Kimmins defines the term forestry 'as the art, science, and practice of managing forested landscapes to provide a sustained production of a variety of goods and services for society.' My project will analyse and critique the art, science, and practice of writing forested landscapes. By exploring a forestry of writing it is not only possible to examine how modern and contemporary authors conceptualise their forests in ways comparable to how foresters manage a treed landscape: it is also possible to offer a more nuanced exploration of utility in the woods.

Traditional ecocritical approaches to forests in literature have neglected or dismissed the worked and managed forest landscape and cast figures such as lumberjacks as thoughtless defilers of nature. My project will re-evaluate this position and demonstrate how American authors stemming from a rich timber-tradition offer a vision of woods that can be used for both timber and the diverse benefits of their living trees. By analysing the way in which American authors have storied human use of the forests of North America, it is my contention that one can conversely outline the ways in which people can be useful to forests now.

(Some) Research Aims

- To re-evaluate the role of the often-maligned logger or lumberjack in contemporary American literature, and from a more nuanced analysis of this figure explore aspects of wood-culture otherwise ignored by the majority of ecocriticism.
- To continue and encourage interdisciplinary thinking (in the BIFoR community) by offering a unique perspective on the values and meanings of forests in art.