

[Review] Patricia Ononiwu Kaishian. *Forest Utopia: The Abounding Queerness of Nature*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2025. 255pp, ISBN 9781954118904;

Sabrina Imbler. *How Far the Light Reaches: A Life in Ten Sea Creatures*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2022. 264pp, ISBN 9780316540537;

Lulu Miller. *Why Fish Don't Exist: A Story of Loss, Love, and the Hidden Order of Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020. 256pp, ISBN 978151162071.

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It is commonplace in critical animal studies to note that Claude Lévi-Strauss once declared 'animals are good to think' (89). But perhaps the more interesting claim came at the beginning of *Totemism*, where he dismisses anthropological studies of indigenous societies in which 'it is though [the scholar] were seeking, consciously or unconsciously, and under the guise of scientific objectivity' to make his subjects 'more *different* than they really are' (1). What if we extended this un-othering to non-human animals, to plants and other forms of life?

Some authors have already taken these steps, shaking loose trees of life that turn out to be as sturdy as a house of cards. To do so, *Fish Don't Exist*, *How Far the Light Reaches*, and *Forest Euphoria* bring together natural history, journalistic science writing, and the emphatically subjective genre of memoir. They are also rife with queer joy. Of course,

exploratory efforts to *queer nature* are no longer novel, taking the form of intersectional eco-politics, excavations of sexual diversity in the animal world, and interdisciplinary approaches to *de-naturalizing* heterosexual, reproductive, and cisgender imperatives (for example, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson.) But the joy in these volumes is their effortless queerness: they need not set about queering nature, for it is already abundantly queer.

In *Fish Don't Exist*, Lulu Miller lets the logic of literary genres fall away, situating her own life story against her exploration of the life and work of ichthyologist David Starr Jordan, who is said to have identified some 2,500 fish species. Knocked sideways by a breakup with a man she loved, Miller is initially fascinated by Jordan's knack for turning adversity into opportunity, and his unremitting quest to impose order on a disordered and largely unknown natural world. Shouldn't order, especially the fine-grained order of a taxonomist like Jordan, bring stability to a life gone topsy-turvy? At times, Miller's dive into Jordan's story can barely repress the sensuality she finds in his – and her – search for knowledge, scientific and otherwise:

On his first day of middle school, David secreted home from the library 'a little book on flowers.' And back in the privacy of his room, he'd sit, manual in hand, desk dirty with flowers, discerning which flower was which, unbuttoning its genus, its species. (11)

Learning of Jordan's virulent promotion of scientific racism, Miller is duly repulsed. 'Order' of this type is its own shackle. But after a lesson in cladistics, Miller finds relief in its disruption of traditional taxonomy. Hence the title, *Fish Don't Exist*, as she learns that no self-respecting cladist would lump lungfish and lamprey, shark and salmon, into one big mess of 'fish'. Miller lets us know that, now seeing the world anew, her broken heart finally healed, and that she stumbled upon was a new romance, a queer one that she never allowed herself when convinced that a rule-bound world of order would be her balm.

Imbler, too, entangles their own tale with that of non-human life. In part a coming-out story, one whose author also grapples with their mixed-race heritage that others often

find unintelligible, *How Far the Light Reaches* offers ten scenes from their life, each paired with a meditation on the characteristics of a species that makes its home in the water. A teenager's attempt to starve their way to elusive thinness, an obsession shared with their mother, sparks a consideration of the brooding octopus's refusal to eat while she guards her eggs. A portrait of the marine worm known as a sand striker, which captures prey by burying itself, all but antennae, in the seafloor, and emerging in a violent flash, is set alongside half-memories of desultory sex and drunken blackouts. Yeti crabs that swarm hydrothermal vents on the ocean's floor form a backdrop for stories of sweaty dancefloors and an emergent queer community.

These pairings may sound improbable, but Imbler is a daring writer, and one deft enough to avoid the supposed sin of anthropomorphism. Likeness, after all, is not sameness, but recognizing it does close some of the distance between the human and the vast array of non-human species. Imbler's animals are, as Lévi-Strauss suggested, companions that are good to think—not only to think *about*, but good to think *with* (Culler 9) and within the very acts of thinking: digesting, analyzing, differentiating, analogizing, theorizing. Imbler thinks alongside these ten sea creatures in a figurative sense, to be sure, and occasionally, literally, when they recount swimming among a colony of shimmering, daisy-chained salps off Jacob Riis Beach on the Rockaway Peninsula in New York City, in an anthemic chapter on communities of intimates joining as a movement, and at the same time, as family.

In *Forest Euphoria*, Kaishian casts an even broader net than Miller or even Imbler, filling a memoir with the animals, plants, and fungi that she knows well. Snakes and snapping turtles accompany an adventurous childhood in New York's Hudson River Valley. Frogs rescued from a college course's dissection exercise croak in a dorm room. The emergence of a brood of cicadas in northwest Indiana brings solace during a lonely postdoctoral appointment in an unfamiliar place. Mushrooms – magic, edible, and otherwise – are ever-present, underfoot in the woods the author loves to visit, in research labs and fungal archives. No wonder, as Kaishian serves as curator of mycology at the New York State Museum. In prose that moves nimbly from bits and pieces of her life to the aesthetics

of sexual selection or the environmental impact of the Armenian genocide (a topic that surfaces in light of Kaishian's Armenian and Irish heritage), one might feel unmoored from the conventions of narrative thrust or sustained thesis. But dizzying interconnectedness is her *métier*.

Kaishian digs deep, into herself and the natural world she inhabits, and finds that much of that world defies normative binaries. In fields of spring flowers, she finds sequentially hermaphroditic jack-in-the-pulpits, which begin life asexually, then grow male flowers which are eventually replaced by female ovaries and stigma. Studying glass eels in the Hudson River, Kaishian dives into the remarkable history of misunderstandings of how they reproduce, which is only recently recognized as dependent on extraordinary migrations, a long asexual adulthood, and development of male or female (or intersex) organs only at the very end of life. Lamenting that the more different an animal's life seems from our own, the easier it is to distance our human selves from it, she counters: 'the mindset of reading comparisons to animals as insulting comes from the same body of logic ... that positions certain people beneath others and animals and nature beneath people'. Thinking of eels, she continues: to see your own biology mirrored in the body of a mysterious, metamorphosing, magnetotactic being is magic' (178-9). Lévi-Strauss's concern that scientists try to cast their subjects as 'more *different* than they really are' is, delightfully, nowhere to be seen here.

While none of these three volumes is an academic book per se, they offer those of us engaged in scholarly writing a lesson or two. For one thing, they are not afraid to share with the reader that they are in love with their subjects, infusing their writing with cross-species, cross-phyllum queerness that crackles with pleasure. For another, they demonstrate how the pursuit of knowledge, scientific curiosity, and getting out in the field – in salt water, in swampy woodlands, and in dusty archives – is not simply a path to publishable results, but at times, a way of finding oneself.

Works Cited

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