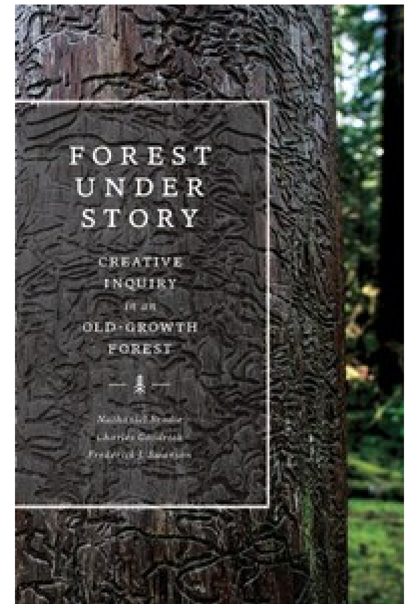
High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

Artful science

Data and poetry converge in an experimental forest.

Lawrence Lenhart | **Feb. 20, 2017** | *From the print edition*



In the western Cascade Range, just one hour east of Eugene, Oregon, there is an old-growth forest where ecosystem science and the humanities converge. Since 1948, the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest has been a research sanctuary for scientists studying biodiversity, climate, hydrology, soils and stream ecology. And so, 31 writers have taken to its slopes to collaborate on *Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest*. These environmental poets and -essayists — all of them participants in the -forest's collaborative Long-Term Ecological Reflections Program — have pressed their literary stethoscopes to the roots and snags and cones of the 16,000-acre reserve to record what they observed, coming up with answers both empirical and oracular.

The forest's oldest Douglas firs are 650 years old, meaning these 300-foot tall giants were just saplings when the Black Death was devastating Europe. Essayist John R. Campbell demonstrates how the forest's topography defies the "usually horizontal, linear" way time is expressed. As he descends a creek cut, each step takes him not only downward, but back in time, millennium by millennium, until he is "entering the original pyroclastic flows … stepping, unsteadily, down (not back) toward 25 million years ago." Another contributor, lepidopterist and writer Robert Michael Pyle, cranes his neck upward and catches a glimpse of the "old vine maples (that) hoop and droop

under their epiphytic shawls." He views the maples through the lens of gerontology, dressing old growth in the verbiage of old fashion so as to signal the forest's enduring wisdom.

But it is not enough to just see the forest. In his poem, "Parsing My Wife as Lookout Creek," Andrew C. Gottlieb shapes lines like a river, letting them meander across the page to mimic the movement of running water: "the river's unnecessary way of sharing what she composed / unburdened by grammars, maps, latitudes, rules / banks." Beyond Gottlieb's concrete poetics, Bob Keefer's black-and-white two-page photography spreads help readers further visualize Andrews Forest.

New trees grow from a stump in the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest.

Bob Keefer

If this has all started to smack of literary "tree-huggery," then just wait for the opening to Scott Russell Sanders' essay, in which he admits to caressing trees not unlike the way one would "stroke the fenders of automobiles or finger silk fabrics or fondle cats." When we make contact with a tree, Sanders reminds us, we are repeating a gesture that was essential to our simian ancestors, who found shelter in the branches 5 million years ago. But early in the 20th century, loggers in the Pacific Northwest began regarding the ancient forest as over-mature timber, and much of the old growth was converted "into studs for the walls of West Coast homes."

Caressing or chopping, caching or littering, there is a suggestion throughout *Forest Under Story* that we will be remembered for how we handle the land, and how we communicate with it. Robin Wall Kimmerer visits sap-flow meters that have been attached to the trees and notes: "Water is a storyteller." In her essay, "Interview With a

Watershed," Kimmerer considers writer and physician Lewis Thomas' four forms of language: chitchat, conversation, mathematics and poetry. "The data may change our minds," Kimmerer writes, "but we need poetry to change our hearts."

The complementary functions of mathematics and poetry are dramatized in a duet by poet and essayist Alison Hawthorne Deming and geologist Frederick J. Swanson. "Poetry-Science Gratitude Duet" begins as an exchange of flatteries but shifts into a discourse that defines (and occasionally defies) the pair's roles as scientist and writer. As in a true duet, each sings an equal number of parts. Deming thanks Swanson for his stillness "in the face of the velocity our kind has created." And Swanson thanks Deming for writing what "scientists may feel but cannot articulate." Deming's hope to "free scientific discourse from its yoke and see what can sing in its vocabulary" is actuated over and over in the individual works of the poets and essayists of *Forest Under Story*. In the Andrews Experimental Forest, "experimental" is the domain of the scientist and writer alike.

It is also the domain of the forest itself. Kimmerer goes beyond Lewis Thomas' four forms of communication to propose a fifth: the language of the land. This is how the forest dictates its own story. *Forest Under Story* seems keenly aware that the most important feature of language involves listening. When writers listen to the forest, when they press their ears against the bark of a hemlock or yew, the forest always speaks, however softly. In a recurring excerpt from her long poem "Debris," Vicki Graham agrees: "Listen to the sounds of the forest / the sounds of the land, the sounds / of a place loved and touched / by human hands."

Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest

Nathaniel Brodie, Charles Goodrich, and Frederick J. Swanson (editors)
264 pages, hardcover: $29.95.
University of Washington Press, 2016.

Copyright © High Country News