

Review: Forest Under Story

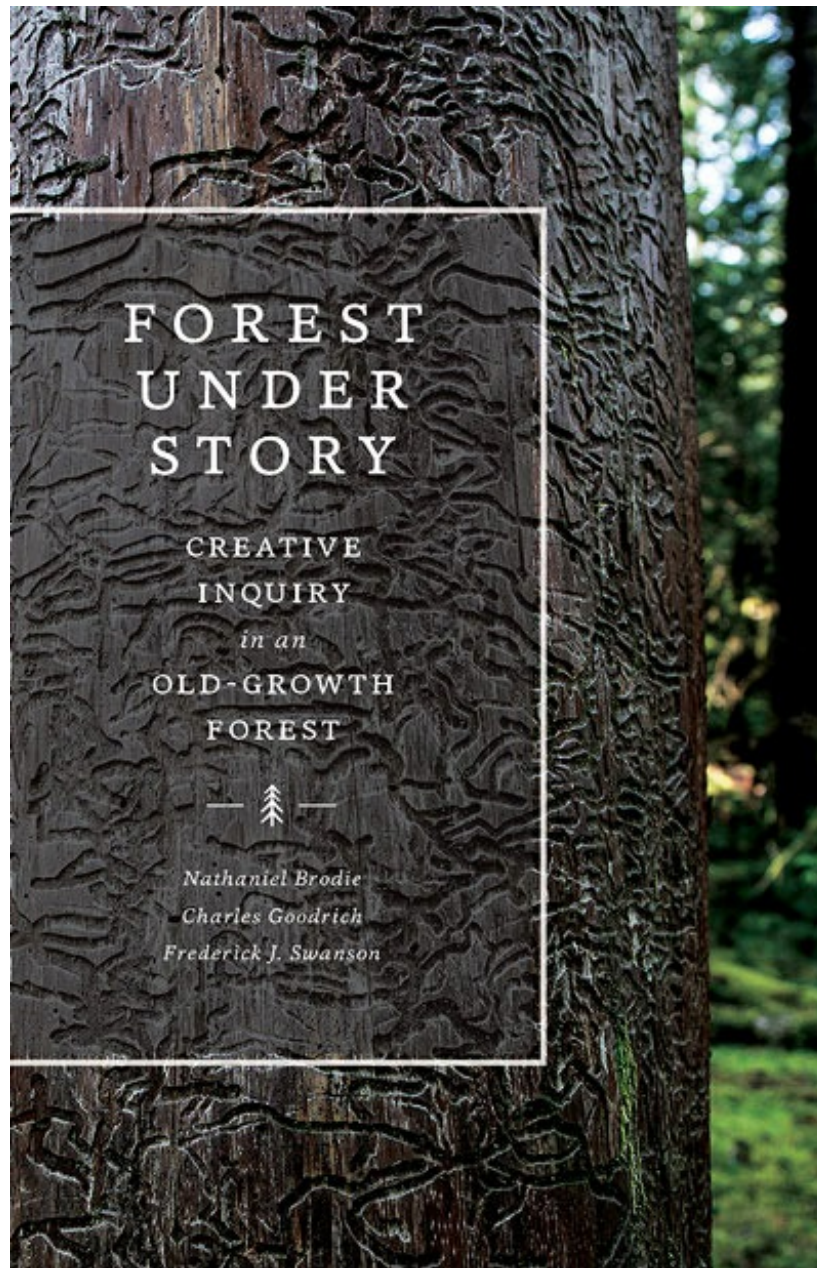
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Jennie Goode reviews *Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest*, edited by Nathaniel Brodie, Charles Goodrich, and Frederick J. Swanson

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Every place has its own vocabulary, a specific lexicon that tells us, even without the connective tissue of narrative, what life is like in that spot on the planet. How many words are there for rain? What are the nuances of *drizzle* and *mist*, and how often does *sop* appear in everyday speech? What do the names of plants and animals—sword fern, Douglas squirrel, spotted owl—tell us about a landscape and its history? Words, at their most specific and distinct, aggregate into ecosystem, experience, life itself.

The particular place limned in *Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest* is the H. J. Andrews Experimental Forest, on the western slope of Oregon's Cascade Mountains. Stretching over 25 square miles and encompassing the entire watershed of Lookout Creek, the Andrews, as it's called by those who live and work there, is a temperate rainforest where trees half a millennium old stretch 300 feet high, and the sky releases nearly a hundred inches of precipitation each year. Under a canopy of Douglas-fir, western

hemlock, western red cedar, and Pacific yew, hundreds of species of lichen and moss adorn the limbs and trunks of vine maple and dogwood. But the Andrews isn't undisturbed, pristine wilderness; it's a working forest dedicated, since 1948, to scientific research on topics as diverse as the decay rates of tree species, the effects of floods on aquatic organisms, the ways moisture travels from tree canopy to ground, and the long-term legacy of clearcutting.

In 2003, the Andrews became the site of another kind of investigation, the Long-Term Ecological Reflections program, which brings writers to the forest for a week or two to observe and reflect on what they see. As part of their stay, writers visit four "Reflections Plots"—a clearcut, a selectively logged hillside, a log-decomposition site, and a gravel bar created by a major flood—to learn about the research occurring at each location. Just as the science at the Andrews has been going on for decades, so too is the Reflections program intended to extend into a distant future. *Forest Under Story*, a compilation of writing from the first dozen years, is the initial installment in what's envisioned to be two centuries of literary response to the forest.

Editor Charles Goodrich describes the Reflections program as "a humanities analog to the scientific research," and it is the interaction between creative and scientific inquiry that distinguishes this collection of place-based nature writing. The book asks: What's the value of looking at the forest through different lenses? What can literature bring to the study of a place that science can't?

The conversation between art and science takes place most overtly in a collaborative piece by Alison Hawthorne Deming and Frederick J. Swanson called "Poetry-Science Gratitude Duet," in which the authors discuss the strengths and limitations of their disciplines' approaches to their work and to the world around them. "I so much admire your skills with language," writes Swanson, a scientist, addressing Deming, a poet. "You can say what we scientists may feel but cannot articulate, or that we do not even realize that we feel. What skills we once had for expression of emotions and out-of-the-box description have long been professionally scrubbed from our minds." Deming, in turn, quotes fellow contributor Kathleen Dean Moore: "'You [scientists] feed our astonishment,' and I thank you for that. It's weird to me that empirical findings can spur that transcendent sense we call wonder. But certain data can verify for me the sense that natural systems in their beautiful complexity have a great story to tell, perhaps the greatest."

Throughout *Forest Under Story*, writers turn the raw material of scientific observation into stories of beauty and wonder. They act as interpreters, translating the quantitative data of science into art that moves people to care about the forest's diverse and sometimes obscure forms of life, like the mycorrhizal fungal networks that allow an orchid and a fallen log to exchange nutrients through underground pathways, and the lettuce-like *Lobaria* lichen that pulls nitrogen from the air and makes it available for use by neighboring vegetation.

In “Denizens of Decay,” Tom A. Titus brings to life the evolutionary marvel that is the Oregon slender salamander, who lives with a “singular devotion to dampness” in “the womblike wetness within her log” because, lungless, her body relies on moisture to keep her skin porous enough for oxygen and carbon dioxide to travel back and forth across this thin, breathing border. “She must adore humid darkness,” Titus writes of the salamander, “revel in the press of her flanks against moist wood, delight in tiny bits of decay that cling to her head and legs as she negotiates the tight channels of her log. She must love this place.”

Such pieces help us see differently, see more. Like science, they help us notice what is present but not always apparent. As Jane Hirschfield says in a short essay titled “Wild Ginger,” “The journey from ignorance to seeing is made by borrowing others’ eyes.” The writers in *Forest Under Story* borrow scientists’ eyes and lend us their own, expanding our perspective and focusing our attention.

But this collection does more than record the stories of the forest and of the science occurring there. The authors document and describe, yes, but they question and criticize too, exploring the effects of all kinds of human activity on the wild, even that intended to benefit it. Logging is part of the socioeconomic DNA of Pacific Northwest forests, including the Andrews. Scientists are still studying the site of a sizeable clearcut experiment carried out there in the 1960s, research that has, over decades, shifted forestry practices toward more sustainable management. But even here, where knowledge and not profit is the goal, writers recognize the casualties of research. In her poem “Log Decomposition,” Joan Maloof describes the log-decomposition research site as a kind of massacre: “The dead here have been murdered / and lie like corpses in a mass grave. / . . . The victims, cut at the ankles / and laid at the feet of the living ones.” And at the clearcut research site, she writes, “Healing can be imagined, / but I will not witness it. / Only at this place do I want time to hurry.”

Writer-scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer echoes the kind of empathizing Maloof is engaged in and acknowledges the limits of the knowledge science can impart when, in “Interview with a Watershed,” she writes:

There is danger in thinking that we do understand. We cannot say to the forest, “Did you suffer terribly when the trees were all gone?” But we can measure the hemorrhage of nitrate washed away. We might want to ask about forgiveness, but instead we measure the increasing clarity and oxygen of the stream, and hope that it will suffice. Data alone do not bring understanding. You can collect data in a day, information over a year, knowledge over a decade, but wisdom takes a lifetime. Or more.

Elsewhere in this essay, Kimmerer recounts that Lewis Thomas identified four kinds of human language: chitchat, conversation, mathematics (“the language we [scientists] use to interview the land”), and, finally, the “highest form of language”: poetry. “The data may change our minds,” Kimmerer writes, “but we need poetry to change our hearts.”

Poetry changes our hearts through acts of imagination and empathy like Maloof's, but also through the sheer musicality of language. As poetry departs from the plain of logic and meaning and enters a realm attuned to rhythm and resonance, echo and hum, it conducts its own experiments into the effects of words and their component parts on our unconscious. Perhaps Vicki Graham says it best in her poem "Cosymbionts":

Like science, poetry is an art
of dissection—it is the tiniest part
the poet wants—fern spore, leaf pore,
bud scar, the veins of an insect wing
catching the sun, the barbs and rachis
of a swallow's feather in flight.

Image and sound combine to transport us. We are not there and, yet, also there, in a forest fresh from rainstorm, sunlight angling through the canopy, a breeze exhaling across damp skin. We are there and also somewhere deep in ourselves, carried backward or inward by the rhythms of language.

Jennie Goode is a writer and editor based in Seattle. Her recent essays have appeared in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Brevity*, *Water~Stone Review* and *slag glass city*.



Header photo of Oregon old-growth forest [courtesy Pixabay](#).