

The Cabaret of Plants by Richard Mabey, review: 'a startling achievement'

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ABSTRACT

In the chapter on the "vegetable lamb" (a mythic chimera, half-plant, half-animal, from which cotton was thought to come), a typical page begins with Levi-Strauss's speculations on how the human brain is hard-wired to make myths, then moves to the storytelling, Neolithic hero of Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones*, who suggests that lies make more effective stories than truths.

FULL TEXT

Richard Mabey's new book, a startling achievement, is so pleasing to the hand and eye that you would proudly hang the endpapers on your wall. Its elegance is also its point: it takes art to communicate science.

Language and image can mislead, if they are not skilfully used. Mabey argues, for instance, that our former intimacy with trees has been replaced by a confused anthropomorphism and a propensity to "bad metaphor", "seeing the trunk, the body of the tree, as analogous to the human body". When a tree is cut, we "lament the felled figure and fail to see the aspiring shoots - as satin sheened as salmon - rising from its foundations."

* *The End of the Cold War* by Robert Service, review: 'a riveting read'

Mabey's purpose is to make us think anew about our vegetable cousins, and he is peerlessly fitted for the task. Who writes better English prose? Many readers will have followed Mabey over decades now, through bestsellers and landmark works, from *Food for Free* to *Flora Britannica*, *Beechcombings* and *Nature Cure*. It has been a wonderfully instructive journey, made delightful by Mabey's plain and splendid writing.

In the pages of this "cabaret", he cites or quotes stylistic competitors who have also written well about nature: Coleridge, Ruskin, Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth and Van Gogh. Perhaps Charles Darwin is the closest ancestor to Mabey's fierce precision and musical elegance. Darwin was a sublime writer, but here is Mabey on the olive: "To cross over the olive line, as many travellers and painters did in the 18th and 19th centuries, is to pass from the bright and sappy greens of the deciduous north to the silvers and grey-greens of the south. Olives, massed in groves, are the top layer of this colour shift, overlaying the rosemary and cistus and lavender of the garrigue [...] Even in a breeze olive trees seem to shimmer in alternations of green and blue and silver, the undersides of the leaves showing matt grey, and the angled, resinous upper surfaces reflecting the sun in flashes of burnished bronze."

* *Weatherland* by Alexandra Harris: when the Thames froze over

Aside from the easy run of sounds, it is the precisely factual "angled, resinous" which gives the last line its spring. Mabey, like Mark Cocker, stands apart from most nature writers because he is a true naturalist. Neither Mabey nor Cocker need to buff up their surfaces, whether writing about themselves or reaching for high metaphor in description, because the science and curiosities of their subjects are already so rich, and as familiar to them as they are strange to most of us.

The book, subtitled "Botany and the imagination", tells the stories of cotton, oak, olive, samphire and many others. The history of these plants' relationships with humans, their uses and the myths they have inspired are explored in a series of essays, all illustrated with beguiling colour plates. As much as a cabaret, we are given a cornucopia, from the Victorian fern craze ("pteridomania") to the roof of Westminster Hall, 600 tons of timber with no central support, an architectural "supertree" whose 75ft span "would not work unless it aped the structure of its mother lode".

* Richard Mabey: meeting the oldest living thing on Earth

With a light touch, Mabey takes the role of teacher, explaining, comparing, diverting into anecdote. He makes the striking claim that the hues and tones beyond the olive line provoked the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists to a revolution in European art, but Cézanne, Renoir and Van Gogh support him. Van Gogh thought the olive "too beautiful to paint" (although he couldn't resist trying), while Renoir called it "a brute": "How all those little leaves make me sweat! The colour isn't on the leaves, but in the spaces between them."

The experience is rather like attending a brilliant lecture. In the chapter on the "vegetable lamb" (a mythic chimera, half-plant, half-animal, from which cotton was thought to come), a typical page begins with Levi-Strauss's speculations on how the human brain is hard-wired to make myths, then moves to the storytelling, Neolithic hero of Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones*, who suggests that lies make more effective stories than truths. Mabey concludes the page with some lines from Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh and another superb writer, who argued that to question a myth's veracity is to miss its point, the real crux being whether the myth is alive or dead. Does it still have meaning for our time? For Mabey, the vegetable lamb retains its power as a parable about the inseparability of plants and animals.

* 1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear by James Shapiro, review: 'sensitive and bold'

The bare facts of each plant species, and the ways we have come to perceive them as distinct and peculiar characters, makes a tale no less extraordinary than any human fantasy. Mabey introduces us to the 2,000-year-old seed of a Judean palm, unearthed at the site of the Israeli settlement of Masada. It was planted at the start of this century and rapidly put out root and shoot, growing 10ft tall. Its long-dormant fecundity questioned the whole business of life and death. "If seeds are alive but aren't metabolising, then maybe we need to rethink our definition of what it means to be alive," said Chris Walters, an American seedbank botanist.

We hear of the Madagascan Star of Bethlehem orchid, and its "exclusive oil-drill arrangement with a single species of night-flying moth, which has a 12-inch-long tongue, enabling it to reach the nectar at the bottom of the flower's tunnel-like nectaries". By the time Mabey presents the South American orchid *Catasetum denticulatum*, which "fires a small, winged cupid's dart from overhead, a pollen arrow, which sticks the bee's back with a quick-drying glue and remains there until the bee visits another flower", readers must begin to throw their pot plants a cautious second look.

* The End of the Cold War by Robert Service, review: 'a riveting read'

Mabey is an amused and often enraptured teacher. The facts and stories he has assembled here defy precis, but a particular touchstone is the samphire. Mabey recalls the revelation of its "iodine and ozone taste". Samphire seems something between animal and vegetable, liquid and solid, a marine organism "making the supreme adventure of colonising the land", thriving on ooze, extending terra firma into the sea. "It taught that the divisions between plant as sustenance for the body and nourishment for the imagination, and between scientific fascination and Romantic inspiration, were fluid. Everything I have written since has been influenced by the thought of its ephemeral life, in which opportunism, selfexpression and utility... coexist."

Here's to the samphire, then, and its pupil. "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower", as Dylan Thomas had it, surely drives Mabey's perennially green and vital art.

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DETAILS

Subject:	Books; Leaves
Publication title:	Telegraph.co.uk; London
Publication year:	2016

Publication date:	Jan 22, 2016
Publisher:	Telegraph Media Group Holdings Limited
Place of publication:	London
Country of publication:	England
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--Great Britain
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	1759060827
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/cabaret-plants-richard-mabey-review-startling/docview/1759060827/se-2?accountid=8630
Copyright:	Copyright Telegraph Media Group Limited Jan 22, 2016
Last updated:	2016-01-23
Database:	ProQuest Central

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