
A great number of books have sprouted up in recent years about the sentience and communicative capacities of nonhuman animals and plants (Weber 2017; Haskell 2018; Gagliano 2018; Simard 2021; Yong 2022; Bakker 2022). *The Imagination of Plants: A Book of Botanical Mythology* can be added to this number, in part as an affirmation that, while scientific studies provide new tools and technologies for extending the human capacity to listen, peoples the world over have long recognized the agency, communicativeness, and kinship of plants.

The author of *The Imagination of Plants*, Matthew Hall—a scholar with degrees in the sciences (botany) and humanities (philosophy)—takes his inspiration from Val Plumwood, a seminal figure in ecophilosophy. Toward the end of her life, Plumwood challenged scholars to dive further into storytelling as a means of drawing ethical attention to the other-than-human world. She became well-known outside of academic circles for her near-death encounter with a saltwater crocodile and the conclusions she drew from the experience; namely, that humans should humbly acknowledge their place within ecological cycles and interrogate the presumed hierarchies among species that prevail in so many religious and secular cosmologies. Or, as she puts it, and Hall quotes, ‘(re)situating humans in ecological terms and non-humans in ethical terms’ (p. xxv). Hall explored the philosophical implications of the personhood of plants in his previous book (Hall 2011), but in this volume he casts a wider net, scanning the annals of cultural mythology to see what light may be shed on other aspects of human relations to plants. This project unearths various literatures from around the world, literally from A (Aboriginal Australia) to Z (Zoroastrian Persia), and stands them beside one another thematically to highlight ‘non-humans in ethical terms’ (p. xxv).

*The Imagination of Plants* is divided into six topical chapters that provide commentary and containers for these myths: ‘Roots’ (creation or origin myths in which plants are ancestors, share divine origins with/as gods, or are sentient kin); ‘Gods’ (in which the categories of being between divinity and plant are often mutable); ‘Metamorphosis’ (plants as exemplars of change, sometimes having been human or vice-versa); ‘Legend’ (plants as persons who nurture); ‘Sentience’ (plants that feel pleasure and pain and stories in which trees communicate directly to humans); and ‘Violence’ (how to avoid unnecessary harm and the consequences of treating plants as objects). Among these topics, two major themes receive repeated attention: kinship and sentience. An appendix includes further cultural and historical context for the narratives from which the texts are drawn. Also worth mentioning, as they are a major piece of the book’s contents, are the lush illustrations.
primarily various scientific botanical figures or historical artwork that corresponds to the plants mentioned in the text excerpts.

Hall asserts that plants need to be understood as agentive beings, and that ‘we need not start from scratch’ (p. xxvi) to find such presentations—there’s a whole body of work that precedes ‘us’. Familiar to scholars of religion and nature will be parallel projects that look to religious and mythological traditions for green insights and behaviors (sometimes referred to as the ‘greening-of-religion hypothesis’; see Taylor 2016; Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016). A similar spirit of inquiry animates this volume: What can be found in cosmologies and sacred narratives that have been suppressed or ignored in the predominant ideologies of the West? At its best, this draws attention to sometimes obscure tales that have remarkable poetic qualities and reveals profound empathic perceptions of botanical animacy. At its worst, such a survey may be a target for criticisms of cherry-picking without appropriate context; in essence, extracting the ‘greatest hits’ in a way that may mislead the reader to assume a mythical ideal represents a culture’s common practices. Moreover, the question of how compelling any myth will be in practice, especially outside of its particular cultural context, remains an open one.

For the fields of religious studies and environmental ethics, however, The Imagination of Plants offers an unequivocal signal, alongside the books mentioned at the beginning of this review, that the philosophical ground for the moral consideration and inclusion of nonhumans is expanding. There is, for example, a marked difference in the available literature now compared to when I was in graduate school almost two decades ago, when typically only animals were allowed to howl at the door of moral inclusion. Even then, human capacities (often cognitive) were frequently made the standard of judgment for ethical regard given to nonhuman animals. The flush of plant-related books is a good sign that such a thoroughgoing anthropocentric ethic is eroding, at least in parts of academe, perhaps akin to seemingly impermeable pavement giving way to the living soil that lies beneath.

The Imagination of Plants may be useful to scholars as a one-stop reference on the themes Hall highlights in various cultures’ sacred myths and epic tales. But Hall does not pitch this book as one targeted for scholars; he explicitly sets his sights on ‘the general reader’. In that respect, The Imagination of Plants can perhaps open a portal for students and naturally curious readers that points toward more capacious perceptions of plants-as-kin that exist and continue to thrive among many cultures. As Hall underscores, the human-as-heroic-conqueror trope is a single way to tell a story—one with potentially deadly consequences. To allow the green tendrils of other stories to reach into one’s consciousness could indeed open up worlds of relations and affirm plants are ‘more than just the silent servants of humanity’ (p. xxvi). I found compelling Hall’s simple call to become better listeners in a world full of other-than-human languages and ways of being. In the chapter on plant sentience, he highlights Gunwinggu Aboriginal elder Bill Neidjie, who offers a concise affirmation of reciprocal perception and perhaps a good summary of the book as a whole: ‘Tree. / He watching you. / You look at tree, / He listen to you’ (p. 144).

References

Book Review


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