

# Landscape, nature writing and the politics of intermedial ecocriticism

University of Bern (26-28 October 2023)

“Literature and Politics: Intermedial Perspectives”

Sophie Aymes (Université de Bourgogne, France)



Intermediality prompts “a political discussion”:

Jens Schröter (2010, 107)

Gabriele Rippl (2015)

Jørgen Bruhn (2020)

Erin James and Eric Morel (2020)

**Contested terms: our critical metalanguage?**

**From text to book**

**Sites of encounter**

# 1. Landscape, human fashioning and ecocritical textualisation

## Landscape is a human construct

Tim Ingold (2011)

W.J.T. Mitchell (1994): “a medium of exchange”

Neal Alexander (2015)

Kate Rigby (2004)

## A textualized space/network: landscape and “storied matter”

### Material ecocriticism

“[...] the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be “read” and interpreted as forming narratives, stories. Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations, and arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs, the stories of matter are everywhere”

“[...] a *material ecocriticism* examines matter both *in* texts and *as* a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces *express* their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality”

(Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann 2014, 1, 2)

## A heuristic model

## A hermeneutic task

“A foundational assumption behind contemporary media studies research is that human beings, animals, microbes, and artificial intelligences are all endowed, to varying degrees, **with an ability to perform communicative acts, and that such communication necessarily entails media.** [...] Thus, media studies generally relates to what biosemiotician Jesper Hoffmeyer called a ‘natural history of meaning’ [...] or what John Durham Peters has called a ‘natural history of media’ [...]”

(Bruhn 2020, 9)

## Putting an end to asymmetrical relationships

Entanglements within **a common mesh** (Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, Tim Ingold)

“the language of textuality suffuses material ecocritical writings” (Garascia 2022 20)

## An asymmetrical relation?

**Semiotic expression of matter/world/nonhuman**      **vs**      **human reading**

W.J.T. Mitchell's critique of textual/semiotic readings in image analysis (1994, 2005)

Karen Barad's critique of human and cultural agency (2003)

**“Language has been granted too much power.** The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation.”

“[...] language and culture [are] granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable” (Barad 801)



Mitchell (1994) and **ekphrasis**

Mitchell (2005): “the ‘default’ position of images is feminine” (35)

**“What do pictures want?”** (Gayatri Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” 1988)

**“Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. [...]**

What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshipped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their beholders, or to enthrall their beholders. They may not even want to be granted subjectivity or personhood by well-meaning commentators who think that humanness is the greatest compliment they could pay to pictures. The desire of pictures may be human or inhuman, better modeled by figures of animals, machines, or cyborgs, or by even more basic images – what Erasmus Darwin called “the love of plants.” **What pictures want in the last instance, then, is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all.**” (2005, 47-48)

**What does the non-human world want?**

**Scrutinizing our critical metalanguage**

## Another useful precedent

Doreen Massey (2005) and **the “storied landscape”**

The ambivalence of landscape

The landscape is “punctuated” with stories

Collaboration with filmmaker Patrick Keiller (2010)

Tate Liverpool exhibition *Radical Landscapes* (2022)



## **2. From text to book**

## The book of nature

**Turning non-human spaces into textual spaces:** a long history

**Nature's legibility**

“[...] the idea of **the book of nature** regards the physical world as a repository of **nonphysical meaning that needs only to be extracted or decoded**. But in contrast to the more confident assertions of legibility, we also find, often within the same examples, **another tendency that emphasizes the inscrutability or obscurity of nature's text**”

(Rebecca Davis 2022, 32)

**Linda Cracknell** (*Writing Landscape: Taking Note, Making Notes*, Saraband, 2023)

“In some places, looked at from shore to sea, the inland line was solid and precisely laid, and above it, **like a strip of hieroglyphics** lay a scattered geometry of algal shapes in diverse colours; **a mysterious script** which I didn’t know whether to read from left to right or the reverse. **An archive of the tide.**” (61)

**Tim Robinson** (*Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, Lilliput Press, 1986)

“**Signatures and counter-signatures accumulate, confuse, obliterate. Seabirds put down their names in cuneiform, lugworms excrete their humble marks.** [...] Is this an image of the work I have dreamed of, that book – with which the present book has a certain flirtatious but respectful relationship – preliminary to the taking of an all-encompassing stride? **A muddled draft of it perhaps,** or more usefully a demonstration of its impossibility; for the multitudinous, encyclopaedic inscription of all passing reality upon a yard of ground is ultimately self-effacing.”

(176, ctd in Alexander 16)

## **From text to book**

The physical book as a **“contact zone”** (Davis 41)

**In intermedial terms:** the book as inscriptive medium and interface

### **3. Intermedial sites of encounter**

## The shore and the book as ecotones: intermediality and ecocritical relationality

**John R. Gillis** (2014, 155): “where ecosystems intersect, overlap and exist in creative tension with one another”

**Karen Barad** (2007): “intra-action “

### The borders and porosity of media

Ann Garascia (2022): the “littoral book”

Sophie Aymes (2019): remediating the motif of the coastline as sensitive site

Pippa Marland (2021) and “archipelagographies”



## Intermediality and trans-corporeality (Stacy Alaimo)

**Linda Cracknell** (“Lunar Cycling”, “The Writer, the Island and the Inspiration” in *Landscape Writing*, 2023)

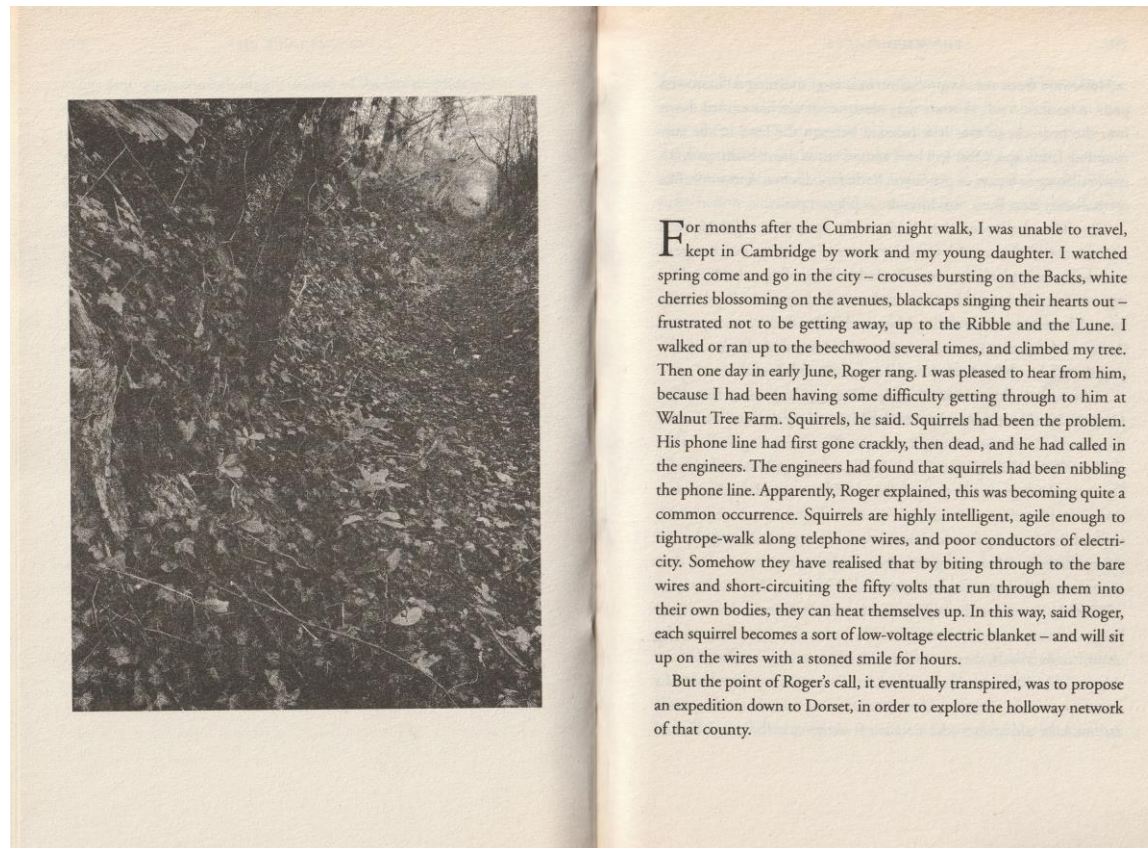
Beach-combing and sea-side inspiration

Flotsam

“these crustaceans would remain fixed to a human tool of travel and revolutions; passenger-barnacles who cycled through the tides” (22)

## Intermediality: common fields of inscription

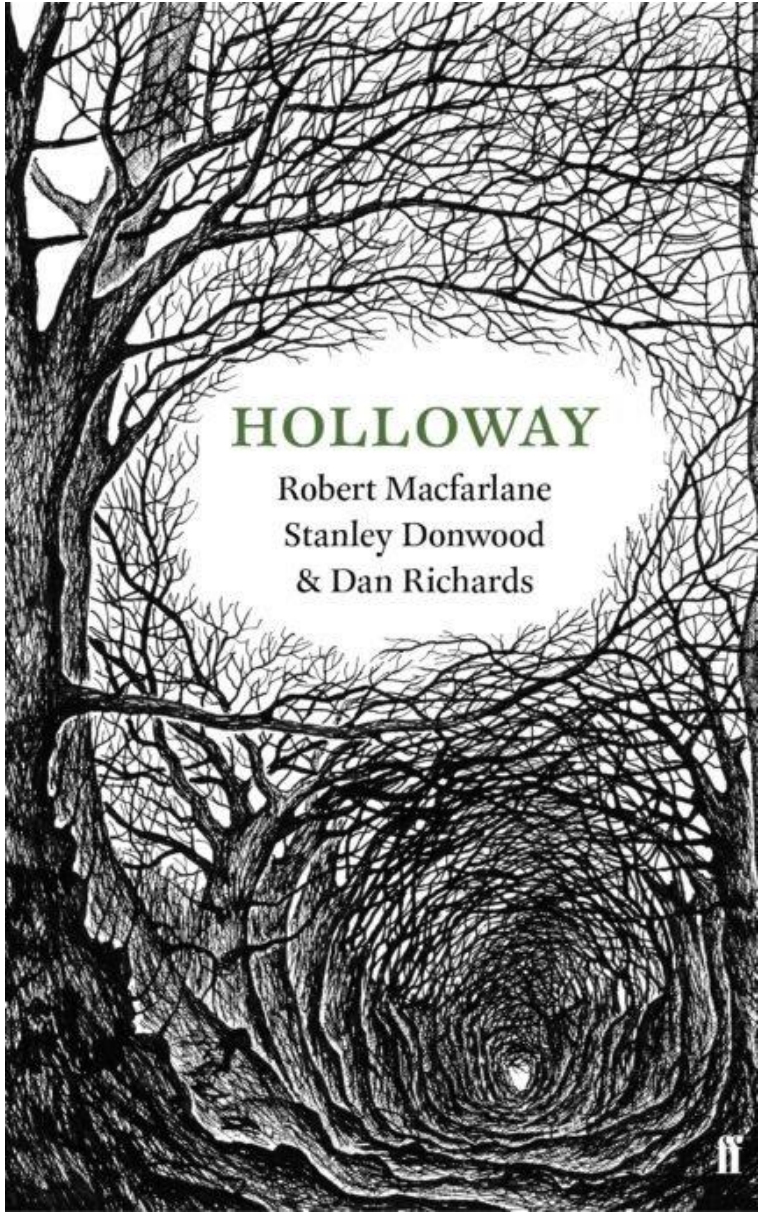
**Robert MacFarlane:** *Holloway* (2013), a reprise and his chapter “Holloway” (*The Wild Places* 2007)



For months after the Cumbrian night walk, I was unable to travel, kept in Cambridge by work and my young daughter. I watched spring come and go in the city – crocuses bursting on the Backs, white cherries blossoming on the avenues, blackcaps singing their hearts out – frustrated not to be getting away, up to the Ribble and the Lune. I walked or ran up to the beechwood several times, and climbed my tree. Then one day in early June, Roger rang. I was pleased to hear from him, because I had been having some difficulty getting through to him at Walnut Tree Farm. Squirrels, he said. Squirrels had been the problem. His phone line had first gone crackly, then dead, and he had called in the engineers. The engineers had found that squirrels had been nibbling the phone line. Apparently, Roger explained, this was becoming quite a common occurrence. Squirrels are highly intelligent, agile enough to tightrope-walk along telephone wires, and poor conductors of electricity. Somehow they have realised that by biting through to the bare wires and short-circuiting the fifty volts that run through them into their own bodies, they can heat themselves up. In this way, said Roger, each squirrel becomes a sort of low-voltage electric blanket – and will sit up on the wires with a stoned smile for hours.

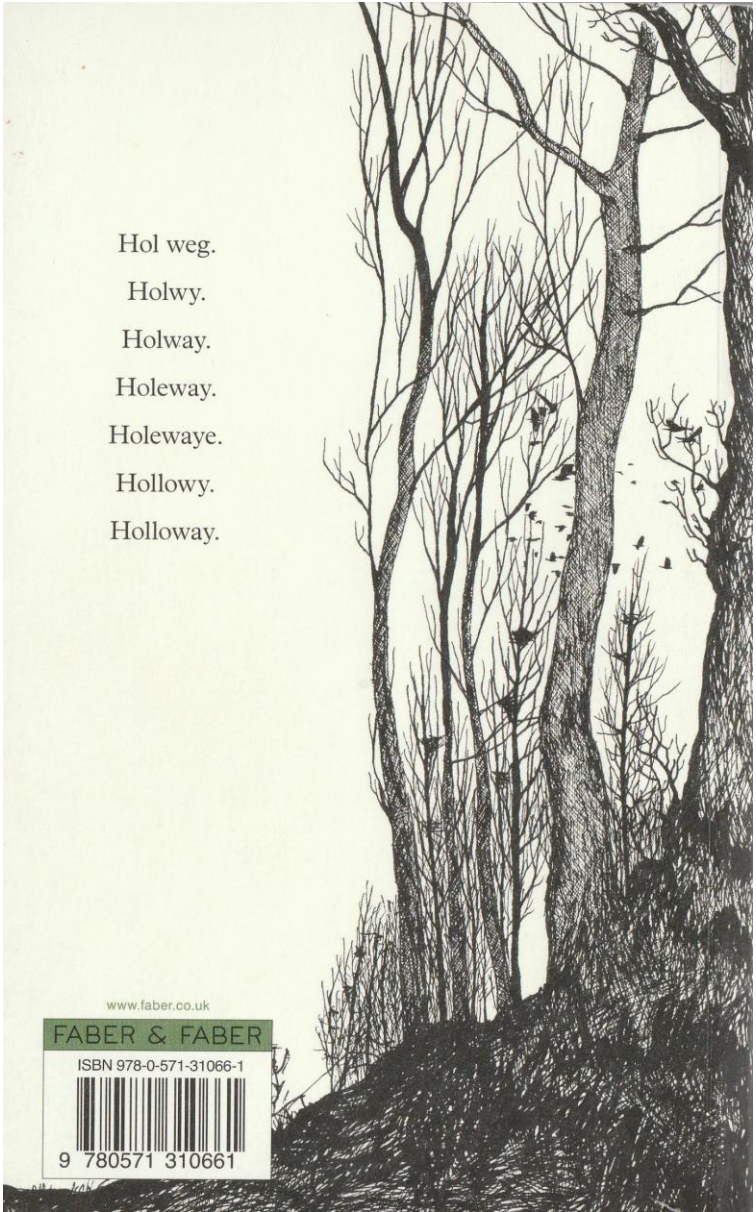
But the point of Roger's call, it eventually transpired, was to propose an expedition down to Dorset, in order to explore the holloway network of that county.





# HOLLOWAY

Robert Macfarlane  
Stanley Donwood  
& Dan Richards



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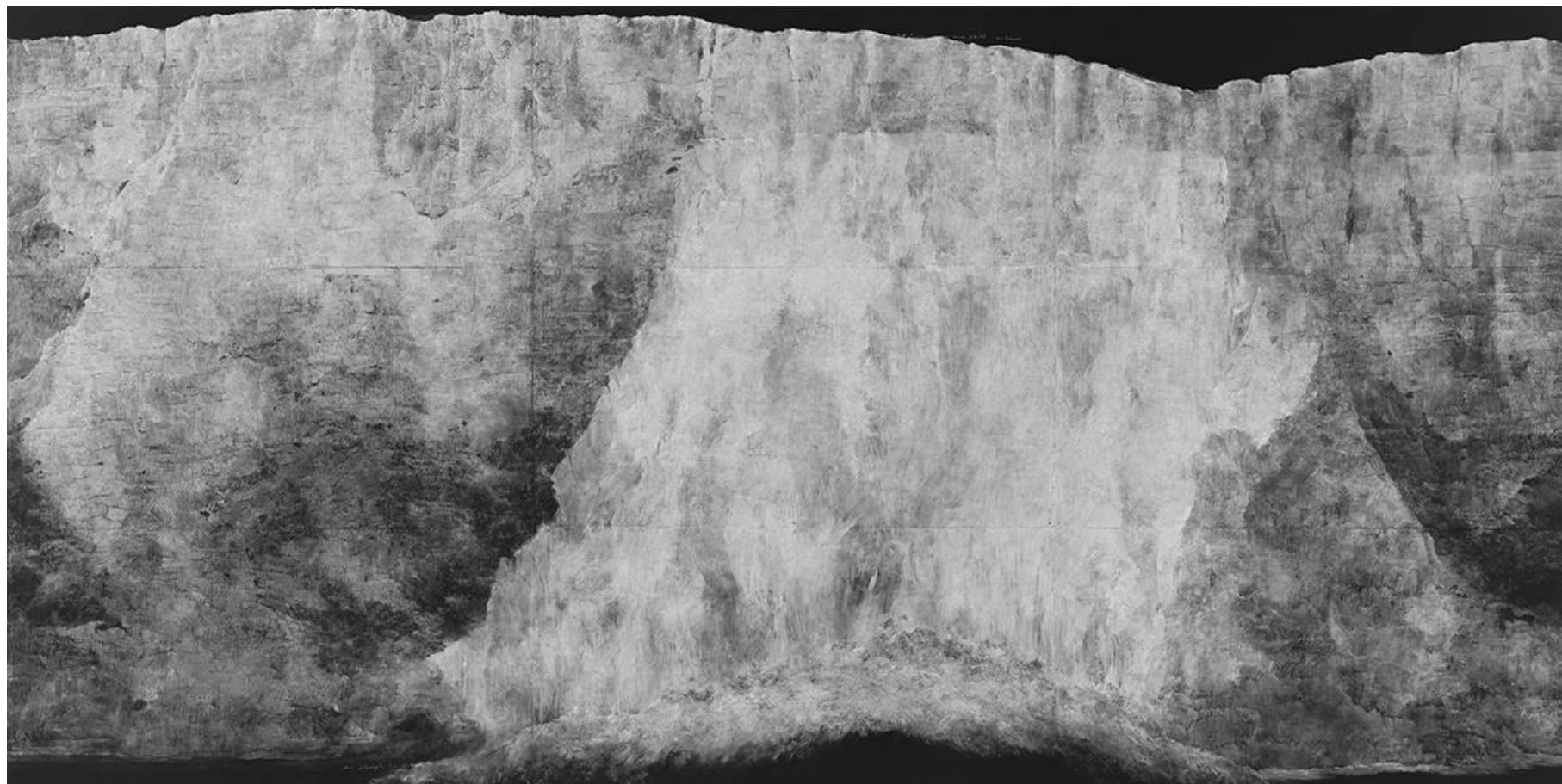
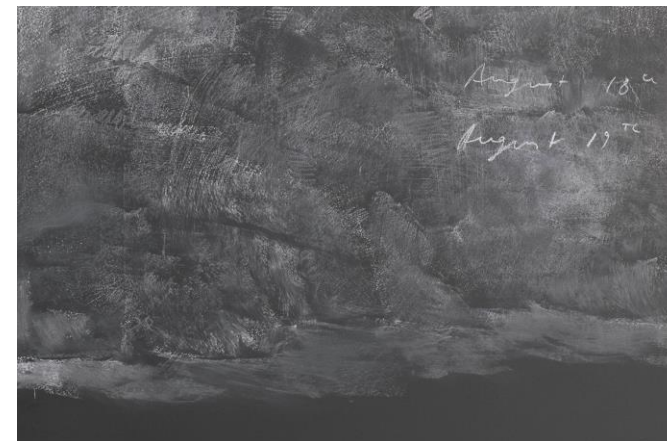
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# Tacita Dean, *Chalk Fall* (2018)

Chalk on blackboard. 365.8 x 731.5cm (overall)

<https://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/>





**William Dyce, *Pegwell Bay, Kent – A Recollection of October 5<sup>th</sup> 1858***  
(1858-1860, oil on canvas, 63.5 × 88.9 cm)

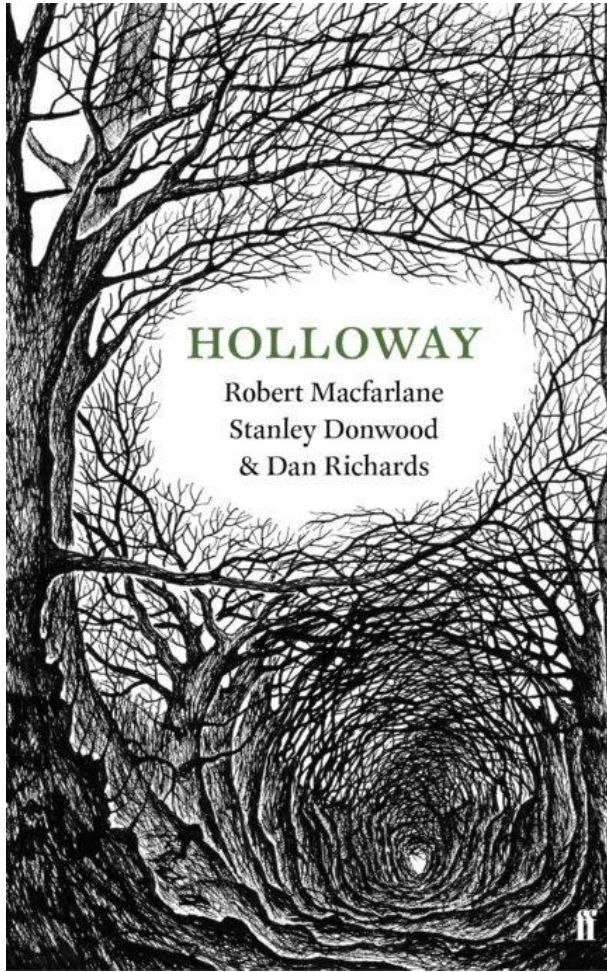


'Like creases in the hand, or the wear on the stone sill of a doorstep or stair, they are the consequence of tradition, of repeated action. Like old trees – the detail of whose spiralling and kinked branches indicate the wind history of a region, and whose growth rings record each year's richness or poverty of sun – they archive the past customs of a place.' (*The Wild Places*, 216-17)

**Erin James:** the “environmental representation of sequences of events”

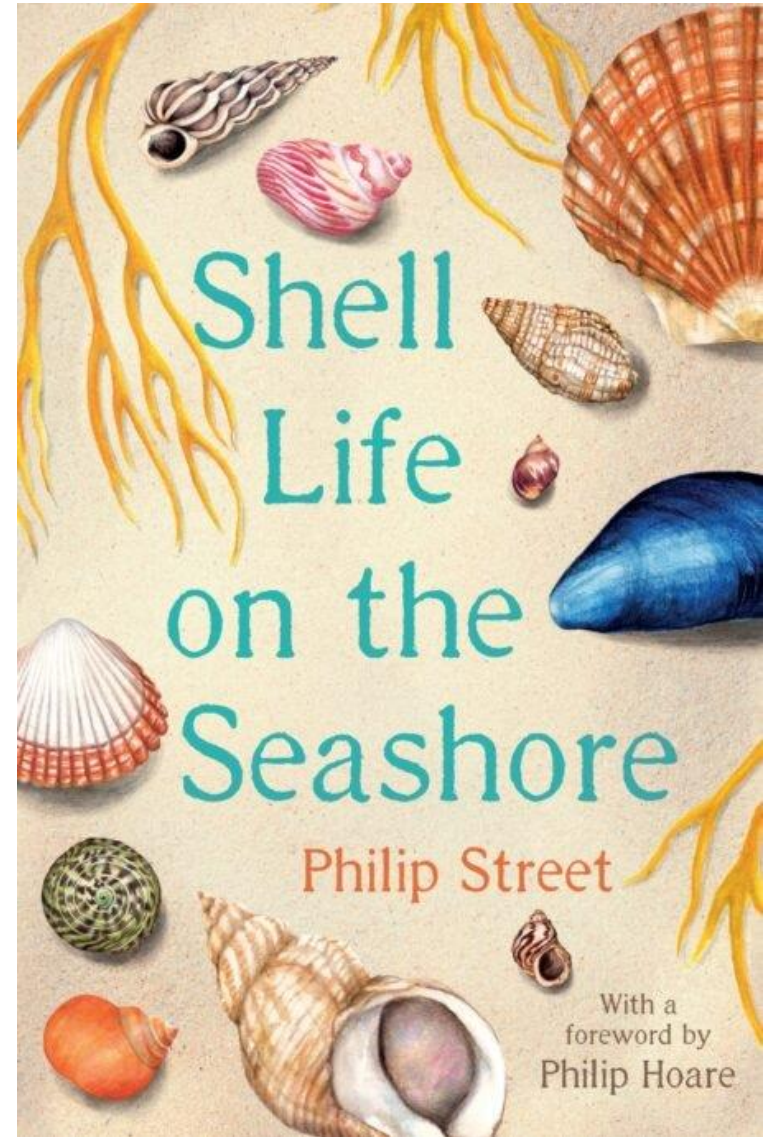
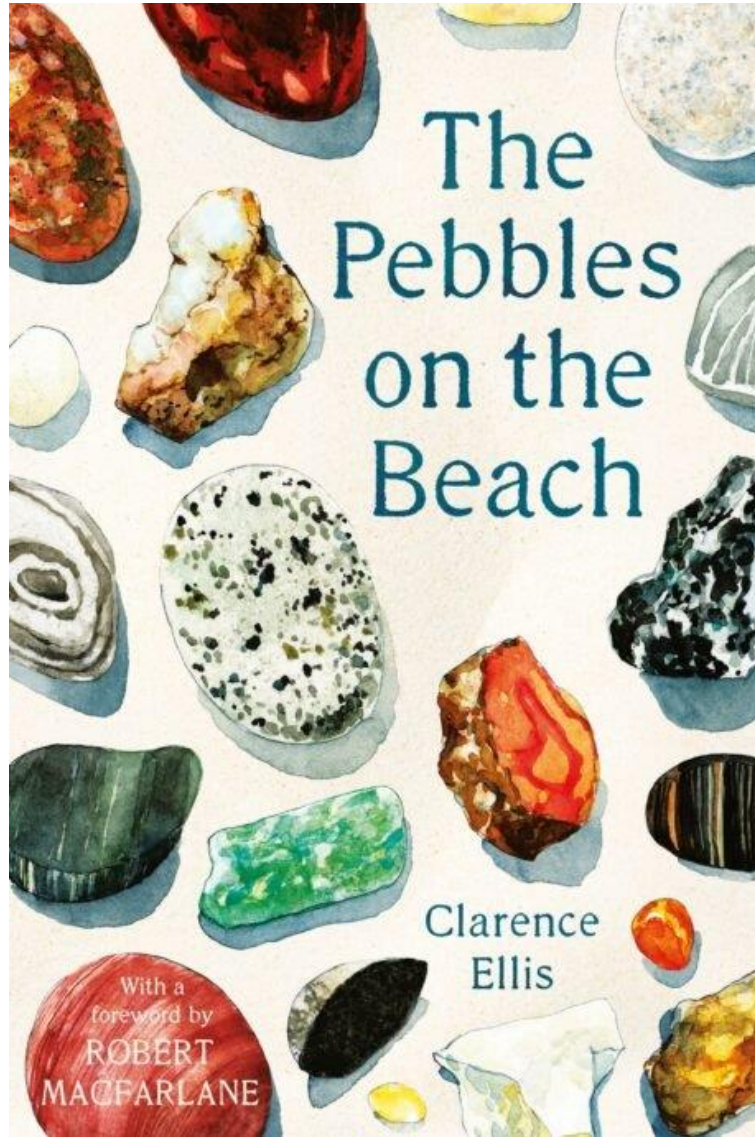
(geological strata, ice cores, tree rings) as “basic degree of narrativity” (191)







Faber & Faber non-fiction list





## To conclude

An ethical questioning of asymmetrical relations

Forms of openness

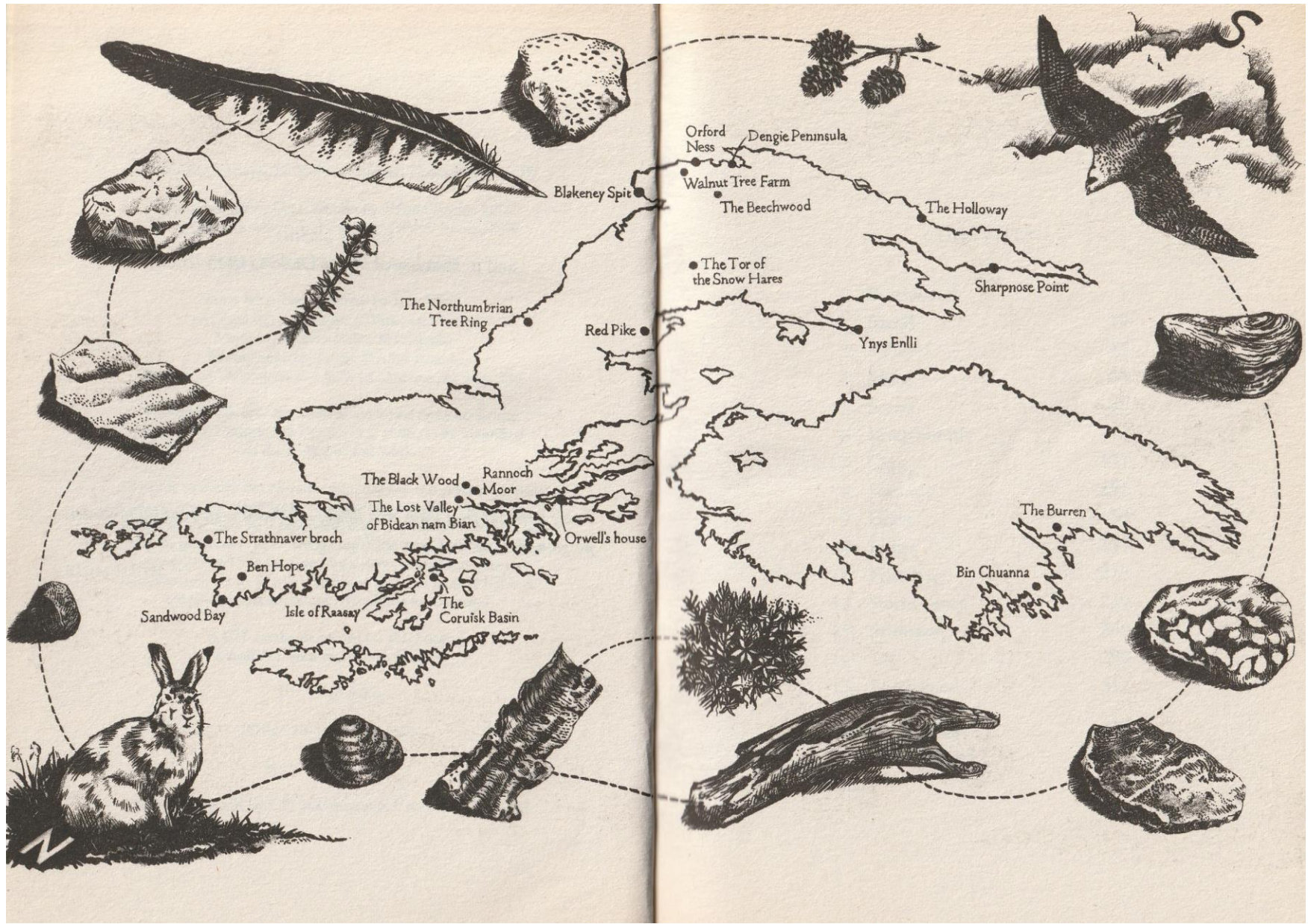
“a negative ecopoetics, which in some measure protects the otherness of the earth from disappearing into a humanly constructed world of words” (Rigby 119)

limitation

openness

relationality

*Thank you!*





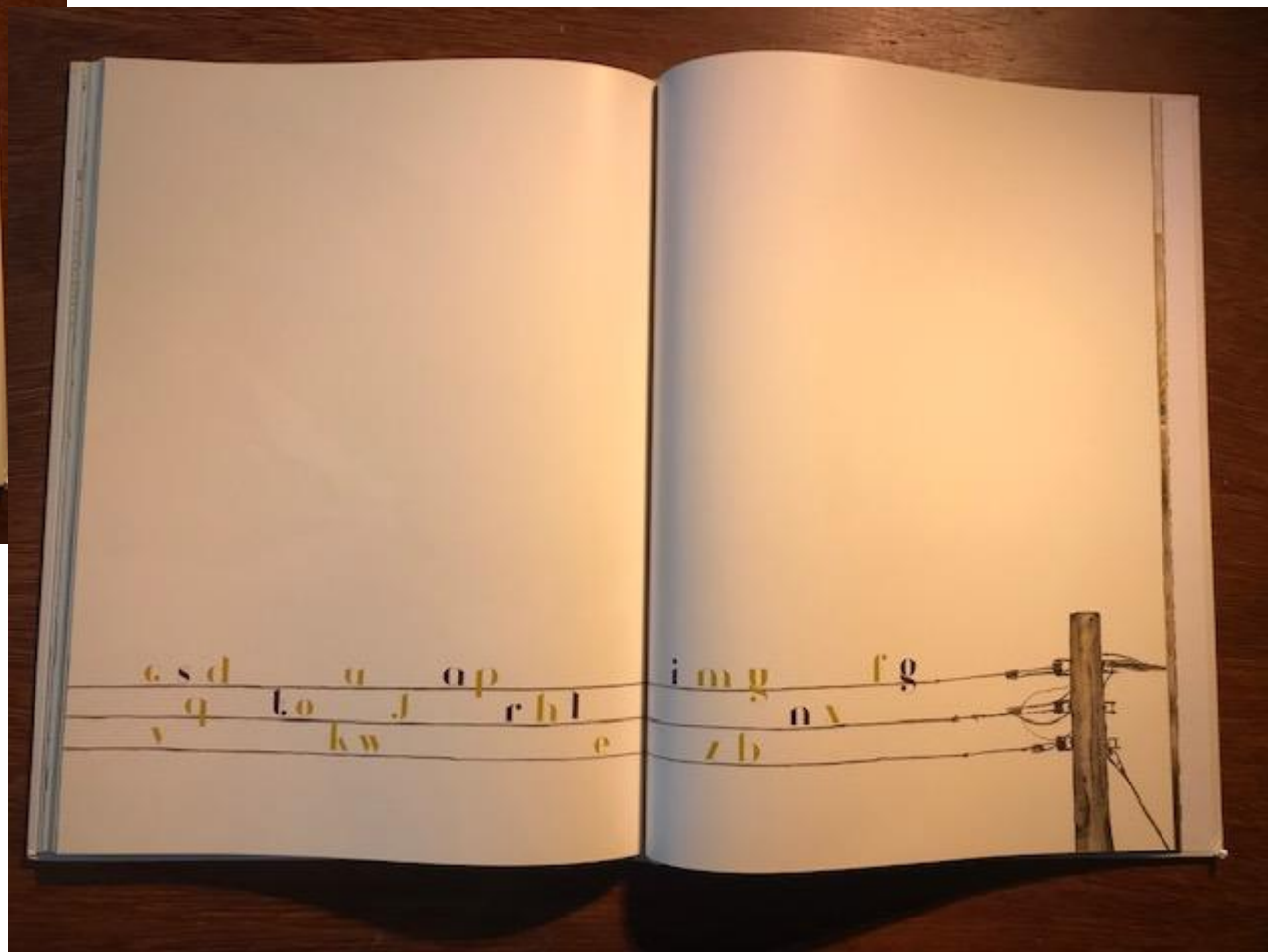
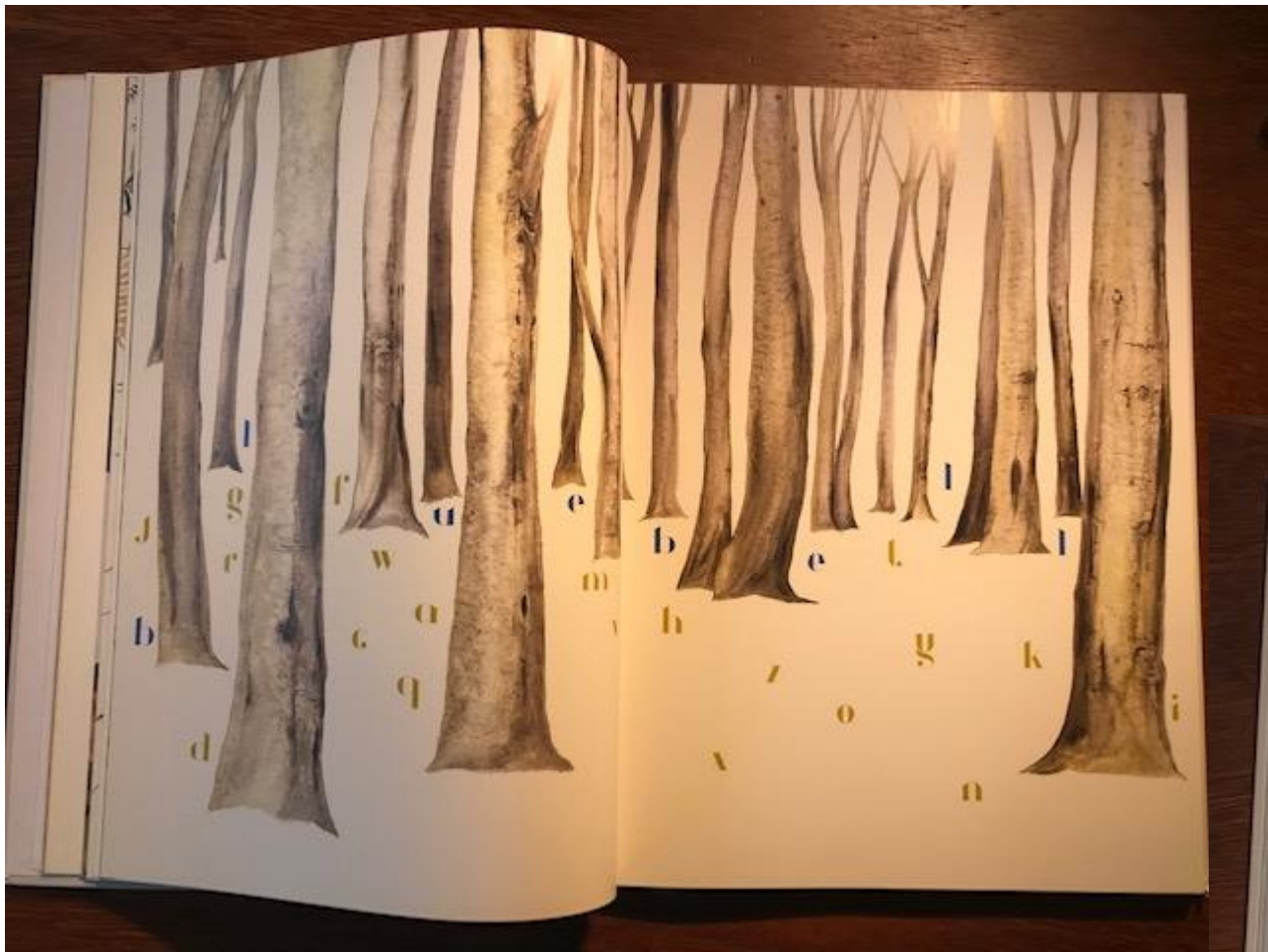
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nce upon a time, words began to vanish from the language of children. They disappeared so quietly that at first almost no one noticed – fading away like water on stone. The words were those that children used to name the natural world around them: acorn, adder, bluebell, bramble, conker – gold! Fern, heather, kingfisher, otter, raven, willow, wren... all of them gone! The words were becoming lost, no longer vivid in children's voices, no longer alive in their stories.

You hold in your hands a spellbook for conjuring back these lost words. To read it you will need to seek, find and speak. It deals in things that are missing and things that are hidden, in absences and in appearances. It is told in gold – the gold of the goldfinches that fly through its pages in charms – and it holds not poems but spells of many kinds that might just, by the old, strong magic of being spoken aloud, unfold dreams and songs, and summon lost words back into the mouth and the mind's eye.







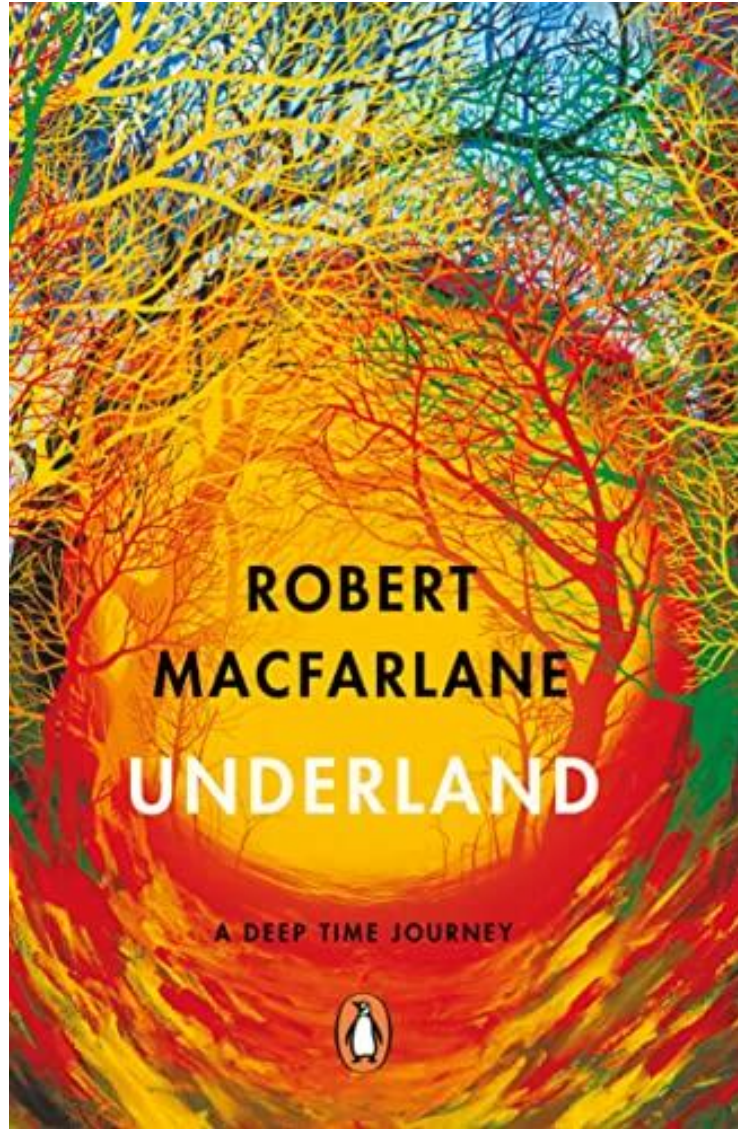
Robert Macfarlane is a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and the author of a number of bestselling and prize-winning books, including *The Wild Places*, *The Old Ways*, *Holloway* and *Landmarks*. His work has been translated into many languages and widely adapted for film, television and radio. The American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded him the E. M. Forster Award for Literature 2017. He is a word-collector and mountain-climber – and he has three young children, who have taught him more about the world than any book.



Jackie Morris grew up in the Vale of Evesham and studied at Hereford College of Arts and at Bath Academy. She has illustrated for the *New Statesman*, *Independent* and *Guardian*, collaborated with Ted Hughes, and has written and illustrated over forty books, including beloved classics such as *The Snow Leopard*, *The Ice Bear*, *Song of the Golden Horse*, *Tell Me a Dragon*, *East of the Sun, West of the Moon* and *The Wild Swans*. Jackie Morris lives in a cottage on the cliffs of Pembrokeshire.

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**ROBERT  
MACFARLANE**

**UNDERLAND**

A DEEP TIME JOURNEY

