

Return to the Hundred Acre Wood: The Rewilding Movement and Robert Macfarlane's *The Lost Words* and *The Lost Spells*

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Do you hear these words I utter? I ask this - / Have you heartwood, cutter?

—Robert Macfarlane, *The Lost Spells*

Abstract: As contemporary nature writing entangles itself with decentralizing the human voice in literature, Robert Macfarlane's *The Lost Words* and *The Lost Spells* reintegrate nature's names into popular vocabulary enlivening readers' and writers' imaginative landscapes. From these "spell songs," literature decentralizes the reader and speaks to them at a deeply personal level. Beyond mere metaphor, these poems transform metrics into meditations for readers to reconsider their role within nature. These texts transform literature from a peripheral subject to the core of restructuring the anthropocentric world into one where nature and culture are interwoven.

Is there any more heartwood, reader? Robert Macfarlane's poetry collections, *The Lost Words* and *The Lost Spells*, emerge from the rewilding movement, which seeks to recentre nature in landscapes both literal and literary. Responding to nature's decentralization across culture, Macfarlane reintroduces nature to literature, which transforms the role of reading and writing as nature's poetry exceeds metre into metaphor that destabilizes anthropocentrism. Macfarlane's poems revitalize imaginations and hearts by restoring the language of nature to contemporary vocabularies—into readers' heartwoods, their cores—which empowers readers to defend nature's position in culture and in their own

lives. "Once upon a time, words began to vanish from the language of children" (*The Lost Words* 1), until writers began to imagine how nature's reintegration could terraform literary spaces. Drawn from contemporary nature writing, these texts emerge as tangible Neo-Romantic literary theory that, amidst increasing environmental degradation and technocentrism, is paramount to regrowing an imagination centred around nature. As the rewilding movement seeps into literature from travel logs to children's poetry, Macfarlane's spell books and poetry collections use metaphors turned morals to captivate young readers' minds, and transform individuals' imaginative landscapes.

The poems are "a book of spells to be spoken aloud" (*The Lost Spells* 3), which, accompanied by Jackie Morris's watercolour illustrations, come to life. *The Lost Words*, published in 2017, responds to the removal of 40 words from the *Oxford Children's Dictionary* including "acorn," "oak," "otter," and "starling" (Walsh). Digital words, like "voicemail," "database," and "broadband," replaced nature's language in a children's dictionary. After the removal of these words, Macfarlane reinstates them as poems in his collection, *The Lost Words*. As the cultural disconnection from nature grows, the forest risks imprisonment to park borders. Oaks, willows, and birches are transformed into mere trees, and slowly their names are forgotten. Macfarlane is one of many writers who works to restore nature's names in his writings to address the primary issue in nature's vocabulary eroding: if people cannot name the woods, how can they possibly save the woods? By speaking these spell songs aloud, readers become nature's protectors through knowledge conservation, which begins the internalized process of rewilding.

A Literary Rewilding

New to many vocabularies and even newer to literary analysis, rewilding literary theory recapitulates Romanticism's environmental anxieties in a contemporary context focused on reintroducing nature to physical and literary landscapes. Rewilding became a movement in 1980s North America,

and the movement caught fire in Europe since conservation efforts continued to fall short (Hawkins et al. 4). As environmental degradation worsens, the rewilding movement challenges mere conservation with radical ecosystem regrowth. In Yellowstone Park, conservationists reintroduced wolves, which ultimately terraformed the park's rivers by controlling the overrun of deer and thus restoring ecological balance (Hilty 153). Reintroducing the wolves was ecologically influential enough to completely transform Yellowstone, which writers like Macfarlane seek to mimic in the restoration of nature to literature. When "the *Oxford Children's Dictionary* notoriously dropped the words acorn and buttercup in favor of bandwidth and chatroom" (Kimmerer 216), the ensuing outrage prompted writers to restructure language. Rewilding literature evolves the theory from natural sciences' hypothesis into imaginations and vocabularies that impact the human condition through imaginative terraforming. Rather than reintroducing wolves, reintroducing language radically transforms the reader as nature takes over the centre of their imaginative landscapes, weaving nature and reader into one. Throughout literary philosophy, naming is a source of power and possession over a subject matter. The erosion of nature's names, like oak and acorn, in the dictionary not only removes this language from popular vocabulary but deems nature unworthy of being known. Rewilding revolves around this key question: how would imaginative landscapes transform if nature's names were reintroduced? In an answer to this question, Katie Holten theorizes nature's transformative presence in *The Language of Trees* through what she calls "a rewilding of literature and landscape" (1). Holten reconstructs a nature-centric literary canon from Ursula K. Le Guin to Robert Macfarlane and even to Plato. Unlike other canonical re-evaluations, Holten begins by rewriting the alphabet with trees, much like Macfarlane's own rewilded alphabet. Even the alphabet must change to recentre respect in nature's language.

In a rewilded literature, "essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain maturity" (Wordsworth 290), but these passions existed long before

this current context. Rewilding echoes the Wordsworthian "rural," or to the contemporary reader, nature as a Neo-Romantic movement that only gains relevancy. Like Macfarlane and Kimmerer's constructions, Wordsworth illustrates the relationship between nature and language that shapes how people's imaginations interact with environments. Literature and imagination reside at society's heart, but often it appears that "poetry and plays have no relation to practical politics" (Le Guin 206). They are reduced to mere arts, or as Le Guin calls them: operating instructions (206). In Le Guin's theory, "The Operating Instructions," Le Guin discusses how literature class, with language in tow, devolves into a functionalist activity (208) so that when one inevitably writes anything, it is more tolerable—perhaps even enjoyable—to the reader. The "unnecessary" words, like acorn, bluebell, and curlew, become empty terms in the operating instructions that are slowly glossed over until they are inevitably removed, as with the *Oxford Children's Dictionary*.

"Through story, every culture defines itself and teaches its children how to be people and members of their people" (Le Guin 207), which reemphasizes rewilding's essential role in cultivating language. Language reconfigures for each generation, but every time it reshapes, something is lost. The greatest choice that faces each generation is what is lost. In *The Lost Words* and *The Lost Spells*, Macfarlane, like Wordsworth, guards these words' positions for future generations' vocabularies. "Literature [becomes] the operating instructions" (Le Guin 210) and guardians of what words will be taught to the next generation. Imagination, like colours and sounds, is limited by the current knowledge that acts as a building block. Even the most creative child cannot imagine a new colour or a new sound. Similarly, if a child does not know an elm or a pine, the ability to imagine beyond the digital space becomes increasingly impossible.

Acorn, Bluebell, Curlews

Accompanied by illustrations, Macfarlane invites children

and adults alike to learn or relearn their ABCs and nature's names as they learn kindness, emotions, and poetics. These spell songs re-enchanted imaginations as the words seep into vocabularies and rekindle nature's names. *The Lost Spells* opens with an illustration of Red Fox's eyes. Red Fox is the first poetic character introduced and becomes the reader's guide to spell songs. Immediately, the reader makes eye contact with Red Fox, who beckons the reader into the rewilded world. Red Fox's eyes sharply swirl with green and yellow contrasted against the burnt orange of his fur, capturing eye contact with the prospective reader, setting them as equals and breaking the boundary between observer and observed. As the reader begins to learn nature's names again, Red Fox equalizes human and animal in one exchange. In the glossary's only note, Macfarlane urges readers to "take this book to wood and river, coast and forest, ark and garden; use it there to look, to name, to see" (*The Lost Spells*). These instructions illustrate the book's intentions and uses—its operating instructions—for readers to integrate their minds with nature's knowledge.

"A" is for acorn. *The Lost Words* begins with a seed in readers' minds. "Acorn" is the first poem in Macfarlane's first collection and sets the subsequent tone for reseeding readers' imaginations with nature. "Acorn" begins the rewilded alphabet that Macfarlane composes of lost words to recirculate nature's language. Alphabetical or metaphorical, "Acorn" beckons readers to imagine comparisons and patterns in the natural world. Awkward line breaks in the middle of sentences riddle the poem and disrupt any sense of pattern. If the poem is read aloud as intended, it quickly becomes clunky, causing readers to over-pronounce the first word in each stanza. This stumbling, along with highlighted letters, reveals "Acorn" to be an acrostic spelling out of "acorn" vertically. As the word "acorn" spells out, the stanzas grow longer from one line to three lines, each like the acorn sprouts. Within these lines, similes about growth illustrate what acorn does. "As flake is to blizzard" ("Acorn" line 1) evolves into "as, / kindness is to good, so acorn is to wood" ("Acorn" line 9) which moves the imagination from

the imaginary acorn to the literal good. The poem's comparative structure begins to teach that goodness grows from kindness like all things grow. "Poetry depends upon the meter" (Wordsworth 304), but in Macfarlane's work, poetry transforms metrical framework into moral framework through natural metaphors. The physical acorn becomes indistinguishable from the allegorical acorn which comes to symbolize the growth of goodness. Immediately, nature teaches readers lessons—something a resource could never do.

"B" is for bluebell. "Bluebell" follows the acrostic poem set in "Acorn," continuing Macfarlane's alphabet. In "Bluebell," colour theory lends to the poem's synesthesia, which envelops the reader in a comforting melancholy to teach a masked grief. Echoed by blue's persistent reappearance in the "blue hour," the "blue wood," and the "blue flower," "Bluebell" embodies poetic colour theory. "Bluebell" playfully mingles ocean and wood while endearing the reader as "my love" ("Bluebell" line 8) through blue's repetition and endearment. The poem's sweet lulls sweep the reader into its seemingly impossible wooded ocean leaving them adrift amongst the blue. In tension with the poem's tenderness, yellow dominates despite the poem's primary subject matter. The seemingly innocent bluebell drowns as yellow watercolour overtakes the somber poem's words. Contrasting illustration and poem, sorrow and forced joy meet in opposition, creating a synesthetic grief throughout the poem. The melancholic bluebell and joyful yellow explore raw emotions carried through the flowers' colourings. Instead of the reader projecting their emotions onto the poem, "Bluebell" decentralizes the reader by prioritizing the flowers' emotions, which transforms how readers position themselves within a poem. Here, the emotional exploration does not come from the poet, but from nature.

"C" is for curlew. Unlike many birds in literature whose songs are the poem's subject, the curlew is both poet and poem. Here, Macfarlane reduces himself to a mere scribe to celebrate the bird's poetry. The bird's cry echoes across "Curlew" situating the bird in the poet's role. Instead of the

poet, Curlew becomes the speaker in its poem. The first stanza's eerie sound reverberates with "curlew," "curved," "cry," "carries," "clear, and "corrie" mimicking a bird's call, and the "wild bell-ringer" ("Curlew" line 4) himself. Macfarlane attributes many musical names, such as "singer" and "bell-ringer," to the curlew and his "unearthly song" ("Curlew" line 3), reinforcing the curlew as the poem's voice. The poem rhymes when naming the curlew as an "eerie singer" and a "wild bell-ringer," creating a melody of rhyme across the metrical music. "The world is sudden with wonder again" ("Curlew" line 10) as the bird's cry reaches poetry's heights which strike the scribe with wonder. "Curlew" inverts the role of subject and poet, returning the poet to the reader's role as they become the listener, silent and observant, of the curlew's poetry. The curlew speaks and sings, not the human poet. From this inversion of the poet, nature becomes active in the creation of poetry rather than a mere subject. "Curlew" destabilizes how the reader and the writer conceive their roles in poetry as Macfarlane opens the possibility of nature being the poem's orchestrator.

The Rewilded Words

Through "Acorn," "Bluebell," and "Curlew," Macfarlane's poetry teaches lessons of growing, feeling, and listening by re-centralizing nature in writing. Instead of writing criticism, Macfarlane rewrites the ABCs, which creates new operating instructions in the most simplistic form: children's poetry. At the heartwood of these poems, Macfarlane speaks to the inner child's imagination that still traipses through the hundred acre wood and climbs the garden walls. "[Poetry] is as immortal as the heart of man" (Wordsworth 302) because it stirs hearts from imagination to action. Poetry becomes the heart of transformation that the rewilding movement wields in nature's reintegration to literature and culture. Through linguistic terraforming, literature begins dismantling culture's reduction of nature to a resource which depersonalized the wild (Kimmerer 216). Through Macfarlane's new imaginative operating instructions, readers

begin to transform their own imaginations, which begins stirring the roots of nature's literary revolution as Red Fox guides them down the forest path.

When poets reintegrate nature into their writing, nature's language infiltrates imaginations and vocabularies so that willows and oaks cannot be reduced to mere trees—or forgotten. Much like the oak tree, this imaginative resurgence starts with an acorn and microscopic language changes. Kimmerer explores language's transformative powers through "it." The word "'it' [is used] to distance ourselves, to set others outside our circle of moral consideration" (Kimmerer 214) but naming draws individuals into nature by restoring nature's autonomy. Naming is power; it structurally controls language. One poem cannot "suddenly change language, and with it, [a] worldview, but in fact English evolves over time" (Kimmerer 216). That evolution and this revolution begin with relearning nature's many names. As nature's names are restored, the readers' enriched vocabulary centres nature in language which frees nature from its confinement to peripheral words.

To the heartwood, cutter, is where resistance goes. Resistance cuts through stories and language into the world to change it, and Macfarlane offers a set of operating instructions for this rewilding resistance. Anyone can pick up a copy of *The Lost Words* or *The Lost Spells* and begin to feel the words change their understanding of landscapes and language. The reader echoes, "I am Red Fox" (*The Lost Spells* 6) as they make eye contact with the large watercolour fox on the first page, and the spells begin. From this first meeting, readers step into these poems where nature reigns over imaginations. Deeply personal to Macfarlane's own environmental advocacy, at the close of *The Lost Spells*, "Heartwood" affirms the reader's resistance as reader and poet echo, "I am a world, cutter, I am a maker of life" (*The Lost Spells*). In this closing poem, the speaker boldly affirms themselves and their resilience in environmental restoration and the power of naming. Macfarlane urges the reader to speak these spell songs and feel nature's words in their own voices. By speaking the words, the reader personalizes

nature's names and begins integrating this language into their own imaginations.

Macfarlane leaves readers to wrestle with one last question: "Have you heartwood, cutter? Have those who sent you?" (*The Lost Spells*). The foundation of Macfarlane's ABCs guards and restores nature's names to the next generations. Like setting wolves loose in their natural habitat, nature's language reshapes imaginations and worldviews through reintroducing nature into readers' vocabularies. *The Lost Words* and *The Lost Spells* not only remind readers of nature's names, but also remind readers that their own language shapes the literary and cultural landscapes. Beyond metre and metaphors, Macfarlane's deceptively simple poetry urges the reader to act outside the literary landscape. Readers must speak these spell songs because only people with knowledge of this language can transform their imaginative landscapes that shape authoritative texts like dictionaries. Teachers and readers must meet Red Fox and speak spell songs over acorns, bluebells, and curlews. Restoring nature's names to the dictionary is not sufficient. Instead, readers must restore nature's language to their own languages. Nature's names must be carved into literature's roots because to save the woods, one must first name the woods.

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