Annmaria Weldon *The Lake’s Apprentice, Crawley, Western Australia, UWA Publishing, 2014; pp. 260; RRP AU $29.99 paperback*

I have lived in Perth my whole life. This does not make my opinion more authoritative on the subject of the ecosystems of the South-West region of Western Australia, but it does shape my approach to writing a review of a book on an area so familiar to me. I, like so many other readers, are probably more likely to bypass Yalgorup (a national park in the Peel-Harvey catchment area) on our way to consume the products of Margaret River, sitting in our cars that careen down the highway past the cellular sprawl of Mandurah. The delights of wine and olive-oil soap at the other end hold our attention and make us ignorant of the ecological diversity that lies on the other side of the unassuming scrub, arguably of more generational value than any good bottle of red, and given the steady expansion of suburbia, our gastronomic consumption is a habit that we carry on through the landscape.

As a resident of Perth, Yalgorup is both familiar to and estranged from me. I did not know the ecological marvel of Yalgorup existed and we cannot appreciate Yalgorup without knowing its ecological diversity. If we remain ignorant we run the risk of losing it before we even knew it was there, leaving it to the curiosity of children who climb on top of fences and look at it from a distance, until it is settled by a playground and a bike path. In reviewing *The Lake’s Apprentice* by Annmaria Weldon, I am torn between recommending it to readers because it will inform you of the biological, historical and cultural narrative of Yalgorup in an accessible form, and reviewing its literary style that, at times, detracts from the nature writing.

The Lake’s Apprentice is situated within the eco-memoir genre: a mixture of nature writing in the form of essays, biographical sketches, poetry and photography. It shares its form with Germaine Greer’s own eco-memoir that came out this year, *White Beech*, however, *The Lake’s Apprentice* is more adventurous in its style, combining text and photography, prose and poetry, memoir and the natural subject.

The nature writing paired with biographical sketches are the most enjoyable and well-written and are integrated seamlessly. The chapters “A Delicate Seam- a memoir of love, loss and nature-writing,” and “The Song of the Long-Necked Turtle” are the thromobolites of the eco-memoir: “microbialites responsible for raising Earth’s early atmospheric oxygen levels through their photosynthetic processes, thus enabling other life forms to exist.” (Weldon, 6) Without these two equally biological/biographical essays, the book would not breathe. In these two essays, Weldon’s prose aptly contrasts starkly scientific and poetic language to construct a narrative of Lake Clifton. The transition
between the eco and the ego of the nature writing positions Weldon’s subjectivity clearly within the subject, the landscape. However Weldon integrates herself textually within the landscape, her photography very rarely includes herself interacting with the ecosystem, apart from photographs of herself taking photographs of the subject. The inclusion of photography jars against the subtle poetics of the text, detracting from rather than adding to the text as a whole.

The visual composition of the book was a distraction from the prose. The brightly coloured pages and drawings at the beginning of each chapter and section were nice to look at but at times, felt extraneous. These elements of the hybrid genre of the eco-memoir are deleterious to the strength of the essays, which should be the focus of the piece. Whereas the mix of nature-writing, poetry and memoir work well, the photography and drawings lack integration and cohesivity with the text. For example, marginalia can be an interesting and informative addition to the text, however, here it is a distraction from the strong prose of the essays. The list of names of native animals and plants, streaming together in English, Latin and Noongar, at the bottom of the page, and often below photographs, would have been better integrated into the prose through a poetic device, weaving these genres together fluidly, rather than in a fragmented fashion, which only tenuously includes the importance of language, and the conflicts and power of naming, which are briefly addressed in each essay.

The Lake’s Apprentice is not just a coffee table book. It is a conversation piece, and it is accessible, but it requires more than a momentary glance - more than bypassing Yalgorup on the highway.

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