

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

How to Cite: Ricard, M. (2021) Book Review: Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington (eds.), *Beasts of the Forest: Denizens of the Dark Woods*. *Gothic Nature*. 2, pp. 221-223. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: March 2021

Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a fully anonymised process.

Copyright:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access: *Gothic Nature* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington (eds.),
Beasts of the Forest: Denizens of the Dark Woods
(East Barnet: John Libbey Ltd, 2019)

Marc Ricard

Running the gamut from Jan Brueghel the Elder's *Belebte Waldstraße* (1605) to *American Horror Story* (2011-present), *Beasts of the Forest* (2019) takes in the full range of “threatening” forest apparitions’ that haunt our popular media (p. 2). As outlined in Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington’s introduction, the collection aims to reassess the state of the wildwood as a site of monstrosity, danger and horror—questioning how and why forests and the creatures that dwell within them continue to be used to instil fear, when they are ‘essentially one of the most threatened ecological contexts in the 21st century’ (p. 2). The aforementioned breadth of source material does not prevent the collection from building concise and coherent thematic points, such as the attribution of forests as primordial spaces, or the forest as a site for rebellion or anarchy. And while representing distinct disciplines and subjects, the essays fit together in a pleasantly harmonious manner, combining to build an eclectic and wide-ranging survey of how the forest has and continues to be re-imagined as a place of peril for humans.

The nine essays are divided into three groups of three, the first of which, ‘Ferocious Forests’, focuses especially on the ‘forest as context and subject’ and sets the scene for the collection as a whole (p. 3). The section begins with Richard Mills’ dissection of both cult and occult forest iconography in Wolf People’s *Night Witch* video, which suggests the homages to past forest horror films be read as a forewarning of the kind of environmental catastrophe that awaits in a near future. This anticipatory ecological message is evoked once more in the following essay by Elizabeth Parker, exploring the persistence of ecoGothic and ecophobic conventions that lie at the heart of western modernity’s depictions of forests. Drawing attention to the often overlooked arboreal elements from otherwise renowned works of television and film (*Stranger Things*, *Twin Peaks* and VonTrier’s *Antichrist*, to name a few), Parker further develops the contention first highlighted in the collection’s introduction that we use ‘fiction to immerse ourselves in forests of the mind as we lose forests of the land’ (p. 33). The section is rounded off with András Fodor’s

examination of the first of Brian Catling's *Vorrh Trilogy*, appropriating a theological lens to unpick the monstrous and sacred forces that paradoxically coexist in the anomalous space of the woods.

The propensity for forests to imaginatively sustain contested, anomalous, or even impossible forms is developed further in the following triad of chapters titled 'Denizens of the Woods'. Alexander Sergeant's foray into 'The "Good" and "Bad" Forests of Modern Fantasy Cinema' confronts head-on the Janus-faced image of the forest in contemporary fantasy by way of Melanie Klein's object relations theory. Sergeant's conclusion that 'fantasy forests' represent sites of 'psychic [...] emotional and pre-logical attachments' resonates with the queer utopian view of the woods in the preceding essay, 'Cruising the Queer Forest With Alain Guiraudie' by Benjamin Dalton (p. 105). In the films by the acclaimed French director and novelist, the wild green spaces of the forest provide a fertile landscape in which queer connections can be forged away from the scrutiny of modern built environments. In Dalton's reading of the forest space, the animated, living environment of trees and plants combines with the ambiguous forms of attachment and desire that typify the queer sexual politics of cruising to express 'biology's own plea for metamorphosis and mutation' (p. 89). By highlighting this shared impulse of wild ecologies and queer sensibilities to drift away from contained homogenous monocultures towards expanding degrees of plurality, variety and possibility, the essay makes legible the forms of resistance that can take place at the fringes of landscapes and human sexuality.

The final section is devoted to the subject of forests in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. Encompassing *The Lord of the Rings* as well as Tolkien's work on myth and legend, the three essays put forward a case for the centrality of trees to the lore that underscores Tolkien's literary imagination. Opening the section, Brad Eden offers 'a quick overview of the importance of trees, forests, and woods in both ancient and medieval societies' (p. 117) by contrasting the reverence, even worship, of trees by Anglo-Saxon and Germanic medieval cultures with the tales of Tolkien—particularly through his evocation of Mirkwood, or 'Myrkviðr' in Old Norse (p. 113). In Leticia Cortina Aracil's chapter, we are treated to a whistle-stop tour of the forests of Middle Earth. She offers each woodland as a case study and provides a list of eleven key features of forests in *The Lord of the Rings*, ultimately emphasising the forest space as one that discloses 'something else that is not seen' (p. 131). This threatening element of the unknown carries perfectly to the

final essay of the collection, Damian O’Byrne’s ‘Fiendish Forests of Middle-earth: Tolkien’s Trees as Ominous Adversaries’. The sentient trees and Ents of *LOTR* are well known, and the especial focus on some of the more marginal examples from the series, particularly Old Man Willow, is timely and much appreciated. The closing anecdote of the real-life violence of the crumbling of Tolkien’s Tree in the Oxford University Botanical Garden (pp. 144-146) is especially effective at reconnecting readers with the very real and imminent ecological threat outlined in the collection’s introduction.

As suggested by the title, *Beasts of the Forest: Denizens of the Dark Woods* would be of use to any readers with an interest in the intersection of literary studies and green environments. The prominence of contemporary and popular media makes it especially suited to scholars of works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The mediums of television, film and even music are well represented here. With the exception of the contribution from *Gothic Nature*’s own Elizabeth Parker, there is scant direct allusion to the ecoGothic in the collected essays; however, a poisoned rose by any other name is still as deadly, and with its multi-faceted and wide-ranging studies of how forest spaces threaten, disorientate and avenge themselves on modern readers, there is plenty here for scholars of the ecoGothic to sink their teeth (or roots) into.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hackett, J. and Harrington, S. (eds.) (2019) *Beasts of the Forest: Denizens of the Dark Woods*. East Barnet, John Libbey Ltd.