

## Meeting 13 of the Empathy and Writing Group, Corsham, 23 May 2018

**Empathy and the Living World: how do we develop empathy with the non-human world? How do we write about it without preaching?**

11.00 Coffee and tea, introductions

**International Empathy Group News:** it's exciting to learn that Empathy Group member, novelist and lecturer Kylie Fitzpatrick, currently away at Canberra University in Australia, is co-organising with Professor Jen Webb a day-long Empathy and Creativity Seminar in Canberra, flyer attached, on June 15.

11.20 **Professor Owain Jones** of Environmental Humanities on 'Empathy and Water'

Owain Jones says that when he was appointed to Bath Spa in 2014, he was the first Professor of Environmental Humanities in the UK. He has a wide range of interdisciplinary research interests in the borderlands between nature and society, centred on cultural geography. He is Principle Investigator on a £1.5 million AHRC Connected Communities Large Grant whose theme is sustainability, investigating how citizens and communities might connect with water and with each other. Owain's last presentation described how he very delicately and patiently saved a bee that was dying of thirst on a hot station platform.

Owain's talk addressed the topic of empathy and water from multiple perspectives. Embracing them all was his insight that all living beings are linked by, and principally composed of, water. Carbon life cannot exist without it. He talked poetically about water flowing quickly through every cell in our bodies and the bodies of others, travelling upstream and downstream, flowing into and out of the oceans and connecting us all. This at once brings us closer to other living organisms and sets us in competition with each other, since water is a scarce resource that with global warming is likely to become closer. Owain ranged across possible negative future outcomes – rising sea-levels destroying coastal settlements including many of the world's major cities, water wars, an increase in the gap between haves and have-nots as valuable resources like water are increasingly monopolised by the richer and more powerful through privatisation, extinctions. But he also talked about the role of empathy in avoiding these outcomes through political action based upon citizen responsibility, 'Hydrocitizenship', an empathic realisation of others' needs (where 'others' does not only mean human others but recognises the interconnected web of life), empathy to landscape and to water. If freedom from thirst is a basic right, should we be able to empathise with a thirsty tree cell as well as a thirsty human cell? He referenced James Lovelock's Gaia theory about the oneness of all living systems on this planet. Water's nature must be understood: that it wants to fall, that it can be seen as alive, that it is rare and remarkable, heavy and difficult to transport in a low tech world, and must be valued and not wasted. The seas are suffering human-generated crises of plastic pollution and overfishing, which we now have to face up to urgently. More and more, water will be seen as an essential actor on the planet. He told us how in 2017 the Whanganui River was granted "personhood rights" by the New Zealand government. The ease with which we access water in the rich world should not blind us to all its unique qualities, which his talk had ranged brilliantly across.

11.35 **Lesley Richardson** is a writer of speculative fiction, a recent BSU MA student in Creative Writing who hopes to do a PhD in Cr Writing. She has been a journalist, political campaign copywriter and press officer.

Lesley talked about how you can use story to motivate people to act. In her life in politics she knew about campaign messaging, but when she covered a story about sea-horses and sea-grass as a journalist, she realised she could use storytelling as a campaign tool. In the fiction she wants to write she has been inspired by her sense of mourning for the loss of beautiful areas of countryside, or for birds choked with plastic. This can bring depression, but she cited Timothy Morton's book *'Dark ecology: for a logic of future coexistence'* to suggest that these negative emotions can be transformed into productive action. She talked about using the future as a metaphor for the present and trying to change people's minds by involving them, as readers, with her invented characters' predicaments. Can you use the point of view of an ant, she wonders? Shifting point of view increases empathy. She does believe you can use fiction to change minds: a great story like Noah's Flood has endured and offered a parable to generations of human beings. Why shouldn't a story create a social movement?

11.45 **Amanda Read** is a former Bath Spa MA student with a distinction in Creative Writing, but she's also a plant scientist who holds a Royal Horticultural Society Fellowship for Horticultural Taxonomy, studying plant diversity at the University of Reading, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and the Natural History Museum. She works as a programme manager of agricultural research for international development. She says her 'mission' in writing fiction is to enhance the perception of plants so that humans are inspired to act more sensitively towards them.

Amanda's talk was a point by point critical analysis of how literary works can relate to, and potentially have a positive effect on, the ecosphere. She tabulated the factors in fictional writing that might both involve readers directly in the novel and also motivate them to act differently – more sensitively and empathically – in the real world outside the novel. These included the role of embodied writing – writing where the reader's emotional and sensory capacities are fully engaged by the writer's use of vivid description – and at a pre-writing stage, careful exploration/observation/research by the writer of the world in which they hope to involve the reader, thus in a sense 'making the world new' by presenting it afresh in a new narrative context and a new, compelling story.

12.00 **Maggie Gee** has chaired the Empathy Group since it began in early 2015. She has written 14 books which include several novels about the relations between human beings and the non-human living world, like *Grace*, *The Ice People*, *Where are the Snows* and *The Flood*(2004). Some have been direct attempts to engage the reader on specific, and current, real-life ecological-political issues, others are more playful or mythical, and she is always pulled between the two approaches.

Maggie's paper, called 'Let it be light', suggested that empathy with the reader and with even the most disreputable parts of the writer's own self, as well as empathy with nature, may be a path towards lightness when trying to write about weighty

themes, and that lightness may be the best way to woo the reader to dance to the writer's tune. There are two approaches when trying to change readers' attitudes towards the non-human world – novels which are clearly urgent calls to action, and novels which work by showing the world as it is and raising implicit questions in the reader's mind. Which approach works best? Both, and neither, she thinks. It is difficult to predict the effect your work will have in the world, both in the short and longer term. Why are apocalyptic films and novels popular? Because they allow us to experience the terrors and disasters that have regularly come upon human beings through our evolutionary history, but in the safe space of the cinema or the room where the man or woman is reading. Maggie favours happy endings for some of her books...*[and this is where, after a reading from novel *The Flood*, she had to stop her paper for shortage of time, leaving many thinking she was advocating quietism – but let's cheat and skip on to the end of the actual paper she wrote.]* ...Maggie favours happy endings because she knows there are nightmare visions in the course of her pages, but hopes to leave the reader in a calm, contemplative state in which, later, the truths the novel is trying to tell may re-emerge and be deeply thought about – whereas in real life, terror and disasters sometimes inspire only panicky short-term actions or else 'I'm going to forget about this because it's too horrible to contemplate.' The paper ended by suggesting some tools for ecologically-aware writers: asking questions, rather than making statements, though sneaking information in is always good: using satire; making the reader grieve; showing threatened beauty; inspiring love and compassion. Empathy with the reader, to Maggie, means not browbeating them – they will only resist. Empathy with the writer's own desire to have fun and freedom and be entertained will remind us to entertain and surprise the reader even as we try to find new ways to deliver urgent messages – such as 'First do no harm', 'Try to feel with others who are not like you', 'Look outside what you think you know', 'Be warned'.

12.20-1.00 approx, **Q and A and discussion.**

This was a lively, interesting and often controversial discussion about the moral imperative on writers in the climate change era to write books that address the urgency of the need for human change. Some people questioned whether books ever changed minds; others asserted that they had been changed by reading books. Owain said creative writers should try harder! And so we should. Maggie, attending her last meeting as Chair, tried to dig herself out of the 'happy ending' hole without success. But a terrific discussion was had by all - thank you for coming.

1.00-2.00 pm, **lunch and more discussion.**