

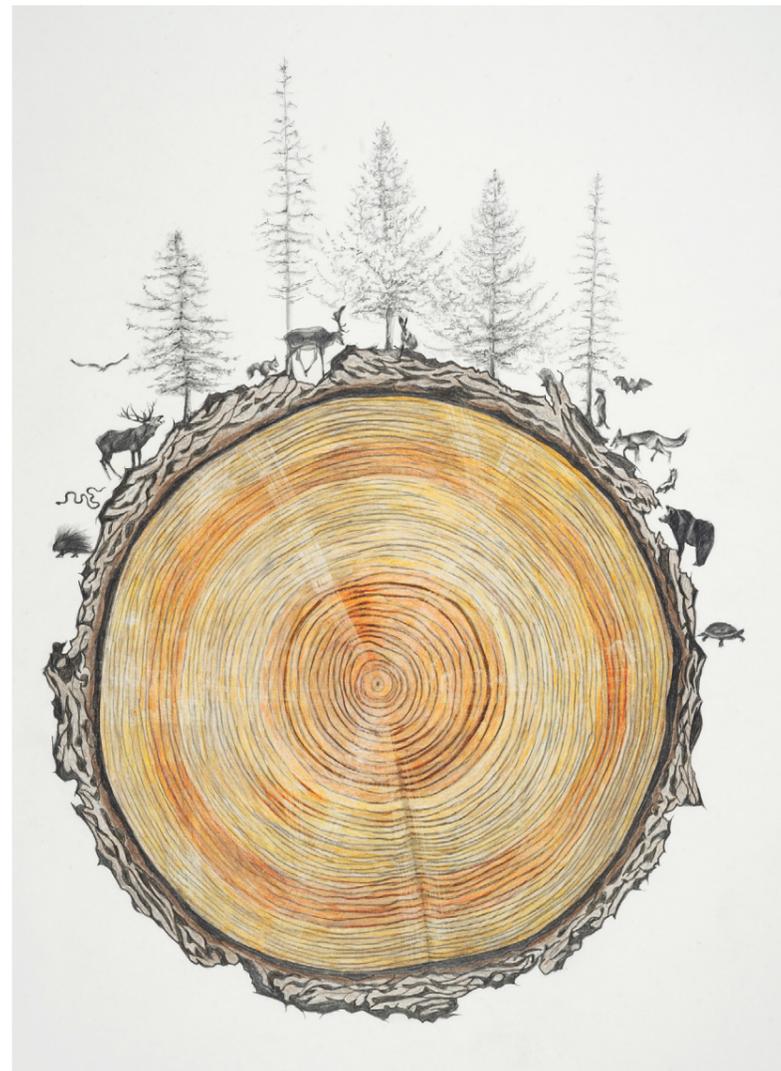
Celebrating a great American tradition

Peter Reason reviews a collection of writing by and about Joanna Macy

A Wild Love for the World: Joanna Macy and the Work of Our Time
Stephanie Kaza (ed.)
Shambhala, 2020
ISBN: 9781611807950

I want to start this review by honouring Joanna Macy and Fran, her husband, her collaborator for three decades. In these days when many of us watch with horror the political, social and environmental events unfolding in the United States, it is easy to forget the gifts that its citizens have brought to the world: a fierce insistence that a better world is possible, a startling creativity, and relentless work towards that world. This America draws on the European liberal tradition but also reaches out to the wisdom of Asia and Africa, of Indigenous people. It links scholarship with political activism. Macy is an exemplar of that great American tradition, and indeed reaches beyond it to exemplify what Abraham Maslow called the “farther reaches” of human possibility.

“Do we need another book about Joanna Macy’s work?” I asked myself when the review copy arrived. Macy herself asks this question, as Stephanie Kaza tells us in her editor’s preface: what could one more book add to the creative contributions of a lifetime? The answer to my question must be a resounding “Yes!” *A Wild Love for the World* both maps the scope of Macy’s contribution and develops it. It includes writing by 42 people from around the world who have been influenced by Joanna and involved in the Work. There are names that will be familiar to *Resurgence & Ecologist* readers – David Abram, Matthew Fox, Anita Barrows, Pat Fleming among them – and others less well known who have taken the work forward in Russia and Belarus, Sri Lanka and Colombia, Australia and



Family Tree, 2014 by Rebecca Clark
Graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 30 x 22" www.rebeccaclarkart.com

Japan as well as western Europe and North America.

The book is divided into four sections, which represent the scope of Macy’s contribution. As Kaza says in her introduction, it is the big ideas that are central to Macy’s work: a planetary sense of self, the power of grief work, dependent causality, deep time, and taking up the work together. Kaza reminds us that Macy is a serious scholar, a gifted and deep thinker. We know that throughout her life Macy has been an activist and an educator as well. Yet there is something more: many of the contributors to this book tell of meeting her, the impact of participating in her workshops, the way her influence grew in their lives, her contribution to activism in their countries. What shines through in these accounts is people’s experience of her capacity for kindness and love – for other humans and for the Earth. As she herself tells of exclaiming to Fran in the 1980s, “Nothing in my life has prepared me for what I experience now: the sheer size of the human heart – it’s so big I could walk into it.” She could be speaking of her own heart.

Interwoven with these narratives of Macy’s influence

are pieces that take aspects of the work forward, drawing on the three streams of thought that so influenced her: the Buddha Dharma, systems thinking, and deep ecology. In my own reading, I picked out the contributions that articulated *pratityasamutpada*, mutual causality, independent arising; and those that developed ideas of deep time. But maybe most touching are those glimpses we catch of Macy the person – in Catherine Johnson’s portrayal of her as house guest, in Anita Barrows’ account of working together to translate Rilke, in Dahr Jamail telling how she witnessed the

grief he carried from experiences in war-torn Iraq over a cup of tea.

Despite my wondering whether another book was needed, as I reach the end of this review I find myself full of enthusiasm. This is a big book with nearly 400 pages (and the bonus of a comprehensive bibliography). Different chapters will appeal to different readers, but overall this has so much to offer. R

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Guiding spirit

Gerald Taylor Aiken enjoys an exploration of ‘self’ amid ecological crises

Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being
Alastair McIntosh

Birlinn, 2020
ISBN: 9781780276397

The manner of young reviewers everywhere is to tick off a new book for not drawing on the latest scholarship. I was wary of this coming to Alastair McIntosh’s treading into my field of the social impacts following the IPCC predictions. Well, this book is steeped in the scholarship – if anything the first three chapters would be dry and technical if McIntosh weren’t a good writer regularly interspersing the data with anecdotes. But McIntosh is at his best, not as a populariser of science, or summing up policy briefs on how we can keep to 1.5°C warming, but on the intangibles.

McIntosh’s other books include explorations of the psychology, spirituality and hidden histories and ecologies underpinning living well – together. *Riders on the Storm* is structured around a pivot, the first half recapitulating the latest science around climate change – basically a précis of the latest IPCC reports. The second half delves deeper and curates an array of insights, quotes and vignettes about why any supposedly external crisis – in this case ecological – says as much about internal workings within us as it does about ‘out there’ facts and figures.

The heart of this book lies in this structure. No matter how exhaustively you cover the ground of the ‘science’; no matter how clearly, coherently and concisely you explain the ‘facts’; no matter how fairly and even-handedly you weigh the evidence and the special interests – ExxonMobil executives, anyone? – this will never be enough. This book is factual, clear and fair, but there remains something other, something numinous, something that words cannot quite capture, that lies at the heart of our relationship to the world. Into

this space step the explanations McIntosh offers: psychology, spirituality, mystery. It is not only the world–self relation that he brings to bear. More precisely, it is the relationship itself: including self–other, and even self–self.

The book’s title phrase ‘survival of being’ comes from the philosopher Raimon Panikkar, and refers to the ‘foundation of all things’. It is this expansive, larger framing that McIntosh seeks for the book. He reaches for the latest science, and explains the high-level IPCC reports in a down-to-earth manner. Yet McIntosh looks higher still – or should that be deeper? Ultimately he seeks to place climate science within a more spiritual understanding of what it is to be human: to act as an ecological agent. Not as a god, commanding and reordering the world around us, but by taking a human place within an ecology of life. For the human to be ecological is thus at once a humble, de-centring process, but it is also one that takes our responsibilities seriously – not shying away from the ability, and even necessity, for stewardship. We don’t have to delve too deep to see traces of McIntosh’s Quakerism and the metaphors he playfully pinches from a whole gamut of religious traditions. We have a hand on the tiller, and we ought to grasp it carefully and firmly, not limply or recklessly.

McIntosh’s psychological insights include individual denial of how people can do atrocious things and still think themselves decent people. On a larger scale, what explains humanity’s willingness to burn huge amounts of fossil fuels when humanity is aware that burning fossil fuels causes climate change? This seems to be where the next stage of ecological consciousness-raising should direct its attention. The age of climate denialism is over: we are now in an era of displacement, dissociation and projection. This book is a great guide. R

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