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Prudence Gibson. *The Plant Thieves: Secrets of the Herbarium*

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It's clear that the existing hierarchy, where humans look down on plants, is no longer tenable. Plants support us and we need to support them. *The Plant Thieves* reveals and interrogates these structures, starting at the source of institutional power, inside the vaults of the institution. This book brings us back to the reality of our entangled relationships with plants. It introduces the reader to Critical Plant Studies using everyday language and accessible narratives.

The Plant Thieves takes us inside the archives of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Sydney. An Australian institution established in 1816 by Governor Lachlan Macquarie, it contains specimens collected at the time when white colonial contact was first made with these indigenous lands and peoples. The collection includes samples collected by botanist Joseph Banks in his 1770 expedition. This is a significant botanical collection, one of the largest in Australia.

The book is punctuated by the appearance of the banksia, first introduced through the archived botanical sample collected by Banks, where the specimen gets its western scientific name; and then in one of its older Indigenous names *wiriyagen*, reiterated through the storey of the seed pod's use as a toy by Indigenous Gamileroi man Luke Patterson; and finally in the closing chapter by the author's personal reflection of the tree in an urban Sydney context. This multi-layered narrative is

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indicative of Prue Gibson's style, peeling away layers to uncover the secrets and stories surrounding flora specimens in the collection, as she decolonises the archive through the critical lens of post-colonial and multi-species perspectives. Put simply, Gibson's contribution to critical plant studies is enabling us to re-envision worlds of complexity where the simplistic hierarchical system, foundational to the colonial museum endeavour, is superseded by the richness and multiplicity of knowledge that flourishes in relational, ethical ecosystems.

Tristan Harwood describes 'landrelations'[1] rather than landscapes, as the latter encapsulates a hegemonic settler colonist world view. It is in the same vein that *The Plant Thieves* reinterprets a museum collection in line with contemporary awareness of multiplicate knowledge systems. It is a bold and ambitious project to challenge the authoritarian voice of the museum, meddling in the structural system that governs and supports civilisation. But what is civilised about humanity's disrespect for the natural world? Gibson is well-aware of the fragility of this façade. It is the contention between various stakeholders' understanding of what it means to decolonise plants that gives this project great strength. For the reader, it is as if the earth keeps moving under our feet in tectonic shifts; yet, all the while, we are engaged in short narrative stories of personal perspectives on its surface.

For the institutional forbear back in 'mother' England, the museum's task of decolonising plants was a matter of diversity and access. For critical plant theorists, decolonising plants involves contextualising knowledge within systems of white privilege and countering that hegemony with Indigenous expertise. For others, the primary focus of decolonising plants is about rights to custodianship of their cultural use and who, if anyone, can hold copyright. Prudence Gibson avoids the authoritarian voice of the author. Rather, all is revealed through the narrative voices of others as she tells their stories and her own encounters with plant companions and plant witnesses. The richness of this approach is in what is left unsaid in the fuzzy interstices between stories. The reader becomes aware that they too are a player in this narrative encounter. Left to consider their world view.

Trade in rare species, stollen samples, smuggled exotics, where does a museum collection sit ethically amidst this debate? Are the museums

1 Tristen Harwood, 'Along the road, sadlands', *Meanjin* **82** (3) (2023): 46–51

the plant thieves, or the plant saviours? As a public institution, the museum makes strategic choices about what information to share. For example, in the botanic gardens the location of rare species, or those whose properties are valued as hallucinogens, may be hidden from the public who, in this context, could become plant thieves. Indeed, a dark underworld of plant propagators exist in Sydney that chooses to remain invisible. Gibson seeks them out and discusses candidly their fascination with native hallucinogens.

The writing offers a plethora of perspectives. Although it would be easy to fall into the human-centric trap of anthropomorphism, and attribute human emotions to other-than-human entities, there are no illusions or utopian visions here. The task of imagining the future is for the reader, through thought-provocation, as they are immersed in rich narratives connected to natural specimens that serve to reveal the complexity of world views.

Whatever your perspective, there is a wealth of information available. Have you ever considered that plants have colonised us rather than the reverse? Did you know that the process of fire causing a seed release is called serotiny; or that the red flowering Kurrajong (flame tree) is deeply connected to earth and water cycles and a crucial part of the ecosystem for birds. Indigenous wisdom tells us this tree is women's business, possessing a sentient and intelligent character and feminine power.

If we acknowledge that collectivism moves us closer to community and country, cultures with strongly individualistic narratives such as the dominant white Western one, move us further away. *The Plant Thieves* brings us back in touch with the plant kingdom, revealing our deeply entwined ecologies and connection to country.

Patricia Flanagan is an artist, designer and academic who produces permanent and temporary artwork for exhibition and display at the nexus of art, science and technology. Her recent work investigates the Brigalow Belt South bioregion, the rich biodiverse vegetation corridor which once ran half the length of the east coast of Australia, where she traced remnant Brigalow and companion species across NSW. By visualising alternative critical and speculative futures for plant–human interaction Flanagan aims to develop the social imagination and 'plant seeds' for transition to biosphere regenerative practices. Tricia is the co-director, Creative Technology Research Lab, University of New South Wales, Australia.

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