

Reflections from the Spring 2011 Writers Residency
Andrews Forest Long Term Ecological Reflections Project

Submitted by

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Photos courtesy of Rafael Aguilar Chaves, unless otherwise indicated

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June 1, 2011

Saturday, May 14: A Week at Andrews Experimental Forest



Source: andrewsforest.oregonstate.edu

This is going to be a short post today; more than anything I want to set the stage for the coming week, which will be devoted by my residency at the [HW Andrews Experimental Forest](#) in Oregon. Andrews is located inside [Willamette National Forest](#). This will be my first time visiting the rain forests of the Pacific Northwest, and I am very excited. It's the perfect follow-up to the launch of EOLYN; to immerse myself in the type of ecosystem that so inspired this novel, and to reflect once again on the influence of the forest to on that very special magic we call

imagination.

Tomorrow, we fly to Portland, where I will do a book signing for EOLYN in the afternoon, starting at 5pm at [Powell's Books at Cedar Hills Crossing](#). On Monday, we'll drive up through Eugene to Andrews. Once we're settled at the experimental station, I will post daily reflections based on our experience there, cross-posting to [my livejournal blog](#) as well. I'm not really sure what will come of this week -- we'll see where the muse takes me -- but I'm expecting to gain some insights not only into the forest, but into my own process as a writer, and hopefully produce a few new stories as well.

Please join me for the adventure in Andrews Forest by visiting the blog whenever you have a chance. It's going to be a great week!

Tuesday, May 17: Born of Fire



We arrived yesterday evening at [Andrews Forest](#) Headquarters, tired but invigorated by the scenic drive from Portland to the Cascade Mountain Range. I didn't expect to have all that much to write yet, as we only had time for a brief tour of the station and its surroundings before darkness fell and the cold set in. But the forest has a way of speaking to you in your dreams, and by the time the sun illuminated the misty woods with a gray morning light, my head was turning with ideas and images.

During the coming days, I'm going to try to capture the mood of this forest in words; no small task as I will be with it only a short while, and already I can see that Andrews is varied and complex. Tim Fox, former writer-in-residence and long-time member of the Andrews Forest community, showed us around the 'reflection plots' yesterday. These are designated areas that writers must visit during their time here and investigate from a literary or creative perspective. The program began in 2003 and will run until 2203, for a total of two hundred years of collaborative investigations of the forest by writers from different genres. This effort runs in parallel with ongoing scientific research at the site, which is one of the most studied forests in the world.

The tracts of forest that we visited yesterday were dominated by Douglas fir and hemlock; each tree stretching in a single stunning pillar to the sky, trunks solid and wide at the base, the bark dark and deeply furrowed, a living image of the ancient. In the plot of primary forest that we visited, Tim told us the trees are four to five centuries old.

This is the forest of East Selen.



Or at least, that's what I was thinking yesterday, as we drove up the Blue River Reservoir and then walked the trails around the station. Those of you familiar with Eolyn lore will know that East Selen was the home of Akmael's mother Briana. One of the most powerful Magas of her time, Briana witnessed the massacre of her Clan by the Mage King Kedehen after the War of the Magas. She was then captured by the Mage King -- or surrendered willingly, depending on whose story you decide to believe -- and became Queen of Moisehen.

The forests of Briana's childhood are different from the South Woods in which Eolyn grew up. Eolyn's home is a mix of deciduous hardwoods dominated by oak, with a few conifers scattered throughout. East Selen, situated further to the north, is a forest of ancient conifers dominated by fir.

In my October 9, 2010, post entitled [Tree Magick](#), I talk a little bit about the tree lore of the Magas and Mages of Moisehén. Firs play a prominent role in this tradition of magic, forming a bridge between the Underwold and the world of the living, and holding the power of flight in their branches.

Last night I was reading about the Douglas Fir in *Ancient Forests of the Pacific*

Northwest by Elliot A. Norse (a reference that is probably a little out of date by now, but it's what I have on hand, so we'll just go with it), and I learned something new. The Douglas Fir is a somewhat exceptional fir, not only for its height, but because it does not begin its life in the shadows of an understory covered by thick canopy. In Norse's words, the Douglas Fir is 'conceived by fire'. Seeds germinate and grow following periodic fires (periodic, in this sense, being once every few centuries), and the saplings thrive best in open areas with lots of sun.

This was a wonderful detail to come across because it fits so perfectly within the legends and lore of Moisehén. So I decided, between last night and this morning, that the fir used by Magas and Mages to invoke powers of flight will also be 'born of fire', more specifically 'born of the breath of [Dragon](#)', the legendary creature who gave [High Magic](#) to Aithne and Caradoc.

This is one of the stories I hope to develop this week: The myth of why firs hold the power of flight, and the role of Dragon in creating this magic.

The character of Briana has also been speaking to me, and before the week is out I am certain I'll be sketching out some story or scene from her life, probably in the time before the War of the Magas.

Not bad for less than twenty-four hours. I think I'll go get some breakfast, and then take another hike.

Wednesday, May 18, 2011: Old Growth Forest

In my first fantasy fiction publication, the short story 'Turning Point' ([Zahir, Issue 17](#)), two women struggle to understand the highland forests of Costa Rica, one from a scientific perspective, the other as an artist in the making. Their passionate focus on distinct modes of inquiry generates tension - each comes to resent the other, and neither is capable of seeing the forest through her companion's eyes. The story ends in separation; one woman abandons her present life to disappear inside a fairy ring; the other remains faithful to her career as a scientist, yet loses herself in the endless task of cataloguing the forest's smallest creatures.



While this denouement may seem kind of depressing, in truth both women are satisfied with their choices; both will come to know the forest in a way few others have had the privilege to experience. The real tragedy, I suppose, is that no one else will ever learn of the wonderful secrets they discover.

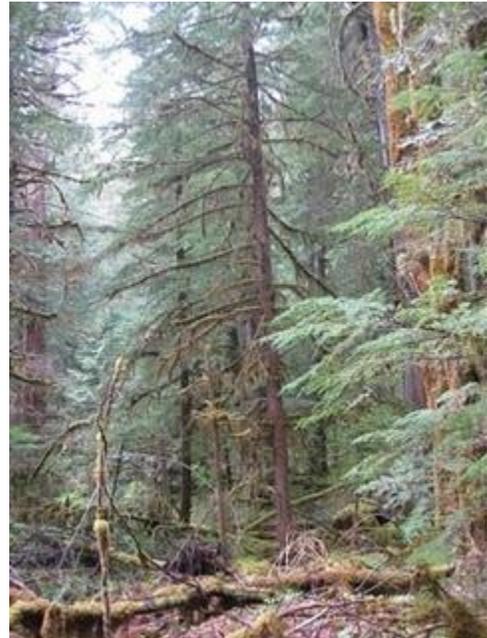
As we hiked through the primary forest of the Cascade Range, I was reminded of this story, and I realized that whether I enter the forest as a biologist or as an author, the challenge remains the same: How can I hope to capture this world and communicate its magnificence and complexity to others?

This is the first time I've been asked - formally - to study the forest from a writer's perspective, and I've found that my approach in the first moments of the encounter is the same:

I stop.

And then I 'listen'. With all my senses.

From the sequel to EOLYN (currently in progress):
*She pressed her hands against the rough bark,
closed her eyes and heard the pulse of the tree,
solid and slow, a steady current that stretched
toward the sky and descended into the deepest
places of the earth, a quiet murmur of
indomitable strength.*



It is not an easy task to listen, and it is especially difficult to listen to creatures who speak in ways completely foreign to our experience. In the world of Eolyn, Mages and Magas must learn to understand the plants, animals and rocks before they can hope to master any other form of magic. Nor do I - as the author -- make their task made simple by introducing animals that speak English; rather, the maga must come to understand each animal (or plant, or mineral) on its own terms, through its own language and behavioral patterns. This is, in essence, the same task of any modern-day biologist. What we are really trying to do, with all those instruments, data points and statistics, is translate the language of ecosystems into something that can be communicated in meaningful ways to other members of our own species.



When I ‘listen’ to the forest, the first things I tend to ‘hear’ are the familiar - a plant that belongs to a family I recognize, for example. The way the moss hangs from the branches or covers the logs. The chill of the air. The shape of the fungi. The quiet - which, as I should point out, is not the same as silence. In a forest, sound is ever-present, yet understated. The flow of the river, the hushed sway of the canopy in response to a breeze. The rhythmic chirp of a small bird, like the intermittent squeak of a tiny gate, interrupted by the sudden chatter of another. The distant monotone trill of the varied thrush. The scratch of my pen on paper, the plasticky crinkle of my rain coat.

Now there’s a phrase: ‘plasticky crinkle’. Neither word can be found in the dictionary, but then again, much of what I would like to describe about the experience of old growth forest cannot be found in a dictionary. Imagine if we had a word for every mood, texture, sound, sensation that one experiences in the old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. What a rich language ours would be.

Walking the trails through Andrews Forest sometimes leaves me at a loss for words - a terrible feeling for a writer - and my immediate response is an intense desire to create new words, new ways of saying things, so that I might capture and

communicate the experience. I will, for example, study the bark of the Douglas-fir for several minutes at a time trying to decide how best to describe it. This inner tension between a loss for words and the need for words left me wondering today to what extent wilderness has given us our language.

How many times in our long history, has someone walked into a new territory and been compelled to invent novel words or phrases because nothing he or she had handy was sufficient to describe the plants, the animals, the personality of that particular place which had been woven by nature in all its complexity?

And if we destroy old growth forest, leaving behind only the barren earth, or monotonous stands of young plantations, do we not also obliterate the potential for new ways of communication that verdant maze might have inspired?

I don't have answers to these questions at the moment, but I believe they are worth thinking about.



May 19: Shades of Black



As part of the [Andrews Writers Residency](#), we are required to visit and reflect upon three sites in the experimental forest; a fourth site is optional. Two of these four sites have undergone some sort of intervention; in other words, wood has been extracted from them. Andrews is an experimental forest, after all, and one of the ongoing goals of research here is to evaluate the impact of different forms of harvest on the forest ecosystem.

Yesterday I wrote about the old growth forest, but that was only half of the story I had to tell. On the day we visited old growth, we also stopped by the fourth 'optional' site, as it is situated more or less along the same road, albeit much further up along the ridge. This site is an experimental plot where, from what I understand, wood was harvested in a selective fashion, and then the remaining forest burned in order to simulate the effect of natural fires on forest regeneration.

The feel of the site is -- as you might imagine -- completely different from old growth. The primary forest is characterized by countless shades of green, which when the sun shines are further diffracted into even subtler tones along a broad spectrum from very bright to very dark. But on the burned landscape of this fourth reflection

plot, colors are not subtle and the vast shades of green have been distilled into a few dominant tones that tend toward sage.



The dense stands of trees of various ages and sizes have been replaced by a handful of giants with blackened trunks - though black is not quite a dark enough word to capture the color of the charred bark. 'Ebony' is too beautiful; 'stygian' too malevolent; 'charcoal' too tame. 'Raven', perhaps, would capture the color. But does anyone ever say 'a raven-scorched tree' or 'a tree scorched to raven'?

Anyway. These giants with raven-scorched trunks are still alive, which I find remarkable. Somehow their thick shaggy bark bore the brunt of those deadly flames, protecting the living tissue in the cortex and allowing the trees to maintain admirable crowns of verdant needles. (Do trees have a way of feeling pain, I wonder? Can they, in the absence of a nervous system, still sense their bark melting, bubbling, steaming, smoking, crackling under the lick of fire? The Magas, I think, would say 'Yes'.)

Despite the persistence of these old trees, the canopy as a whole is wide open, and that makes for a very different kind of understory, in which there is nothing 'soft' or 'subtle' as we might find in the old growth forest. The mosses and ferns have vanished, replaced by stiff prickly bushes and young firs just beginning their multi-centennial climb toward the sky. Underfoot crunch countless bare branches bleached white by fire and sun, like the scavenger-cleaned bones of some old and forgotten battlefield.



I was pleased to find, in this field of destruction, plants belonging to one of my favorite families the Ericaceae (this is the same family that gives us the blueberry), growing in abundance under the mountain sun, their clusters of white bell-like flowers bringing a spot of cheer to an otherwise bleak landscape.



More than indignation, what I felt when comparing this razed patch of forest to the old growth was disappointment, a frustrated desire to find something more. If I were

to return in a hundred years (or two or three), after the forest has been allowed to regenerate, that 'something more' would probably be there, thriving in the quiet hum of a dense forest understory.

I have to admit, a single blog post is not enough to capture a day in the Andrews Forest. I'm trying to give simple snapshots here, and even so I'm two days behind on all the wonderful experiences that could be shared. Yesterday we hiked a watershed trail up through yet another tract of stunning forest, saw a multitude of fascinating creatures and then nearly got ourselves lost; well not entirely lost, but certainly headed in a direction we hadn't quite planned. All I can say is: Thank goodness for Forest Service radios. Then today, I visited the third reflection site on Lookout Creek, which was just marvelous. That will be the focus of an upcoming post, either tomorrow or the day after.

This morning, I started on a fantasy fiction short for Briana, a scene from her youth set in the forests of East Selen. I'd give you a preview of that, except I'm not quite sure where it's going to lead yet. Still, it's a great feeling to take some of what I've experienced here and begin to channel it into a story. Writing about the magic of the forest allows me to experience it all over again.

Friday, May 20: Lookout Creek

AKMAEL SPENT HOURS wading with the girl Eolyn along the river bank, both of them taking care not to wander too deep into the swift current. The elusive rainbow snail never appeared but many other creatures danced in the water for their entertainment. Large silver fish jumped over the deeper rapids, their strong bodies flashing in the bright spring sun. Darting guppies scattered at their feet and nipped at their toes if they stood still long enough. They found tiny water dragons clinging to the underside of heavy rocks and whirligigs and water beetles filling the still edge of the river with frenetic activity. Bright blue shrimp scuttled along the rocky bottom, and Eolyn caught several to take back home because, as she enthusiastically informed Akmael, they made for an excellent stew. -EOLYN, Chapter 4



Last summer, I wrote a brief post entitled [Rivers of Destiny](#) in which I talked about the forest rivers of Costa Rica, and how they inspired the scene in [Chapter 4](#) of my novel where Eolyn and Akmael meet for the first time. I was reminded of that scene, once again, while visiting the third site for the [Long-Term Ecological Reflections Program](#) at [Andrews Forest](#).

Lookout Creek runs just behind Andrews Forest Station. It's a broad (about 10m wide) expanse of crystalline water that in Costa Rica would qualify as a river. In returning to this site, I wasn't entirely sure whether Tim Fox - who had shown us the reflection plots on our first day here - meant for the reflection to be completed right on the banks of the creek, or just off the banks underneath the forest canopy. In the end, I

decided not to worry about this detail. Very unscientific of me, but really one cannot be near a stream without descending to the stream. So no matter where I started the reflection, I would have ended it in the same place: on a dry rock under the warm midday sun, watching the water flow like liquid quartz over rocks bearing earthen shades of brick, jade, rust and clay; marveling at how the water captured the sun's light in effervescent streams of liquid fire.



The breeze was cool and unobtrusive, flowing downstream like the water. Tim Fox has told me there are studies now of “air sheds”, the movement of air masses along these ravines throughout Andrews Forest. Air, unlike water, will change the direction of its flow, moving downstream during certain periods of the diurnal cycle (usually at night, when air masses cool and grow heavier) and upstream during other periods (usually during the day, when the sun warms the air and draws it back up hill).

Flying insects were out in abundance, bright points of white against the azure sky. At the very tops of the tallest firs, we could see long strands of silk being released by spiders taking advantage of the wind currents to float toward new (and hopefully productive) hunting grounds.

The community of plants that thrive on the rocky silt banks closest to the water are very different from the towering conifers perched on the higher banks. Young stands of alder dominate, their bark smooth and thin, colored dark gray and mottled with ivory patches of lichen. In some cases, the bark was actually a deep jade green, an almost sure sign that the trunk retains some photosynthetic capacity. Which I thought

was way cool.

Horse tail plants (Equisetaceae) - another one of my favorite families -- were also very common. These are living fossils that once dominated the forests of the late Paleozoic. (That's over 250 million years ago for those of you who, like me, can never keep those darned geological eras straight.) They are relatives of the ancient trees that gave us coal. Horse tails grow in segments that are easily pulled apart and then snapped back together, much to the delight of the destructive child in me. I'm embarrassed to admit I've never bothered to find out whether they can survive the trauma of dismemberment, though I would not be surprised if they can. Some plants are very hardy that way. The tropical family Piperaceae (which gives us black pepper) regularly drops pieces of itself onto the forest floor, where they take root and grow into a whole new plant.

Now wouldn't that be a need talent to have?

I suppose it's no accident that Eolyn and Akmael's first encounter with each other was along the banks of the Tarba River in the South Woods. Forest streams will always be a meeting place for me - a place where the sun breaks through the dense cover of trees and mingles freely with earth and water along a thin corridor of open air. With the forest canopy held at bay, very little can hide here (though the cleverest creatures always find a way to make themselves invisible). Plants and animals that wouldn't stand a chance in the forest understory often find a foothold, becoming an integral part of the larger landscape. It is a unique habitat where creatures from different worlds can coexist.



Saturday, May 21: Legends in the Making (Or Why Every Fantasy Writer Needs a Good Forest)



Today I visited the fourth and final reflection plot, and area that was clear cut some years ago. I'm going to let my thoughts on that experience simmer for a little while, and will come back to write about this final reflection plot tomorrow.

Instead, I want to take a brief break from my essays and share with you some more of the great images my husband has caught with his ever-reliable digital camera -- just a few examples of the infinite opportunities a mature forest offers for the playful imagination. Most of these photos

come from hikes along the old growth trails of Andrews Forest.

Fans of Tolkien will be familiar with the Ents of Middle Earth. As you might be glad to know, Ents are still alive and well in the oak forests of Talamanca in Costa Rica -- I have a few photos of them from my time there (although to the untrained eye they

are almost indistinguishable from mature oaks). I've been very pleased these past few days to find signs of remnant populations in the mountains of Oregon as well. We did not come across any breeding adults (they may be hard to distinguish from the older firs), but we did spot this fledgling wrapped in warm moss just to my husband's left:



And this adolescent a little further down the same trail. Perhaps they are siblings?



Old growth forests are, of course, full of wonderful ingredients for magic spells and potions, like this rust-colored morel, which is almost certainly essential for some dark and powerful spell as yet unknown to me:



Note the abundant lichens littering the forest floor around the mushroom, which are likely collected and used for similar purposes. And of course, what witch's brew is complete without a plump little newt:



Though of course, I could NEVER toss this little guy into a boiling pot of water.
He's way too cute to suffer such a terrible fate.

Here's a rather strange formation from an exposed root of a tree. I'll let you decide what it could be, what it might mean, and how you'd like to use it in your next story. (And if you'd like to share your ideas, please post in the comments below!)



Finally, when we weren't communing with young and spritely Ents, we were talking to gnomes, which like the Douglas-firs grow to be quite large and old in this forest. Here's one we managed to catch on film, standing just to the right of the trail:



That's it for today. My stay at [Andrews Forest](#) is almost finished now. One more full day tomorrow, and then we'll head to the coast for a night before returning to Portland and then to Kansas City. I'd say tomorrow will be my last installment related to my residency here, but I'm not quite sure about that -- I have a feeling I'll be reflecting on my stay at Andrews for some time to come.

I moved forward a bit more on my short story for Briana today. I think it's going to be a nice one, and may post some excerpts here in the coming week or so.

Sunday, May 22: The World I want to Live In



I lost an opportunity yesterday because of fear. Let that be a lesson to us all. (I suppose I should add here, that one of the underlying themes of EOLYN is the debilitating power of fear; how so often it is the fear of danger -- rather than danger itself -- that proves the greatest obstacle to attaining our dreams.)

It was my idea to hike up to the meadow overlooking the fourth reflection plot, a relatively recent clear cut ('recent' being, in my estimation, about 10 years old). The plot is a mess to walk through. Splintered stumps of dead trees litter the area. The tallest saplings are now up to four meters high, densely packed, with a thorny net of dry ferns, broken twigs and sprawling raspberry bushes underfoot, the latter just beginning to show their happy white flowers. It was almost impossible to navigate the area without getting cut, scraped, tripped up or otherwise waylaid as we tried to reach that meadow.

The brambles didn't bother me, though. What bothered me was how steep the slope became as we approached the summit.



There were simple treats to distract me from the increasingly difficult climb for a while, like a small flat area where the weight of large animals had beaten down the grass into neat oval shapes. A resting place for deer, we concluded, judging from the tracks and the scat.



Also, the flowers were stunning:



...and there was a beautiful burgundy moss that grew in cushiony patches over the (nearly vertical and rather slippery) charcoal-colored rocks.



With a little help from my intrepid husband, halfway up I found a place where I could squat against the hillside and observe the landscape: a rugged chain of mountains covered in verdant stands of trees interrupted by patches of impossibly steep slopes, where the earth has been robbed of all greenery due to clear cutting.



I have to admit, it surprised me to see so much clear cutting on such a large scale in my home country, given the wealth, expertise and technology to which we presumably have access. I am no expert on forestry, but I learned a lot about management plans and different approaches to logging - particularly in mountainous areas with valuable forest -- during my years in Costa Rica. It now seems to me that this tiny Central American nation has a much better handle on how to make efficient use of its resources, and how to mitigate the impacts of logging, than we do.

This was about all I had time to think about before looking down made me dizzy, and I began to fret about how I was ever going to descend that slope, having made it this far up. As for Rafael's enthusiastic suggestion that we ascend at least a little more - no way was I going to do that. At my insistence, we moved horizontally along the hill to a nearby plantation, and there found another path back down to the road.

Of course, once we returned to the car, I looked up at the meadow and wanted to be there again, and kicked myself for not being able to stay in the first place, or climb

even higher, as it would have been a wonderful spot to write a full reflection -- my last reflection as a writer-in-residence at Andrews Forest. But what was done was done. The opportunity to stand upon that particular meadow had come and gone. At least I could say I'd given it a try.

So I sought comfort in a little hot chocolate, and then ventured back a short way into that bramble-carpeted stand of young firs to finish my thoughts on the impacts and aftermath of clearcutting.



When Tim Fox first showed us this site, he mentioned the Long Term Ecological Reflections program was thinking about locating a more recent clear cut for use by the writers-in-residence. I see the importance of having a barren landscape evaluated by the writers-in-residence, but I also think it would be useful - as long as LTER is going to be at this for another 200 years - to have authors continually visit the same harvested patch, to follow its growth and recovery after clearcutting, which probably constitutes the largest single impact humans can have on a stretch of forest.

As I mentioned earlier, the trees here have reached about 4 or 5 meters in height. They are uniform in their Christmas-tree shape, and crowded tight in their



intense, albeit slow-motion, struggle to see who gets to be the next 400-year-old giant. (Though whether they will be allowed that much time is a mystery to me; whoever manages this piece of land may have other plans.) The tips of their branches are studded with the buds of new leaves, fresh and pale green, soft as feathers to the touch.



Interspersed among the young conifers is the occasional dogwood, its highest branches adorned with bold ivory flowers. Small flocks of birds are common, but they never held still long enough for us to identify what they were. And as for the tiniest critters...Well, there are ticks here. The moment I realized that, it suddenly became rather difficult to focus on writing.

Recent clear cuts are a grim site, but a young patch of forest like this - having rebounded within a few years following mass destruction - is a place of hope. The saplings look young and vigorous, ready for anything, though they do lack the rich character and individuality of their older counterparts. If I could translate the feel of their presence into human-speak, it would go something like this:

Hah! Here we are, ready to go again. You can't beat us back, little human. All we need is earth, sun, water and time, and we will be old once again, in ways that you can only imagine.

Their determined growth is an act of defiance, really. A mockery of my anthropocentric view of the world. It is as if these young trees somehow know they have a gift I do not. After all, they can endure the passage of time through centuries. Some of them may have four hundred years of life and experience ahead. I have - at this point -- maybe forty.

So who loses out, really, when we raze old growth forest? Granted, there are some notable species we may drive to extinction in our hunger for destruction; the northern spotted owl being a prime example. But the trees, left to their own devices for a few hundred years, given some peace and distance from us bothersome humans, will

weave their magic once again. They will rebuild their forest, slowly and inexorably, filling it with beauty, mystery and complexity. By the time they have finished, we will no longer be around to see their work of art. Indeed, our legacies as individuals -- and perhaps even as a people -- will have been long forgotten.

We often think of conservation as something we engage in for the good of future generations; and in a very deep and important way, it is. Yet there are many aspects of conservation that are not just about the future, and Old Growth Forest is one of them. Once these ancient forests are gone, they will not return. Not in our lifetime, not for our children, nor for our children's children. Not for many human generations to come.

So the question I have in mind, when I contemplate these treasures of thought and imagination, is not only "What kind of world do I want to leave behind for those to come?" The question I also ask is, "What kind of world do I want to live in right now?"



Many thanks to Charles Goodrich, Frederick Swanson, Tim Fox, Kathy Keable, and all the staff and faculty of the Long Term Ecological Reflections Program at Andrews Experimental Forest.

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--Addendum--

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July 12, 2011

June 19, 2011: Animating the Forest

There are a couple of lingering topics from my week at Andrews Forest, and I want to return to one of them today.

During a follow up conversation with Frederick J. Swanson, one of the coordinators of the Long Term Ecological Reflections project at Andrews, he expressed interest in knowing more about ‘what I had to let go of’ when trying to consider the forest from a writer’s perspective, having been trained for so long to approach the forest as a scientist.



An “Ent” as depicted in the Lord of the Rings film series

I’d say the most difficult impulse for me to follow - to put my faith in, so to speak -- was the desire to anthropomorphize the creatures around me, to animate them with human qualities.

It is very common for story tellers (and humans in general) to anthropomorphize animals and other non-human creatures. Walt Disney’s *The Lion King*, for example, imposes a human social structure and human behavior on lions and their cohorts in the grasslands of Africa, so that what appears to be a story about lions is, in fact, a story about humans dressed up as lions.

Disney, of course, does this with a lot of films; but I chose *The Lion King* is an example because the first animal social structure I learned about when I began my study of behavioral biology was in fact the lions.

Lions live in matriarchal prides, where territory is shared among sisters and passed from mothers to daughters. Males leave the pride when they reach reproductive age and live alone or in small groups (usually pairs of brothers) until they are able to challenge and replace the reproductive male of another pride. Upon 'taking over' a pride, a new male kills all the cubs in that pride, causing the females to enter their reproductive cycle earlier than they would have otherwise. The new male then has about two or three years to sire as many cubs as he can (and see them safely to maturity) before he, in turn, is booted out by a younger, healthier rival, who will then proceed to kill all the cubs that his predecessor sired.

Not the stuff of Disney movies, I suppose. But it was through the lions that I first realized most animals interact with each other in ways that are difficult to understand if measured by a human world view. We must use other tools - in this case, evolutionary theory - to make sense of their behavior.

The danger, for a scientist, of anthropomorphizing is that the moment we dress up another species with human qualities, we handicap our capacity to understand them on their own terms. So as a biologist, I have for years coached myself - and all my students - away from the habit of anthropomorphizing. (I might add that this is also the approach that the Magas and Mages of Eolyn's world take; they do not impose human qualities on the plants and animals with which they interact; nor do I as the author.)

While I was in Andrews, whenever I found myself wanting to give voice and personality to the trees and other creatures, my first instinct was to back away. But this instinct ran contrary to the number one rule of any creative writer, which is not to censor yourself. In order to honor me-the-writer, I occasionally had to let go of me-the-scientist.

Anthropomorphizing may be treacherous ground for an ecologist, but it can be a powerful tool for the story teller. If used well in the attempt to relate something as complex as the experience of walking through a forest, the occasional anthropomorphic creature allows the reader a familiar thread that can help carry him or her through otherwise unknown territory. How many children, for example, came

to love lions because of *The Lion King*? And would they have been so quick in their affection for this imposing predator, if the first thing they had learned about it was the customary massacre of all those sweet and playful cubs every time a new male takes over a pride?

While I appreciate the benefits of anthropomorphizing, something inside me cringes every time I see a movie - or read a story - where animals think, talk and act like humans. In my own work as a writer I try to avoid this, seeking a balance between making the creatures of Eolyn's world accessible while respecting their fundamental non-human qualities.



One of my favorite examples of a skillful anthropomorphism in fantasy is J.R.R. Tolkien's Ents, the tree shepherds, which are essentially anthropomorphized trees. Tolkien allows Ents to wander through the forest, speak with hobbits, and even go to war. He hints at a loose social structure and the one-time existence of Ent-Wives. Ent-Wives are very cool; they are credited with having taught the people of Middle Earth much about agriculture. Nonetheless, a 'wife' is a kind of pointless concept for real trees, most of which have both male and female reproductive parts, and because the offspring take care of themselves, there's no need for

An "Ent" of Andrews Forest.

the pair bonding we tend to see in animals.

Despite all these human-like qualities, Ents never lose their essential tree-ness. I think that's part of what gives Ents their immortality in our imagination, and why every time I enter a forest, I half expect to see one - whether I'm thinking like a scientist or not.

June 24, 2011: The Landscape of my Imagination



I read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* when I was in high school, as part of my English class. To this day (and it's been a long time since then), the cover art of my high school edition of *Frankenstein* remains vivid in my mind: A man in 19th century dress, his back to the viewer, his figure small but distinctive in a vast landscape of ragged mountains and hidden valleys.

It was wonderful surprise - while I was refreshing my memory of Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and Romanticism - to come across this same image on Wikipedia. It didn't take much; just one click on "Romantic" from Wikipedia's *Frankenstein* page. The artwork, entitled *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, is by Casper David Friedrich, a painter of the Romantic period.

I also remember our classroom discussion of *Frankenstein*, where our teacher talked about the importance of wilderness for the Romantic movement. Shelley is a prime example of this. In her timeless novel, she devotes ample attention to the untamed landscape in which her characters live. Were she alive and writing today, I suspect Shelley would find herself embroiled in some vigorous debates with fellow authors, who now live in a world where generous attention to landscape is often seen as an impediment to a story rather than an integral part of it.

My own writing is heavy on description and landscape. I believe a reader cannot fully understand the characters of a story unless he or she also experiences the setting in which they live -- this because the landscape with which we interact shapes who we are. I would have been a happy camper (literally and figuratively) had I written during the Romantic period. As it is, I am constantly challenged by my readers and fellow authors to strike a balance between my own convictions regarding the importance of landscape and more contemporary lines of thought, which often insist setting is not only unimportant, but actually in the way of the 'real story'.

Why shun landscape in our stories?

This question has come back to me often during these last few years, as I've engaged with different perspectives regarding what makes good writing. It has resurfaced again these past few weeks, as I reflect on my experience as writer-in-residence at Andrews Experimental Forest and the short story inspired by it - a story that in its current draft is, perhaps even by my own standards, 'too heavy' on description.

But what is 'too heavy'? What determines the point where we stop looking out the window, because we just don't want to see anymore? Why is that cutoff in a different place now than it was some 200 years ago, when Shelley wrote her immortal tale?

The biologist and philosopher inside me can't help but wonder whether rejection of landscape is simply about 'good technique' in writing. Perhaps it's more than that. Perhaps it is also a reflection of the context in which so many of us now live: a world where wilderness has been fragmented and pushed to distant corners of the earth; where we have no point of reference for the organic nature of our surroundings, living as we do in climate controlled spaces, attached to our ipods and cell phones, purchasing pre-packaged boneless meats, avoiding fresh fruits and vegetables because they must be peeled, treating our next door neighbors as somehow less 'real' than the person we just met on Facebook.

Not that the modern lifestyle is bad perse; just that we lose something, I think, if we let ourselves become too absorbed by it. There's a larger world out there; larger even

than the internet. Filled with sensory experience -- sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures. A world that would speak to us, if we let it; just as the forests of Moisehén speak to the Magas and Mages of Eolyn's world.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Romantics like Shelley, I have read contemporary fiction that takes place entirely inside the mind of the main character. While I appreciate the artistry behind this approach to storytelling, it has little appeal to me as a reader. A disembodied mind in an organic world seems not so much a reflection of real life as a precursor to madness. I cannot engage with someone who is so removed from their surroundings; indeed from their own flesh and blood.

I suppose for me as a writer, the landscape and its components - forests, plains, valleys, rivers, cultivated fields, mountains, plants, animals, rocks, weather patterns, and so forth - will always be characters in their own right, and deserve to be treated as such. My protagonists interact in intimate ways with the environment in which they live; so, then, should my readers.

And even though I tend to cull descriptive passages as I move toward the final draft, I'm rarely fully convinced that by doing so I'm creating a better story. Indeed, it often seems like I'm deforesting the landscape of my imagination, just as we have deforested the landscapes of our planet.