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Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 225 pp.



Depicting a forest lit up by blazing fires, the cover photo *Fire (Australia)* by Claudia Terstappen encapsulates Kate Rigby's reason for writing this book: she witnessed firsthand the Canberra bushfires that wreaked havoc on the outskirts of her hometown in January 2003. *Dancing with Disaster*, a title endorsed by Rigby's late friend Val Plumwood (Rigby, "Dancing" 1), invites the reader to an improvised dance with disaster. Not only do the unusual chapter titles contain Gerundive forms (i.e. driving winds, breaking waves), but they are also metaphorical, used appropriately in order to attract the attention that such a serious and urgent topic deserves. Rigby's *modus operandi* relies on particular disaster narratives which can help us prepare, be aware, and overcome extreme weather events and ecocatastrophes. It allows us to reflect upon our own situatedness within the environments that we inhabit, and what our role as individuals should be in light of current events. It also focuses on the "entanglement of human and nonhuman actors and factors in the genesis, unfolding, and aftermath of a 'natural disaster'" (*Dancing* 14). The more-than-human sphere suffers the effects of climate change along with us (the human), but is often overlooked. Yet there are disaster narratives which pay attention to the fates of other-than-human beings, as is the case in Goethe's *Faust. Part Two* (1832) and Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter*. The skeleton of the horse comes to life and dies again in an attempt to join forces with the human in light of the storm surge that causes the dykes to break and the sea to come in with unparalleled force. Rigby argues that, depicted as white in both its skeletal and living stages, the horse is a symbol for the purity of the entire more-than-human sphere.

Throughout her book, the author focuses on various "nature disasters" (3) or ecocatastrophes that have plagued the Earth, starting off with the Great Lisbon Earthquake which took place on the morning of the 1st of November 1755. Rigby spends an entire chapter exploring the Earth that moves, and finds references to this type of event as far back as the Old Testament (27). It is a sad yet enlightening fact that a major ecocatastrophe such as the Great Lisbon Earthquake had to occur in order to catalyse the development of seismology (33). With thinkers such as Voltaire, Kant, Pope and Kleist being outlined, Rigby offers a plurality of thought that is counterbalanced by the works of writers such as Rousseau. Voltaire's anthropocentric views are countered by Rousseau quite justly, and Rigby is quick to side with the latter in that all earthquakes and ecocatastrophes should be given equal attention, no matter what area of the Earth they occur in and whom they affect.

In Rigby's second chapter, *Spreading Pestilence*, she focuses on Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* in order to illustrate "a scenario of socioculturally intensified vulnerability to a lethal pandemic" (52). Similar to Verney's opening account of "a world that is no more" (72), in many areas of the planet today, due either to ecocatastrophes or anthropogenic destruction, we encounter analogous situations, as well as the plurality of responses to them, expressed by Shelley's survivors, and the almost 7.5 billion people living on Earth today. Unlike the other texts that are discussed in *Dancing with Disaster*, *The Last Man* does not draw upon a particular natural disaster, but according to Rigby, bears a striking resemblance to the Justinian Plague of 542-c.740, which produced "an estimated death toll of some one hundred million people" (56-57). Drawing upon the environmental issues of her time such as pollution, Shelley proposes a dystopian scenario for the future, one which today seems more and more likely to happen.

The third chapter, *Breaking Waves*, which sparked my interest the most due to its relevance to my research,¹ focuses on ecocatastrophes caused by water and violently conflicts with an idealised version of the seaside. Rigby looks primarily at *Faust* (1832) and *Der Schimmelreiter*, and links these fictional texts to the real life event of the flood of 1825 that made Belgium's dykes, illustrative of the domination of man, look like children's building blocks. In this way, the chapter title can be read as the reclaiming of nature by nature, "breaking" referring to the destruction of land by water. Through the interweaving of fiction and reality, Rigby successfully outlines the capacity of "today's printed words" to become "tomorrow's reality". What these texts allow us, is to explore the human affect at conflict with the human effect upon the environment. Sea level rise for example, cannot be driven away by the force of a mythical hero and such works should remind us that these issues are happening whilst most people are going about their everyday lives.

The fourth and fifth chapters feel by far the most personal to Rigby, and closely follow Zapf's focus on of ecocritics "who explore the global and systematic aspects of ecocriticism, emphasizing the need to link local and personal ecologies with transpersonal and cross-cultural aspects of ecological thought in a globalized world" (46). Here, she illustrates the deadly fusion of fire driven by wind, which is an unstoppable force that swallows both human and more-than-human areas and causes long term destruction to the environment on a hard to imagine scale. The fourth chapter focuses on Australian wildfires and starts off by turning to mythology in order to introduce them, reconsidering "the mythic prototype that stands behind the figure of Faust" (112) and outlining Thiel's *February Dragon*. Here Rigby introduces Prometheus and does not only mention Australian wildfires, the issue closest to her heart, but Europe, as well. It is Australia that Rigby labels as a "flammable" continent. The fifth chapter, *Driving Winds*, focuses on Wright's *Carpentaria* which envisages an ecosystem that stands up for itself. Rigby looks mainly at the Aboriginal Country which "has its own agency and voice" (162), comparing it at one point to Wiekes' narrative *Volcano*. Australia's tropical cyclones are a kind of ecocatastrophe whose consequences Rigby

¹ My area of interest as a Postgraduate Research student includes intertidal areas and coastal landscape.

witnessed firsthand. She also outlines the importance of acknowledging the power of aboriginal cultures to adapt to climate change and of taking heed of the ways in which they work with the environment instead of against it.

The accidental or premeditated destruction of the environment is the equivalent of man working against himself, and both colonizers and aboriginal people have a shared interest in wake of current ecocatastrophes. According to Konisky et al. (2016), the nearer in time and space people are to extreme weather events, the more likely they are to remember them (535-36). Otherwise, it takes only a few months for people who are not directly affected to forget them. Additionally, if we are looking at ecocatastrophes that have taken place in the past, it can often be the case that they are experienced as traumatic events without a living memory attached to them. This is where disaster narratives step in and provide the world with a version of such unfolding events which can act as substitutes for an immediate experience. In light of the current state of the environment, such narratives can lead to an increase in awareness both of the presence of anthropogenic climate change and its rapid acceleration, and “might provide a vehicle for fostering deeper reflection on the ontological, epistemological, and ethical underpinnings of different kinds of disaster narratives” (2). It is important to note the difference between anthropogenic ecocatastrophes and “genuinely nonanthropogenic phenomena” (13) which can both affect the human and more-than-human world. Nature never takes sides. Ecocatastrophes of one type or another can occur virtually anywhere in the world, often with little or no forewarning, but anthropogenically altered landscapes that lead to floods, for example, or altered coastlines that allow tsunamis to hit with more severe power are surely contributing to an increase in human and more-than-human casualties.

Similar to the characters in the narratives explored in this book, Rigby refuses to submit to the altered landscape and uses these particular texts as tools to explore how the Environmental Humanities “might provide an enhanced understanding of the complex interplay between cultural factors and geophysical processes in the genesis, unfolding, and aftermath of calamities” (2). Even though the calamities depicted in the selected texts are localised events, they are much larger than the spheres they contain and they are aimed at the world rather than a target audience. Although the calamities that Rigby focuses on are localized events, they not only affect the people on which they have a direct impact, but humanity as a whole. As stated in the postscript, none of the texts she selected tell “the story of post-trauma reconstruction” (178). This, however, is seen to be an advantage, as “it leaves a space for the reader to consider the implications of the narrative for the actual or potential ecocatastrophes of their own time and place” (178). Rigby’s dance might be improvised, but both she and the disasters she engages with move together elegantly, as if they know the steps.

Works cited

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