

Friday 23 August 2019

“Are we being good ancestors?” asks Robert MacFarlane.

English writer Robert MacFarlane appeared at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in an event chaired by Scottish writer and doctor Gavin Francis, to discuss his new book *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*. The pair discussed how hands are a running theme throughout the book, the ingrained and ancient process of human beings’ desire to journey down into the darkest corners of the earth and how trees can communicate with one another.

“This book is about the hand, and it’s partly that, because one of the earliest marks we’ve left as a species as you know, are these handprints on the walls of Lascaux and Chauvet famously, but also across rock and stone around the world.

“Recently there was an extraordinary advance in uranium thorium dating techniques and they allowed the precise dating of handprints, the earliest known marks left on European Stone and these are in Western Spanish caves and they were dated back to 64,000 years ago. That’s interesting because it’s a very old date... but it’s also about 20,000 years before anatomically modern humans are thought to have reached that part of Europe.”

MacFarlane’s book *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* traces the path beneath our feet, down through glaciers in Greenland, salt mines in Yorkshire to the Onkalo spent nuclear fuel repository. He says that the human desire to look underground is older than time itself.

“The impulse to go down and go low voluntarily, and there are many people who have been drawn down historically against their wishes for incarceration of extracted labour. The impulse to go low, to go into darkness, to go into the ground, is as old as it gets.”

The discussion turned to the newly discussed theory of the Wood Wide Web, that considers that trees are connected, sharing resources and alerts and warnings to other trees. “Increasingly, it’s being understood that trees are able to share resources with one another because the trees connect via this Wood Wide Web, but also they can also send a form of signalling. They can warn trees to upscale, plants to upscale their defences if a certain kind of insect attack is coming at one point. It’s just mind blowing, mind blowing beautiful visual that is really being disclosed in terms of western science, modern science, over the last twenty years. Forest dwelling cultures, this has been self-evident for thousands of years and is now in their stories.”

MacFarlane’s book looks at fascinating structures in the natural world like the Wood Wide Web, but also how the human mind tries to organise such a thing as nature assisting one another under the guise of political structures that people fall into.

“On the one hand there’s a sort of socialist reading which says ‘ah all the trees are looking out for one another. This is an NHS system in which the needy are cared for, this is a beautiful socialist vision. On the other there’s this sort of free market neo-liberal reading which just says ‘well this enables competition at a greater distance’.

“For me that then became a secondary and fascinating subject about how, as humans, we relentlessly anthropomorphize these structures. This beautiful being, as it were, a complex being, which shows forests to be a much more complex structures than we adhere to now.”

Underland also looks at the only example of successfully constructed deep geological repository for radioactive waste, named The Onkalo in Finland. “This is a book about burial and we bury many things, but one thing we’ve proved bad at burying is radioactive material. It seems astonishing to me that as a species that’s reached the level of technological sophistication that we various have, cannot work out how to dig a big hole in the ground and put waste in it so it’s safe for future generations.

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“I guess that is the ethical question, as well as the political question which presses very hard on this question of disposal, because this is waste which has a harmful life which extends arguably into a post human future.

“There’s an ethical question at the heart of this book, which are we being good ancestors?”