

# Foreword

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*William Fiennes*

I associate my growing awareness of the natural world with a growing body of language, so that in memory it was only when I learned and could say the words *Alchemilla mollis* that I first saw the crimped pale-green leaves beaded with rainwater in the flowerbeds. When a hedgerow song spirited the word *yellowhammer* out of thin air, or I saw the black buds and felt the word *ash* arrive in my mouth like a cherry stone, I imagined myself to be in a relationship with those presences, connected to them. Knowing the names of birds, trees, clouds, plants, rocks and flowers transformed environmental vagueness into thrilling configurations of detail, and I thought (pompously) that in each small act of naming I was reprising Adam's task and participating in the creation of the world: 'And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.'

The great urge to be closer to the world around me that I experienced during illness in my early twenties, and which I tried to describe in *The Snow Geese*, brought with it a manic appetite for the names of things. My reading was similarly hungry for Nature – *Walden*, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *The Peregrine*, *Arctic Dreams*, *The Natural History of Selborne*, the essays of Wendell Berry and Edward Hoagland – and it was in this period of immersive noticing and naming that I first encountered John Fowles’s *The Tree*. I hadn’t read anything like it – a sui-generis polemical memoir-essay, by turns obstreperous, dogmatic, rousing, excitingly provocative and completely infuriating, and it was a shock to discover that (according to Fowles) the giving of names was not, as I’d thought, a generous bringing-into-being but in fact a corruption, a slander, an obfuscation, a badge of my small-mindedness – and that the great namer Linnaeus was less a hero than a kind of war criminal, his work ‘a nuclear explosion, whose radiations and mutations inside the human brain were incalculable and continue to be so...’

‘Even the simplest knowledge of the names and habits of flowers or trees,’ Fowles writes, ‘removes us a step from total reality towards anthropocentrism’

and ‘destroys or curtails certain possibilities of seeing, apprehending and experiencing.’ Naturalists and natural historians, that is, rather miss the point, as do writers who attempt to describe the natural world — the only purpose of such writing, Fowles declares, being ‘to flatter the vanity of the describer.’ As both a student of natural history and a writer attempting to incorporate non-human presences into his descriptive ambit, I felt doubly dissed.

But then *The Tree* is a book to bridle at and wrestle with. In fewer than a hundred pages, Fowles offers a series of binary distinctions — father and son, conscious and unconscious, art and science, Devon and suburbia, the green chaos and the printed map — and part of the book’s interest lies in the way it forces you to argue with such simplistic categories. Why, for example, should Fowles seem dismissive of his father’s carefully tended fruit trees, and of the hard-won hands-on botanical expertise he brought to his beloved suburban orchard? Knowledge doesn’t automatically negate emotional and visceral responses: even cardiologists fall in love, after all, and even theologians go to church. Fowles may well be right when he says that ‘the threat to us in the coming millennium’ lies ‘in our growing emotional and intellectual detachment from’ nature, but you

can make this point without dividing humanity into those who like gardens and those who like wilderness. Even the way Fowles uses the word 'nature' to denote forms and processes distinct from human beings invites argument: we mammals are nature too, and the old intellectual reflex of assuming our separateness from the rest of the natural world gives sad licence to our environmental carelessness and degradations.

I've come to value the serial provocations of *The Tree*, though there are aspects of it from which I still recoil. The portrait of the father seems more condescending each time I read it — he's so neatly summarised, pinned like one of the butterfly specimens in Fowles's *The Collector*, these early pages closer to Freudian case study than the kind of complicated empathetic seeing you'd hope for in such a gifted novelist. It's hard to reconcile Fowles's early dismissal of nature writing ("To try to capture it verbally immediately places me in the same boat as the namers and would-be owners of nature...") with the ten-page description of a visit to Wistman's Wood on Dartmoor at the end: 'This floor like a tilted emerald sea, the contorted trunks, the interlacing branches with their luxuriant secondary aerial gardens...'

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Still, the question at the heart of *The Tree* remains so vast and so necessary: how should we understand and configure our relationship with the non-human world? It's one of the most urgent questions there is, and I go on being grateful to this cranky, fearless, rebarbative *cri de coeur* for asking it, for reminding me that 'As long as nature is seen as in some way outside us, frontieraed and foreign, separate, it is lost both to us and in us.'

*William Fiennes*  
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