



Liz Newell meets an Albany artist and Perth poet combining their talents to present an exciting new book highlighting WA's diverse flora and fauna species

LITERARY SYMBIOSIS



A PICTURE IS SUPPOSED TO SPEAK a thousand words. If that's true, a new book from independent publisher Fremantle Press is perhaps a weightier tome than James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Two With Nature brings together the illustrations of Albany artist Ellen Hickman and the poetry of Perth research fellow John Ryan into one unique package focused entirely on appreciating Western Australia's flora and fauna.

The qualified and would-be botanist, respectively, make for an unlikely pair and even though *Two With Nature* hits shelves this month, they have hardly met.

Rather, the book is the result of the publisher's connections to both Ryan, who has published poetry there, and Hickman, one of their go-to illustrators.

"The editors knew that I write botanical poetry and they thought it would be a good collaboration to bring botanical poetry and botanical illustration together," Ryan reveals from his office at Edith Cowan University.

"As far as the synergies between Ellen and I are concerned it's really the editors who made that happen," he says.

"The two forms amplify one another. The botanical poetry is made a lot more accessible and is augmented by the illustrations. The poetry adds depth to the illustration and the illustration adds depth to the poetry. →

I could burrow to this tree's pith
with fingertips, through cambium
once hard as concrete, now rotting
in its sleep, boneyard of protuberances –
disfigured scapula, splintered sternum,
broken femur heaped in the middens:

down down, the daub of a defunct
termite clan, gangrene in the toes –
I kick it off, watch it roll downslope,
but high up, stubby limbs bloat
like beached whales but without
the sick belch from under sun-bleached skin...

John Ryan



ALL ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLEN HICKMAN

→ "It's just beautiful. If I could have envisioned something years ago, it would be this."

The New Jersey-born writer first combined his avid love for walking (before settling in WA, he did a stint moving with the seasons across the northern half of the United States on foot) and his appreciation of nature during postgraduate research from 2008 to 2011.

He studied literary representations of WA plants after settling in Perth in 2008 and wrote poems focused on the diverse flora of the Fitzgerald River National Park.

"I've always been drawn to nature as a writing subject and I've read the so-called nature poets from an early age," Ryan says.

"So the poetry I write is often very much about nature and in the past years, in the poetry of *Two With Nature*, I've been focusing just on plants.

"That's been very interesting, to write just about one subject like that, intensively, for a time, in a place where you can go and interact with those plants in their wild environments."

BY "INTERACT", RYAN IS REFERRING to his aforementioned love of walking, strolling, trekking or hiking – call it what you will – through the wilderness notebook close at hand.

maybe it's my quest for kinship here, but
I quite like caravanning across town
to a rendezvous with a quandong tree;

around Kojonup, they say, farmers' wives
gather fruits for jam – like mini
pomegranates they judder there – pluck,

pluck – as the double-decker sheep trucks
bound for Katanning, tremble the ground

John Ryan

"Another important aspect has been to research the Noongar understandings of plants and the names for the plants, to try to get a whole picture of the plants from my personal experience, to the historical colonial representations, to ancient Aboriginal knowledge," he says.

Learning as much as he has, he'd still prefer to think of himself as "a strong enthusiast" than any kind of expert.

"I still think, 'Wow, there are so many plants in a space like the Fitzgerald River National Park,'" he laughs.

"If I know just a handful very well, I feel like I'm doing well ... I'm very interested in bringing the arts to the exploration of those plants, whether it's



poetry or in Ellen's case, the use of illustration, as a way to increase awareness of the plants.

"It's an ongoing fascination certainly because I see there's so much possibility."

When visiting Hickman's home – a quaintly welcoming cottage surrounded by a vibrant garden filled with natives – later the same day as my conversation with Ryan, I realise the poet has hit the proverbial nail on the head.

Attaining a science degree to do the "sensible thing" after leaving school and not expecting to make a living out of her passion for art, Hickman now gets to blend two equally consuming loves – botany and drawing – into one lucrative pursuit.

She vividly remembers expecting her university lecturer to chide her for drawing diagrams of the pieces she was supposed to be studying, and instead praising her efforts and encouraging her classmates to do the same.

Six months later, that lecturer, Terry Macfarlane, commissioned Hickman to illustrate grasses for his book *Flora of the Kimberley Region*.

She credits much of her considerable talent to her mother, also an artist, and to various university courses, especially a two-year undertaking at the North Melbourne Institute of TAFE.

That course led to her first foray into illustrating children's books in 2003's *Hooray for Chester*, about an adventurous crocodile, which she followed up with an award-winning work called *Tuart Dwellers* in 2008.

EVERY ARTIST'S

so-called "process" differs and Hickman has had plenty of time to fine-tune how she produces her intricately detailed pieces.

Her use of waxy Accrual pencils, which are watercolours but never exposed to water

in Hickman's usage, gives colours a chance to blend softly together on the page in a way that is both breathtaking and convincing.

But the nature-based artist shares one common grievance with others in her field.

"I can never find the right green," she muses.

"Never. It doesn't matter how many pencils you have, you can never find the right green."

The flowers look beautiful but they're also very functional and very important in our environment, so there are a whole lot of aspects to that education going on. If they weren't here, we wouldn't be here.

ELLEN HICKMAN

Not that the untrained eye would notice, or care if it did.

The book's ability to reach the common man without flying over their head propelled by scientific babble and elitist prose is something that appeals to both writer and illustrator.

"In broadening that base of appreciation, there's more possibility for increasing public awareness of the plants," Ryan says.

"With increasing pressure, this living heritage is compromised, and we need to do all we can and we need



to work together – scientists working with artists and artists working with conservationists and artists working with historians – so that we can try to promote the plants and protect them ultimately.”

Inter-disciplinary correlation is something Hickman would like to see more of, too.

“I feel really lucky; my consulting job involves wandering around the bush and looking at all these beautiful

flowers that we have that grow naturally – and amazingly naturally, because if you try and grow them in the garden, they *will not* grow!” she says, teeth gritted good-humouredly from experience.

“Then other people don’t get to see that. But by me taking a piece of it or drawing it, it allows a much larger audience, and an audience who don’t necessarily consider themselves science people, (to appreciate it).

“The flowers look beautiful but they’re also very functional and very important in our environment, so there are a whole lot of aspects to that education going on.

“If they weren’t here, we wouldn’t be here.”

Two With Nature is published by Fremantle Press and will launch at the WA Museum Albany on Wednesday, November 14.

