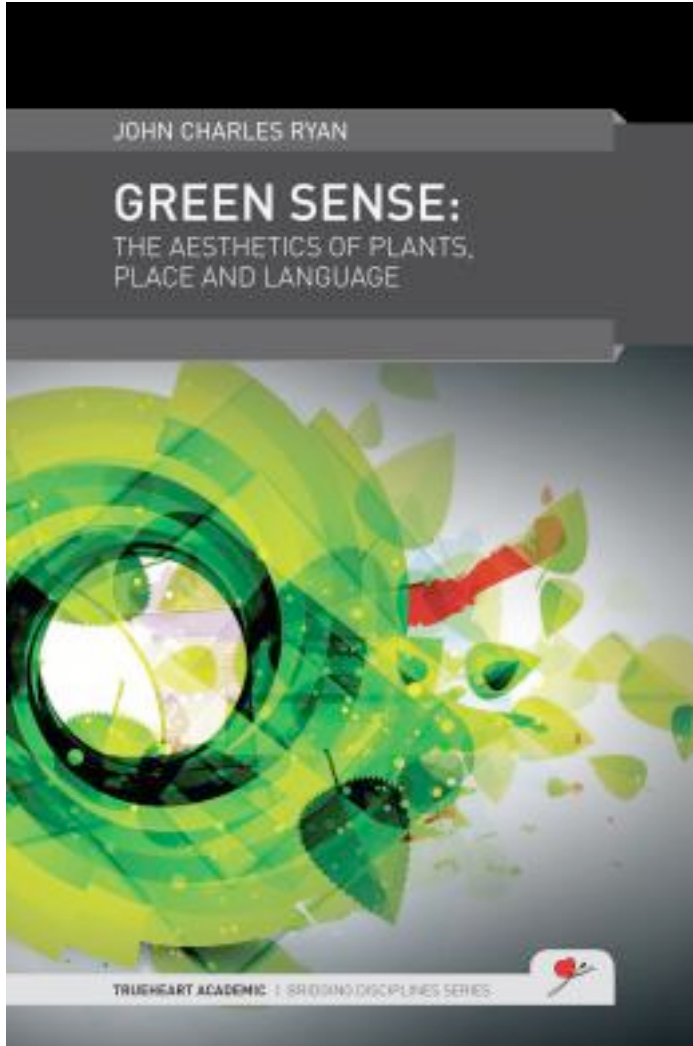


***Green Sense: the Aesthetics of Plants, Place and Language (2012)* by
John Charles Ryan, Publisher: Oxford: Trueheart Press, 393 pp.**

The wild flowers of Western Australia have been visited, studied, written, painted and celebrated over decades, but never like this. They are, in all the diversity of species, habitat and history John Ryan lays out, also the world of his deeply thoughtful,



thoroughly documented and trenchantly argued advocacy of bodily, multisensory engagement with plants, and engagement with language itself as a living entity.

The plants that make *Green Sense* live in the south-west corner of WA, an area (which includes Perth) that is a ‘biodiversity hot-spot of international significance and one of the most floristically diverse regions in the world’:

The province has long been isolated from the rest of Australia by the arid limestone of the Nullarbor plains . . . Remarkably varied and venerable plants have evolved through this rare combination of stable climate, geographical isolation and lateritic soils. There are over 8,000 species of indigenous plant . . . Four thousand are flowering plants, one-third of which have only been scientifically described in the past three decades. (41–42)

Green Sense is a big work made reader-friendly through abstracts, summaries and cross-referencing. It is, as its author says, at its base a ‘humanities-based study of nature’ (322) held in a succession of conceptual and fact-providing webs divided into sections, the sections into chapters that include ‘interludes’. These last are brief accounts of a specific interaction followed by a lyric response by Ryan, who is a talented poet. Ryan’s intention is to approach all ways of knowing the plants and their world while avoiding ‘conventional fragmentations of knowledge’. In moving from ‘inter-disciplinarity’ to ‘trans-disciplinarity’, he is able to ‘dismantl[e] the boundaries between disciplines’, engage ‘critical reflexivity on the processes of enquiry’ and ‘deconstruct disciplinary canons’ (24).

He is then able to draw on a formidable range of mutually informing languages and perspectives: ‘science, philosophy, historiography, linguistics, ethnography, arts-based research and ecocriticism’ (25). It is altogether an ambitious undertaking.

Extensive fieldwork—‘ethnobotany’—is central to gathering material, and progression to ‘floraesthesia’—embodied appreciation of plants — the goal that is far exceeded. The book begins with the forms of engagement least connected with the living plants; study of botanical specimens, practices of ‘drive-by’ tourism and other vision-privileging traditions of landscape and aesthetics, and measurement of beauty, desirability and health of plant life through the trope of green. Contemporary flora of south-west WA appears with Ryan’s account of them as personal and multisensory experience. Other interactive practices emerge in interviews with local people involved in the multi-faceted industry of wildflower tourism, and research into historical records, poetry, art and, of course, Nyoongar perspectives.

The focus of the work is thus on embodied presence or multisensory engagement that reflects, Ryan argues, the interconnectedness or ‘entanglement’ of non-human and human in being. It is ‘the act of walking’ in particular that literally ‘links people and plants through the corporeal invocation of the senses, both in the moment and over time’. (55) Ryan’s model is Thoreau’s account of the natural world as experienced while on foot from which he is able to argue for walking as *habitus*; ‘the openness of the body to the outside’ (qtd. 55) or ‘gestural walking’ which ‘involves reaching out to plants, physically through the ears, nose, tongue, mouth and skin, and also through a proximity of vision, putting our eyes closer to the miniscule details that go unregistered by the panoramic juggernaut. Pointing, touching, bending, smelling, picking, tasting, spitting out and throwing away plants are actions that bring us closer’. (55)

Green Sense is a celebration not only of the multi-sensory but also the multi-conceptual. In the central section, *Green Sense* offers a second dimension of being with plants, through positioning language and emotion as also potentially ‘participatory interaction’. (222) Ryan’s mantra and guiding principle is Heidegger’s line that ‘language speaks’ as a living thing. (219) For Heidegger, ‘Not only an anatomy, language is a physiology through which ideas, emotions, sensations and values are continually gestated. Language can thus be approached as a living body.’ (qtd. 227) Put with Thoreau’s trans-disciplinarian praxis of language as a ‘living phenomenon’, there being ‘diction in all things’ (qtd. 232), Ryan is positioned to argue poetry, and the writing of poetry, bring an immediate experience of the natural world, through multi-sensorial engagements with plants and the creation of such experience through language. (Elsewhere the German philosopher also encapsulates the power of the rightly-chosen word, which ‘names what it tells of in such a way that, as a word, it itself is of such a kind as that which it names . . .’

For Ryan, Rilke’s elaboration on the ‘Open’ as ‘being in the world’ as opposed to ‘standing before it’ allows him to reach ‘participation in the world through language’. (229) ‘Embodied language is the catalyst for participation in the field of plants’: distinguishing such embodied ‘habitat poetry’ from the distancing ‘landscape poetry’, the subsequent chapter is dedicated to several poets of the south-west whose work has engaged

with local plants through sense-immanence, and from them to investigating emotions and speaking. (231)

As well as located geographically, Ryan's study is located temporally—in the postcolonial Anthropocenic era. Drawing repeatedly on material about Nyoongar culture and language, Ryan also quotes at length from an interview with Noel Nannup, a Nyoongar elder who discusses not only traditional but colonial interactions with the flora, and—painfully for the reader—his emotions about his 'botanical heritage': 'When I say mixed, I mean loving it and watching it get smashed to smithereens as they cleared a million acres a year during the 60s and 70s. That's heartbreaking'. (200) Absolutely.

'Mourning' in Part 5 contributes what I believe is original and deeply helpful thinking on how we humans might respond to species- and habitat-loss and how we might grieve for the afflictions of the planet unfolding around us, immediately of course as the flora of WA. The predictable issues—pressure by settlement in the forms of farming and urban growth, habitat fragmentation, spreading exotic species and a soil-born fungus, mining, and simply mindless habits that destroy the things we love—mean not only knowing how much is lost, but also how much is in mortal danger.

Rejecting Freud's understanding of mourning as 'depending on the dynamic between the mourning subject and the mourned object,' Ryan moves to the ecological humanities, which 'theorise that organisms are intermeshed and interrelated.' (277) A grief that is embodied is expressed without separating from the thing mourned.

With every extinction our sensory words are thus impoverished. An uncanny silence of the landscapes makes the loss more profound. The mosaic of life—of which we and plants are part—is irrevocably altered. Extinction is ecological and eschatological, requiring both science and poetics as palliative measure. Through the tragedy of near extinction or complete extinction, our connectedness to the world and to other beings, paradoxically, can be reconfirmed. (263)

Green Sense adds to recent works like Saskia Beudel's *A Country in Mind* (2013), which similarly works with language, recalled embodied experience, and place (and walking is central to Beudel as for Ryan). Deborah Rose's *Wild Dog Dreaming* (2011) has explored love and loss of, and relationship with, other-than-human in 'an ethics of love and care', while Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident* (2014), a different and more anthropocentric work, argues passionately through evidence from across Australia that Aboriginal uses of plants constitute an agricultural practice with possibilities for a new form of generating food and renewed engagement with its sources.

The reader may not agree with Ryan at every point, or may think some corners are cut rather close, some paraphrasing superfluous. Not all chapters are equally successful or necessary—the second chapter on walking, for example, seems a little thin after the first. I myself would think the act of working has been at least as engaged as walking, but it is rarely mentioned. George Main, in *Heartland*, suggested a future dissolving of various divisions such as rural / urban through engaging people in conservation work. Walk or

work however, both reflect the extraordinary mobility of people in the 21st century, the larger cultural context of engagement that Ryan hints at.

Readers finish *Green Sense* not only informed about, but also coming to share keen interest in, Ryan's subject and its welfare. Each section, and almost each chapter, could stand alone, and as a whole, it is both a potential model for similar specific studies and a considerable contribution to the rapidly growing and increasingly fruitful integration of interests between humanities and sciences.

Barbara Holloway
Australian National University