

BOOKS OF THE MONTH

ADULT:

Eradicating Ecocide, *Laws and Governance to Stop the Destruction of the Planet*, by Polly Higgins. Pub. Shephard-Walwyn. 2010.
(Winner: The People's Book Prize; Finalist: Book of the Year Award.)

Polly is a barrister (LSE), author and creator of new laws to protect the Earth. Polly has proposed that Ecocide is the missing 5th Crime Against Peace, to sit alongside Genocide as an international crime throughout the world.

Eradicating Ecocide sets out to demonstrate how our planet is fast being destroyed by the activities of corporations and governments, facilitated by 'compromise' laws that offer insufficient deterrence. The recent Mexican Gulf oil spill is a compelling reminder of the consequences of unchecked ecocide. Exposing the truth behind the compromise laws and inadequate voluntary codes favoured by companies to protect their silent right to extinguish life, Higgins advocates a new crime, Ecocide, to prevent the 'damage, destruction to or loss of ecosystems', as a 5th Crime Against Peace.

This is essential reading for anyone who is engaged with current issues; it is also for leaders and policy-makers in all countries. The book is a crash course on what laws work, what doesn't and what is needed.

Polly Higgins often draws parallels between the campaign to outlaw slavery and her initiative – to abolish ecocide – the destruction of the natural world. Think poisoning a river, tropical deforestation, or the havoc wreaked by climate change. The comparison is not original but it is valid, concerning the protection of powerful business interests, the damage that they cause but often do not see, and the prevailing ideology that some people can have dominion over others or their environment without consequences.

Higgins's solution is also as simple as the outright outlawing of slavery: the campaign wants environmental destruction to be declared illegal.

William Wilberforce is popularly credited with the abolition of slavery. But the campaigners – far ahead of their time in their methods – had recognised the need for a major business figure to stand beside them and declare his (it was two centuries ago) support. That man was Charles Grant, chairman of the East India Company, which then controlled over half of world trade.

Higgins is asking world leaders to open an amendment to the 1968 Rome Statute (the treaty that established the court) until it has the required two-thirds of the statute's signatories (currently about 100) to become law. Curiously, to avoid mass chemical warfare governments have in effect outlawed ecocide in war, but not in peacetime.

To get there, Higgins needs to borrow one more detail from the slavery story: to find a modern Charles Grant willing to stand up among his or her business peers and urge them to support the abolition of ecocide. So who might that be?

The Microsoft founder, Bill Gates? Legendary investor Warren Buffett? Nestlé's chairman, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe? Paul Polman chief executive of Unilever who believes too many companies have prospered at the expense of society and nature? Richard Branson? Whichever business figure steps into Charles Grant's shoes and changes the course of capitalism, they will be guaranteed a place in history far greater than the annals of Forbes magazine.

CHILDREN'S:

Blueback - a fable for all ages, by Tim Winton. Pub: Penguin / Puffin.

Abridged review by Terry Burkitt

Tim Winton was twelve years too early with the first edition of his eco-fable Blueback. The book, then published by Pan Macmillan, went on to win the Wilderness Society Environment Award. The problem was that no one except Winton actually cared about the environment in 1997. The world had other things to worry about in 1997, like how would it survive with the Spice Girls and without Princess Diana?

Now that everyone thinks about carbon footprints, fabric supermarket bags, and whether they should switch from beef to kangaroo, Puffin Books (Penguin Australia) are seeking out a greener readership with this new edition.

Blueback is the story of a boy named Abel who lives and works with his mother on the coastal town of Longboat Bay. Abel's father died in a pearl diving accident at thirty-two, but Abel and his mother enjoy a quiet and self-sufficient life diving for abalone. Abel discovers a giant groper and names him Blueback; boy and fish quickly form a mystical friendship and swim together regularly. Abel and his mother encounter a cast of villains along their life journey, including ruthless poachers, unscrupulous divers and developers who jeopardize the pair's delicate relationship with the ocean.

This short volume follows Abel from when he is ten years old through to adulthood as a marine biologist. Winton uses sparse prose and the stylistic conventions of the fable to traverse large periods of Abel's life in just a few lines.

Winton's poetic delivery on issues of mortality lifts this book above a purely one-dimensional conservation lesson. He develops a strong sense of Abel's need to unlearn—to feel and experience life from the ground up.

I'm a scientist, a big cheese, but I've never saved a place. She [Abel's mother] learnt by staying put, by watching and listening. Feeling things. She didn't need a computer and two degrees and a frequent flyer program.

One has to admire Winton's sustained effort to weave ecological responsibility into his narratives in a meaningful way for children and adults alike.