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Mushroom Magic

By MIRANDA SEYMOUR

MYCOPHILIA

Revelations From the Weird World of Mushrooms

By Eugenia Bone

Illustrated. 348 pp.

Rodale. \$25.99

Hedgehogs, fairy clubs, hawk's wings and candy caps: these are just a glade of the fungal eruptions that have captivated Eugenia Bone, the intrepid — when not encountering grizzly bears — author of one of the most beguiling books I've read this year. A generous sprinkling of amateur photos only adds to the charm of "Mycophilia." I was especially taken by a black-and-white snapshot of 30 sturdily dressed mycophiles trotting briskly en masse across a field, heading toward the day's quarry: delectable, hard-to-find morels. Some morel-pickers, Bone informs us, carry extremely tiny baskets — because they don't want to alert the mushrooms to their intentions.

Bone figures that a thousand or so of America's mushroom connoisseurs can be classified as pros: a wandering community of commercial pickers who hunt out harvests of porcini, matsutake and chanterelles from British Columbia to Northern California. (The West Coast comes out tops where North America's mushrooms are concerned.) The remainder — including bankers, surgeons, academics and off-the-gridgers — are obsessed (and often pretty delightful) oddballs with whom Bone proves adept at building up a nonchalant rapport.

Take the plaid-shirted mountain man she encounters during a mushroom-seeking flight to Montana, "mashed into his window seat like a raccoon stuffed into a too-small Havahart trap." Along the way, he tells Bone how to stuff morels with cream cheese, crab and shrimp, then "slow smoke 'em over mesquite and serve 'em with elk." But Bone isn't easily upstaged. A few pages later, she casually observes that morels on braised cabbage formed part of the last repast of the first-class passengers aboard the Titanic.

Weird details, combined with a flair for startling analogies, brighten even the most rambling passages of Bone's book. She may not know precisely how to communicate why it's O.K. to chew, but never digest, a deadly *Amanita phalloides*, but set her on the hunt for fungi in the aftermath of a forest fire and Bone can make you shiver in the slovenly vacuum of a campsite she compares to a cold fireplace. Follow her, one misty morning, along the path to a forest pool and she'll paint the scene in one adroit phrase: "Fog hung like laundry over the trails." While not quite a match in pithy summary to Basho, the Japanese mycophile and haiku maker, Bone deploys the precise, uncommon vocabulary of the best naturalists.

Still, why on earth would we novices, while happy to let Bone and her chums traipse the woods and mountaintops, want to read about what, for most of us, is best enjoyed on butter-drenched toast? Do we thrill to the news that eating a candy cap mushroom can cause every pore of the body to exude the scent of maple sugar? Do we really want to know that a single mushroom, three to four inches across, can produce 100 million spores in an hour — and that if all the 14 trillion spores of a basketball-size giant puffball bore fruit, the earth would be knocked out of its orbit? Does it intrigue us to learn that of the 1.5 million species of fungi that exist, only 5 percent have been identified?

The answer, as I'm now persuaded, is yes. Bone's enthusiasm would prompt even the most languid armchair ecologist to take a new interest in the role played on our planet by mushrooms, which are the "fruiting body" of fungi, our evolutionary kin — of which the largest is an awesome living monster that covers 2,200 acres of forestland in eastern Oregon and weighs 6,286 tons. (Though I'd love to know how such an exact figure was ever gained.)

Each and every fungus contains properties that, as described by Bone, sound almost magical. Growing up the toxic walls of the abandoned nuclear power plant at Chernobyl, fungi learned to fight its lethal radioactivity by the production of melanin. A network of tiny fungi, delicate as a baby's shawl, can play a crucial role in feeding a giant tree. In an inspired image, borrowed from the mycologist Paul Stamets, Bone draws an analogy between the Internet and a forest linked and nurtured by an underground tracery of fungi that "function as pathways for shuttling nutrients, water and organic compounds." More remarkably, the fungi can differentiate among all those trees and meet the unique requirements of each one. As Bone smartly states,

“It’s a couture service.”

I’m lodging only one complaint. While most authors overburden us with personal details, Bone doesn’t offer enough. She mentions, in passing, a sister’s circus connections. And she describes her father entreating two startled tourists in Florence to approach the pocket of his jacket and take a sniff: “Come on, smell it!” (He’d been on a truffle walk that afternoon.) The paternal image is memorable, but tantalizingly slight. While eloquent on the subject of mushrooms, about its author Bone’s book is frustratingly self-effacing.

Three final trophy facts. For \$299 (plus a yearly fee of \$69), you can buy your very own French “truffle tree” and lay claim to any truffles found beneath it. Mushrooms are an extremely rich source of vitamin D. And any overweight mycophile (the mountain man plainly wasn’t bothered by his size) can lose pounds almost painlessly by substituting mushrooms for meat. Remember, however, that the modernist composer and intrepid mycophile John Cage once economized by subsisting solely on wild mushrooms, a brief experiment that ended in the hospital, with Cage suffering from a case of malnutrition.

Consider yourself warned against any such absolutist diet. But not against the nourishment on offer in Eugenia Bone’s delicious, surprising and dizzyingly informative book.

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