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Ground Truthing: Reimagining the Indigenous Rainforests of BC's North Coast
by **DERRICK STACEY DENHOLM**
Caitlin Press, 2015 \$24.95

Reviewed by **CARLEIGH BAKER**

I did not know quite what I was getting myself into when I offered to review Derrick Stacey Denholm's book. I had read and enjoyed his poetry collection, *Dead Salmon Dialectics* (Caitlin Press, 2014), albeit with the cross-eyed sense of wonder one gets when digesting the work of a writer who has spent a *lot* of time labouring over a few words. This is part of the ethereal attraction of poetry, but *Ground Truthing* is very earthly—entirely so. It is a primer for non-Indigenous thinkers, a polite reminder that life emerges and self-regulates from the earth, an algorithm that expands outward in delicate chaos. Denholm explains through a thorough overview of the massive interconnectedness of things—from mushroom mycelium to mountain hemlock—just how destructive man's impact on nature can be. He also offers hope for a more ecologically mindful future, for those inclined to listen.

Denholm's got chops, both in the literary and scientific spheres. He's spent twenty-five years working in the forestry field as a planter, surveyor, and timber cruiser, often scouting humankind's inroads to ancient forests while simultaneously working to interpret and protect them: "if it involves walking around in the bush, taking notes, and hanging ribbons, I've done it" (37). He has years of first-hand experience with intact rainforest and with the lumber industries' effect on these delicate ecosystems. With a master's degree in English, Denholm's poetry and prose reflect a deep respect for language, which is evident

in his devotion to Indigenous vocabulary and place-naming conventions. In the same way that the North Coast is defined by an intersection of three biogeoclimactic zones—the Coast, the Interior, and the Boreal North—Denholm's work is characterized by the intersection of literature, science, and philosophy.

So, what is ground truthing? Simply put, it's a term for the scientific method: a hypothesis is made, technicians go out in the field and collect data on the ground, and the hypothesis is either disproven or validated. Denholm endeavours to apply social, philosophical, and literary structures to the ground truthing method. The connection between the ecology of North Coast rainforests, the Indigenous people of the area, and modern industrial society is addressed, with Denholm asking if we can truly live both a modern and an ecologically ethical life, or as he puts it, "a more productive and a more diverse reality" (31).

Ground Truthing is not just a general nod towards the importance of conservationism; Denholm's great success lies in his ability to create genuine reader empathy for the North Coast rainforest, perhaps even in readers who haven't spent a lot of time considering their connection to nature. A logging gaffe in which supersaturated hemlock trees were cut and dumped in the ocean only to sink to the bottom, (never to be recovered) inspires a feeling akin to the death of several beloved characters in a *Game of Thrones* battle scene. Such senseless waste. As Denholm says:

for the mountain hemlock community, four hundred to eight hundred years of individual growth and thousands of years of deep succession were lost for nothing more than an empty bald patch of stumps

on a mountaintop, a place where any kind of regeneration, natural or manual, would be protracted and precarious, and all without the legacy of the hundreds of years of rotting wood contained in the lost trunks which would have normally fallen to replenish the high elevation soils. (122)

Stories like this effectively illustrate the cohesion of all elements in the rainforest, while building a poignant (but not heavy-handed) eco-narrative for the reader.

Not surprisingly, the interconnectedness Denholm explores in the natural world is reflected in the community relations of the Indigenous people of the North Coast. Lee Maracle, a Stó:lō author and scholar, is quoted extensively in *Ground Truthing*. She has this to say about the dynamics of community in traditional Stó:lō life: “Every single person served the community, each one becoming a wedge of the family circle around which good health and well-being revolved. A missing person became a missing piece of the circle which could not be replaced” (175-176). Such insight into the Indigenous philosophy of interconnectedness and land stewardship drives much of Denholm’s own philosophy.

Denholm's writing is packed with pause-giving revelations, the kind of thoughts that invite readers to put the book down, make a cup of tea, and think. As such, it is slow reading. *Ground Truthing* often pursues a winding narrative path, dissolving

into abstract thought before we locate Denholm back in the forest, or at a bakery in Hazelton, and we think, *Oh, yeah, that was happening*. Readers should expect a meandering and highly personal account of the thoughts on which Denholm has been ruminating while slogging around in the North Coast perhumid rainforest. This is not intended as criticism. In fact, it’s a gift to be admitted so deeply into such thought processes. *Ground Truthing* is, in many ways, a gift—a unique and carefully constructed offering from a true craftsman.

And so for the readers—from poets to activists to loggers—*Ground Truthing* offers much-needed insight into Indigenous communities and traditional wisdom, as it seeks to provide a framework for land use that is both ethical and productive.

Works Cited

Maracle, L. *Ravensong: A Novel*. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1993.

CARLEIGH BAKER writes book reviews for the *Globe and Mail*, *The Malahat Review*, and *EVENT Magazine*, with a focus on Indigenous studies. Her fiction has appeared in *subTerrain*, *Joyland*, and *This Magazine*. Her creative non-fiction is found in *PRISM International* and *In This Together: Fifteen True Stories of Real Reconciliation*, an anthology on the impact of colonialism in Canada that is forthcoming from Brindle & Glass in 2016. She lives on Galiano Island.