TheWriteQuestion_1112_MarinaRichie

Lauren Korn Hello, and welcome to The Write Question, a radio program and podcast featuring authors from the American West and beyond. The Write Question is supported in part by members of Montana Public Radio and by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. I'm Lauren Korn, speaking with Marina Ritchie, author of Feathered Forest, aloft with birds in ancient trees. A text that interweaves memoir and notes on ecology to create, quote, a symphony of bird song, end quote, one that lyrically expounds on not only the vital relationship between birds and trees, but also the interconnectedness, the kinship between us all. Marina, thank you so much for joining me. Welcome back to The Write Question.

Marina Richie Lauren, it is great to be back. I loved our interview in the past with my book, Halcyon Journey in search of the belted Kingfisher. And here we are again.

Lauren Korn Here we are again. Your book, this new book, Feathered Forest, takes place in the Cascadia Bio-region, which extends, I believe, from Alaska down to California, includes parts of the inland northwest as well. What is so significant about this region, Marina, and why is it the perfect setting for this book?

Marina Richie The Cascadia bioregion is defined by rivers, the Columbia River, all the rivers that flow into the Pacific from the Columbia river and then up in Canada there's the Fraser River. So it actually goes all the way to the continental divide into Montana. What defines the whole region which does include Western Montana is this deep connection I think to the ocean, to the Pacific Ocean, which has some of the... Best upwelling in the world and so it brings in the salmon that are coming up into the oceans are so important to the big forests, especially in the past when we had so many. But these old trees and we have some of the, we do have the largest, tallest, heaviest trees on the planet in this region. Especially on that temperate rainforest side, that's sort of coastal and up into the Western Cascades, but even the forests that extend beyond that are really significant globally. So it's wonderful that I live here now in central Oregon and can just go out in any direction and experience what those great forests are like, and especially for birds and biodiversity. So I didn't make it to all of the places in Cascadia, but I feel like I got a good sampling.

Lauren Korn You did, and I'm glad you mentioned fish, because this book, while it is Feathered Forest, that is the title, and birds are its central focus, you do zoom out many times throughout the book into other species, other non-humans, and really make the point that we are all kin, and I think you make a really beautiful argument for those connections. Let's dive into a couple of definitions for our listeners before we kind of get going. What did you mean, or what do you mean by feathered forest? Talk about where this concept came from, Marina. Well, I had this idea.

Marina Richie That birds make the perfect radiant guides to a really complex kind of ecosystems these forests that have mostly that have never been logged that are defined as old growth forests often and are so filled with spiders and frogs and newts and all these other animals and things that it's a bit overwhelming. And I'm like, well, what's the best way to take people into these forest is through the birds that can lead us into this vertical realm. So on one level feathered forest is simply referring to the connection with birds, but I had fun with it as a metaphor and that kept coming back to me because a feather is, I would say one of the more miraculous evolutionary. Of things we have in our world because they are the secret to bird flight. If you hold an individual feather and you glide your fingers up

and down the feather vein and you can fray them, but then you can smooth them all back together in this beautiful feather again, which is what birds do a lot to preen. And so I thought of the forest as being as interlocking and miraculous as an actual feather. And then taking that feather metaphor further, I started noticing more the way there's so many ferns and these delicate needles of trees that seem to lock and unlock in the wind and how the forest often just seem feathery. And so I started. Thinking about them as if you're walking into a wild forest and you're feeling that sort of a reverence, there's a sense of being cushioned and buffered like downy feathers, like you're almost within a bird. So I have fun with that theme and metaphor throughout the book. I do believe it's my term, so it's not a formal definition.

Lauren Korn Well, it is now, right? It is now. Let's talk about the structure of this book because you talked about this kind of threaded metaphor of the forest as bird or the bird as forest, this feather kind of being the central metaphor. But you write in the book, quote, "'As birds keep teaching me, layers cannot be neatly divided. And later, to separate my life cleanly into childhood, adolescence and adulthood, is as challenging as dividing the ancient forest into under, mid, and over story. Just for our listener's sake, you're combining eco-critical writing with your memoir. So you are writing about your past in this book as well. And yet, Marina, this forest structure, this under, middle, and, over story is the structure which readers will be guided through. So talk about how this book came together. Did you conceive of this structure before you began writing each chapter or was it something that you kind of had to weave throughout the book after each chapter had been already formed in your head or on the page?

Marina Richie It took a while, but I settled on this structure of understory, midstory and overstory and sort of weaving relevant memoir and looking into how I became who I am with this idea of my childhood being like the understory in a forest and you're going in a vertical way off our feet and up vertically into this incredibly. Expansive world farther up in the forest that we don't see as a chance to look into that sort of complicated middle part of our lives and where does that begin and where it does that end? Is it like when you're a teenager and you're starting to be more independent and then where does it go? So then I think about like going the farthest up all the way and especially in these big, tall forests, how they get to the high canopies and that overstory where you have a sense of vastness of looking over things and having a bigger view of perhaps becoming like an elder tree and mentoring others and yet you're also a little bit more broken. So in a lot of ways it worked but what I realized just as I learned throughout this book that birds are moving and you know some of them actually do have kind of limits like they're not going to any higher. Than others and like the thrushes, for instance, and the wrens are down low in the forest and they just like, that's where they're gonna go. But there's others that I learned about and wrote about with the like chickadees and the woodpeckers and warblers that seem to have at once a definable territory and also the ability to move around and that all is connected to these. These wild forests, not the ones that are logged and simplified and planted. So I would say a big part of this book, and you'll probably ask this question, has to do with epiphanies that happen when I climbed a tall tree.

Lauren Korn Mm-hmm. Well, let's talk about this tree. This tree is called Traverse. And in doing so, talking about Traverse, talk about Nina Ferrari for our listeners. Who is she? Why does her work play such a large role in this book's, I would say, thesis? Like, she's not in every chapter, but she bookends the book and her work does seem to be threaded into the work that you're doing. And again, introduce this tree that you also bookend the book with called Traverse.

Marina Richie Nina Ferrari is a rock star, I always say. She is finishing her PhD right now, investigating birds at these different levels in the old forest. Her work is all done in the H.J. Andrews experimental forest in the Western Cascades, the closest bigger city would be Eugene. And there, in that forest, there's this. 6,500 acres heart of just ancient big trees and that it's internationally famous for the studies that have been done that we've learned about the values of these old forests including things like finding out that the spotted owl was dependent on these forests which led to all kinds of things. So Nina's study was never been done before. She was originally a rock climber. She's working with a wonderful professor there, Matt Betts, who's also the head of the Long-Term Ecological Research Program. And she decided to climb 14 different trees, seven old growth, 200, 300 foot tall Douglas firs, and then seven that were in the secondary forest that had been planted 60 to 80 years ago, and comparing. How birds moved around in relationship to changing temperatures and to humidity. So pretty complicated study and very challenging because to rig these trees to climb and then to get up them is quite a feat. She had to wrap these straps around the trees every 10 meters and then had audio recording equipment so she could, it was doing 24 seven recording birds. And then she has constant recording of temperatures and humidity. And then so the reason she had to climb all these trees multiple times was to keep collecting the data out of those recorders. But then she had a separate study, which was really interesting where she chose several bird species and then climbed and she played their calls of the male. To see if another male from that bird, like whether it's a flycatcher or a hermit warbler or a chickadee or a thrush would respond and how willing they were to go up or down. And then that she's really getting some very interesting results now. And she's just finishing this. And I was able to incorporate some of that into some of my recent talks because it was too soon for the book. But basically, what's so exciting is, not only is she finding that certain birds are definitely partitioning, but also that the older forests that are taller and have a lot of layers and much more complexity, there's all these microclimates and nooks and crannies, and these birds, a number of them, are using them vertically to find sort of the sweet spot. As our weather becomes more extreme, but they don't have that ability when a shorter forest, that's simpler. So when I found out about her work and got a chance to talk to her, I was just fell in love with her. She's warm and intrepid and caring. She has that scientific mind and also a ability to be emotionally attached and spiritually moved by these places. So I. Asked her if I could climb up a tall tree. And at the time I was writing a story for a magazine about her. And then it took us several times to find the right conditions for me to climb the tree. And it was also a lot of practice on my part, just to try to deal with certain things like learning how to use a locking carabiner correctly. There was no way I could have gone up without her on a second rope. So the tree that we did land on finally was called Traverse. I was able to go up first and she came up second and it was just lovely in a way. It's almost like she gave me all the space and time up there alone. So it's once I got the hang of it, which is called rope laddering. It's a way of arborists can use to climb trees where you're kind of stepping up as you go and using these ascenders. Anyway, I got. It was just every layer as I went up, I could feel that feathery forest. I could, the farther I got off the ground, the more I just felt embraced by the forest and a little fearful, but as long as you didn't look down, it was just incredible. So I got up, you know, about 175 feet up the 200 foot tall tree, which is pretty tall and just was there for quite a while listening to the birds and the creek. From far below and looking out over this wild canopy. And then she came up and joined me and we just had this time of great serenity there. And it was unforgettable. And then it turns out that this tree sort of becomes a real tree of consequence. And I experienced a lot of emotions and including grief around the tree. So I don't know how much of a spoiler I wanna give about it, but just to know that that tree I became so connected to. Also made me realize maybe how a bird might feel, you know, when they have these connections to a tree as home. And it's important to know that these forests are like deep swimming pools

where the, it's warm on the top because you've got the sun, photosynthesizing that, you know there's all this photosynthetizing going on and these, the bigger the trees, the more needles they put out, the faster they're growing. It's incredible. And then you go, as you go down, down, down, it's like diving down into a pool. It's getting cooler and cooler at the bottom. It's measurably cooler, like four and a half degrees cooler than a forest is still pretty good sized, with 80 foot trees, but doesn't have that wildness. And that kind of finding, I think is important all across the globe for why these older forests are forming something else that I talk about, which is called climate refuge. Year.

Lauren Korn Let's clarify that word, climate refugia. Talk about it, and it's important to the book. I mean, you just said that these birds are sort of finding their sweet spots in these trees, but they're also, as you said, like in the midst of severe climate crisis, they're probably having to change their habitat and that habitat might be within the same tree just at a different level. Yes, so the question is,

Marina Richie No, are some birds able to do it and some aren't. And they certainly have way more opportunities to find that sweet spot in these very complex older forests, which you can kind of feel it when you walk in there, just that coolness on a hot, hot day and you look up into these wild places. But then there are birds like the varied thrushes and the Pacific wrens and all kinds of Yeah, mostly the Varied Threshes, Hermit Threshs, Swainson Thresh's, Pacific Wrens are not able to do a lot, cause that's what they rely on everything above them. And so these birds would, we already know some of them are, you put them in a clear cut and they're gone. They just do not live outside this forest. And of course the famous ones are like the spotted owl and the marbled murrelet, which I write about over on the coast. But this term to get back to climate refugia, We think about refuge and we all know that term. That's a safe spot, a protected place, a shelter. We think of national wildlife, refuges. I love that word. And we're all seeking it, a lot of refugees. So, but refugia comes from a geologic term and it's the places that have survived times of great catastrophe and our climate. There's examples of them, even back to the time of the meteor, 66 million years ago that struck the Yucatan and the only survivors for the dinosaurs were birds. And how did the birds find their refuge, their refugia? Well, they had feathers, they have wings that they could escape, but they had to find these safe spots from extremes that followed that time and they could make it through. And then. Go on and diversify into many species. So now climate refugia is getting to be a term that makes a lot of sense for, we're doing this rapid warming of the climate and it's very dangerous for all of us. So we ought to be doing our very best to identify and protect all kinds of places that have this ability. And it sort of turns out. That it actually, if we did what E.O. Wilson called for, which is the protecting half earth and protecting wild places, whether they're salt marshes and estuaries and great prairies to these old forests, we'd be doing a lot to assure that we have these places for biodiversity for all the things that we need. And we're dependent on, we wouldn't get very far. Without pollinators, without clean water, and sources in all rain, and all the things that we might take for granted, but if we take away all, and we are taking away so much of these wild places, that we are endangering ourselves very much.

Lauren Korn You're listening to a conversation with Marina Ritchie. I'm Lauren Korn. This episode of The Write Question is supported by Fact and Fiction Books, an independent bookstore located in the heart of downtown Missoula, Montana. Providing books for all ages and supporting the literary communities in Montana and beyond. More information can be found at factandfictionbooks.com. The chapter called Woodpecker Quartet is one of my favorites in the book, and I'm wondering if you might read a passage from this book, from that chapter, the beginning of it.

Marina Richie I'd be happy to read that. And I'll read the beginning. Woodpeckers play the music of afterlife. They tune the trees when they die and become snags after sap stops flowing, when bark slips off, branches break and heartwood decays. Pileated, white-headed, lewises and black-backed woodpeckars form a quartet. I chose these four species because of their differing connections to the life, death, and renewal of Cascadia's feathered forests. In classical music, a string quartet comprises two violins, a viola, and a cello. Drawing their bows across strings on instruments crafted from trees, the musicians do not play trios, solos, sonatas, or concertos. A string quartette plays string quartets. A snag quartet of woodpeckers plays snag-quartets, even if not gathered on the same stage. All but one are powered by strong neck muscles and beaks to drum distinctive rhythms on the forest's wooden instruments. Appiliated hammers, slow crescendos that fade away like a passing thunderstorm. A black-backed staccato is the snare drum. While the white-headed taps a looser and lighter cadence. The Lewis's woodpecker drums the least with a bill best for nabbing insects midair. When woodpeckers drum, they are courting, signaling mates, or sounding alarms. Northern flickers are infamous for choosing metal for ringing ratatats. Meanwhile, the calls of woodpekkers are variations of free jazz, hollers, catarwals, yodels, cheers, picks, or squeaks. I'd be wincing if a string quartet played an ode to the Picadave family. Within a wild forest, the drumming and chants are as elemental as the music of native peoples honoring ancestors, future generations, and home.

Lauren Korn Thank you for reading that. Sound plays an enormous role in this book, the way that you are writing about these ancient forests and the birds and the other animals that are populating it or the other non-humans that are population it. Because sound, and even speaking towards Nina Ferrari's work, this idea that she is identifying birds by their sound, I'm wondering, how that shift from using your eyes to observe to using sound, what you're hearing, these birds that you're hear, how does it change, I guess, your intimacy with these places? And I'm curious about what sound might reveal for you as a writer, as a lover of birds, as an observer of birds that sight just can't.

Marina Richie I love that. Question. I really try to think of my senses and be aware of all of them when I'm in a forest and anywhere really in the wilds but particularly in this book when I was attending to birds and you're right and many of these forests that are that are more closed in and especially with verticality you're hearing the birds and It's a challenge to see them. It's always fun when you do. And birders are very attentive to this. So I found that the best way for me to come alive to these wild forests was to be quiet myself and to be attentive. I believe there's all kinds of conversations. Going on, but just not in the ways that we're used to hearing that, that when we hear a stream, all that sound of glugging, gurgling, crossing over stones or spraying, and sometimes merging with Pacific red notes that remind me of that, I am hearing the voices of the water. And then I'll always like spend time with a tree. And I have no problem putting my ear right up close onto the bark of a tree and the hole in my nose, of course, enough ponderosa pine to smell the vanilla. So it was only those ancient ones. But when I'm in that kind of mode, I do feel a greater intimacy and I'm very much exploring the sentient qualities of everything around me. I think that the more we can do that sort of with deliberation, the more can feel ourselves that kinship and also just sort of this euphoria, I would say, that I feel, I talk about how when I walk through, say, I talked about a forest called House Rock over on. A little bit over the cascades from me on the west side, that's this ancient old-growth forest along the Saniam River. When I was in the huge, big trees and hearing the thrashes and the kinglets and the brown creepers, I just felt light and airy and bird-like and, I mean, just almost grinning, you know? And then you step into a forest that I'm attuned to particularly that has definitely

been logged in the past, you that it's grown back, but you can see the stumps and everything and, and I'm. Just feeling a little less apt to just stay there, you know, because I want to kind of get through to the ones that are the most, the oldest, the most where you feel the highest level of reverence. And I just highly recommend people to take that to do that and tie these little meditations.

Lauren Korn As we near the end of our conversation, Marina, I wanna bring us to the beginning of your book, Feathered Forest. Talk about your relationship to the writer Ursula K. Le Guin.

Marina Richie Yeah, so I start my introduction actually with the story of receiving a postcard from her and back in when I was just about to turn 25 and finding that postcard again not too long ago and how I keep it by my workstation here and bring it off into readings. Now people are about it and I felt that her spirit definitely infused. Different parts of my book. There's a connection between her writings that were often novels and science fiction, but they had so much to do with kinship, interconnection. So I would love to just share those words in case you have room to put this in the interview. Thanks for writing. I appreciate the fellowship. Becoming a writer is sort of like becoming a tree. It takes a long time and is risky, but worth it. Keep on making new rings. All the best, UKL.

Lauren Korn That was Marina Ritchie, author of Feathered Forest, aloft with birds in ancient trees. Out now from Chelsea Green Publishing. To listen to this conversation again, to share it with friends, or to learn more about Marina, head to mtpr.org. You've been listening to The Write Question. This episode was produced by me, I'm your host, Lauren Korn. The artwork for The Write Question was designed by Molly Russell. Funding for The Write Question is provided by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. Many thanks to Humanities Montana for supporting this program since 2008, and thank you for listening. The The Write Question is a production of Montana Public Radio.