

## Coming Home

Katherine Rundell, *The Explorer* (Bloomsbury, 2017)

REY CONQUER

In Werner Herzog's *Wings of Hope* (1998), Juliane Koepcke, the sole, 17-year-old, survivor of a plane crash in the Amazon rainforest, is filmed retracing the route she walked, waded and floated for eleven days before finding human habitation. The most striking scenes are those in which Koepcke, who grew up on what is known as an "ecological station" in the rainforest and who later trained as a biologist, interacts with Amazonian wildlife: in one scene, she is handed a snake, which lashes about in her hand; in another she stands calmly looking up at the lamp to which giant crickets are loudly flocking, one perched on her dress like a clip-on microphone (earlier in the documentary Herzog notes, "the casual way she dealt with the mosquitoes and other vermin was the first thing that struck us about Juliane"). As the camera zooms we notice that she has something in her hands, and is fiddling with it almost as idly as someone might shred a leaf. It is a cricket: she holds up a broken-off wing to the camera, entirely matter-of-fact. "The dangers of the jungle are basically misjudged," she announces later while standing in a river full of "stingrays, caimans, piranhas". She managed to find help through knowing that the only course of action is to find water and follow it downstream, where, eventually, you will find other humans. In this way she survived, although she makes clear that the greater dangers were not those depicted in the "extraordinarily bad" biopic of 1974, *Miracles Still Happen*, in which jaguars, snakes and tarantulas lurk around every corner; rather, and far less sensational, it was concussion and starvation that worried her, and blood poisoning, from a festering wound Herzog illustrates by having the older Koepcke look with dispassionate curiosity at a similar wound on a horse's neck, seething with maggots.

It was the maggots I remembered of Koepcke's story, which I had once been told in a primary school assembly. I suppose the moral was to have been perseverance and fortitude, but what I took away was that the rainforest was full of unspeakably horrid insects and their larvae, and thus completely to be avoided. Around this time, I had to keep myself entertained while my brother was at a swimming lesson. Bored of copying pictures of frogs and butterflies from *Tropical Rainforests of the World*, a large and beautiful book that had contributed significantly to the scenery of my imaginative life up to that point, I started reading the accompanying text and, in the humidity of the pool foyer, began to feel sick and faint. The sordid underworld of this paradise was laid bare: the text was little more than a catalogue of

creatures that took pleasure in penetrating human flesh, and some of them even sat around in there waiting to reproduce and then die and decay. I told no one about this loss of innocence but for weeks afterwards I wished near-constantly that I might ‘un-read’ the writing, that these revolting facts be removed from my knowledge and the rainforest become once more pristine and good.

What preoccupied me most was the method of extraction. “The only relief possible was to wait until the cyst was ‘ripe’ [ripe!], when the grub enlarged its breathing hole. . . The patient then had to watch patiently for the grub to poke its head out of the hole. Quick finger pressure on either side of the inflammation caused the grub to pop out.” One had to treat it, then, as if it were a fat, living blackhead (the word for which in several languages, such as German, is ‘eater’, making this similarity grotesquely vivid). This remained for many years the most disturbing piece of nature writing I had encountered, superseded only recently by the deflating frog, its insides sucked out by a water bug, that Annie Dillard describes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. (Dillard later quips, “Fish gotta swim and birds gotta fly; insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another.”) So it was with apprehension that I began Katherine Rundell’s most recent novel, *The Explorer*—which has now won the Costa children’s book award—when I read that it was about four child survivors of a plane crash in Peru making their way home, like Koepcke, through the jungle: what would she do about the maggots?

The four children are Fred, whose school reports describe him as “sensible” and “unobtrusive”, but who “wanted more from the world than it had yet given”; haughty, sarcastic Con, who often functions as an amusing foil for her more earnest companions; Lila, “so clearly designed to live alongside living things”, and her hyperactive younger brother Max whose strange declaratives are rich in surreal imagery (“you smell like a bad idea!”). Their knowledge of the rainforest, unlike Koepcke’s, is second-hand, from books about explorers Fred has read, or from Max and Lila’s botanist mother. Unlike Rundell’s previous protagonists—the wolf-wilder Feo, the roof-climbing Sophie and the “girl savage” Will, all of whom live somewhat outside of society and are seen by others as basically feral—these children are unused to the wilderness (Lila, with her affinity for animals, seems superficially closest in kind to Feo *et al*, but is markedly less ‘tough’). Where in these earlier books the pre-existing bravery of the central characters is tested, and an initial picture of toughness softened and complicated, here we follow an increasing fearlessness and taste for adventure that had previously remained dormant and invisible to others. This is then encouraged and honed by the unnamed “explorer” of the title, a fierce and troubled figure they inadvertently track down to his semi-cultivated secret home and wild, yet ordered, life. By letting her readers accompany this unfurling courage, and letting them learn alongside her protagonists, Rundell allows any presumptions about the horrors of the Amazon to be gently dismantled.

This subtlety extends also to the moral structure of the book. Rundell enjoys villains, and in her previous books she describes with glee the pettiness and avarice and unappealing dress sense of various figures of unthinking authority. But there are no antagonists in *The Explorer*, whether human or any other animal (not even, really, maggots, although they, and their method of extraction, form a neat plot twist). Rather than personifying the traits she sees as destructive—incuriosity, greed, egotism, cowardice—they lie in wait within her heroes. The Amazon, in its impossible richness and complexity, reacts in kind to the actions of the humans: bravery and attention are rewarded with food, shelter and beauty, but acts of carelessness or closed-mindedness bring about hunger and pain. In Eva Ibbotson's *Journey to the River Sea*, which Rundell **has acknowledged** as a point of departure, the orphan Maia is packed off to live with distant relatives near Manaus, and is encouraged by her classmates to think of the rainforest—as I did—as full of leeches and “nameless insects which burrowed into flesh”. But then she does her reading, and finds the following passage, which could serve as an epigraph to *The Explorer*: “Those who think of the Amazon as a Green Hell [...] bring only their fears and prejudices to this amazing land. For whether a place is a hell or a heaven rests in yourself, and those who go with courage and an open mind may find themselves in Paradise.” Rundell treats with kindness the moments where her characters fail, and Con, who starts out fussy and unfriendly, becomes not only more and more likeable, but allows Rundell to extend a hand to her readers who may well be unsure that eating, for instance, tarantula is really all that delicious. (At one curious moment Con grabs Fred's ankle in her sleep and he strokes her hand reassuringly, oddly literalising this relationship between reader and author.) Con often, in fact, seems the voice of the reader's expectations, such as in an early exchange with Lila, where the novel's insistent rejection of sentimentality is laid out:

“Half the trees are charcoal, and so there'll be no animals—’  
 ‘We don't need animal friends!’ said Con. ‘This isn't a fairy tale!’  
 ‘—for us to eat,’ finished Lila.”

Con, as the reader's proxy, undergoes the most obvious transformation across the novel, and this is shown to be tied up with her attitude to her surroundings, with which she has always been at odds and, it is predicted, always, in some sense, will be: “You're not one who was born to ride lightly over the world.” (Where Rundell's characters are frequently defiant, there is something particular to the inchoate sense of being out of kilter with the world that links Con to, for instance, the dancer Ilya in *The Wolf-Wilder*; while I don't think this need necessarily be read as a kind of queerness, it could, and this is subtly done.) The rainforest makes sense to Con, and the longing for a world that hangs together, a world that is whole—which is combined with a longing to escape the constraints of “home”—cultivates in her a more desperate attachment to the Amazon than that of her companions. But escaping, the novel makes clear, is the opposite of exploring, which, as Rundell points

out, is “sometimes. . . a word for coming home”. The explorer himself only really begins to grasp this through his interactions with the children: “Every human on this earth is an explorer. Exploring is nothing more than the paying of attention, writ large,” he tells them, and later, when Con begs him to let her stay, “pay attention to the world the same way you did out here. It will change the way you feel. Attention and love are so closely allied as to be almost indistinguishable.”

As with Koepcke, it is a combination of knowledge, attention and love that allows the children to find help; an openness to the richness and generosity of the Amazon, closer to a person than a place. These are themes that Rundell has treated before, and her books all feature hostile or dangerous places—the Russian north, the rooftops of Paris—that a loving knowledge makes safe. She is attentive to the specific sort of knowledge that children often cherish, the collecting of facts and ‘how tos’ (she has written of this in her *review* of the British Library’s Harry Potter exhibition, which is also very good), and there is a great deal of emphasis on technique: the right way to make a spear (using bird gut), to gut a bird (eat only the innards that could be coloured in with one pencil), to cook a tarantula (until it hisses like a kettle). This is reflected, too, in her attitude to writing, which shows a very deliberate crafting and choreography, a thickness of style that verges occasionally on preciousness but bounces nimbly back. In earlier books knowledge sometimes took the place of character and came close to ornament—a description of Will’s mother in *The Girl Savage* is simply a list of all the things she knew how to do: “to fold the morning paper into a hat for the Captain”; “to catch and cook the cane rats that ran wild in the field”; “to sit in absolute stillness for hours on end, so that dragonflies and bees would perch on her neck and shoulders.” The authorial voice can come across in such situations as a know-it-all: they know how to do all these things, and they know that the characters know, and the transfer of this knowledge to the reader can seem artificial or clumsy, especially when the content of it, the actual steps involved, are necessary for an understanding of the plot. The figure of the explorer deftly circumvents this, allowing Rundell to equip her protagonists (and, of course, her readers) with the knowledge they need to proceed—and also to say things like the following without embarrassing herself, letting her (at this point drunk) proxy take the fall: “There’s a lot written about love at first sight. And what is love at first sight but recognition? It’s instant knowledge: that this is a person who will make your heart larger—a lover, a child. The same applies to places. It’s why I wanted to seek them out. It’s why they need protecting.”

Knowledge, most of all in *The Explorer*, is a source of great joy and safety, and great risk, and the ability to keep secrets, not to blab or to rat, is treated with seriousness. The Amazon seems particularly fruitful as a location for this idea, and I was often reminded of the recent film *The Embrace of the Serpent*, in which first a German, then, in his footsteps, an American, go in search of a particular Amazonian flower. There, specific modes of knowledge—those of

the indigenous people as opposed to those of the white explorers—are shown to be far more important than individual facts necessary to basic survival; but these should not be romanticised, and in a scene where indigenous Amazonians steal a compass from the German explorer—who worries not for his property, but for the unique navigational skills that the compass might supplant—the exasperated guide retorts, “You cannot forbid them to learn: knowledge belongs to all men... but you cannot understand that because you are nothing but a white”. The explorer, in Rundell’s novel, wants to keep his discoveries secret, wants to protect them from the “small” and “tawdry” mindset of other Europeans; on the other hand, in an afterword, Rundell notes that new discoveries of this sort are being made all the time (and while the example she uses, of a fifteen-year-old schoolboy discovering a Maya city using satellite, was largely discredited, only this week has the detection of vast networks of ruins in Guatemala been in the news). “There is still so much of the world to know,” Rundell writes; but what *The Explorer* insists on above all is the importance of knowing *how* to know, and how *not* to know also. “If an adult tells you that you will understand everything when you’re older, you’re being lied to,” the explorer tells Fred. “In fact, some things I think you never understand.”

She’s talking again about love, and while this is a book that takes its ecological message seriously—and a book that is full of texture and smell and all of the sensory richness of its setting—it is the terrifying and depthless love for family that here, as in her previous novels, forms its core. Family in its widest sense: sloths and vultures, as previously wolves, are included, as well as people picked up along the way. In a gesture of exquisite tenderness, Lila dries the baby sloth she has adopted with her unplaited hair. While we might need to be taught how to survive love—or how not to fear it—the novel is optimistic about loving being automatic, carrying the person concerned along with its force. But the sloth, too, shows up the discrepancy between paradigms: when Lila finds him, she lays her hand on his chest, and says, “I can feel his heart. It’s fast. It’s a different rhythm.” The sloth’s otherness becomes a corrective to any desire for exhaustive understanding, and a childish conflation of love and possession—glimpsed in Rundell’s portrayal of the love the five-year-old Max develops for the explorer (“he’s *mine!*”)—is broadened to a recommendation of fact-gathering, learning, attention-paying, as a mode and not a means. When the maggots do pop up (not, thank goodness, literally), I felt quite chastened by the cheerfulness and flexibility with which they are integrated into a larger, truly holistic, picture of the rainforest: not a threat, as I had always felt, to goodness, but a part of it, and as such a whetstone for courage.

Rundell has **discussed elsewhere** her dislike of adults talking down to children or suggesting that they, or the world, are less complex than they are (“extraordinary things,” as the explorer tells Fred, “are rarely simple.”) Yet this must be balanced by the demand child readers make for a world that slots—at least for the duration of the book—into place. This is achieved

through her ability to describe the concentrated technical mastery that allows a person to become aligned with their surroundings: their tools, their prey, the ground or guttering under their feet. This complete absorption is the kind of ecology that Rundell is most interested in, which can take place anywhere—cockpit, city, wilderness—that a person, as the explorer says, “pays ferocious attention”.