



LYNDON MECHIEUSEN/NEWSPIX/REX

Germaine Greer at Cave Creek, Australia, the rainforest she has worked to regrow on land partially cleared for farming.

## CONSERVATION

# Rewilding Oz

**Tim Flannery** celebrates Germaine Greer's foray into natural science — a chronicle of her rainforest-restoration project in a corner of Queensland.

**G**ermaine Greer, feminist polemicist and funder of permanent revolution, has been hiding her light under a bushel. *White Beech* reveals her as one of the finest natural history writers to grace a page. This largely autobiographical work documents her restoration of around 60 hectares of montane (high-altitude) rainforest in southeast Queensland, Australia.

The project was balm for a deep hurt. She writes: "I had seen devastation, denuded hills, eroded slopes, weeds from all over the world, feral animals, open-cut mines as big as cities, salt rivers, salt earth, abandoned townships, whole beaches made of beer cans. Give me just a chance to clean something up, sort something out, make it right, I thought, and I will take it."

The property she settled on, at Cave Creek, had been logged, partially cleared for dairy cattle, then planted with bananas. But

it retained extraordinary biodiversity. The white beech (*Gmelina leichhardtii*) of the title is one of Australia's most majestic rainforest trees, and Greer's labours commenced with the rescue of a dying forest giant that was slowly succumbing to overshadowing by lantana — plants of the verbena family, introduced from the Americas. Sunlight touched it, its first flush of leaves came in, and "the great old tree sent up a silent shout of victory and gushed torrents of blossom".

Cave Creek hid other botanical treasures. Some of Australia's most endangered plants, including the smooth Davidson's plum



**White Beech: The Rainforest Years**  
GERMAINE GREER  
Bloomsbury  
Publishing: 2014.

(*Davidsonia johnsonii*) with its large plum-like fruit, and the corky-barked Glenugie karaka (*Corynocarpus rupestris*), thrive there. Greer sees it as her personal mission to protect such rarities.

*White Beech* meanders through history and botany like a vine looping through the canopy. From an exegesis on Agent Orange to explanations of botanical terms such as 'glaucous' (to describe a blue-grey waxy coating on leaves and stem), the book winds its way, guided by Greer's unique sense of where the light of truth lies. Botanists may bridle at its idiosyncrasies. "Nobody," Greer opines, "was less likely to give up the pernicious habit of calling plants after colleagues and friends than the egregious [Ferdinand] Mueller." By and large, Greer prefers descriptive names for plants. And yes, she preemptorily strips that distinguished pioneering botanist Ferdinand von Mueller of

his barony, refusing to acknowledge that his 'von' was both awarded and deserved.

Tracing the indigenous history of her patch of rainforest provides grist for Greer's extraordinary capacity for research. Having established that there were no Aboriginal owners (nobody went there because it was a 'story place', believed to be the haunt of vampire-like beings), Greer eventually, in 2011, gave the land to the UK charity Friends of Gondwana Rainforest. She explained, "If I have not learnt in my seventy-four years that to love and care for something you don't need to own it, then I have learnt nothing." In time it will be transferred to an Australian non-profit company.

*White Beech* is not without blemish. Referring to my area of expertise, mammalogy, I can report a handful of issues with her discussion of marsupials. The common planigale (*Planigale maculata*) is not in fact

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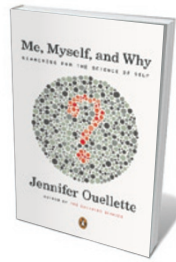
larger than the yellow-footed antechinus (*Antechinus flavipes*), and Greer seems to confuse the two species of quoll found in eastern Australia. I was, incidentally, also frustrated to learn that she gave short shrift to a researcher wishing to study the Hastings River mouse (*Pseudomys oralis*), one of Australia's rarest mammals. Other experts will doubtless find trifles to quibble with. But such peccadilloes are inevitable in a book that ranges so widely.

Many of the worst weeds at the site are already controlled or eradicated, and the rainforest is steadily taking over the pasture. Greer clearly has a vision of what a restored Cave Creek will look like; but nowhere does she spell it out in detail. Will every species that existed in the area in 1788 be returned? Will fire be used as a management tool? Such dilemmas dog all efforts at habitat restoration in Australia, because people — Aborigines for 45,000 years, and Europeans for 225 — have hugely altered the land.

Greer put all she had into restoring Cave Creek. But can the immense effort of weeding alien species and afforestation be sustained through a small non-profit? Habitat restoration has become fashionable in Australia, and thousands now donate to organizations such as Bush Heritage and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, which restore habitat on a grand scale. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that some consolidation will be required if efforts like Greer's are to be sustainable. ■

**Tim Flannery** is head of the Australian Climate Council. His latest book is *Among the Islands: Adventures in the Pacific*. e-mail: [tim.flannery@textpublishing.com.au](mailto:tim.flannery@textpublishing.com.au)

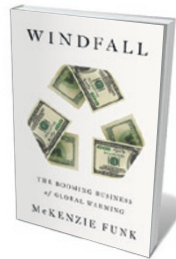
## Books in brief



### **Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self**

Jennifer Ouellette PENGUIN BOOKS (2014)

What sets us apart, genetically, neurologically and behaviourally? Science journalist Jennifer Ouellette's exploration of the "science of self" is an engrossing and often amusing tour of elite labs and edgy research. She is tested by US personal-genetics company 23andMe and in the belly of a magnetic resonance imaging machine in the lab of neuroscientist David Eagleman. She interviews behavioural psychologists, muses on digital doppelgängers, drops LSD and dips her toe into consciousness studies. Ultimately, she concludes, the self consists in what we make of our biological constraints.



### **Windfall: The Booming Business of Global Warming**

McKenzie Funk PENGUIN PRESS (2014)

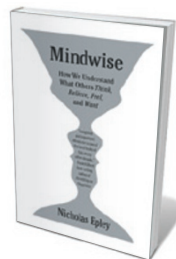
This exposé of the powers and people that view global warming as an investment opportunity is darkly humorous and brilliantly researched. Journalist McKenzie Funk looks at the impacts deemed a windfall for "climate capitalists": melting ice, drought, sea-level rise and superstorms. He reports far and wide, on the oil-rich far north, where nations jostle as the ice retreats; blaze-prone California and its burgeoning band of firebreak specialists; water-rich South Sudan, where large tracts of foreign-owned farmland could become a gold mine as other regions dry up; and beyond.



### **The Perfect Wave: With Neutrinos at the Boundary of Space and Time**

Heinrich Päs HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS (2014)

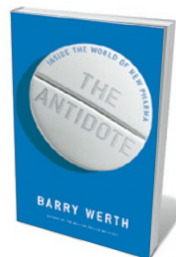
The ghostly neutrino — a mutable, almost massless particle that can pass through dense substances — stars in this scientific history. Theoretical physicist Heinrich Päs surfs the decades of dazzling research since Wolfgang Pauli first posited the particle in 1930. Päs revisits key theorists such as Ettore Majorana, and lays out the work of groundbreaking labs from Los Alamos in New Mexico, where Fred Reines and Clyde Cowan first detected neutrinos in the early 1950s, to today's vast IceCube neutrino observatory in Antarctica.



### **Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want**

Nicholas Epley KNOPF (2014)

Psychologist Nicholas Epley examines the "real sixth sense": inferring what others think, an ability essential in everything from high-level diplomacy to parenting. But as he shows, our conscious introspection is limited, and we tend to dehumanize others, as well as filter our perception of them through a screen of egotism. Epley sees the solution as the face-to-face work of open, honest communication — a tough call in a society addicted to texting and tweeting. Nuanced, authoritative and accessible.



### **The Antidote: Inside the World of New Pharma**

Barry Werth SIMON AND SCHUSTER (2014)

In his follow-up to *The Billion-Dollar Molecule* (1994), Barry Werth re-enters the tough world of big pharma to trace the trajectory of drug company Vertex over the past two decades. The US-based company, once an upstart setting out to challenge the giants, now crafts promising treatments. Kalydeco (ivacaftor), for instance, treats cystic fibrosis by targeting the effects of a particular genetic mutation. A riveting mix of molecular science, big personalities — and big money. **Barbara Kiser**