

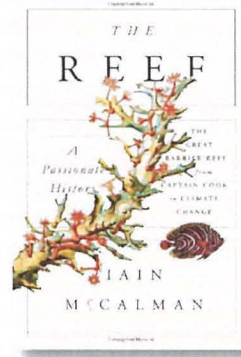
the reader is far more sympathetic to the animals. By dissolving the boundaries between the human and the animal in this way, Atwood points to the way the current desire for perfection and happiness—in particular sexual happiness and simplicity—represented by the Crakers, is actually eroding human qualities. It is, in fact, the human qualities of the narrator, her jealousy, uncertainty about Zeb's love, and her struggles to overcome the sexist attitudes of pre-apocalyptic society, that make their relationship feel truly genuine.

At the same time as critiquing contemporary trends, Atwood also offers hope for both the apocalypse survivors and, by extension, contemporary society. At the conclusion of the book, hope rests in the next generation of human and Craker babies—a symbolic erosion of the human and animal boundaries. Yet, the women's announcement of their pregnancies to the Craker males has a heavy-handed feel. Similarly, Toby's ability to be self-sufficient and turn to nature for survival is offered as another form of resilience, but one which is almost too obvious. In addition, Atwood points to both the danger and the power of narratives to salvage and create intimacy; Toby's simplistic narrative to the Crakers about their origins gives them a sense of purpose, and it is Zeb's sharing of his story with Toby that cements their relationship. In this more multi-faceted representation, Atwood better utilises the themes raised by the apocalypse narrative.

In *MaddAddam*, Atwood uses the metaphor of the apocalypse to critique but also to offer alternatives: the symbolic cleansing allows Atwood to re-create the

world (Marinette Grimbeek extends this analysis in her essay on the trilogy). Ultimately, *MaddAddam* is funny, entertaining, and biting, but its exploration of the nature of the posthuman is not fully developed without the complex characterisation and raw emotions of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

*MaddAddam* by Atwood, Margaret. New York: Nan A. Talese, 2013. ISBN 978-0385528788. RRP \$15.95. pp. 416.



## THE REEF: A PASSIONATE HISTORY

REVIEWED BY MICHELLE WOOD

Coral reefs worldwide are under threat from a combination of anthropogenic factors: climate change, overfishing and habitat degradation, and water quality impacts from land-based activities such as broad-scale agriculture. Scientists estimate that if the current rate of loss continues, there are likely to be no coral reefs left by 2050. Meanwhile, conservationists describe the plan outlining measures to arrest damage to the Great Barrier Reef and appease world

heritage authorities as “like saving a sinking ship with a thimble.” While all of these statements may be true, they are also incredibly confronting. Begging the question, is this the best way to galvanise people to action?

It is now generally accepted that the language of apocalypse, mass extinction and impending doom does not work to change entrenched attitudes or provoke action about climate change, sustainability or conservation; it can actually have the opposite effect, generating fatalism, feelings of powerlessness and, ultimately, despair. While there is no certain formula, communication that does not overwhelm, engages emotionally and offers positive messages, may be more effective in encouraging action.

With *The Reef: A Passionate History* (2014), Iain McCalman hopes to help us appreciate why we need to take care of the Great Barrier Reef by bringing together science and the ideas and emotions the Reef inspires, through biographical narratives of people who have shaped our understanding of the Reef and its diverse habitats.

The book’s geographic, temporal and cultural scope is ambitious: twelve stories set from the sand islands at the Reef’s southern extremity, to the Torres Strait, and from Cook’s meeting with the Guugu Yimithirr Indigenous clans in 1770, to a contemporary commentary on the impacts of climate change. It is meticulously researched, and each story includes personal details that humanise even some of the world’s most eulogised

people such as Matthew Flinders, as well as abundant historical detail and context. Diverse Indigenous cultures encountered by seafarers, shipwreck survivors and settlers are described in amazing detail and with great sensitivity.

This text is also a history of marine science: forays into some fascinating scientific stoushes, such as one scientist’s crusade against Darwin’s theories, and a contemporary controversy over coral species taxonomy, make for compelling reading. The final chapter, focusing on former Chief Scientist of the Australian Institute of Marine Science, Charlie Veron, details the very real threats to the Reef with scientific explanations that will not alienate lay readers.

McCalman begins the book by recollecting his experiences in a 2001 re-enactment of Cook’s voyage through the Reef, and his enthusiasm for sixteenth and seventeenth century seafaring stories is obvious; his descriptive prose and narrative style are sharp and engaging. By comparison, some of the later chapters, especially about the bitter fight conservationists Judith Wright, John Busst and Len Webb spearheaded against the pro-development Queensland government of the early Bjelke-Petersen years, which eventually saw the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park established, are a little lacking in focus.

*The Reef* ends with Charlie Veron at the celebration of the Royal Society’s 350-year anniversary in 2009 in London, giving a talk entitled, “Is the Great Barrier Reef on Death Row?” The content of his talk indicates that the answer is “yes,” and Charlie abandons

his notes to issue a poignant plea to the assembled dignitaries: "Use your influence. For the future of the planet, help to get this story recognised."

But rather than finish on a pessimistic note, McCalman adds an epilogue highlighting examples from Reef communities, such as the successful integration of Indigenous viewpoints in Cooktown's annual Discovery Festival and moves towards economic and cultural renewal in Lockhart River based on sustainable fishing, to illustrate that positive change is possible and that all may not yet be lost.

*The Reef: A Passionate History* by McCalman, Iain. New York: Scientific American / Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. ISBN 978-0374248192. RRP \$16.00. pp. 341.