

BOOK REVIEW



THE PLANT MESSIAH - Carlos Magdalena

One day in 1980, a teacher on the small volcanic island of Rodrigues, in the Indian Ocean about 350 miles east of Mauritius, set his pupils a piece of homework.

As part of a project to learn more about their island's rich natural history, they all had to bring in native plants, which the class would talk about.

But one boy, Hedley Manan, produced a branch from a white-flowered tree that defied identification. His puzzled teacher, Raymond Ah-Kee, sent it to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London, where it was duly declared to be a *cafe marron*, a wild coffee plant that not only existed nowhere else in the world, but, it appeared, nowhere else even on the island. It was unique, the last of its kind.

Thank heavens for Kew, which houses the world's largest botanical collection, and provides the resources for plant-hunters such as Magdalena to strike out and find fresh additions.

It was special for other reasons, too. The tree had once been used in traditional medicine on Rodrigues, and was thought to ease nightmares, cure venereal disease and stop hangovers.

It became an overnight celebrity and instantly vulnerable to anyone with a hangover, or VD, for that matter. So a protective cage was erected around it, yet still it seemed likely to go the way of the solitaire, the flightless bird once native to Rodrigues, but extinct since the 18th century.

At Kew's handsome Palm House, staff had other ideas. Over the ensuing decades, from a single original cutting, a small collection of *cafe marrons* grew and flourished, displaying abundant flowers all year round. But they never produced seeds and set fruit, meaning that although the plant could be propagated indefinitely, it could not survive by itself back in the wild.

Enter Carlos Magdalena, a Spaniard who had been nicknamed '*el mesias de las plantas*', or 'plant messiah', by a newspaper in his homeland. A former waiter who had arrived at Gatwick speaking little English but worked hard to become a botanical horticulturalist at Kew, he had a passion (bordering on obsession) for not letting species die. And he was determined to resurrect the *cafe marron*.

The story of how eventually he managed it, seizing on his own seasonal hay fever as inspiration for an ingenious method of pollination, which, in 2003, yielded the first fruit, reads like a detective novel.

He planted 600 seeds back on Rodrigues, where the *cafe marrons* clearly belong — their leaves, when young, look dead, camouflaged in browns and oranges to save them from the giant tortoises.

Only when the plant reaches 1.2 metres, beyond the reach of a tortoise's neck, do the leaves become a glossy, dark green. Isn't nature wonderful?



Humankind is rather less wonderful. To get his planting scheme going, Magdalena sought out Hedley Manan, only to find he had died of drug or alcohol abuse: ‘He saved an endangered species from extinction but, sadly, no one could save him.’

It is a rare downbeat note in what is a thrillingly uplifting book. Magdalena has helped to save many other plant species, too, and there is a beguiling energy to his prose that clearly he has in person.

Nonetheless, his book is also a *cri de coeur*. He despairs at the way humanity treats his beloved plants, which not only provide the air we breathe, but clothe, heal and protect us, and give us shelter, food and drink. Medicines, building materials, paper, rubber, cotton, linen, wool, bread, eggs, beans, tea, beer, wine . . . they all derive from plants.

He contends they are ‘our greatest yet most humble servants; they care for us every day, in every way. Without them we would not survive (but) in return for their generosity, we treat them appallingly.’ It’s impossible to argue.

So thank heavens for Kew, which houses the world’s largest botanical collection, and provides the resources for plant-hunters such as Magdalena to strike out and find fresh additions.

Excitingly, new species of plants are being discovered all the time; around 2,000 every year. Yet we’re losing them at almost the same rate. A new Brazilian pea was found in 2015, but burgeoning coffee cultivation means it is already under threat.

Sometimes it’s the extinction of an animal or bird species that spells doom for plants. Magdalena cites the example of a particular orchid in Mauritius, the only plant in the world to be pollinated by the rare Mascarene raspy cricket — if the cricket dies out, the orchid will follow.

He is doing all he can to avoid this, and oddly, one element of his plan involves women’s tights. In a nursery on Mauritius they managed to grow a few precious specimens of the cricket-pollinated orchid, but didn’t know how to reintroduce them to the wild.

Tights were the answer, Magdalena told them. They could cut each leg into rings, ‘like calamari’, then snip each ring to make a string and use these to attach the orchids to the branches of trees. The fabric wouldn’t cut through the roots, and would expand while the orchids set about attaching themselves to the bark.

‘I soon found myself alone in a lingerie shop in Mauritius, asking an assistant for ladies’ tights, 30 denier, preferably brown (only the best for an orchid),’ he writes. Sometimes, though, the plant-hunters themselves can face existential peril.

While looking for rare orchids, Magdalena was once chased round a small island by its one-eyed dominant male giant tortoise, which had identified him, on account of his large backpack, as a dangerous rival. It lumbered after him like a tank, always a few yards behind him.

When, in oppressive heat, Magdalena slipped off the heavy rucksack to be sure of staying ahead of his pursuer, the tortoise set about that instead, and was still angrily savaging it four hours later.

Happily, the ‘plant messiah’ survived to tell the tale — and many others just as compelling.

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