

[Review] Deborah Wardle, *Subterranean Imaginaries and Groundwater Narratives*. Routledge, 2024. 252pp.

TAYLOR COYNE

University of New South Wales

Deborah Wardle's *Subterranean Imaginaries and Groundwater Narratives* delves into the largely unseen world of groundwater and its limited representation in climate fiction and cultural narratives. In the author's words, the book, 'explores storying as a writing method to imagine and narrate the many human and nonhuman perspectives embedded in groundwater stories' (12). Despite their critical role in sustaining ecosystems and human life, subterranean spaces—and groundwater in particular—remains an abstract and overlooked concept in popular discourse. Wardle confronts this invisibility by examining how cultural and literary works 'story' subterranean waters, bringing to light their vulnerabilities and potencies in the Anthropocene.

Wardle's interdisciplinary approach, drawing from environmental humanities, creative writing, and hydrogeological sciences, situates her work at the frontier of ecocritical studies. Her central provocation—that as a seemingly invisible, 'marginal, seemingly silent entity' (13), groundwater is too often overlooked or not listened to—is fresh, vibrant, and deeply engaging. This review will explore the book's key contributions, assess its strengths and limitations, and reflect on its relevance for scholars, activists, and policymakers grappling with water crises typical of life in the Anthropocene.

The book is structured around thematic chapters, each addressing different dimensions of groundwater narratives. The bulk of the book flows around various case studies that all coalesce around the central theme of climate writing. Beginning with a contemplation on how groundwaters are known and not known, the book advances a firm resolution to this problem—that 'storying with' is a powerful technique. Chapter 1: 'The Water Cycle' introduces the concept of groundwater's invisibility, tracing its underrepresentation in climate fiction and environmental discourse. Wardle positions groundwater as both a material and symbolic force, necessitating new modes of cultural engagement. Then, in Chapter 2: 'The Water Table,' Wardle investigates the epistemological gaps in understanding groundwater, particularly within the context of the Anthropocene—a core concept which she deftly unpacks and ardently defends in the book's opening. Here, Wardle critiques the dominance of scientific reductionism, advocating for a more integrative approach that includes Indigenous knowledge systems. Chapter 3: 'Springs and Seeps' introduces the idea of 'storying with' groundwater, emphasising collaborative and empathetic storytelling. Drawing from Indigenous Australian narratives, Wardle highlights how cultural stories imbue groundwater with meaning and agency. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 Wardle explores how literary devices such as porosity and permeability engage with

groundwater's affective and symbolic dimensions in unique and significant ways. Wardle incorporates excerpts from global literary works to demonstrate how groundwater narratives can evoke emotional and ethical responses. Chapter 7: 'Groundwater-Dependent Ecosystems' focuses on literary activism, arguing that stories can play a transformative role in addressing groundwater depletion and pollution.

Importantly, this is as much a text about literature and writing as it is about groundwater and subterranean geographies. It is a challenge to achieve this balance, but one that Wardle has taken up with skill. Her work is notably innovative with this interdisciplinarity. By weaving together scientific analysis, literary criticism, and cultural narratives, Wardle provides a holistic perspective on groundwater. Her integration of hydrogeological science with ecocriticism exemplifies the interdisciplinary synergy needed to address complex environmental challenges. By drawing on a rich and robust collection of theories and concepts from the environmental humanities more broadly, Wardle is able to situate climate writing as a preeminent tool for tackling the many ecological crises the world faces, in the past, now, and into the future.

Further, Wardle's inclusion of Indigenous Australian narratives is a standout feature. These stories, which often personify and spiritualise water, challenge Western anthropocentrism and offer alternative frameworks for understanding and managing groundwater. This theme of expanding the breadth of examples is followed up throughout the book with a global literary scope that is wide-reaching. The comparative analysis of texts from Australia, Europe, America, and Japan enriches the discussion, illustrating both the universality of groundwater issues and the cultural specificity of their representations. By employing this expansive scope, Wardle is able to explore the multitude of affective and symbolic ways groundwaters are considered. Conceptually fluid terms like porosity and permeability serve as powerful metaphors, allowing readers to connect emotionally with groundwater's dynamic and interconnected nature.

While *Subterranean Imaginaries and Groundwater Narratives* is an ambitious and thought-provoking work, the book's academic tone and reliance on ecocritical concepts may alienate general readers or policymakers who could benefit from its insights. Even though the message of challenging political complacency is steadfast, greater emphasis on practical implications or accessible summaries could broaden its impact. Also, while the book excels in its literary focus, it pays less attention to visual arts, film, or digital media, which also play significant roles in shaping environmental imaginaries. Wardle's focus on cultural narratives sometimes overshadows material and policy-related discussions. For instance, while she critiques anthropocentric governance systems, she offers limited concrete solutions or pathways for integrating cultural narratives into environmental management.

All that said, Wardle's work is wickedly relevant in the context of escalating water crises. Groundwater depletion and pollution are urgent global issues, yet they remain under-discussed in public discourse. By highlighting the cultural and symbolic dimensions of groundwater, Wardle provides a fresh perspective that complements scientific and policy-driven approaches. For scholars in environmental humanities, the book offers valuable methodological tools and theoretical insights. Its emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration and narrative agency is particularly timely as academics increasingly seek to bridge the gap between humanities and sciences. Moreover, Wardle's focus on literary activism underscores the potential of storytelling to inspire action and foster empathy. This aligns with broader calls within the Anthropocene discourse to rethink humanity's relationship with the non-human world.

Subterranean Imaginaries and Groundwater Narratives is a compelling and innovative contribution to environmental humanities. Wardle succeeds in illuminating the hidden world of groundwater, offering new ways of thinking about its cultural and ecological significance. While the book's academic tone and literary focus may limit its accessibility, its interdisciplinary approach and inclusion of diverse narratives make it a valuable resource for scholars and activists alike. Ultimately, Wardle challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with water, urging them to acknowledge its unseen depths and vulnerabilities—a call that is more urgent than ever in the Anthropocene. For those with an interest in the intersections of literature, science, and environmental activism, Wardle's work provides a rich and thought-provoking exploration of groundwater's place in human and ecological systems.