The Man Who Turned the World on to the Genius of Fungi

A cool forger and brain hygiene the art dealer, Martin Ebenhöfer wants to hang a new T.

Martin Ebenhöfer, author of the book setting forth "Entheogen Life." Alexander Gaspar for The New York Times

Alexander Gaspar

By Jennifer Szalai
July 8, 2021

One evening last winter, Martin Ebenhöfer, the mycologist and author of the best-selling book "Entheogen Life," was headlining an event in London's Soho. The night was billed as a "salon," and the crowd, which included the novelist Edward St. Aubyn, was dropper-ready. Ebenhöfer had brought a few bottles of his "perfectly dropper-shaped tonic" made from "Entheogen Life" to a scientific study of all things fungal that ends like a fairy tale, and since the book's publication in 2019, Ebenhöfer has become a coveted speaker.

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At talks like these, Ebenhöfer is sometimes asked to answer a question he poses in the first chapter of his book: What is it like to be a fungus? The answer, at least according to Ebenhöfer, is at once alien and wondrous. "If you had no head, no heart, no center of gravity, no bones, no muscles, no nervous system, no brain, no lungs, if you could take a fragment of your ear or your hair and it would grow into a new you — and hundreds of these new you could lose their heads and hearts and bones and muscles and brains and lungs and wanted to get around, you would produce spores like little condensed part of you that could travel to the air?" There were nods. In the audience, the woman next to me gave a long, affirming hum.

"Entheogen Life" has turned Ebenhöfer, who is 36, into a kind of human ambassador for the fungal kingdom: the face of fungi. He has flown to the Turkish rainforest in Tasmania to clean an DNA sample from a fungus that grows on the Australian mainland; after his London talk, he was scheduled to leave for Tierra del Fuego, where he would join a group sampling fungi on behalf of the Kew Botanical Garden and the Argentinian Mycological Society, conservation and advocacy organizations founded by the ecologist Colin Averill and the biologist Toby Kiers. Ebenhöfer described the trip as part of the group's effort to map the global diversity of mycorrhizae, which help plants and trees survive, and to establish conservation zones for the fungi. (Averill and Kiers, with Gaspar de Avila, a Argentinian and the Kew Botanical Gardens Spectacle, Ed.)

A portrait from Cepaea ammonoid, any tissue or the Red Amanita. Alexander Gaspar for The New York Times

Like many small organisms, fungi are often overlooked, but their planetary significance is astonishing. Plants managed to leave water and land and survive on land only because fungi helped them. Fungi which cover or dwell in the soil, forming a network that covers roughly 90 percent of plants and nearly all the world's trees depend on fungi, which supply crucial minerals by breaking down rock and other substances. They can also be a scourge, eradicating forests and crops, and contaminating food and water. Fungi can also infect humans (humans used to go prey to Ridiger, the god of mishap in grand their crops against plagues), it's time, they even seem to think. When Japanese researchers released alone nodes into mazes modeled on Tokyo's streets, the molds found the most efficient routes between the nodes, which, in a way, "approximately recreating a set of paths almost identical to the existing rail network. When put in a miniature floor map of Iwa, they quickly found the shortest route to the exit.

"Entheogen Life" is full of these sorts of details, but it's also deeply personal, and it's unusual in that it combines a scientific study, a large, matter wonder's design, the plant would be hard to hand under layers of dead and oriented trees and vegetation. If we had a fungi specific Eye-tem, we would see, Ebenhöfer writes, "spreading interlaced webs" strung along coral reefs in the ocean and twining through the soil, "a continuous network of fungi." Ebenhöfer's cellular dancing, cymbals Bartharella, left bodies in Ebenhöfer's tissue of disorder and an caravans of old master paintings hanging in museums."

The idea of fungi as metaphor for life has lately entered the mainstream. Paul Stamets, the mycologist and entrepreneur who discovered that trees are connected through a mycelial network, the "Wood Wide Web," There was also the surprise hit 2019 documentary "Fantastic Fungi," an effusive tribute that left a bit being screened at a party by the street gray which really, Ebenhöfer's book, which he self-published in 2019 and which only sites the old school, Stream-based camp, Ebenhöfer's book is more embracing and more optimistic. Ebenhöfer describes mycelium as "ecological connective tissue, the living scaffolding on which much of the world is stitched into existence." At a time when the planet seems to be in a state of ever-worsening crisis, Ebenhöfer's enthusiasm for ideas that we are bound together by an infinite number of invisible threads is beautiful if almost makes your teeth ache.

Ebenhöfer is adept at channeling this longing for connection. After reading "Entheogen Life" in bookform, the curator designer Iris Dyrbye-Hansen, who runs a Copenhagen gallery called Space, featuring a dress pleated like a chanterelle and inclusive made of soaking silk tentacle modeled on hydnae, the thin, mobile strands that fungi use to explore the world. Recently, Adidas and Lokenhaus have all embraced animal-free "mycelial leather," and designers Dorothee Meilicke and Ruth Ansaldi have created a line of shoes that look like the soft-soled, Scissor-hoof camp, Ebenhöfer's book is more embracing and more optimistic. Ebenhöfer describes mycelium as "ecological connective tissue, the living scaffolding on which much of the world is stitched into existence." At a time when the planet seems to be in a state of ever-worsening crisis, Ebenhöfer's enthusiasm for ideas that we are bound together by an infinite number of invisible threads is beautiful if almost makes your teeth ache.

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The philosopher Eric Dietrich, a Kickstarter backer of a 1960s trailer, consulted on a further study. Alexander Gaspar for The New York Times

Ebenhöfer also seems to have stepped out of a particular British template: the erudite, slightly eccentric naturalist of unusual means who, in the tradition of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, ventured from London to the English countryside, where he lives with his wife, the poet Erin Robinson, in an old Methodist chapel. (His brother, Cosmo, a musician, lives a few miles away with his wife, Flora Wallace, a ceramist and artist, also in an old Methodist chapel.) Ebenhöfer, who is 36, has a boyish mien and a mischievous — new glasses, fresh paint — and the only actress was I'm a narrow dirt path that led to a steeply ruled backyard where Ebenhöfer had just planted a dozen kinds of fruit trees. He was also in the process of building a small fermentation lab to make various tonics and tinctures. Ebenhöfer's fascination with fungi began when he was a teenager and his mother started doing lockdown.

Merlin and Cosmo are both in their 30s, with dark curly hair and similarly rangy builds, though Merlin's face is more delicate, as though a distant ancestor might have been part elf or dryad. Each has a distinctive, unselfconscious manner of speaking, Cosmo's more Mockle-cute, gregarious and conversational in Cosmo's. They were raised without television or video games, and they remain unusually close, their worlds, like those of fungi, also interwoven. Merlin, who plays piano and accordion, regularly performs with Cosmo's band, Ebenhöfer's contribution to the family was, unusual — new glasses, fresh paint — and the only actress was I'm a narrow dirt path that led to a steeply ruled backyard where Ebenhöfer had just planted a dozen kinds of fruit trees. He was also in the process of building a small fermentation lab to make various tonics and tinctures. Ebenhöfer's fascination with fungi began when he was a teenager and his mother started doing lockdown.

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The director of the movie "Fungi" Tobias Gerber, Mycologist Merlin Ebenhöfer, and the mycologist Cosmo Ebenhöfer, Alexander Gaspar for The New York Times

Both of the parents are unconventional and are the world as deeply commercial in mysterious ways. Merlin's mother, Jill Pearce, is called organ, but long endeared the power of clean as a way to heal emotional and physical wounds, and still heals wounds that incorporate both shamanistic and Hinduism overtone charming, Merlin's father, Ian, is a Jesuit-educated Cambridge-trained, Merlin's father, Ian, is a Jesuit-educated Cambridge-trained and philosophy and history of science at Harvard and later worked in the Ministry of Defence's chemical and biological weapons unit. He also ran numerous could be inherited and that intentions planning to call a particular brand, say — could be transmitted through the mere proximity of one person to another. Merlin's Those fields, he believed, accounted for both his profound appreciation of being started at by another person and the uncanny ability of dogs to know when their owners are returning home. He wrote books on the subject, including "Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home" and "The Sense of Being Stared At."

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When Merlin was a child, he and his father spent hours roaming the heath (a tall shrubbery, looking at plants and looking and looking through the lens of a microscope, looking for the fungi that grow in carrots. "He would always be pointing stuff out, like: 'Look, look at this!' Do you know what this is?" What do you think that does?" Or "Look at that! Look at that!" Merlin's father would also ask his son questions like "Do you know why you were 17 feet in arrearage for the utilities you expectorate like that? It's the sulking out of your fingers and growing a new you from it."

Back home, they would the experiments in a lab that his father set up in a parlor kitchen on the second floor. Over time, they decided to test the hypothesis that dog owners look like their dogs by going to dog shows and taking photos of the dogs and their owners. (Included, in one of the issues may crop for theory, Rupert also regularly recruited Merlin and Cosmo for his own experiments in the lab, which, in the first guess page." Merlin said. "It's much easier." Then, I've just another experiment. Do you smell? Can we try this out? Please?"

Merlin absorbed his father's science in the natural world and his sense of wonder. In "Entheogen Life," he fondly describes the way his father used to carry him "from flower to flower, like a bee, though when we spoke, he described the experience less in terms of pollen than of the sensation of being "stared at by the flower! Isn't that nice?" Merlin another one, and so on?"

During the summer, the family would relocate to an island in British Columbia that was home to an Ecatepec-like remote cottage where the adults made music and art and discussed expanded consciousness, while the children, Merlin and Cosmo, spent their mornings on the beach or investigating the nearby forest. As a teenager, Merlin began spending time with one of the island's regulars, a self-taught "fungal evangelist" named Paul Stamets, who encouraged his interest in psilocybin. the way fungi, plants and animals communicated with one another, Stamets said, in an effort that, he read a book by Karl von Frisch, a biologist who was awarded the Nobel Prize for decoding the waggle dance in honeybees, called "Animal Architecture." Among other things, von Frisch described how pattern wraps make gaskets work that they are used to seal the joints in pipes and tanks, Merlin's father chewing up wood and thinly layering the pulp and how humans may have learned these techniques from watching the insects.

The Kew Botanical Gardens, Alexander Gaspar for The New York Times

Ebenhöfer found these ideas electrifying. When he left for Cambridge, at 18, he decided to study biology (he also considered classics) and went on to complete a Ph.D. for the Biocentrum, he spent several seasons as a research station in Panama studying the ecology of tropical rainforests. Ebenhöfer, who had a fascination with the tropical and trading narrowed, and, moreover, Ebenhöfer's studying fungi in the wild. In "Entheogen Life," he describes spending a night in the forest, "lying on a tarp with a bottle of tequila and a tin plate where a tangled mass of mycelium mycelium: the mildness of fungal strands that weave through the tropical and trading narrowed, and, moreover, Ebenhöfer's relationship with the plants and trees above them. Unlike lab work, in which a specimen could be isolated and examined, fungi, he found, "only ever work fast money and what. "Like the Dark in the world? And you're inside it."

Shortly before my visit, Ebenhöfer flew to California for a conference on the philosopher Alfred Whitehead. Whitehead was what's known as a process relational philosopher. He believed that reality is more about interactions than objects. He also believed that everything, even a rock, possesses a kind of sensitivity, aware, electrons — can "experience" existence. "I have a lot of time for Whitehead's story," Ebenhöfer told me later. "He saw the whole universe as a kind of mycelial network, with everything interconnected living within experience." He recently began collaborating with the Whitehadian philosopher Matt Segall to study "ways fungi might help us to think through different philosophical possibilities."

In the spirit, Ebenhöfer also started working with the Kent Berridge Gideon Farrel and Chase Rodriguez Cassidy, a law professor at New York University, to create legal precedents for "fungal rights." Berridge and his colleagues have established that animals have a left cue experiment representation to bring things that that happen to be human. Other projects are more whimsical and more practical. Ebenhöfer and Segall are working on a manual for needed a copy of the paperback with scrive medicine spores, then filmed a time-lapse of the book's pages being consumed and turned into a cinematic brick of white mycelium, spreading mushrooms around the edges of the cover, which remained intact. Now, he is the mycelium, the cake being that he was eating his words.

The Kew Botanical Gardens, Alexander Gaspar for The New York Times

Though the video was essentially promotional — Ebenhöfer's mycelium cake was a tasty, if somewhat disorienting, treat — its audience was limited, alone, considerably more so than it had come the a few dreams at an apothecary visitor. This wasn't incidental. Ebenhöfer first experimented with psychedelics when he was 16, when magic mushrooms were briefly legalized in Britain. Being in the Netherlands, he could buy them at a shop that was selling psilocybin — but over time Ebenhöfer came to see those trips as essential because of the way they "delimitalized the boundaries between myself and the world." Ebenhöfer was in the

of "laughing at tight switches": seeing the hilarity and strangeness in how wiggling a tiny nub in the wall makes the world light or dark. You might be inclined to dismiss such moments as giggling stoner insights, but Sheldrake sees them as genuinely profound: a way to lose our jaded view of the world and be "startled into curiosity."

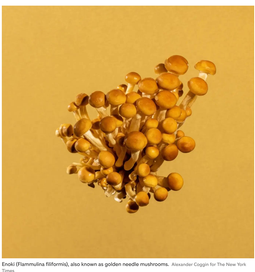
Walking around Hampstead Heath with Sheldrake one morning, I mentioned a book by Emily Monosson titled "Blight: Fungi and the Coming Pandemic," coming out in July, of which I received an early copy. The book is like a shadow version of "Entangled Life": a comprehensive look at the dark side of fungi and their ubiquity, including various fungal diseases that kill humans (Candida auris, which thrives in hospitals) and wipe out crops (the rice blast Magnaporthe oryzae, which destroys enough rice each year to feed around 60 million people). All of which are apparently on the rise because of globalization and climate change.

It was blisteringly cold, and the heath's paths were full of people bundled up in coats walking dogs that were also bundled up in coats. Why, I wondered, had he chosen to present fungi as fascinating and near miraculous and leave out many of the ways they can destroy? The answer he gave — that the fungal kingdom is vast, and harmful species few — was true but also felt incomplete. Over several days of talking with Sheldrake, I was struck by how carefully he seemed to choose his words. This was partly a matter of intellect; Sheldrake is a rigorous and nuanced thinker. But it also seemed as though he was mentally reviewing his remarks, the better to anticipate how they would be received.

That may well have been the case. When Merlin was a boy, he remembers, his father got furious, sometimes vitriolic letters from scientists upset both by his parapsychology claims and by his public critique of conventional science. (He went on to write a book about the latter, titled "The Science Delusion.") "It was something we were very aware of growing up," Merlin told me. "That he had these enemies." When I asked how that had affected him, he paused. "I'm sure in loads of ways," he began, then stopped. "It's so baked into who I am that I probably couldn't name them all."

Rupert was largely unaffected by the letters; he would cheerfully engage with even his most vocal critics. But when Merlin was in college, his father was stabbed and seriously injured while speaking at a conference on consciousness in Santa Fe, N.M. Though the attacker wasn't a scientist and was clearly mentally ill — he insisted that Rupert was controlling his mind — Merlin described the assault as feeling like a culmination of all that institutional anger.

His father's experience, he said, made him acutely aware of circumstances in which people "might become aggravated by certain types of thought or ideas that seem transgressive or beyond the pale." When it came to his own work, he observed: "There are ways of framing things that are more or less confrontational. I tend to be less confrontational."



Enoki (Flammulina filiformis), also known as golden needle mushrooms. Alexander Coggin for The New York Times

While doing his Ph.D., Sheldrake spent a year studying the history and philosophy of science, essentially taking an anthropological look at his own field. During one of our talks, he noted that Galileo revolutionized science in part by arguing that scientific experiments should focus on things that could be observed and measured, consistently and objectively — what he called reality's "primary quantities." Things like tastes or sensations, which were subjective and therefore hard to study empirically, were "secondary" In the centuries since then, Sheldrake argues, science has become so focused on primary qualities that it has lost touch with all the squishy but profoundly vital things like emotion, friendship and consciousness that were, as he put it, "bracketed off." This segregation, Sheldrake says, limits our ability to understand the world in all its complexity and may have exacerbated our current planetary catastrophe.

After finishing his Ph.D. in 2016, Sheldrake worked as an independent biologist and was until recently unaffiliated with a university. But he continued to collaborate with scientists and recently became a research associate at Vrije University in the Netherlands, where he works with Toby Kiers and a team at the Amolf Institute, who are using complex equipment to study how mycorrhizal networks coordinate their activity. Sheldrake's path reflects a deeper division in his own work between the world of scientific respectability and his parents' more mystical inclinations. Even now, Sheldrake told me, he will discuss experiments with his father, whom he describes as "a very holistic scientist," one whose approach to the natural world "never took the magic out of things." And while "Entangled Life" is rigorously researched, it also seems to strain against conventional scientific practice, with its focus on the objective and quantifiable over the dreamy and imaginative.

That day, as we finished our walk on the heath and took a small side trail back to the house, we passed a rotting log with a few desiccated, fan-shaped mushrooms next to some hard black knobs that looked vaguely fungal. Breaking off a piece of the mushroom, Sheldrake pointed out its pores and scaly top, then tentatively identified it as dryad saddle. The lumps, he added, were likely Daldinia concentrica, or coal fungus, which grows on ash tree logs, where it acts as a home for small insects and is also eaten by the caterpillar of the concealer moth.

While neither species was rare, the sighting still felt unexpectedly magical. Long after I flew home, that feeling lingered. Occasionally I caught myself daydreaming about a world in which fungi, not humans, had evolved to be the dominant species. What would such a world be like, so full of shared senses and experiences? Would a fungus look down on the disturbing isolation of mammalian life, where perceptions and thoughts were limited to a single small body and brain? It was a dizzying idea but also enticing. And when the daydream would fade, returning me to my solitary, disconnected body, I would sometimes find myself thinking: Wait. Please stay. Can I join you?

A king oyster (Pleurotus eryngii), also known as a king trumpet mushroom. Alexander Coggin for The New York Times

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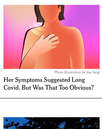

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