

Combining

by Nora Bateson, Axminster, Triarchy Press, 2023, 386 pp., £28 (paperback), ISBN 9781913743857

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BOOK REVIEW

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Eating breakfast, my youngest daughter is gazing, in love, with our cat. She climbs on a chair and stretches, wishing with all her might into cat-ish-ness. 'I want to be Smudgy, I want to be a cat, I wonder what it is like to have a tail, what is a tail for?' She moves into having a tail, I can feel her feeling of having a tail, right out beyond her usual body, changing her movement, the contours of her awareness, such is the shape-shifting wonder of play.

At the launch of *Combining*, Nora Bateson asked us gathered together, 'what if survival depended on growing gills?' At the time, my body recoiled in shock at the enormity, while my mind applauded the layers of complexity in this simply worded question. Now, sensing my daughter growing a tail, I wonder how lightly and successfully our capacity for play might allow us to respond to such required transmutation.

Yesterday evening I was watching a somewhat unsatisfying film when suddenly there was a long cinematic moment of wind through a field of waving wheat. I felt again the awe I feel about the conversation between the wind and the long grasses in our local park; and now, I remember long ago sitting on a train going to London to meet Nora and writing about the language of the tall grasses that passed by my window.

Combining has been sitting next to my bed for months, now and again I pick it up, I dip, each dip is so much. Do not be fooled by the format into thinking this is a coffee table pretty book. Although you should put it on your coffee table and enjoy its beauty, it is as dense as any philosophy book I have ever grappled with; but more as, in process as well as content, *Combining* requires the reader to stretch their mind to places new, to the unmapped. So, it has been sitting here because it makes me timid. It would be embarrassing not to *get it*, and to review it requires me to show and risk a little bit of myself, not nearly as much though, as to write it. Now I pick it up again and notice that it has been lying with an old copy of *Japanese Children's Favourite Stories* (Sakade & Kurosaki, 1958). The covers tone and flow into each other; the faded pink with birds in bamboo on the stories' cover has some relationship to the handmade wallpaper scraps printed for *Combining* by Mats Qvarfordt, Nora's husband, with Trevor Brubeck, her son.

These things combine. In starting with a little bit of me, my dipping becomes resonant. I read *Self Portrait* (pp. 86–87) in which Nora transposes herself exquisitely.

If I were a mathematical formula, I would be a chalkboard full of symbols and arrows. No ... I would be many such chalkboards. Or maybe
Just a crayon writing $1 + 1 =$
With no answer.
Wondering. (p. 86)

Then she is a song, a meal, a weaving, a painting, a poem, a forest ... and on. This 'set of messages that explain and confirm one another' (p. 87) dance with her father, Gregory Bateson's infamous questioning of the pattern that connects. Later in this piece, she points to the images and messages that cloak us with society's values and asks:

Can you still feel the texture of my math?
Can you breathe the ink of my wool?
Can you be a blade of grass with me? (p. 87)

This last line sticks, like cleavers to my heart. It twines with my wondering at the waving grasses, and this sticky significance asks me to look again for *The Meadow-Verse* that begins ‘I want to be the soil that is alive with a world of organisms. And I am’ (p. 188). The lush illustration spreads like a living meadow over eight double pages, the words initially appear as organised verses, but become ever more malleable in order and thereby meaning as they disperse between the painted plants and insects. The culminating words at the edge of the last green right-hand page are ‘Just oh yes love, life, play, go again.’ And then under a line reminiscent of a common denominator, represented as a stem being crawled along by a ladybird, ‘Things change. They just do.’ and ‘It’s not a digital thing. But here we are’ (pp. 200–201).

And then I read again *Where is the edge of me?* (pp. 59–61) a disquieting disillusionment of the individuation of self-betterment, which includes:

When I ask ‘How can I be a better person?’ – the question carries an illusion that is out of kilter with families, cultures, and histories that we are all responding to. I would rather ask, ‘Who can you be when you are with me?’ This is a more ecological question. (p. 60)

‘Who can you be when you are with me?’ If the whole rest of the book had been empty or meaningless, this question and what it requires has made *Combining* invaluable for me.

The relationship between and together is represented as an offering over and over in different ways throughout this book. As a whole, *Combining* feels like an organic structure, each part of which holds the story of the whole, while also being uniquely itself.

While the cacophony may seem as spontaneously occurring as the bird songs of the dawn chorus, the variety is just as incidentally deliberate. In the introduction, Nora explains:

It is necessary to have an ensemble of all sorts of communication to meet ecology – intellectual, emotional, storied, non-verbal, and physical. The communication must be diverse enough to meet the diversity of life. Disgust, humour, earnestness, seriousness, sexiness, pensiveness, silent awe, and gushing appreciation allow for the complexity of being alive to meet the complexity of life. (p. 1)

Play as experience and approach, across species and lifespan, reverberates through *Combining*. For instance, *Kinky* (p. 185) plays with our sensory responses through such wisdom as ‘Stinky belly buttons have more to offer the scouts now than a thousand articles of strategic analysis.’ *Creature* is a darkly playful tantrummy expression of algorithmic constrictive asphyxiation of biophilia. *A letter to my imagination* (pp. 228–229) is a plea toned in loving surrender, which includes the request, ‘Please don’t send the imagination ambassador from the department of human assumptions, send the other one who lives in the creative belly of evolution’ (p. 229).

Aphanipoiesis (pp. 145–182), a weighty academic offering, sits in the middle section of *Combining*. This word aphanipoiesis, ‘meaning a coalescing of unseen factors toward vitality’ (p. 145), builds upon

two other neologisms, “Warm Data” (N. Bateson, 2017) and “Symmathesy” (N. Bateson 2016) ... All three words have their basis in abductive process and explore inevitable mutuality of formation through transcontextual relational process (p. 145).

This piece is massive and it would be disrespectful to attempt any kind of summary. I will need to read it many more times before I am able to assimilate the content into my perceptual lens.

Of interest to those of us who think about play, there is much integrated discussion of flexibility; subheadings include *Stochastic Fractal Flexibility* (pp. 150–153) and *Aphanipoietic Realm—Where Flexibility Lives* (pp. 156–158). Within the latter, Nora uses relatable life

experiences to hold the reader through the mind-hopping requirements of abductive learning, living and evolution – of actual change. She writes that:

The possibility for any new forms to come into being must surely start in this aphanipoietic process. The necessity of it being imperceptible is that it is kept outside of the habituated forms of action which reconfirm each other – which is a form of flexibility of the utmost value to an ever-unfolding evolutionary story. (p. 158)

The subheading *Re-Tissue-Ing the Gaps* (pp. 167–168) begins with a tenderly crafted paragraph about the vital flexibility of gaps to the abductive process, it includes this hinting for the soul ‘In the same way that metaphors generate responses from the unseen inclinations of the observer, the gaps are there to allow themselves to be filled with the inter-steeping ink-lings’ (p. 167). Then Nora quotes Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson (1988), describing the indefinite nature of the American Constitution. Although un-harsh in its representation, consideration is of urgent and serious subject matter, the crucialness of integrity is layered throughout, and play forms are recognised as ‘natural responses to the need to try out new ways of weaving connective ideas, and reweaving them and reweaving them’ (p. 167). I am reminded here both of Fraser Brown’s teaching and writing about Compound Flexibility (Brown, 2014), and of these words of Johan Huizinga’s which my playworking daughter recently brought to my attention ‘Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos’ (p. 3, 1955).


As might be expected, this book includes significant reference to the Batesonian lens, and the work of Mary Catherine, Gregory and William Bateson. One of the most stirring instances of Nora’s writing side by side with Gregory’s work happens, for me, in *What is Submerging* wherein Nora references Gregory Bateson’s (2000) essay *From Versailles to Cybernetics*. I remember the first time I read that essay, the shock went on and on and on within me. As I read Nora’s exploration of the submergence of trauma, I wonder about the experience of reading this piece first – I feel it prudent to avoid shading your encounter, with my own.

I am also choosing not to offer the habitual mixture of critical poke and praise-full recommendation, with which book reviews are often closed – I feel no need to prove my capacity for formulaic academic conformity, to do so would also be a certain demonstration of not *getting-it-ness*. Instead, if this review has made you curious at all, I simply urge you to treat yourself with *Combining*.

NB – while Nora Bateson is the author of *Combining*, her Acknowledgements (pp. xiii-xiv) credit many with contribution to the creation of this book.

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