

Book review: *Fruit* by Wolfgang Stuppy and Rob Kessler

Chapter Three

Fruit have a short life, followed by a cruel death. Two sympathetic authors have erected an illustrated memorial to the progeny of plants. Can this third part of a so far marvellous series meet its readers' high expectations?

To put it bluntly, I have done it. Innumerable times, and with pleasure. I sliced them, penetrated them, squeezed them, bit them, chewed them. And afterwards, I gulped them down entirely.

Fruit.

Yes, I have to confess, I am an inveterate fruit eater. As such, I am an accomplice of Professor Stephen D. Hopper, the dignified Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, who, in the foreword of *Fruit*, also outs himself as a frugivore. Such a confession must have been a sudden body blow for Wolfgang Stuppy, botanist at Kew's Millennium Seed Bank Project. Stuppy devoted many years of his life to fruit; not, however, to eating

thick book is record-breaking. Applause for Director Hopper!

From the next page on, it's Stuppy's turn to grab the readers' attention and take them beyond the following 250 pages. A difficult job, but he does it perfectly. Focussing on fruits and how they develop, he never forgets to underline their true and important destination. Fruit is an attractive packaging for its hidden core: the seeds. Only together do they make sense. The book explains many of the manifold dispersal strategies that plants have developed in evolution. Stuppy takes the reader on a stunning journey into the multifaceted world of plants. Beginning with the everyday question, *What is a fruit and what is a vegetable?*, and ending with *Where have all the mammoths gone?*, he discusses nearly every imaginable fruit-related question that could cause a biologist to scratch their head (and, as below, Joe Public too).

Tomato is a vegetable by law

In addition, Stuppy is a talented tale-teller, for example when he describes a bizarre affair that caused quite a stir in 1893: the highly contentious tomato dispute (Nix

vs. Hedden). The United States Supreme Court finally ruled that a tomato is to be classified as a vegetable, "at least in the sense of the Tariff Act of March 3rd 1883" (which at the time prescribed a tax for imported vegetables but not for fruit). Stuppy's sneering comment on this verdict? "Despite this authoritative decision, denying a tomato the status of a fruit reflects political rather than scientifically logical considerations."

The book contains nakedness and scandal. A chapter entitled *Angiosperms, Gymnosperms and those that copulate in secret*, is about, "the most enigmatic group of gymnosperms that survived to the present day" (the Gnetales, probably brought to us by Sir



Francis Drake in 1580); others tell the reader the ultimate truth about berries (aubergines and kiwis are, but strawberries and blackberries not at all) and unravel the evolutionary paradox of poisonous fruits.

Or did you know that plants are cheating? Some actually have developed a strategy that is not very honest. Their fruit suggest they're edible because they're brightly coloured, but the animals will discover that there isn't any edible reward for them in exchange for their disbursement of the seeds. Such fruit mimicry, i.e. one fruit imitating the appearance of another one, is still a controversial concept. But it may at least fool young, inexperienced birds into swallowing the hard seeds, Stuppy supposes.

The seed morphologist is a German by birth and scientist too, both usually severe handicaps when trying to write in an interesting and gripping style. Not here. In most other illustrated books, the shallow texts are just a fig leaf, whereas in *Fruit* images and texts are emancipated.

Stunning illustrations

Speaking of the illustrations... well. Strictly speaking it is a waste of time trying to describe their richness, but I'll try. Like in their preceding opus, *Seeds – Time Capsules of Life* (see *Lab Times* 3-2007), the scientist, Stuppy, and the professor of art and design, Rob Kessler, make the perfect team. Again, Kessler's breathtaking electronmicroscope photos, coloured afterwards, are simply astonishing. At 30 x 28 centimetres in size, they demonstrate shapes and textures that scarcely anybody has seen before.

Together with *Pollen – The Hidden Sexuality of Flowers* (by Madeline Harley and Kessler, published 2004) and *Seeds* (published 2006), the Papadakis publishing house has completed a breathtaking trilogy on plant diversity. I was totally hooked from the very first page.

WEANÉE KIMBLEWOOD
Wolfgang Stuppy & Rob Kessler: *Fruit. Edible, Inedible, Incredible*. Papadakis, 2008. 264 pages in full colour, with reams of impressive images, ca. €40.--



Rob Kessler (left, with *Fruit*) and Wolfgang Stuppy (with fore-runner *Seeds*) at the launch of *Fruit* in September 2008.

them, but rather to studying and characterising their hidden features. His efforts are summed up at last in this weighty illustrated book with plenty of information on, well, fruit. Was it worth it?

Remarkable start

Without question, yes. The very beginning of the book is particularly remarkable. No need for the reader to be bored by long-winded claptrap over dozens of pages. Director Hopper's foreword oozes the typically witty understatement of the English, he writes in a catchy style, and, most importantly, he gets to the point very quickly. A foreword of not even one page for such a